

Let's Talk... the New Education Act!

Summary Report

On January 17, 18 people gathered at DS MacKenzie Junior High in southwest Edmonton, Alberta to learn more about the new Education Act, which the Minister of Education, The Honourable Dave Hancock, is expected to introduce into the Legislative Assembly in Winter/Spring 2011. The goal of the new legislation is to provide the legal framework under which the “transformation of education in Alberta” can happen. The last time the School Act was thoroughly reviewed and renewed was over 20 years ago. A new Education Act is a momentous and important opportunity to positively shape and impact public education in Alberta into the foreseeable future.

PROCESS

Trustee Catherine Ripley briefly outlined the results of the Province’s consultative efforts over the past two years that have fed into the writing of the new legislation: 1) Speak Out! Student Engagement Initiative, 2) Setting the Direction for Special Education, and 3) Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans. In a nutshell, feedback during the consultations point to the need for personalized learning that engages all students and meets their needs and learning styles and that this learning needs to happen in “one inclusive education system where each student is successful” with the end result that the K-12 graduates will be “engaged thinkers, ethical citizens, and entrepreneurial spirits” ready to face the challenges of a rapidly changing world. She then provided the expected timelines for the legislation, described what the different parts of the Act would consist of (as per a draft framework document that was released in early October 2010), and finally posed the question: Will the legislation allow us to make the vision a reality?

Participants then examined and discussed three parts of the draft Act: the proposed Preamble statements, the proposed purpose statements for the Governance and Roles section, and the proposed provisions for the Financial Responsibility section. They were asked to consider: *If the Minister were in the room, what would you say excites you about these sections, and what questions do you have?* After the discussion on each section, people reported back the highlights of their conversation to the full group.

Trustee Ripley committed to compiling the conversations and sharing the results with The Honourable Dave Hancock, MLA, Edmonton-Whitemud and Mr. Fred Horne, MLA, Edmonton-Rutherford. It is hoped that these “grassroots” comments will help our two area MLAs with their decision-making on this

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legislation later this year. She also committed to sharing the results with the participants, her fellow trustees at Edmonton Public Schools (as well as other interested trustees across the province), her constituents on her Insights E-letter list, and anybody who visits her website. Again, it is hoped that these questions and comments will help all assess the legislation when it is introduced into the legislation. Again, will it enable the vision to become a reality?

THANK YOU

Many thanks to the following for attending the meeting and contributing their thoughts: Erla Anderson, Angela Armstrong, Cindy Berg, Michelle Ewoniak, Jacqueline Forest, Karen Hann, Margot Hyrnyk, Angele Leong-Sit, Jennifer Oujla, Baldwin Reichen, Bev Sawyer, Pat Sawatzky, Grant Shaigec, Karen Stewart, Tessa Styner, John Su, and Shawn Wells.

And thank you to those who expressed interest in attending but were unable to: Lori Fankhanel, Louise Forest, Tina Jardine, Deb Mayan, Barrie Mill, Cheryl Miller, and Lori Simon.

Special thanks to Cheryl Miller for helping me think through the agenda and how to tackle this enormous subject – the New Education Act – in only two hours!

And finally, thank you to Principal Dave Devin and his staff for welcoming us into DS Mackenzie Junior High School so warmly on an icy cold evening.

RESULTS

Overall Questions & Comments

How does the new legislation differ from the current School Act? What was the vision before? What are the barriers to making all of this a reality?

There appear to be lots of responsibilities, but no evidence of any resources. Will this Act continue to add more responsibility to the public school system (special needs, medical issues, family issues) without the supports in place? We need more money and access to other support systems instead of trying to provide all the services. Teachers cannot be social workers, nurses, psychiatrists, etc., but need quick and easy access to those professionals to provide the best help to the students.

Is the Government rushing the Act? Suggestion for the Minister: Introduce the Bill in February/March 2011. Let it die and allow for more consultation and public input on the actual legislation. Re-introduce a new revised Bill in Fall 2011.

The Preamble

Comments

It's hard to comment on such generic statements. These cannot stand alone without health and socio-economic considerations.

Maybe 20 years is too long before renewing/reviewing education legislation again: what if the future is far different than we can imagine?

Something that looks good on paper may not be a reality in practicality. You need a balance of excellence on paper AND in action.

I worry that taking too much of the "place" of learning out of education will negatively impact children and education.

With respect to Statement Three, I feel the role of education needs to be bigger than just "developing" citizens. I think the education system needs to INSPIRE students as well.

