



Alberta Voices: Teachers' Aspirations for the Future of Teaching



The Alberta Teachers' Association

This project was made possible with the support and participation of the following locals:

- Battle River Local No 32
- Edmonton Public Teachers Local No 37
- Edmonton Catholic Teachers Local No 54
- Park Plains East Local No 31
- Red Deer City Local No 60
- Red Deer Catholic Local No 80
- Wetaskiwin Local No 18

© Copyright 2012

Unauthorized use or duplication without prior approval is strictly prohibited.

ISBN 978-1-927074-08-4

The Alberta Teachers' Association

11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1

Telephone 780-447-9400 or 1-800-232-7208

www.teachers.ab.ca

Preface

In the fall of 2011, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) was approached to participate in a national research venture, jointly sponsored by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) and the Canadian Education Association (CEA). The study sought to explore teachers' responses to three questions:

1. What are the elements and conditions that contribute to teachers being able to teach in a way that resonates with their beliefs about teaching and learning?
2. What are the professional conditions that support teachers to be able to teach the way they aspire to teach?
3. How can we create learning environments where those conditions are present on a more consistent and systematic basis?

Subsequently, seven ATA locals, representing a mix of large urban, small urban and rural teacher constituencies, responded to an invitation to organize and host focus groups to explore teachers' aspirations for their practice. Using the appreciative inquiry model and a scripted focus-group process, the researchers worked with three focus groups. Through individual reporting in workbooks, peer/pair activities, and group storytelling and conversation, participants shared their recollections of moments when they were teaching at their best and recounted what they would need to meet their aspirations for themselves and their students in the future.

The participants' submissions reveal that teachers continue to hold very high aspirations for themselves, for their students and for the education system. In this study, teachers exhibited a strong desire to create great schooling experiences for every student and a strong commitment to their schools, students, communities and profession. They asked for the space, time and resources to be creative and responsive to their students. They wanted to build caring relationships with their students and their colleagues and to imaginatively create learning spaces where students could be full participants in the pursuit of learning. They asked to be given the professional autonomy to collaboratively shape school-based learning communities that would engender relevant lived curricula and be responsive to students within a conegotiated learning context. The vision of the future articulated by these teacher participants has the potential to fundamentally shift education. It will be the responsibility of education sector workers to hear and honour the voices of teachers such as these if society and the education system collectively hope to transform learning for students and the future of Alberta.

This report represents an analysis of the data provided by teachers in three Alberta focus groups: one large urban, one small urban and one hosted in a rural area. This same data was incorporated into the national research report and will be used for advocacy on a national level and beyond. The Association is grateful to CTF and CEA for the opportunity to participate. Special thanks to the seven partnering locals that supported the focus groups and teacher participants who so frankly shared their perspectives, memories and aspirations. Dr Gaylene Schreiber of the Professional Development program area of the Alberta Teachers' Association completed the analysis of the Alberta data for this project and authored this report. Finally, I am appreciative of the efforts of focus-group facilitator Stephen Hurley, who skillfully guided conversations that empowered teachers to collectively imagine the future of teaching.

Gordon R Thomas
Executive Secretary

Introduction

In the fall of 2011, the Alberta Teachers' Association was invited to participate in a national study conducted in partnership between the Canadian Education Association (CEA) and the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF). The resulting publication, titled *Teaching the Way We Aspire to Teach – Now and in the Future*, was released in July 2012 and is available on the CTF website. It reports the aggregate national data, both of focus groups held throughout the country and an online survey completed by more than 4,700 teachers nationwide.

Nationally, about 200 teachers participated in the focus groups that were held from June to December 2011. The focus groups were based on an *appreciative inquiry* model of facilitation to ensure that the dialogue was grounded in stories of success and to frame the conversation around change in a positive and hopeful way. Thirty-five participants came from three focus groups conducted in Alberta: one large urban, one small urban and one hosted in a rural area. This report, based on a thematic analysis of the Alberta focus groups field notes, recorded group processes and individual text submissions, attempts to deeply probe the Alberta experience, insofar as these 35 participants reflect the realities of their teaching contexts. While the themes reported here are not intended to be generalizable to the entire Alberta teaching population, it is hoped that the report creates a sense of realism and recognizability for educational stakeholders hoping to understand the lived contexts of teachers' work.

