

Summary Comments from Alberta School Council Association (ASCA) Conference 30 April 2011

I attended the ASCA Conference in Edmonton from April 15 to April 17 with another member of the CCS School Council. This is an annual event that gathers all of the School Council members and representatives from across Alberta for a three day session of speakers, ideas, best practices and includes messages from Alberta Education, Alberta School Board Association and others. Approximately 300 parents and School Council representatives attended this event.

We arrived Friday evening and quickly got acquainted with the ASCA staff, Directors and other guests. We also had an opportunity to break out as groups and begin discussions on how to engage parents to get involved with School Councils, effective use of School Councils and best practices. In terms of School Councils, ideas circulated around such items as: hot topics, childcare at meetings, rotating meeting times, Facebook/Twitter, professional development, booth during Parent/Teacher nights, food/pot luck event and student showcases as potential ways to engage parents to attend meetings.

We then had opportunity to talk about how School Councils can become more engaged and supportive. A number of comments had common themes, such as: school district buy in of the importance of parent voices, feedback on policy decisions, trustee participation at School Council meetings, parents' involvement in Division decisions instead of feeling like third wheels, respect for parental input.

The full range of comments will be posted on the ASCA website www.albertaschoolcouncils.ca.

Opening Session and the Minister of Education

Saturday morning started off with an opening plenary session to address the overall theme of the conference and to bring greetings from a number of associated groups to the ASCA (Alberta School Boards Association, Alberta Teachers Association etc). This was followed by a message from the Minister of Education.

The Minister opened his remarks by indicating that a large representation of Alberta Education was out to both this conference and the Speak Out conference in Edmonton. He discussed the changes to the department due to the financial conditions that are present. His key points of concern centered around the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) Program, First Nations Métis Inuit funding, closing the achievement gap to ensure that all students have the ability to succeed, cyber bullying and awareness as well as general parental digital awareness.

He continued by commenting that he recognized that there were resources that our teachers needed, and that our teachers need to be trained properly for the 21st century learner. Currently we are not doing a good job for every child, and a "one size fits all" education system does not fit all students. Although differentiation is okay, it is not effective to all students. We need to discover a way to address the diversity.

Education funding over the past few years has had a 63% increase in the provincial budget, and the student population growth has been around 3% per year. Minister Hancock said that what is clear is that money alone will not fix the problems. There are two key challenges: first, the approach of the teacher to students in the classroom, and secondly the funding.

The education budget is the second largest in the provincial budget. Even with the 4.7% increase in this year's budget, he acknowledges that there are "many ways to spend money, and many ways to educate our students." The Minister went on to comment that if we ensure that our teachers can be at their best all the time, have the resources and use best practices as well, that the system will follow. What we need to do is ensure that teachers have expertise to deal with the new system and changes. Engagement is not just about a voice being heard, there has to be listening, reflection and action.

"Doing more of the same things with more money will not be an effective response to the challenge of creating a truly inclusive 21st century school system."

He then talked about going out to speak to all Albertans about what they wanted to achieve, and also out to schools and asking students about what gets them excited about getting up in the morning to come to school, and what doesn't.

The new Act will be driven by parents and students, not by rules and regulations. It will be a combination of cooperation and collaboration among parents, students and school boards. The emphasis on safe, caring and respectful schools will be spelled out in the Act as will the importance of High School completion and the raising of the age limit for school attendance, and the encouragement of students to return to complete their education. It is a values based Act with children coming first. Boards will need to respect local needs and be more engaged, ethical and entrepreneurial. Each community's needs will be determined by the community, not just teachers and boards. There is an increased role for the ASCA, and the potential of greater involvement for parents.

Teachers need to be provided with the time to prepare to meet student's needs. We need to educate for our future, not our past. For current teachers, teaching the way we always have and the way that we were taught, will not work for our 21st century learners.

The Minister said we need to bring value to the teachers by treating teaching as a profession that students can aspire to. School Councils can play a role in helping to make this happen. We need to pre-service education and make it relevant and current, be creative and have induction programs that respect new teachers. We need to appoint sufficient time for teachers to plan for needs, for everyone to have awareness that there needs to be commitments for professional learning, new challenges, opportunities and new technology.

Currently the average age of teachers is 47 years old. The new technology that we presently have is lost. Students have grown up with digital learning and teachers need to be able to catch up and embrace it.

In terms of the present budget, we only have what we have to work with. Changes at the Board level need to be made without affecting teachers and support staff on the whole. There needs to be a commitment to not affecting vulnerable students in a negative fashion. What is clear in this message is that Alberta Ed and School Boards need to change how they do business going forward.

The Minister then fielded a number of questions from the floor and addressed concerns about the changes to funding, the lack of monitoring of how certain grants were originally designed and how they have outlived their original intents. He said that studies show classroom sizing does not impact the learning ability of students above grade 3, thus the continuance of funding below Grade 3.

In terms of special needs, the Minister talked about Action on Inclusion, and that these discussions were taking far longer than were anticipated to come up with solutions. He referenced that web based support and resources were to be made available for teachers, that a new formula for funding as being developed, and that he had set aside \$12 million in the budget to deal with Action on Inclusion for the fall. Further discussions with stakeholders will follow.

Then a question arose about how to get School Boards to get more involved, respect School Councils and parents' needs. The Minister responded by saying that the new Act engages boards to change how they do business, how they focus on engaging change with its stakeholders. He also commented on whether 17 professional days are truly necessary in a school year. The focus going forward is for excellence in teaching and doing business a new way.

With the number of Alberta Ed staff represented, and the direct conversation from the Minister, it was refreshing to learn more about where we really are at, versus the constant media spins.

Seminar Attendance – Funding Framework (1) and Bullying (2)

1. I then attended a Funding Framework session to hear more about the funding model and how it is spread back to the school level. The panel was made up of Gene Williams, Exec Director of Strategic Funding Service –Gov't AB; Deb Schlag – Secy/Treas St Albert Catholic School Division; Brian Callaghan-Superintendent Cdn Rockies School Division; and Cheryl Smith – Trustee Battle River School Division. This really turned out to be a great session.

The session began with an overview from the Executive Director of Strategic Funding Service from the Alberta government about how the money in the province is allocated by Ministry. Education receives about 16% of the total budget. There was a 4.7 % increase to education in the current 2011 budget, this works out to about \$32 million invested each day to schools. About 90% of the allocated revenues goes directly to all the Alberta School Boards that have a student population of just over 558,000 students and 35,000 teachers. There is diversity in the types of schools, and funding comes from two revenue streams into the government – General Revenues (70%) and Education Property Taxes (30%). The funding distributed is equal to all students and there is no advantage to public or separate school boards.

One of the key messages is that School Boards are given these funds to allow them to make decisions on allocations that are fair, equitable and to be used for the greatest good of the student. As elected officials, they are responsible for public accountability. The funding is primarily on a per student basis as well. Even in the High School where Credit Enrollment Units are allocated, they are based on the same formula at 35 credits per year (About \$6500 per year).

98% of the funding School Boards receive is flexible, meaning that they can use the funds to meet the needs of their students. Only a few grants are specific and targeted. **The government does not direct how the funds are to be used.**

He then talked about specific funding. In terms of the Severe Disabilities Funding (currently under review) \$16,466 per student and Severe (PUFF) for Kindergarten \$24,560 (each student) these funds are given to the School District to use, and **do not** follow the student to the school level. They are district wide funds specific to the program as a whole. The Class Size Initiative is being

reduced to just cover the K-3 program, as research shows that children in these grades are impacted by this focus in higher levels than those beyond grade 3.

The Secretary/Treasurer from the St. Albert Catholic Division then spoke next and addressed the impact at the School Board level as it applies specifically to their Division. 92% of their funds are supplied through the government and 8% are school generated through fundraising etc. 72% of their expenses go direct to salaries, 20% to services and almost 8% to other expenses. They have had to change their focus to include parents and community input in allocating the resources beyond salaries. In this coming year, they are facing class size increases, submission of deficit budgets as a commitment to excellence and a reduction in their operating resources as a result of the deficit. She also indicated that Board allocations to schools are not always fair as there needs to be some additional resources for small schools. She was also very clear to comment that they have preserved the 1.5 FTE for Administration per school as a minimum.

Brian Callaghan (Superintendent of Canadian Rockies School Division) then spoke on his school district and how they are dealing with the current operations. 80% of his costs are salary based. Transparency in the budget is top of practice at Cdn Rocky SD. His best practice is to build decisions up front versus defending them behind closed doors. To this end, he breaks down the revenues by schools, works with principals and school councils to deal with the reality and school profile to ensure that everyone starts on the same page. Decisions are then made and implemented. He works with a 3 year district profile as well.

At the beginning of the budget process, he has an enrollment profile for each school, generated by the principal. This gives a grade level breakout by school. The revenue model is then built on a template for each school to see with line by line allocations. He then adds the historical expenditures. What the end result becomes is a one page summary, for each school, without central office support inclusions. His central office cap is 4-6% maximum.

The principles of his budget process include a budget built on average costs, instructional blocks of certificated and non-certificated staffing and a per school allocation for each principal and School Council to review and provide input on, based against the transparency of the entire district. He then visits each School Council personally, after presenting to principals, to review the numbers and solicit additional input prior to final decisions. Each step of the way involves not only a business approach, but consultation and appreciation for expertise in the School Council community.

Parents also have input as to what school fees will be, what they are composed of, and how they are used. His practice is to have principals present the three year Education Plan, as approved by the Superintendent.

Overall, we were all impressed by this presentation, Mr. Callaghan's sincerity and his willingness to meet and discuss the allocations of resources in a genuine fashion.

The Trustee from Battle River addressed the group with some high level best practices that they follow at the School District level:

- 1) Look for ways that their division is reaching out for input
- 2) That they take the initiative to put some of the suggestions into play that are received
- 3) They have a website link to the Superintendent and School Board for focus questions, general comments and input
- 4) The trustees actually attend School Council meetings as a responsibility of their role
- 5) They address District Satisfaction Surveys
- 6) Each voice matters
- 7) They engage in a consultative process. They meet with stakeholders, businesses, parents, teachers, students and others to ask questions
- 8) They review discrepancies
- 9) They ask themselves where the focus of education is. They do not cut essentials and they recognize that technology is here and that teachers need to know how to use it.

Her message was totally about respect for the School Council and parent input.

2. The next session I attended was on bullying and cyber bullying and its huge impact on students. The main message was creating awareness for parents and teachers to be able to spot the changes and begin to learn how to deal with this technology explosion. Bullying is no longer only a physical action. One out of 17 kids in the 6-10 year age group are threatened on the Internet. One in 4 kids ages 11 to 19 are threatened in cyberspace or on cell phones. Females are primary targets. The victims often become the aggressors and the action is just repeated over and over. It is a huge growing problem and suggestions arose about how to deliver messages to parents for awareness and intervention.

We learned about signs of bullying: afraid to go to school, feeling ill, decreased interest in outside or school activities, increased loss of things (money, items being damaged), unexplained bruising or injuries, and threats to themselves or others. Key word use like "accident".

We then heard about how parents can begin the process of involvement by being attentive, talking about bullying, developing self esteem, and creating opportunities for your child to openly talk, and then actively listening. You can then address the issues when you see them by intervening immediately, using teachable moments to model coordinating actions and ensuring awareness with people and school; stay calm, offer comfort, work with others in the child's life, help your child and communicate.

In Conclusion

At the end of the conference time, we had opportunity to meet and greet candidates running for election, as well as attend the awards banquet. During this process, we congratulated two long term supporters of the school council association; Brian Callaghan and Dean Lindquist from Yellowhead Public School Division.

I find this very encouraging as we develop our own relationship with the Palliser Division and seek the engagement of the Division to work under these new models as well.

There will be a number of documents available that we will be posting upon receipt that will offer further insights as to the discussions and directions that Alberta Education and ASCA are partnering on.

Thank you for allowing us to represent you!

Scott Hickling
Executive Director, CSCE