I have experience with a gifted, special needs student at the high end of the scale. There seems to be little or no support for these students. Resources, access to individual programming and strategies to a) recognize and b) support these students is necessary to successfully realize any vision.

Education is not the basis for individual well-being; it depends on the individual, and I hope that the government will not abandon such subjects as ELA, FLA, Science and Math (in favour of competencies/skills) because they are really quite useful and interesting subjects.

With respect to Statement Two, Yes – education is foundational to a healthy democracy, and as such, is at the core of societal well-being BUT so is health. They both interact and both are highly affected by poverty.

I support Statement Four, BUT this principle requires "high quality and socially engaging" SUPPORTS so that children are able to benefit from the "range of learning environments." Matters of economic and health equity, for instance, influence the success of any educational initiative.

The Preamble, as of October 7, 2010, will emphasize ...

... Education is at the core of individual well-being. (1)

... Education is foundational to a healthy democracy, and as such, is at the core of societal well-being. (2)

... The role of education is to develop citizens who will be engaged in their communities and will be able to face the challenges they face in an increasingly complex world. (3)

... The Government of Alberta recognizes the importance of enabling high quality and socially engaging learning opportunities with flexible timing and pacing through a range of learning environments to meet diverse student needs. (4)

Questions

Doesn't creating a healthy democracy also require Voting System reform to back up the educational goal mentioned in Statement 2?

Is the focus on K-12 education here?

Is education's goal to serve the workforce or for some other purpose?

Could we have VALUES included in the Preamble to serve as clearer guiding principles? Where are the values by which the system will operate?

How do you make these "motherhood" statements a reality?

The process so far appears to have been peaceful. What have been the reactions of the ATA and other stakeholders?

What about the difference between practice and vision?

How will this new legislation affect my gifted child who is not getting what he needs now?

What is the role and place of private schooling in all this? (i.e. The financial support for private schools impacts how all students are educated.)

Where is excellence considered?

With respect to Statement One, shouldn't education be at the core of a WELL-ROUNDED individual? Isn't this what education provides as opposed to health initiatives/legislation that contributes to WELL-BEING? What does "well-being" really refer to ... quality of life? Quality of experience?

With respect to Statement Two, how do we define societal "well-being"?

With respect to Statement Four, does the Province also need to consider its role in providing for and ensuring a diversity of opportunities/paths for students when they graduate?

Governance and Roles

Comments

Need to give parents and councils a legitimate mandate.

There is a duplication of boards and their services. If we got rid of this duplication, there would be greater opportunities for more diversity and programming.

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There should be an expectation that boards should provide specialty training to teachers to meet special learning needs; training and understanding is always changing and evolving.

Need to provide capacity building and training for teachers.

Ensure that the last two statements include special needs students.

These are broad statements. The Act may say more or less – we don't know yet, so will there be ample time for consideration of the actual legislation by the public once it is released?

I have heard that the Minister may appoint members of school boards as opposed to current elected positions.

The implication is that the Government is downloading responsibilities to a different level. Let school boards define their own structure and roles, not government.

Too much centralization here. Need the delegation of authority to boards and ensure elected members are serving on boards. Schools, parents, students should be accountable for their education, not province.

These statements seem to really reflect middle class values – where are the rest?

Teachers shouldn't have to talk to EVERYBODY about the students....

With respect to the last two statements – this can only happen in active positive collaboration with other departments (health, social services, etc.) It's just too easy to say it's the school's responsibility while ignoring the contributing/supporting elements.

Governance and Roles

Purpose Statements (as of October 7, 2010)

... The Minister of Education and the Government of Alberta are accountable for the education of all students. (1)

... Each student has rights and responsibilities for their own learning. (2)

... Parents have rights and responsibilities for their children's learning. (3)

... The Government has the responsibility and authority to determine the structure of school authorities and to set provincial standards for the roles and responsibilities of boards, charter and private schools. (4)

... School authorities are expected to actively engage the parents, students, staff, and community in the governance and delivery of education to their students. (5)

... School authorities are responsible for ensuring that all children and students who experience significant risk factors or disabilities are provided with a continuum of supports and services to assist them in achieving education success. (6)

... School authorities are expected to collaborate with external agencies to ensure that all children and students receive the continuum of services and supports they require to achieve educational success. (7)

Questions

With respect to Statement Six, how will risk factors and disabilities be defined? Will there be anything on Gifted and Talented students?

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With respect to involvement and active engagement, what roles and what capacity?

Who will make the choices about assessment and curriculum?

Will the provisions (as opposed to the purpose statements) recognize School Councils and community leagues and others involved in local government and grassroots organizations? Will there be any change for School Councils?