The data produced from the focus group experiences revealed a number of overarching themes that occurred and reoccurred in the collected data, were apparent throughout the series of prompts and frequently surfaced during discussion.

1 Respect for Diversity

Teachers demonstrated a powerful awareness of and enormous respect for the diversity of learners they found in their classrooms. They noted that their most satisfying teaching moments occurred when they were engaged in strength-based, student-driven projects and activities.

2 Resource Impoverishment

Teachers suffered from a chronic lack of resources, such as basic textbooks for each student; access to digital resources and technology hardware; and support personnel to help with nonteaching tasks or support for exceptional students. Teachers noted that they would be able to teach more effectively if they could focus on teaching and learning without the need to locate and negotiate for appropriate resources.

3 Professional Autonomy

Teachers craved the freedom to plan engaging participatory learning activities that could stretch students' understanding of themselves, their skills and the world. Teachers wished they could teach unhindered by limited space and time, standardization and compliance, and prescriptive expectations generated at the systems level.

4 Creative Pedagogy

Teacher respondents placed a high value on the opportunity to engage students in complex and creative problem solving through activities that relate to work and society. Teachers noted that in their best practices they often served as facilitators who navigated with students along paths of discovery and invention.

5 Place and Space

Teachers felt bound by restrictions inherent in the traditional physical place of public schooling, such as standardized furnishings and cramped, single-function rooms. They expressed a strong desire for schools to become more comfortable, accessible places for learning, with a variety of spaces that could be imaginatively used to support multiple learning purposes and styles. They asked for flexible, multipurpose indoor and outdoor spaces, and expressed a longing to capitalize on the potential for learning in the community, using community resources—both places and people. They asked for school environments that are brightly lit, warm, clean and safe, as well as access to external environments that could challenge and extend student exploration.

6 Teaching and Learning

Respondents expressed a preference for open curriculum that provides a framework to be interpreted by teachers. Teachers strongly expressed their sense that their professional expertise was best used when they had the autonomy to make pedagogical choices based on their analysis of their students' individual needs and learning contexts rather than those dictated by external expectations. They were frustrated by having so many administrative tasks that diluted their time and energy for teaching and learning.

7 Positive Collegial and Administrative Relationships

The opportunity to collaborate with colleagues was highly valued. Teachers wanted to learn from each other and capitalize on the expertise in their school communities. They valued school administrators who took an interest in classroom teaching and frequented classrooms to assist and observe. They appreciated administrators who encouraged them to take risks and try new ideas and those who advocated for the resources to help them innovate. Teachers indicated a strong desire to collaboratively plan and develop assessment instruments, engage in cross-discipline and cross-graded projects, and engage in ongoing professional learning with their peers.

8 Pride and Humility

In telling their stories and identifying their own contributions, teachers took remarkable pride in their students' accomplishments but were humble about their own contributions. They expressed significant satisfaction in experiences that allowed them to see their students develop complex skills.

In the following section, teachers discuss successful and satisfying moments in the classroom. Their narratives celebrate the very qualities that make Alberta's education system one of the finest in the world but also identify the uniqueness of these events. One participant opined that the finest moments should be everyday occurrences for every child.

Teaching the Way We Aspire

Prompt: *Thinking back on your own teaching experience recall a specific time over the past couple of years when you felt like you were at your best, a time when everything seemed to click, and you and your students felt like you were “in the zone.”*

“One of my most satisfying lessons occurred in a math class when I was working with the Grade 2 teacher, our students and the teaching assistant. The Grades 2 and 3 students were busy counting, exploring, communicating and analyzing to see if we had enough Halloween candy for the whole school. It was a math investigation of place value and counting. We introduced it as a story and told the students we really needed their help to solve the problem. We encouraged them to collaborate with the other students in their group to come up with a counting plan.

What I brought to the lesson was a problem for the students to solve and an opportunity for them

to think creatively and critically. I provided the resources for them to record their thinking, the idea of possibility and, of course, the candy. The students immediately took ownership, shared their strategies and engaged in peer coaching and teamwork. I recall being so impressed with their vocabulary, problem-solving strategies, and ability to communicate and cooperate with each other. The principal came by to visit and confirmed the importance of the students solving the problem for the whole school. The other adults working with me added a lot of energy, enthusiasm and praise as they observed and made notes. I was so pleased with the results. It remains one of those memorable and satisfying teaching moments.”

