

HOW ONE SUPERINTENDENT LEARNED THE TRUTH OF ALBERTA CHARTER SCHOOLS

(For Educational Leaders)

PURPOSE

I have been the Superintendent (a part time assignment) of Suzuki Public Charter School since 2014, and took on this role after 40 years as an educational leader in public education. There has been an increase in discussion about Charter schools in the media since the 2022 provincial budget was released in late February. It has become clear to Charter school advocates that much of the criticism is not supported with fact. The real truth about Charter schools is mis-understood across the province and this paper is an attempt to uncover the source of the misunderstandings and provide readers with solid evidence about the unique notion of Alberta Charter Schools and the opportunity for educational leaders to understand and support the Alberta Charter School system.

BACKGROUND

After 40 years working as a senior educational leader in various Alberta school divisions, a CASS executive member, Chair of the Central Alberta PD Consortia for ten years and very involved in Alberta Education initiatives I sought out some post retirement experiences. I tried consulting for two years but it did not have the fun factor and flexibility I wanted in a post retirement position. In fact, I applied for the superintendent job because I was encouraged by another former superintendent and members of CASS that the Charter school opportunity was an excellent fit for experienced educational leaders wanting some post retirement continuance of educational leadership.

I did not understand Charter Schools at all when I joined the senior leadership of Suzuki Public Charter School. The night before the interview I was on the web researching the details pertaining to Charter Schools. I had always dismissed them as being elite entities and versions of private schools and similar to the American Charter school model. These assumptions proved to be **very** inaccurate once I assumed the role of Superintendent. Moving to this position was some of the best advice I received from colleagues as the past eight years have been an insightful, rewarding, and exciting experience. This past year I assumed the position of President of TAAPCS (The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools). A key challenge for this group of 15 Alberta Public Charter Schools in recent years has been inequity in funding compared to other Public, Separate, and Francophone schools. The group has collaborated over the past several years to improve the situation with Charter Schools and never with any intent of causing issues for the other public systems in the province.

WHAT ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Charters were formed, as an innovative initiative in 1994 and have been in the *School Act* (now *Education Act*) since that time. Presently, there are 15 Charter Schools (Edmonton, Calgary, Valhalla, Medicine Hat, and Calmar). For years there were 13 and this past two years two additional schools were approved. The Charter is a legal document that defines the special area of focus and how a Charter school will operate. A condition of enrolment in the school is

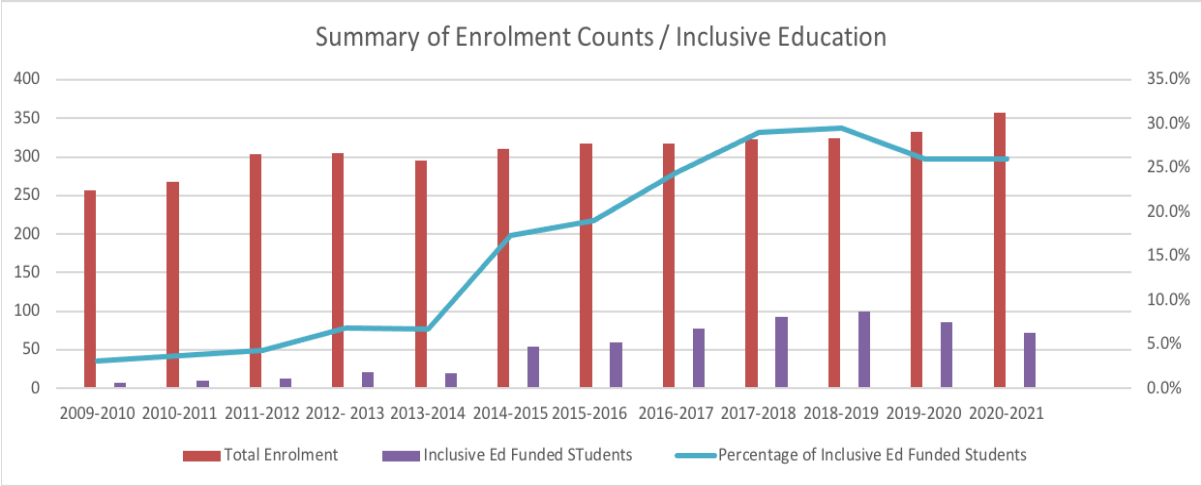
the requirements outlined in each charter. Alberta Education has a rigorous process in place before conditional approval is granted. In Suzuki Public Charter School the charter focus is music education. All students (K – 9) must participate in private, small ensemble, large ensemble instrument playing according to the Suzuki method of music education (high parent involvement and mastery learning), choral, and French language. The dedication to the intense music focus is very attractive to many Alberta families and not of interest to many others. Students in our school have a significant commitment to make to balance music instruction and the full academic program. It is not a music academy but music is integrated in all aspects of learning. Clearly, our charter focus does appeal to many families (as evident by our demand for enrolment). A similar situation exists with Catholic and Francophone schools or some of the specialized schools in the public and separate systems (e.g. high academic high schools, faith or language-based schools). Parents not wanting Catholic education or instruction in French are not going to choose these public school options despite many others who applaud the focus of these schools. Choice is a valuable option for thousands of families in our province. It is less about being elite and more about personal choices.

