

WESTMOUNT CHARTER SCHOOL

AN EVALUATION

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Background:

The Westmount Charter School (Formerly ABC Charter School) is a publicly funded charter school that reports directly to Alberta Learning and has no reporting responsibility to any local public school board. The school is operated by the Westmount Charter School Society (formerly the ABC Public School Society). The current facility is in the Viscount Bennett Centre which has been leased from the CBE since 2001. This is the third facility used by Westmount. Westmount shares the facility with Chinook College which caters to adult learners as well as students who are completing high school after 3 years in other city high schools.

Although the original charter was under the umbrella of the Calgary Board of Education, the Minister of Learning approved a 5 year charter in May of 1998 after the CBE refused changes that would expand the mandate of the school. On December 20th, 2000 ABC Charter School was the first charter school to be granted a five year charter renewal which expires August 31, 2006. Over the years the school has expanded its program. The original concept was to offer gifted programming to Grades 1 to 3. Last fall the school had expanded programming to include Grade 10.

The school currently has an enrollment of 840 students (810 FTE) in grades K to 10. Since its inception in 1996 the school's enrollment has grown from 124 (FTE) to 810 (FTE) this year. This represents a growth of 553% in just 8 years. (See **Appendix I**) This rapid growth has presented many challenges especially in the area of facilities and programming. As well the school offers a program called Summerstock which is an evening and summer fine arts program.

77 adults work in the Westmount program. 55 of them are certificated teachers. The school offers programs which target several facets of giftedness. Class sizes are approximately 20. The school has made a substantial effort to expand its offerings in the fine arts, languages and CTS options.

Terms of Reference for the Evaluation

Purpose

The Charter Schools Regulation requires the Minister to conduct a minimum of one evaluation of each charter school within the term of its charter. The purpose of the evaluation is threefold:

- To provide evidence to the Minister and the board that the charter school is in compliance with provincial requirements and the requirements of the approved charter, inclusive of charter amendments approved by the Minister.
- To report to staff, parents and the community as to the success of the charter school and to identify areas of strength and areas which require attention.
- To focus the attention of the board and staff on the goals and objectives of the charter and the need to establish and confirm measurable outcomes and measures.

Process

The evaluators were contacted by Alberta Learning to conduct an independent evaluation during the month of April, 2004. The CHARTER SCHOOLS REGULATION specifies that renewal of a charter is dependent upon evidence being provided that the charter school meets the following criteria:

1. Is successful in meeting the terms of its charter and has performance measures that demonstrate clear evidence of success

2. Is operating in a manner consistent with all applicable provisions of the SCHOOL ACT, regulations and policies of the Minister
3. Is fiscally viable and responsible
4. Has a school program considered successful by the school council, community, students, parents and staff.

To gather the evidence required, the evaluation team carried out the following activities:

- Classrooms were visited during the week of March 29 to April 2, 2004 to observe instruction and student activities. The Evaluation Team also attended a regularly scheduled staff meeting.
- Discussions were held with staff members in regards to teaching philosophy, planning, evaluation, professional development, teacher-directed instruction, parental involvement, etc. As well meetings were held with groups of teachers who responded to an open invitation to meet.
- The evaluation team had a noon hour meeting with some executive members of the School Council.
- A random sample of 70 parents was mailed a survey along with a self addressed, stamped envelope. The return rate was approximately 50%. **Appendix II**
- A small group of student council members was interviewed to gather student perceptions of the school.
- Surveys were administered to all staff and students (grades 4 to 10). **Appendices III and IV**
- All Board members were interviewed concerning governance, facility and administrative issues.
- The Secretary /Treasurer was interviewed and relevant documents reviewed.
- All materials outlined in the evaluation model were examined including: Parent surveys, Three Year Educational Plan, AERR Report, AISI Project, Handbooks, Audited Financial Statements, classroom and teacher schedules, newsletters, promotional material, Board agendas and minutes, School Council agendas and minutes, etc.
- The evaluation team attended the March 31,2004 Board of Directors meeting The Superintendent and school administrators were also in attendance at that meeting.
- The Superintendent and Principal were interviewed, at length, to determine the organizational and administrative effectiveness of the school.
- Meetings were also held with the school's administration team during the process as well as the last day the team was in the building. The latter was a perception sharing exercise.

Criteria

The following questions are addressed:

- Does the school meet the terms of its charter and has it developed indicators that would show clear evidence of its success?
- Are provincial requirements being met?
- Do students, parents, staff and members of the community see the school as being effective and successful?
- Is the school financially viable?
- Are innovative practices being utilized for enhancing and improving student learning? Are they shared?
- Is the school being governed effectively?
- Is the school administered effectively?