“When I think about some of my best lessons, a lesson I did with my French as a second language class comes right to mind. We were doing a lesson on advertising. The project was for students to work in small groups to conduct an analysis of commercials and magazine advertisements based on criteria I had taught the day before. Following the process of analyzing, each group was to present their findings to their classmates. This led to the creation of their own ads using criteria determined to be most effective by the particular group.

It was an exciting time. I circulated around the room and helped them confirm conclusions,

provided vocabulary assistance, and reminded them of previous examples. They were so engaged, and I was thrilled that they were able to communicate in the target language on a topic they could relate to. They weren’t stilted or practised—there was nothing rote about it!

Preparing for the lesson was time well spent. I had located ads from French and English magazines and TV that had teenage appeal. On the day of the lesson, I made sure resources were available and, after setting a few parameters, allowed students to work on their own. I was so pleased with their engagement and noted with satisfaction that it was a noisy but happy class.”

to Teach —Teaching Stories

“**M**y Grade 6 students were preparing for and enacting a mock legislature to learn about the provincial government. They were given various roles and researched the issues they were debating. Then we went through the process of debating and passing bills into laws. We arranged the desks to simulate the legislative assembly chamber. I recall looking around with a sense of wonder as we began the debate: the students were poised and prepared to ask and answer questions and speak about the bills being passed. I can see now that it didn’t just happen—a lot of

people supported the activity. I taught research skills, prepared them with the outline of a script and staged a model debate of one issue when I introduced the project. The students bought into the debate and the roles and could see the relevance of it all. They brought enthusiasm and a willingness to act their part. Their parents helped by discussing the issues with them beforehand, with the result that students commented afterward that they wanted to do it again. I just wish I had been able to share what I was experiencing with a colleague.”

“**I**wish I had been able to take pictures of one particular lesson I designed. We were studying electricity, and my kids were building a wired shoebox house with specific components, using motors, wires, batteries and other materials. They were using parallel circuits and double switches and were expected to incorporate certain elements, such as an alarm, used in a logical way. I encouraged them to develop their own plan and provided only broad outlines. The challenging part was organizing materials and keeping kids focused on completing their own projects. They

kept helping each other with problem solving! I was proud that they were all so charged and that they had remembered previous lessons and applied the concepts so well. I am lucky to have a teaching assistant who helped me with materials and a custodian who didn’t complain about sweeping up all the wire bits. The principal encouraged me and stops in when I tell him that something neat is planned so the kids can tell him about their projects. I will be able to use what I learned from coaching the students to improve this lesson for the next time I teach it.”

“**W**hen were my students and I in the zone? There are many of these experiences in science class, most of which occur during hands-on exercises. The one experience that stands out in my mind is playing the ecosystem survival game in our local forest. Students play the role of various organisms trying to survive, running from predators and finding food and water. The game has become a school tradition and now includes several grades. Students play the roles of herbivores, carnivores or omnivores that are looking for food and water stations while chasing each other. Teachers and teaching

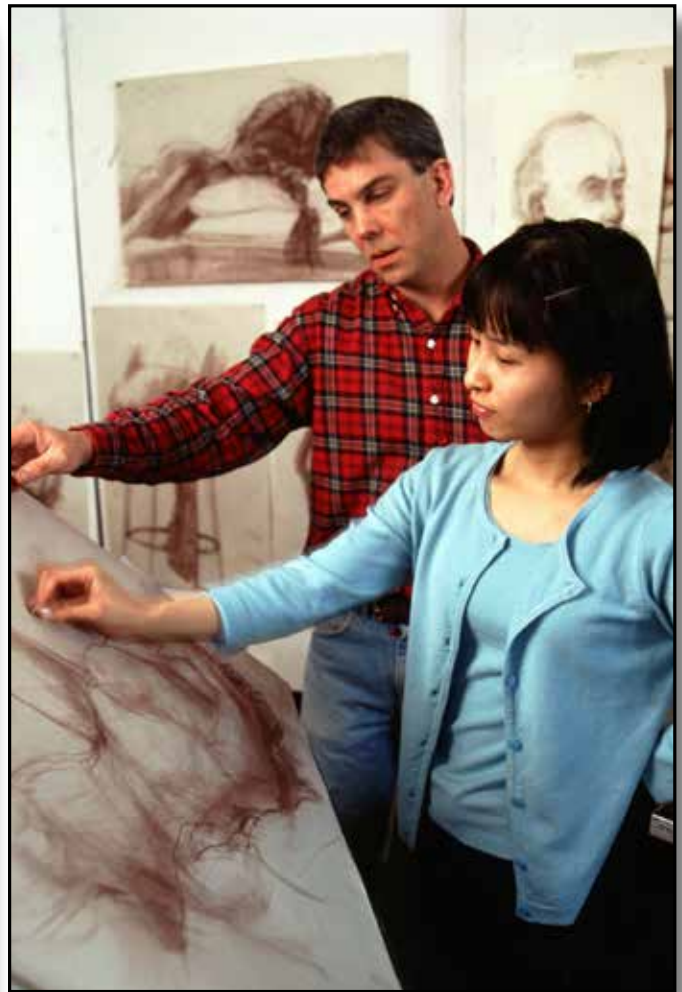
assistants participate in this game in key roles, and students really like this aspect. For the game to be successful I have to create roles based on what we have been studying and that suit all types of students. The other teachers, the principal and I work together to hype it up, spread enthusiasm and help kids get into the spirit of it. It is always fun—I feel invigorated and laugh a lot with the kids when we get to play. It has become an important tradition, so much so that people in the community recognize the event when we take over the park from time to time.”