WAIT LISTS, , AND PARENT DEMAND

Yes, it is true that most Charter schools have a higher demand than available space. This is not because of selective student registration. It is because of historical caps on enrolment. Until late 2019 every Charter school had an enrolment cap. We were not permitted by the legislation to grow. As Charter schools experienced high levels of success, the parent demand also grew. Because of enrolment caps a system of selection had to be deployed. At Suzuki Charter school this is done in a public lottery. The only commitment parents must make is to commit to the music expectations outlined in the Charter. Some families return multiple years in a row to the lottery in hopes of securing a seat. Priority placement is given to siblings of existing students, children of staff, and families who live in the immediate catchment area. The addition of community children having priority has had a very positive effect on the growth of the local community. Many families actively seek housing in the area to get into the school. Presently we are leasing an Edmonton Public school that had become redundant due to low enrolment as an outcome of an aging community. This situation is turning around with approximately 20% of Suzuki families living within walking distance of the school. Many families move to the area to get into the school. Other Charters have also assisted in rebuilding aging communities – a good thing for energizing aging communities.

INCLUSIVE PROGRAMMING

As Charter schools have become more popular, the increases in children requiring special programs, additional time, and resources for success has also increased. See below the trend at Suzuki school. A recent third-party Alberta review of our programs supported that the incidences of special needs in our school was similar or exceeded other public jurisdictions. These students have been accommodated but not supported by reasonable funding. In fact, educators have had to do more with much less funding than other public-school counterparts for years.



Source: Suzuki Public Charter School Annual Education Results Report 2021

FUNDING CONCERNS

Provincial funding to Charter schools has been significantly lower than funding to other Public, Separate and Francophone school divisions. An incorrect assumption about inclusive education needs in Charters since 2008 resulted in serious reductions in Charter school funding. Suzuki is a school of approximately 400 students and in recent years the difference in provincial funding for inclusive education has been approximately \$350,000.00 less annually (compared to schools the same size in other public divisions). That is a serious amount of cash when you are obligated to operate special needs support programs on 25% of the budget other public jurisdictions enjoy. We do not have any consultants, a counsellor, a learning coach or learning assistance teachers. Classroom teachers address all severe student learning needs and all needs of mild/moderate children. We have classroom teachers, a very limited administration team, and a handful of educational assistants. Six students are classified by AB ED as severe learning disabled and another 70 plus receive additional assistance (roughly 25% of our school population).

In order to operate Suzuki programming and not totally deplete our modest surplus we operate three-day care programs and do casinos. Funds from these revenue generating programs are used to supplement our basic student programming. I have never worked in a school division that had to depend so much on revenue generating programs for basic operation. Significant relief is felt by our Board of Directors knowing that we can reduce our heavy reliance on depleting our surplus and relying on our own managed revenue generating initiatives to operate the school.

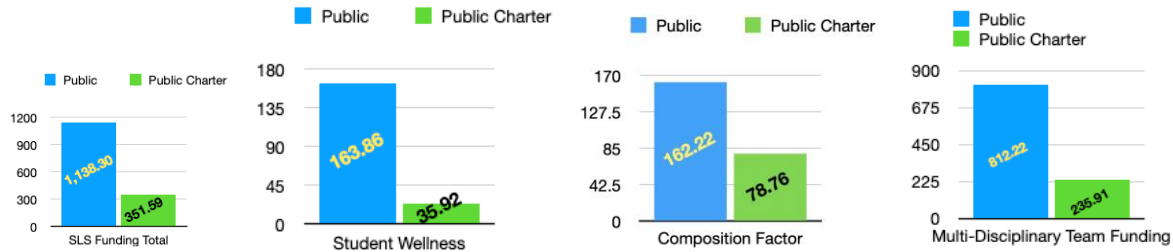
The charts below demonstrate the significance inequity between Charters and other public jurisdictions in the funding formula in the four areas of inclusive education funding outlined in the 2021 schools funding manual. Many Charter schools were reaching a point of serious deficit budgeting if the funding issue was not addressed. Consequently, TAAPCS took a strong position that charter school jurisdictions should be entitled to receive equal funding to other public schools.