EVALUATION REPORT

1. Are provincial requirements being met?

Findings:

- The Alberta Programs of Study are being followed.
- The administration team provides responsible direction and monitoring of curriculum.
- Teacher plans and learning activities demonstrated that the basis of all programming fits within the curriculum as mandated by the province.
- Students are required, and do, write provincial achievement tests at the Grades 3, 6 and 9 levels.
- Students consistently exceed the Provincial averages in the acceptable range and typically in the excellence range as well. Some concerns exist with the writing component at the Grade 9 level. Improvement of student writing will be receiving special focus in school improvement plans. **Appendix VII.**
- At the elementary level, student progress is reported to parents four times during the school year. Parents of Grades 6 to 10 students receive progress reports four times per semester. As well there are scheduled parent-teacher interviews and less formal meetings are arranged as needed. Student portfolios are being added to the reporting package.
- Provincial requirements for instructional time are met or exceeded.
- Completion of formal teacher evaluation reports are in need of attention - especially for staff hired prior to September, 2002.
- Although Professional Growth Plans are in place, their quality could be enhanced.
- All teaching staff holds a required provincial certificate.
- All fees and costs are appropriate and properly explained.
- Provincial requirements are being met effectively.

2. Does the school meet the terms and conditions of its charter?

Findings:

- The administrative team has a clear vision of what is required to fulfill the charter. Many reforms and innovations have been undertaken. The school is moving in a positive direction.. Some staff are feeling challenged by the efforts of administration to align the entire program with the charter, and achieve consistency in terms of a shared vision and common instructional practices.
- Many excellent teaching practices are evident throughout the school. Teaching is student-centered with a strong emphasis upon programming for multiple intelligences.
- The school has developed an excellent, highly defensible, selection process that utilizes several assessment methods. Entrance requirements are clear, communicated and open.
- 91% of responding teachers and 100% of responding support staff reported being satisfied with the philosophy of the school
- There is a high level of awareness that differentiation is the central focus of the school's program. The instructional methods employed are varied, effective and differentiated in content and process to accommodate individual learning rates, styles and interests.

- CTS and second language programs are available to Grade 6 and secondary students.
- Measurable outcomes are reported on. Student portfolios are being developed as an addition to the school's reporting package. Outcomes related to provincial goals, and other specific indicators are reported in the school's AERR.
- The Three Year Education Plan (2003 – 2006), focuses on improving outcomes in areas identified by Alberta Learning,
- Results are communicated to other school authorities and officials The school has a website on which relevant results and information are posted. The school also publishes a newsletter with information about school activities, upcoming events and achievements of students in competitions etc.
- Despite many challenges caused by facility inadequacy, the school continues to meet, and enhance, its ability to implement the intent of the charter.

3. Do students, teachers, parents and community members see the school as being successful?

Findings:

- When seeking the most appropriate educational setting for their children, parents in the Calgary area have a wide variety of schools from which to choose. Therefore, it is significant that Westmount's enrollment has continued to grow dramatically.
- Students expressed satisfaction with their school experience. They felt challenged and engaged.
- Students indicate they feel safe at this school. Of the grade 2 to 5 group, 84%, 79% and 86% reported feeling safe at school, during recess, and going to and from school.
- Students expressed feelings about being safe and accepted by others. The population reflects significant diversity and students work well together in an environment of mutual respect.
- 90% of parents expressed satisfaction with the supervision during instructional breaks.
- While 87% of teachers expressed satisfaction with extra-curricular offerings available, only 38% of Grades 6 – 10 students are satisfied with activities available.
- 85% of parents surveyed expressed satisfaction with the school. 82% stated that the school is living up to their expectations. 88% stated they were satisfied with the school's learning environment.
- Parents have volunteered hundreds of hours and sacrificed a great deal to help the school survive.
- As it currently exists parents see the existing facility as being unacceptable especially in the lack of a library and science laboratories. The presence of students from Chinook College is also of concern to many parents.
- Discipline issues play a very small role in the over all picture of the school day. A new semester system in the middle grades has cut down on the movement of students and as a result hallway related incidents have been reduced.
- In Grades 2 – 5, 92% of students report that teachers expect their best and 86% say they know the school rules. In Grades 6 – 10, 75% report they know teacher expectations and 82% say they know the school rules.