“I grew up on a farm and now teach in a small community. But before this year, I taught in the city at a big vocational high school. I was teaching a small CTS foods class in this incredible industrially outfitted kitchen. I knew a guy who had shot a moose and he didn’t want to butcher it. Being open-minded and also wanting to teach my inner-city kids something about where food really comes from, I asked my hunting buddy to donate the quartered moose to the class so that we could learn how to cut up and debone it. What a surprising experience! I had to cajole some students to participate, but I was pleasantly

surprised by how well they did. I really had to plan for safety and supervise very closely, but the result was that the students were exposed to something they had never seen or done before. An interesting part of the event was a discussion about the ethics of eating meat and the debate between the vegetarians and the meat eaters. It was satisfying to be able to guide and mentor while they discovered something about food, themselves and each other. That group was a lot different after we butchered the moose. They seemed to respect and like each other and me more throughout the rest of the term.”

“I was working with two classes of 24 students who were streamed as average. Though I taught this whole group several subjects, this particular activity was about Grade 6 social studies. I developed a stop-motion animation project to teach concepts related to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The project was very student driven and involved problem solving, taking risks, dreaming big, writing, editing, producing, discussing and having fun.

A wonderful classroom community evolved that had real-world relevance. My students stayed focused because I had previously instituted a peer-discipline structure. They all had jobs, and there were classroom police officers who used a fine/credit system. My role as a teacher was to act as facilitator and technology expert, and I had to be comfortable with a noisy classroom and allow the projects to evolve. I became more of a technology advisor to budding producers than anything. I recall being excited and tired at the end of the day, but in a good way. I was supported with time to plan, professional development to learn how to use stop-motion animation, money to buy resources and thoughtful scheduling. Administrative support was essential for this whole program to work. The biggest moment was when the students presented their videos. The students were so invested and the videos were all so excellent that I was overwhelmed. Clearly, they had a strong desire to succeed.”



“I am a journeyman chef and I also teach high school. Every so often you get to make a difference in a way you don’t expect. As a teacher, you have to try to teach kids ethics and build their confidence by creating opportunities for them to take risks and experience success. I make sure that my students know they can come into the room any time, just to talk or hang out. Sometimes they just need a safe place.