SLS Funding Education Act 33(1)(e):

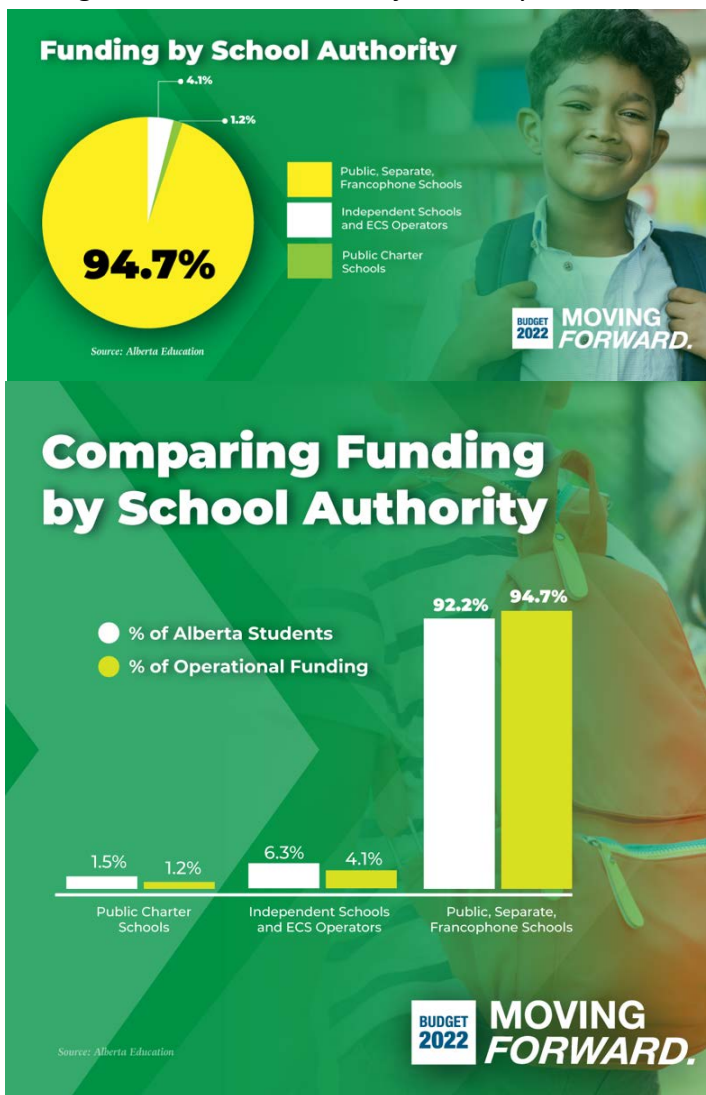
provide a continuum of supports and services to students that is consistent with the principles of inclusive education.

Funding difference is 6,501,047.03.

*Boyle Street, Westmount, CAPE and Mother Earth are not part of this calculation



The recently released budget (2022) restored equity to inclusive education funding and recognized the unfair and unjust reality that Charter schools have been facing in recent years.



As far as robbing funds from the public education pot of cash one must remember that Charter schools are public schools -- one of four different systems of choice in the province. Refer to the charts demonstrating the allocation of public education funding. Charter schools make up 1.5% of the student population but receive 1.2% of the funding. The remaining 92.2 percent of students receive 94.7% provincial funding. It is worthy of note that Charter schools have more students than all Francophone schools combined. Funding to Charter schools is very low compared to the full allocation of funding to all other public jurisdictions. It is amusing to me that the Charter systems using 1.5% of the provincial education budget has garnered so much attention from critics asserting that Charters are a threat to public education. We are a small factor in the overall budget and we are a relatively small number of schools.

