

*The following speech was delivered by Coleen Taylor on the occasion of winning the Halvar Jonson Award – October 26, 2018*

Thank you for this recognition tonight. It truly is an honour to be recognized as a supporter of charter schools. When we started New Horizons School we did so because we couldn't find a school in our home area with a program to meet the educational needs of our children. It was a huge effort to start the school, but when it's your children whose needs you're meeting, you do whatever you have to do.

Initially, I even had to persuade the public and the local board that charter schools were going ahead in 1995. When a radio call in show said that charters were on hold, I phoned in to let people know we were going ahead with our school. Then when Alberta Report assumed that the decision by Calgary schools not to proceed in 1995 meant there would be no charter schools, I got it touch with them, too. I kept having to say, "We're not dead. We're getting better. We feel fine."

Because the folks at Alberta Education were under pressure to have some charter schools ready to go, I knew it was the best time for me to try to get a school for gifted children. Our program focus had the added burden of facing public attitudes that suggested gifted children were privileged and not in need of special programming (don't even get me started on what gifted students deal with!). It actually helped the other schools applying for charters to have us approved first, too, because suddenly the minister was willing to provide some enrollment exemptions to get other kinds of programs on board quickly. In those early days, we had to deal with a lot of politics, but making the programs happen for our children, and the children of other folks we came to care about, was paramount.

I think that focus has a lot to do with the preservation of charter schools in the years immediately following their inception. There was some active opposition, and certain department members who tried to frame charter schools as alternate schools in waiting, rather than as important contributors to education in their own right. Our tenacity in the face of this opposition was evidence of how much we valued the schools, and eventually, because of our passion, their value to education received some recognition. We valued charter schools, because they met our children's needs.

At the time, and I don't know if this is still true, I was unique in that I had taught in an alternate program in Edmonton that focussed on meeting the needs of the children we hoped to meet at New Horizons, and my daughters had attended a different alternate program in Calgary for gifted children. Then I taught in the charter school, and the girls attended there. So when someone was saying that charter schools were just wannabe alternative programs, we could see firsthand the difference between the two when addressing the same issues. It was huge!

Why? Each charter community is focussed on the same goals and supportive of them. They can put their resources where they are most needed, they establish their own policies to further their programs, they can hire staff appropriate to their programs, and they have far more

stability than alternate programs that exist at the whim of local administration and school boards. In other words, charter schools have the power to do what they need to do to accomplish their goals – and it shows.

Have charter schools made a difference? Of course they have. We can point to graduates who are now putting their children in charter schools, because of their own successful experiences. The large number of alternate schools available now, on an ongoing basis, can be directly traced to the presence of charter schools. In our area, it wasn't long after we opened that the local board saw fit to start running alternate programs that they wouldn't even consider before the charter school was started. Choice in education that allows parents to find suitable programs for their children is so important. The growth in home schooling is related, in part, to problems parents have accessing suitable programming. For many parents who did not see themselves as home educators, charter schools were, and continue to be, a God send as well.

Early on, charter schools realized that they needed to work together to get government support for their core needs. We formed the Association to ensure that we spoke with a unified voice, identifying our needs to the education/learning department, and often to government ministers as well, when we weren't heard at the department level.

There's still an important role for the Association to fill. The need for, and value of charter schools has to continue to be put in front of those who make decisions about charter schools. There needs to be more charter schools, size caps need to be removed, and the charters of successful schools need to be extended when they come to an end. When some good will is established with either the education department or the government, the Association can be ready with an agenda to further the well being of education via improving the situation for charter schools. In the past, those individuals in the education department who were charged with the responsibility for charter schools had a tough job. They would hear about the unmet needs of the schools (and they heard!) but when they tried to meet those needs they'd find themselves unsupported. Those in charge of charter schools need to have sufficient power/influence to really go to bat for the schools so that they can live up to their potential. We need to lobby for that!

In establishing charter schools, the Alberta government found a way to harness the enthusiasm and ability of parents and educators to produce diverse, cutting edge educational institutions focussed on children and excellent education. All Albertans benefit from this, and we are privileged to have this opportunity. Thank you for carrying the torch.