

Starting with a clear vision

We've listened to the advice of countless people who participated in the Commission's consultation process and we've looked at trends that are likely to affect our province and our schools in the future.

Before we get to the Commission's recommendations, it's important to begin with a clear understanding of what we want for Alberta's students, for schools and for the education system in general.

Important starting points

There are five key starting points that underlie the Commission's vision for the future of Alberta's education system.

The first is that Alberta has an outstanding education system. This was reinforced in comments and presentations throughout our consultations. Our results on national and international tests consistently put us at or near the top. We consistently heard about Alberta's excellent curriculum, capable teachers, and the continuing emphasis on innovation and improving outcomes for students. One of our province's greatest strengths is the fact that we have a strong public education system that is open to all children. Those strengths, however, don't mean we can be complacent and accept what we have as "good enough." It simply means we have a higher platform to spring from. We need to keep asking questions, assessing evidence and outcomes, and taking action to improve Alberta's education system. The objective is to build on today's successes and ensure nothing short of excellence in the future. To borrow the words of Jim Collins, the goal is to move from good to great.¹⁴

Second, education is the most important investment we can make as a society. Our education system not only shapes individual students' lives, it shapes the very nature of our society. A strong and vibrant public education system - a system that values each and every individual, instills positive values, and builds tolerance and respect - is critical to develop social cohesion and the kind of civil society Albertans want for the future.

The third point is that it's critical to look beyond the pressing issues of today and prepare for the future, whatever that future might hold. The world is continuing to evolve and change and Alberta's schools have gone through a number of changes as a result. It may be tempting to look at some of the latest buzzwords in the education field and assume that those ideas will still be current in the next five or ten years. But a better approach is to ensure that the education system remains flexible, resilient and able to anticipate and adapt to a changing environment. That means steering clear of prescriptive changes that might seem right today but will unnecessarily tie the hands of schools in the future and prevent them from responding to what will undoubtedly be a climate of continuing change.



The fourth point is that education will become even more important to individual Albertans, to their communities, and to our province as a whole, particularly because of the growing importance of skills, knowledge and ideas to the future of Alberta's economy and our society. Today, people talk about the importance of education. It's consistently rated as one of the top two priorities for Albertans and Canadians. And yet, too often, that implicit support is not translated into explicit action. Alberta's education system is too important to ignore. It will only remain one of the best systems in the world if we take deliberate action to keep it that way. That means all Albertans - not just those who have a direct stake in the education system - need to play an active role in their schools and their education system - asking questions, seeking answers, providing support and encouragement, and getting actively involved.

Finally, the most important point is that everything in the education system must start and end with children and youth. Schools are not there for teachers, for administrators or trustees. They're not there for parents, for businesses, or for governments. They're there for students. And the first and only criterion for judging the success of schools and the education system should be how well every child learns.



Setting a vision

With those starting points in mind, the Commission's vision for the future of Alberta's education system can be described as follows:

Every child learns. Every child succeeds.

The entire focus of the education system should be on students and on ensuring the best possible education for every child. Each and every one of them should have every opportunity to succeed. Children should come to school well prepared and ready to learn. Steps should be taken to identify vulnerable and at-risk children long before they come to school and make sure they get support so they're ready to learn at school. Students should be actively involved and take more responsibility for their own learning. In addition to learning essential skills, especially literacy and numeracy skills, they should learn how to learn, how to seek ideas and information, how to collaborate with others, and how to apply what they learn.

As a result of their experience in school, we want students to be:

- Happy and healthy
- Thinking and caring citizens
- Able to judge ethical and moral issues and to make sound decisions
- Ready to continue learning or enter the workforce, with the skills and abilities they need to fulfill their own expectations and participate fully in Alberta's economy
- Respectful of themselves and others in the rich diversity of communities across the province
- Ready to participate actively in their communities and in shaping the future of their province, their country and the global community
- Ready to be lifelong learners.

Within that overall vision, nine key components help describe the education system we want to see in Alberta's future.





Excellent teaching

Alberta's students should be taught by the very best and most capable teachers. All teachers should be well prepared to meet the challenge of their students' diverse needs, willing to embrace best practices, and constantly engaged in improving both how they teach and how well their students learn. They should work closely with each other, with parents, principals and others in the community to achieve the best results for their students. And they should get the support they need in the classroom to ensure that their students learn and succeed. Because of the essential work they do, teachers should be highly respected by their students, parents, and community members.

Excellent schools

Every school in Alberta should be an excellent school. That means every one of their students learns and succeeds. It means schools operate as professional learning communities with a single driving purpose - to continually improve the outcomes for their students. It means schools challenge their students to learn and achieve through inquiry, exploration and active participation in their own learning. They welcome parents and engage them in their children's education. They embrace and celebrate the diversity of students in their classes and in their community. High standards are set and achieved and results from continuous evaluation are used to improve outcomes for students. Technology is fully integrated and used as an effective tool for both teaching and learning. Excellent schools create a safe, positive and caring environment for every one of their students. They become centres of the community where a range of programs, facilities and services for children are available in one common location. Finally, excellent schools are places of respect, where all students are treated with unconditional respect and students are expected to respect themselves, their peers, their teachers, and all members of their community.

Innovation

The school system has to be ready for constant change. And that means being ready to embrace innovation - to continuously explore new thinking and new approaches to improve outcomes for students. Research, evaluation and evidence from successful initiatives and projects should be shared across the system and used to guide change. Major investments should continue to be made in educational research, particularly active, classroom-based research through the highly successful Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). Schools should be closely tied to centres of excellence in post-secondary education, research and development, and business, particularly in knowledge-based industries.

Choice within a strong public education system

A strong public education system must continue to be a cornerstone of Alberta's society. The public education system should continue to be the first choice for the vast majority of Alberta's students and their parents. At the same time, diversity and choice are positive features and add to the strength of the education system. Students should be able to choose different pathways and different ways of learning. Choices should continue to be available within and among public and separate schools, francophone schools, charter schools, private schools, alternative programs, distance learning, and home schooling. The only proviso is that the range of options outside the public system should not become so extensive that it detracts from the core of a strong public education system, willing and able to serve all students.



Equity and access

All students have a place in Alberta's school system, regardless of their background and abilities. Flexible programs and placements must be available for students and should be designed to meet students' needs and give them the best chance of success. For students with special needs, the options range from full integration to specialized programs, depending on the individual needs of individual students. There is no "one size fits all" solution. For students who are new to Canada or don't have English or French as their first language, programs and support should be available to help them adapt to their new home and school environment. Direct action should be taken to identify children who are at risk or vulnerable and make sure they have access to early interventions to improve their chances of success at school. True equity means children not only have equity in access to schools but they also have equity in outcomes. That means children get the help they need to be successful, to overcome obstacles, and to learn to the best of their abilities.

Accountability

Education is too important to simply assume things are going well. High standards must be set and met. An ongoing focus on accountability should ensure that sound information is available and used to guide continuous improvements in Alberta's education system. Students deserve honest feedback and ongoing assessment to help them

improve their skills. Parents need clear information about the achievement of their children and what they can do to help them succeed at school. All the various players in the education system should have clear roles and responsibilities and should be held accountable for fulfilling those responsibilities. Teachers should be accountable for continually improving their students' achievement. School boards should continue to be accountable to their electors and to the province and should have the necessary flexibility and resources to meet their communities' expectations. The provincial government should be accountable to parents, students, and all Albertans for the overall quality of Alberta's education system and the results our students achieve. Finally, all Albertans invest in their education system and want the very best results for Alberta's children and youth. Open, complete and understandable information must be available about all aspects of the education system including policies, funding, results achieved, and all the various factors that affect student achievement.

Sustainability

Education is the best investment we can make in the future of our children and youth, our communities, and our province. Adequate, long-term, predictable and sustainable resources have to be available to achieve the vision set out in the Commission's report. At the same time, those resources must be used wisely and effectively to produce the best outcomes for students.

Parents and partnerships

The first partners in the education system are parents. For children to succeed, parents must be actively and positively involved in the education of their children. Every school should have a school council that provides a strong voice and an effective vehicle for parents and community members to be actively involved in important decisions about their schools. All partners in the learning system - teachers, parents, administrators, support staff, school boards, government, community and business members - should work together to ensure that children receive the best possible education. That means all partners are treated with trust and respect. It means that the walls that sometimes exist between schools and their communities are taken down and schools are recognized as centres of learning, community activity and identity. It also means that schools become the centre of well-coordinated and integrated services for children provided by a range of government and community agencies and organizations.

Balance

The education system should continue to balance a number of forces and factors. There needs to be a careful balance between clear province-wide policies and direction and local flexibility to meet students' needs and community expectations. There needs to be a balance between what parents and communities expect and what schools can reasonably deliver. There needs to be a balance between the roles, authority and power of different stakeholders in the education system including parents, teachers, trustees and the province.

Perhaps most importantly, the education system has to balance what aboriginal cultures describe as the four essential aspects of life - the mental or intellectual aspect, the spiritual aspect, the emotional aspect, and the physical aspect. Just as in a medicine wheel, when these four dimensions are in balance for individuals, for schools, and for the system as a whole, we will be able to achieve the vision of excellence and success for every child.