- The Provincial Achievement Test results indicate that the percentage of students achieving the standard of excellence for all subjects tested ranged from 28 to 51% for Grade 3, 25 to 60% for Grade 6 and 16 to 23% for Grade 9.
- The Student Council provides opportunities for students to learn and practice leadership skills. As only 21% of the students expressed satisfaction with the efforts of the Council. Improving student satisfaction with Student Council should receive some attention..
- Support for the high school program is limited. Only 34% of the Grades 6 – 10 group expressed desire to attend a high school program at Westmount. The issue of facility inadequacy may be a factor.
- Parents, staff and students generally see the school as being successful.

4. Is the school financially viable?

Findings:

- All Provincial requirements for accessing funding are met.
- Alberta Learning's concerns about the Audited Financial Statement have been addressed. **See Appendix V**
- Budget procedures are in place and they meet provincial standards.
- Budget expenditures are closely tracked and reported to the Board of Directors.
- The Board carefully monitors expenditures as they relate to budget. Reports are taken to the Board on a quarterly basis.
- Reserve funds are invested in interest generating accounts.
- Although teachers are provided with funds for classroom supplies the Staff Survey indicates significant dissatisfaction over the lack of instructional resources. This concern probably originates with the overall frustration of not having a library in operation.
- The school is financially viable. Proper control and monitoring processes are in place.

5. Are innovative practices and approaches to student learning being used, effective and shared?

Findings:

Educational practices are conducted as defined in the charter.

- The three year Education Plan identifies areas for growth. The Education Plan focuses on areas of concern identified in previous surveys and during the analysis of Provincial Achievement Tests.
- In mid and high school 3 hour blocks of time are used to deliver programs in core areas. These time blocks are scheduled on a semestered basis. The early results seem promising in terms of student bonding and in strengthening relationships between students and teachers. There are some timetabling and scheduling challenges associated with these changes and the new arrangement is not endorsed unanimously by teachers, parents or students.
- The Summerstock Program has added an exciting new component to the school's ability to meet the needs of gifted students as well as promote the school's vision within the broader community.
- The Professional Partners project is a strong initiative for achieving a shared purpose and shared practice. Although this concept isn't totally endorsed by staff it has exciting potential for the development of common understandings and practices.

- The Rotary program provides elementary students with opportunities for enrichment through short-term options. This concept provides teachers and students to experience some novel pursuits together.
- The staff clearly attempts to employ strategies that will accommodate the development of gifted learners.
- Students have a high degree of choice in the way they learn. Independent and cooperative learning are given strong emphasis.
- Ability grouping, curriculum compacting and acceleration are also used to meet the needs of students.
- Staff encourages, and plans, volunteer activities and projects directly related to curriculum.
- Many students are involved in out of school contests, projects and activities.
- The extension of the fine arts component is an exciting initiative.
- The band program provides both elementary and middle school students with the chance to explore their talents in music. The computer equipment associated with this provides for opportunities to understand and create music.
- The concept of multiple intelligences pervades planning for instructional strategies.
- Teachers maintain Learner Outcomes Binders which document the expected outcomes of lessons, units and courses.
- The school has been very open in welcoming visitors. Several individuals and groups have toured the school to learn about Westmount's programs. The school also maintains a website that gives information about the school. In terms of sharing best practices with the educational community at large, we believe that Alberta Learning has a role to play in this matter.
- All staff are provided with opportunities to take part in professional development activities. Funds are provided for these endeavors. As well many are taking university courses on their own initiative. The school even provides time to staff for taking such courses. Encouragement of life long learning is evident. A collaborative environment exists among staff. Sharing of ideas and materials is encouraged
- Although many exciting innovations are in place, administration may need to be more cognizant of the rate at which they are introduced and implemented.

6. Is the school governed effectively?

Findings:

- The Board has properly appointed required officials.
- The Board meets regularly and minutes taken and properly stored. Some of the minutes reviewed are somewhat informal and some items need to be tracked more effectively. **Appendix VI**
- Effective communications exist between the schools administration and the Board.
- Although the staff is generally supportive of the school a significant number have expressed dissatisfaction with the relationship that exists between staff and the Board.
- 65% of parents expressed satisfaction with the performance of the Board. 32% said they were undecided.
- Parents want action regarding facility deficiencies and they wish the Board to solve the problem.
- The Board openly encourages input from parents and provides opportunities for this at meetings.

- The School Council plays an active role in supporting the school through fundraising and sponsoring special events. Council members have a clear understanding of its role. Members feel comfortable with the level of communications that exist with the Board.
- The school's Policy Handbook is up to date and copies of policies are available through the school's office. Availability is made known through the school's website.
- Insofar as the ability to delegate responsibility, the Board feels that current legislation and regulations are not appropriate for a school of this size.
- The school is governed effectively. However, issues such as communications, facility and the scope of programs to be offered, need to be addressed.