How can one implement some of these statements?

With respect to Purpose Statement One, WHO is the Government accountable to – the student, parent, school administration, voter? The system could look quite different depending on which one.

What about capacity building for teachers and other staff?

What will be the impact on higher education in terms of delivery to students who are becoming teachers? How will we revise the context and the values of their education so they are prepared for the new vision? How will we teach the teachers?

Does this place unrealistic expectations on teachers to implement what is set forth in the legislation?

Where are the considerations of children from low income, marginal situations?

Will School Councils and schools take input from parents?

What are the roles and responsibilities of boards, charter schools and private schools now? How will they change? Will they all have the same basic standards? Will homeschoolers be included here?

With respect to “educational success” (Statement Seven), is there a minimum/maximum approach here? It is important to recognize that a student’s individual potential and let them maximize that potential without judgment. What is the objective? Who sets the standards? What should students know and be able to do when they graduate?

Who is the Minister accountable to?

With respect to Statement Four, how is this different from what is currently the case? I am concerned about the government’s authority without an excellent democratic process to back it up.

What rights and responsibilities do the parents have?

Why would the government change private schools?

What will other agencies be “responsible for” and “expected to” in relation to education?

Financial Responsibility

Comments

Generally, the budget delivery and expectations seem unrealistic. Possibly there will be layoffs in the future and the costs are crazy.

Removing the restrictions around borrowing for school boards is a “can of worms.” Financial oversight and expert advisors are necessary.

I support the idea of school boards notifying the Minister if it is planning to purchase or lease land for a school building – provided that dialogue is available and the purpose is to improve overall delivery and access.

With respect to the school boards having the authority to determine when it no longer has the use of a school building, I am concerned about whether or not sufficient conversation would take place and repurposing of the schools in the community.

None of these things can be managed with an eye to optimal outcomes unless appropriate funding is in place.

Too vague, too many questions on these provisions!

Schools should not have to work casinos to provide what are really pretty basic supports.

Questions

What options for resourcing education has the government considered besides raising taxes?

The Province has control over the main part of the budget so where is the flexibility? Does the special school tax levy provide this?

Where is the provision statement for a funding formula? Right now funding to school boards to educate children is insufficient.

Proposed provisions for Financial Responsibility section (as of October 7, 2010)

Boards will continue to be accountable for the expenditure of funds and to provide accurate financial statements to the Minister as required. (1)

Provisions relating to property assessment, requisitions, and the Alberta School Foundation Fund¹ will remain in effect. (2)

Boards will continue to be able to access the Special School Tax Levy Plebiscite² provisions. (3)

Restrictions around borrowing by a school board for operational expenses will be removed. The Minister may, by order, set a threshold over which Ministerial approval for borrowing must be obtained. (4)

A school board will be required to provide notification in advance to the Minister if it plans to purchase or lease land for a school building. (5)

A school board will have the authority to determine whether it no longer has use for a school building, and will be required to notify the Minister when this determination has been made. (6)

Ministerial approval will be required for school building projects but will not be required for non-school building projects. (7)

Clarification of the definitions, responsibilities, and procedures for school closure will provide greater flexibility and autonomy for school boards. School boards will be required to implement and make available to the public policies respecting closure of a school and the transfer of students from one school building to another school building. (8)

Transportation funding and regulations will be simplified. (9)

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Where is the money to come from to cover the curriculum set out by the government? Parents? Where do you expect to get the \$\$\$ from?

Where does fundraising lie in this? Will it be addressed in the new Act? Will there be rules about what is considered Basic Education?

If the Province is adequately funding education, then why do we need to borrow money or access the Special School Tax Levy?

Why would the school NEED to borrow money? The government SHOULD be providing whatever funding it needs. And why would schools need permission to improve their buildings?

What about equity between have and have not schools? (Observation: "Have" schools draw on parents to supplement programming/equipment; "have not" schools seem to have greater access to government service providers/agencies.)

What about broadening and/or encouraging the use of special needs funding from other agencies/departments during school hours/in school? Why are there barriers here?

OTHER

Comment from participant: With respect to the Access to Education section, which covers who the Province and school boards are responsible for educating, I would strongly like to recommend that the age for entering school be raised. My personal observation is that many of the children I see in my work on the Attendance Board are "young" for their grade. If they started school later, would this help reduce both the dropout rate and attendance issues?



FORWARD!

This document and the PowerPoint Presentation used at the meeting are posted in a blog posting titled "Let's Talk... the New Education Act!" at www.catherineripley.ca