FACILITY AND IMPROVEMENTS

Charter schools have generally had to rely on leasing underutilized public or separate schools or rent from other landowners. Legislation has not permitted charter schools to own their facilities. At Suzuki, we lease a school from Edmonton Public. They have been a wonderful division to work with and have provided us with considerable assistance. However, when we have had to do necessary renovations they must come from Edmonton Public as we are not eligible for IMR funding. This has resulted in serious limitations in what the school can do for improvements. We understand that with constraints on educational funding all school divisions have been impacted and to expect Edmonton Public to pay for improvements in a school leased to a Charter Board is not a high priority. The first exception to this situation was the CMR provincial funding to schools in 2021 where some funding went directly to Charters. Recent changes in capital and support funding for facility improvements will assist Charters in addressing growth issues. At Suzuki there are serious improvement needs for windows (leaking and breaking) and classroom upgrades (a 65-year-old facility). With the revised policy of government to support facility improvements in Charters essential improvements can be made.

SCHOOL FEES, PROGRAMS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

We charge the same fees other schools do as set out by regulations set by Alberta education. We are not permitted to charge tuition. We offer the full program of Alberta academic programs. We are fully accountable to Alberta education and to our elected board. Our boards are elected locally which is similar to Francophone boards but different from Public and Separate boards who participate in municipal public elections to determine board representation. These arrangements were determined when the provincial government originally approved a Charter school application. For families in financial need a bursary program exists through parent fund raising to assist with the costs of private music lessons or other school fees. We serve a diversity of students from a wide range of incomes.

RESEARCH INITIATIVES

Charter schools are involved in a variety of research initiatives with Alberta universities usually providing lead researchers as part of collaborative partnerships. Currently, at Suzuki school all staff are involved in a nationally supported SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) with U of A under the leadership of Dr. Jackie Leighton. The project, has provided relevant direction for teachers in improving student learning by examination of student learning in response to corrective instruction by teachers. In the coming year a book is being released by the lead researcher and this will be promoted on our website and through AB ED for use by other jurisdictions. Charters do not receive any additional funding to support their research initiatives. Most Charters are very active in the Alberta Research Network.

IMPLICATIONS

I hope Charter schools continue to successfully meet the needs of thousands of parents and students. I do not foresee any significant increase in the numbers of Charter schools in the near future. It takes several years and a very dedicated parent interest group to develop a Charter

and complete all the steps in the process. I do not agree that the small number of Charter Schools is a threat to the other three public divisions. We are a small cohort of Alberta schools and each Charter school operates as an independent board. Rather, Charters are one more system of choice that contributes to the overall excellent education system in Alberta. Many of our students come from other public and separate schools where parents were not satisfied with the programs in place and sought the Charter school alternative – and are happy to work with the stipulations set out by the Charter school. We have very little transition of staff or students out of our school, have very high academic success when compared to provincial averages, and we provide support for children with various learning needs. We believe these factors contribute to the high demand for registration in our school.

If you examine the senior leadership positions of the Charter Schools in Alberta you will see that most are filled by post retirement very experienced former educational leaders from systems across Alberta or from Alberta Education career positions. The senior leadership of all Charter Schools together is a very skilled, experienced senior leadership cohort and this has helped bring some amazing successes in the operation of Charter schools. Initially, I thought I would do the superintendency for two years but as I came to know about Charter schools and witness amazing things happening, I am still in the role and loving the work. I often marvel that the high academic success the students experience despite the many learning challenges students have. Clearly, a school highly focussed on music mastery has positive payoffs in academic success of all students.

We are a very pleasant group of educational leaders and open to collaboration with all educational divisions. We are peacemakers and focussed on one thing- quality educational experiences for Alberta children in a Charter school environment specifically focussed in one or more areas of speciality. There are not any plans to take away needed resources from other public education services. We are active in CASS (College of Alberta School Superintendents, Alberta Education, ARPDC (Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia) and other educational leadership initiatives in Alberta. Charters want fair government treatment of the Alberta students in their schools. We are grateful that the present government has demonstrated positive action forward in supporting parent choice in education and support for Charters. We encourage other educators in the province to better understand Charters and appreciate that they do have a legitimate role to play in the education choices for Alberta families.

And who knows? Maybe one day you may want to consider joining our fellowship. It is a wonderful way to apply your skills and experience and net rich rewards for your contributions.

Dr. Lynne Paradis (Ed.D, M.Ed) Supt. Suzuki Public Charter School, President, The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools