

Global Edmonton Grading Our Schools Charter schools offer more variety within Albert...

Local News Choose a Station

Charter schools offer more variety within Alberta education

Emily Mertz, Global News : Friday, September 07, 2012 1:20 PM

Recommend



Alberta Education, Edmonton Journal

RELATED

Canadians worried about kids' grasp of math, literacy: poll

Canadians worried about kids' grasp of math, literacy: poll

Poll: Canadians support separate schools for arts, vocational training and special needs

For a province many Canadians view as "traditional", Alberta is fairly innovative when it comes to education. Alberta is the only province with charter schools. It adopted legislation in 1994 to allow these types of schools, with the goal of providing a larger variety of educational opportunities, and more parental choice.

What is a Charter school?

Charter schools, licensed by the province and run by agencies other than school boards, are free of much red-tape, although they do have to meet curriculum and

testing requirements. Also, they often have a particular focus or speciality.

"One of the really important aspects of why we have such a strong education system in Alberta is that we offer choice," says Kim Capstick, who works for the Alberta Ministry of Education.

Between the private, public, religious, francophone, and charter schools, she says parents "can pick an educational experience that's right for their child."

There are currently roughly 8,000 students enrolled in Alberta charter schools. That compares to about 416,000 attending other public schools, 24,000 enrolled in private schools, 14,000 in Catholic/separate schools, 6,000 in francophone schools, and about 7,000 who are home schooled.

Education & Focus

Charter schools have the same educational requirements as other public schools. The difference - officials say - is the way they deliver that education.

"They have a specialized focus, whether that be they tailor to a specific student body... or whether the curriculum is taught through a particular perspective," explains Capstick.

LATEST VIDEO



Sat, Sep 8 - Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, along with Roots Canada and Minute Maid are holding a lemonade sale, Saturday. Kevin speaks with Kari Readman to learn more about the event.

Sat, Sep 8 - The Sweat, Hope and Rock n' Roll fundraiser is being held Saturday, to support high need schools with year round nutrition programs. Kevin speaks with Trish Dober and Karrie Baker to learn more about it.

More Video

Advertisement

TOP STORIES

Of the 13 charter schools operating in the province, two focus on gifted children, two use an arts or music-based focus, one has a rural focus, and one is an all-girls school that delivers instruction through a female perspective.

"A charter school is going to be a specialty school," adds Capstick, but since they operate under the public system, they can't charge tuition. They must also offer curriculum approved by the province, have no religious affiliation, be accessible to all students, employ Alberta-certified teachers, and be operated by a non-profit organization.

Across the province

Approximately 83 per cent of charter school students are in Calgary, which has six charter schools. Edmonton has 11 per cent of the students, and the rest operate out of smaller Alberta communities like Ardrossan, the home of New Horizons – the first public charter school in Canada.

Capstick believes charter schools not only serve students and families better, but also serve to strengthen the entire provincial education system.

"Charter schools are sort of a unique opportunity for us to try interesting and new things, in a way that we can test out how things are working," she says, "with a particular focus or targeting a particular student group."

For 17-year-old Emily Schiffner, a charter school was the difference between struggling through the early years of elementary school and a wonderful six-year education with peers and teachers who related to her.

Schiffner switched from traditional public elementary school to the Calgary Arts Academy in Grade 4.

"I thought it was awesome. It had a really different approach to learning," she says.

While Schiffner admits she had some trouble at her previous schools, the charter school offered a different approach, which fit her learning style better.

"I was always very interested in art, and Calgary Arts Academy is an arts-focused school... It helped me keep interested in my studies."

She also found the specialization helped her be more successful socially, not just academically. Schiffner says being around other students who were interested in the arts helped her make friends more easily.

"It was really fun; I wish I could go to high school there."

Schiffner graduated two years ago, after completing Grade 9. She says re-entering traditional public school has been quite an adjustment.

"It was quite a shock to get into a normal school... there is that culture shock there."

She raves about her experiences at the Academy, adding the type of instruction helped her really understand the curriculum rather than memorize facts, and taught her how to study independently and budget her time accordingly.

"I definitely think more schools would benefit to have this type of approach," she says, adding they deserve more recognition.

"I think they're definitely underestimated. The big focus is on public or private... but charter schools have their place."

Wider application

Capstick says charter schools are "designed to look at how we can innovate... be creative... and try new ideas in our system... that could translate to the rest of our system."

She says certain school boards are already integrating programs that reach a wider student population through a variety of methods of instruction. In other cases, school districts have responded to real or anticipated competition from charter schools by creating theme-focused schools offering more choice than was there previously. Edmonton is a leader in this style of approach.

"We see more charters in Calgary ... Edmonton's school board has taken it on themselves to do a lot of specialty programming."

That, in essence, is one of the main purposes of charter schools; to push the boundaries of traditional



42 families have a new, affordable place to call home

The Cedar Roots housing co-op is a family oriented townhouse community...



UPDATED: Edmonton police investigating city's 20th homicide
Edmonton Police are investigating the city's 20th homicide of 2012, af...



Harper urges Putin to play more positive role on Syria

Prime Minister Stephen Harper urged Russian President Vladimir Putin t...

RECOMMENDATIONS

Login You need to be logged into Facebook to see your friends' recommendations.

Sight impaired woman denied access to a number of local businesses
12 people recommended this.

Get ready for a major concert announcement
3 people recommended this.

Facebook social plugin

education, and share techniques that work well with schools across the province.

"I think the future that we have is we need to continue to share successes across the system," says Capstick.

She says it's about "continuously evolving and transforming... meeting the needs of kids of today."

Afterall, reaching children, and helping them learn and grow, is ultimately the goal of every educator.

Successes

John Van Beers is the principal at the Calgary Arts Academy. He has witnessed first-hand the difference a charter school education can make in a young person's life.

"The stories of success come from students and staff," he says. "Children who were disenfranchised from school, who come to a different environment, and who begin to love school and excel and find their voice."

"We had a student who started at our school about four years ago as a selective mute... but comes to an environment where they're feeling safe... by the time they graduate, are comfortable speaking in a group, on a stage... those are the stories that need to be told."

Calgary Arts Academy uses the arts as a method through which to educate children.

"We are an arts immersion school," explains Van Beers, "learning through the arts... learning through dance, through art, not so auditory."

"It's more experiential," he adds, but allows young people to become "involved in learning."

"A lot of kids gravitate towards that type of learning."

While his school uses drama, dance, music and visual arts as a platform to teach, Van Beers is appreciative of all the different modes of instruction available in the province.

"Alberta's done a really good job of trying to push the boundaries of traditional education."

"I think first of all it's the notion of choice," he says, "the style of education, the pedagogy in the school."

Some parents may be concerned that a school with a specific focus might put too much weight on that focus, and not enough on traditional academic requirements. Van Beers argues that concern is unnecessary.

He clarifies students write the same exams as their peers in non-charter public schools.

"The similarities are in the curriculum," he explains. "The curriculum is prescribed across the province; the only difference is the mode of instruction. We're focused on academic excellence," Van Beers says, adding the school is focused on social and personal excellence as well.

So, if the charter approach includes the same academic standards as other public schools, why aren't more provinces adopting charters?

"I'm not sure," admits Capstick. "I think it's an interesting model."

"I think that there's sometimes fear of the unknown," says Van Beers. "People get caught up in the idea that the school system I had when I had as a kid worked for me."

He adds we're learning more and more about how children learn, and how different teaching approaches can be beneficial. Van Beers hopes other regions across the country will consider adopting more flexible teaching practices.

"I think more schools and school districts should consider diversifying the way it delivers education."

"Alberta took a bold step when they decided to investigate that...they were really ahead of the game doing that."





In order to continue to succeed internationally, Van Beers says Canadian education systems need to continue to evolve.

"Other provinces have looked into that, but there's still hesitation," he says. "Things are starting to drop a little bit."

So, according to Van Beers, the pressure is on. Children are changing, the way they learn is changing, and so must the way we teach them.

"Kids all learn differently," he says, "and yet there's hesitation to accommodate that because of tradition."

© Global News. A division of Shaw Media Inc., 2012.

Tools:  **Print** **Share:**    **Recommend**



[About Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Copyright](#) | [Media](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Open Data](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Sitemap](#) | [Global TV](#) | [HGTV](#) | [Showcase](#) | [Slice](#) | [Food Network](#)

© Shaw Media Inc., 2012. All rights reserved.