7. Is the school being administered effectively?

Findings:

- An effective administrative structure is in place with vice principals responsible for each division.
- The administration provides responsible direction and monitoring of curriculum.
- School plans, including a new Communications Plan are prepared in a timely manner.
- A Technology Plan has been developed and updated. The facility limits the school's ability to implement it.
- Student and staff surveys clearly indicate that people within the school have a clear understanding of what is expected from them.
- The Professional Partners Initiative has been implemented. This has the potential to provide a shared understanding of purpose and consistency of practices. Several staff has yet to be convinced of its usefulness.
- A new Communications Plan is in place following concerns expressed in surveys administered to staff and parents. Several initiatives have been undertaken to improve communications between home and school.
- 37% of staff expressed dissatisfaction with the relationship that exists between the staff and the administration. Rate of change, communications and perceived changes in focus seem to be issues requiring attention.
- Regular staff meetings are held. Some of them focus on information sharing while others provide for in-depth discussion of concerns and issues. 61% of teaching staff indicate satisfaction with ability to have input into decisions.
- Classroom and grade organization are consistent with the school's charter. Many scheduling innovations are in place.
- Students and parents generally believe that the school is safe. Appropriate safety measures are in place. The layout of the building, parking lots and playground provide ongoing challenges.
- We believe that the school is administered in an effective fashion. Problems associated with growth, and higher expectations from administration, need further attention.

Commendations:

Positive School Culture

- Students seem (and report) being happy to attend WCS.
- They comment on feeling safe and being accepted by others.
- The population reflects diversity and provides opportunities developing mutual respect.
- Discipline issues seem to play a small role in the overall picture of the school day.

Strong Staff

- All staff are passionate about their commitment to serving students well. There is minimal staff turnover despite the difficult limitations caused by an inadequate physical plant.
- Staff members are learners themselves, participating in courses and projects outside the school day as well as involving themselves in professional development activities within the school.
- Action Research is undertaken by staff in a continuous effort to be innovative in ways that improve the learning environment for students.
- A collaborative environment exists among staff. The sharing of ideas, effective practices and materials is encouraged by administration.

Programming

- The staff clearly attempt to employ strategies to differentiate instruction to accommodate the development of gifted learners.
- Ability grouping, curriculum compacting, independent study, integrated curriculum, and other methodologies are utilized to optimize learning.
- There is evidence that students are involved in some out of school contests, projects and activities.
- Staff create opportunities for students to work in cross-grade groupings to allow older students leadership and mentoring opportunities.
- Staff encourage and plan volunteer activities directly through aspects of curriculum and in out of school projects.
- The focus of instruction is student centered, and students have a significant degree of choice in the way they learn and share their learning.
- The Rotary Program provides broad opportunities for enrichment through short term options for elementary students. This program allows both teachers and students to experience some novel pursuits together.
- The expansion of programming to enhance the fine arts component is an exciting initiative. The band, the art program, the Summerstock Program and the new computerized music lab are some examples of this expansion.
- CTS programs and second language programs broaden the program choices for students.

Parent Involvement

- Parents have a high level of involvement with the school and provide generous support.
- The School Council provides support with enhancing communications, fundraising, and a variety of projects.
- Parents report a high level of satisfaction with the school.

Administration

- The administrative team provides responsible direction and monitoring of curriculum.
- Professional Partners is an excellent administrative initiative to bring a greater sense of shared purpose and consistent practices to the staff as a whole.
- The school has responded through its Education Plan to the concerns of stakeholders and their approval has been demonstrated through the recent focus group work and survey.
- Communication with parents has been strengthened. Newsletters, reporting, focus groups, and interviews are just a few of the vehicles for improving communication between home and school
- An affective administrative structure is in place with vice-principals responsible for separate divisions.
- The school has developed an excellent, highly defensible selection procedure that utilizes several assessment methods to create profiles on applicants for admission.

The Board

- The Board has excellent representation from the business, academic, and parent communities. It is, perhaps, unique in having a balance of parent and non-parent membership.
- An effective governance model is in place with clear lines of authority and understanding of roles.
- Board meetings are well organized and preparation is thorough.
- Expenditures are properly monitored and controlled.

There is “grace under pressure” at Westmount! The staff, students and parents continue to move forward with as much positive energy as possible in what can only be described as a very inadequate facility.

Recommendations:

We recommend that:

1. **The school community establishes a clear vision of the role of the school in providing for the learning needs of gifted students.** We felt that this is the most critical challenge as it will help everyone work toward school success in a consistent and accepted fashion. If the school is to reach its great potential this endeavor must be given the highest priority possible. Much has been done in working toward this goal. These efforts must be intensified. Differentiated instruction is only part of this vision. How all parts of the puzzle fit together is the key question to be answered.

This vision ought to include:

- A **shared understanding of the fundamental outcomes** that will characterize Westmount student graduates
- A **common understanding regarding the instructional practices** that will support the development and achievement of those learning outcomes
- An **articulated plan for the implementation** of those strategies across the grades

- **A defensible assessment plan that provides for consistency** in measuring student progress in accomplishing the desired outcomes.
2. **Unless the matter of facility improvement can be addressed, the Board should reconsider the addition of high school programming.** Considering the limitations of facility and concerns about factors that will further stretch and thin resources, especially human resources (teaching staff and administration), we think you might be better to concentrate on consolidating the program in K-9 to make it really shine.
 3. **Administration and staff re-examine the role of the student personal education plans (PEPs) to ensure that students know how to create and measure progress toward meaningful learning objectives.** The use of PEP's is a worthwhile endeavor. Students must understand how to use them for the benefit of their own learning. The whole area of assessment, whether through the use of portfolios or other methods, needs revisiting to align these practices with the fundamental outcomes that the program hopes to achieve.
 4. **The Board, administration staff and parents continue to press for improvements to the facility.** The facility, as it currently exists is totally inadequate for a school of this size. As well there are many negatives to the current arrangement of sharing the facility with Chinook College. Students at Westmount deserve to have an adequate library, science labs, and technology capabilities. The fact that the building is infested with rodents is also a concern.
 5. **The schools continues to:**
 - Discuss and clarify the use of portfolios and their role in the overall assessment plan.
 - Enhance instruction and articulation of the skills for collaborative learning. This can be a very effective learning tool. Using it correctly requires teacher understanding and expertise. As well students need to be coached in order to get the maximum benefit from this type of activity.
 - Have the discussion regarding the implementation of practices to further align assessment and evaluation to the desired student outcomes
 - Investigate and implement methods for strengthening the writing component across the grades and across the subjects
 - Expand the involvement of students in real investigations, and in the creation of products for authentic audiences beyond the school community
 - Involve students in volunteer work to broaden their understanding and commitment to the community, and to provide them with leadership opportunities
 - Raise awareness among staff that there is an important instructional component to teaching even in the education of gifted students, and perhaps particularly with this clientele.
 - Seek new ways to inform the public and the educational community about the many great things you do and the wonderful accomplishments of your students.
 6. **You review the school's Technology Plan and include a vision of the role that technology will play in delivery of programs and in achieving student outcomes.** The school has a well thought out Technology Plan. However, the role that technology will play in the delivery of programs and enhancing student achievement is lacking.

7. **The Board considers creating policy surrounding the issues that arise when parents refuse to support the school in accessing assessment, information, and funding for students with dual exceptionalities.** Currently, due to a lack of parental cooperation, the school is unable to access resources for a percentage of students who are, or may be, entitled to funding and other resources. This results in placing an undue strain on resources and staff time. If parents wish to enroll gifted students with other special needs they must be willing to help the school qualify the maximum amount of funding.
8. **The Board consider ways in which the Board can better communicate with staff and the School Council.** Having representatives/advisors at the Board table might be a good place to start. If a true partnership is to be developed everyone concerned needs to understand decisions and why they were made. Opportunities must exist for stakeholders to have meaningful input during the decision making process.
9. **The Board Secretary ensures that Board minutes are more formal in format.** As well consider adopting a report schedule so that the Board knows when to expect certain reports and staff clearly understands when they are due. This isn't a serious problem. A school of this size needs to have quality minutes that will stand up to public and legal scrutiny. The Association of School Business Officials of Alberta (ASBOA) welcomes officials from charter schools. Membership would be most appropriate for your secretary/treasurer.
See Appendix VI.

In conclusion, the evaluation team finds much to respect and admire in the Westmount Charter School's culture and programs. With support in facility requirements and continued work in the directions set out by the current administration, we believe that this school can be a lighthouse for the delivery of education to gifted students. As children and staff succeed in creating innovative products and performances these successes should be celebrated, shared, and publicized within and beyond the school community.

Acknowledgements:

The Evaluation Team wishes to thank the Board, administration, staff and students for their efforts in making us feel welcome at Westmount. We particularly wish to thank the principal, secretary/treasurer and superintendent for providing all requested information in a timely and organized fashion. It was a pleasure to be in Westmount and we look forward to seeing the school continue to grow and prosper. This school has wonderful potential. Continued efforts to improve will see that potential fulfilled.

Revised - June 24, 2004