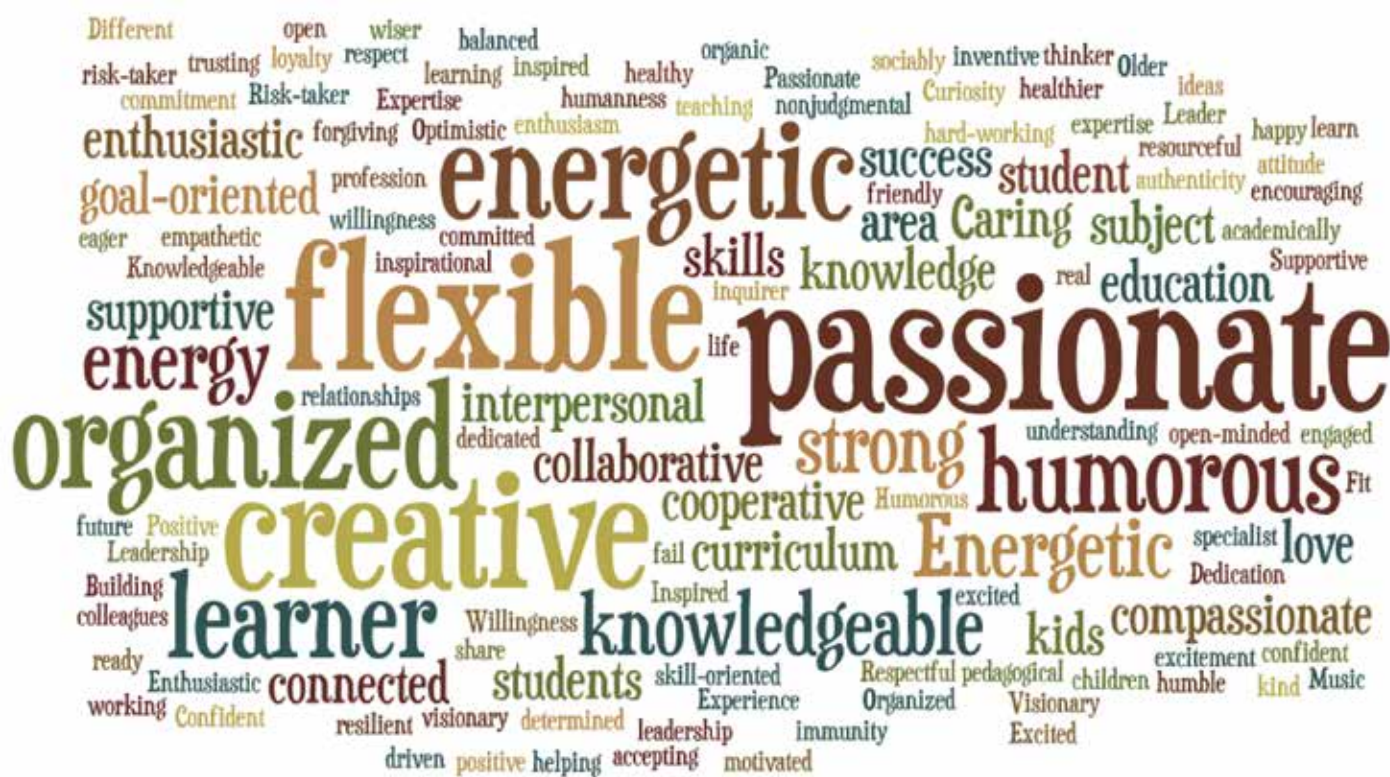
I had this one student who was very down on herself. She had very poor self-esteem and was highly self-critical. She was in a class with 28 other students and was completing a cake-

decorating module. She didn’t have a lot of friends to work with, but she created a technically detailed project of high quality. She was resistant to praise, but I made sure she knew how good it was by pointing out where her use of shapes and colour contrast were artistic and creative. You have to encourage kids to come out of themselves a bit, then let them know how proud you are of them. I kept her cake so I could make sure it got an audience and some recognition at parent-teacher interviews. It was so great to watch this student realize that she had some creative talent hidden inside that she could develop.”



“I remember feeling satisfied with our wiki project. On the first day, I explained how a wiki works and gave my students an introductory assignment on ideology. They had to post one picture and one word on the wiki that described their most fundamental belief. The next day, students took turns showing their picture and explaining their word. They were able to apply some of their most profound personal experiences into this one activity, and it was powerful. The activity was totally student centred after I gave the initial instruction, example and guidance. While individual students presented, I prompted for more clarification from some, asked guiding questions of others, but mostly was just captivated by the explanations and experiences that the students spoke about. I was amazed at how they were willing to share some very personal ideals and stories. It set an amazing tone of openness in the class that lasted an entire semester. I was pleased to share this lesson with my colleagues, and I will definitely use this idea again.”

The Future of Teaching



In this section, focus-group participants were asked to imagine the future of teaching and to comment specifically on their ideal situation in six areas: personal attributes, resources, relationships, infrastructure, leadership, and protocol and procedures. The points under the categories below emerged as pervasive themes throughout the response set. Specific participant quotes have been included to develop the reader's understanding of the participants' submissions. The responses are not presented in any particular order but are intended to represent a synthesis of the data sample.

Prompt: You have fallen into a deep sleep and wake to find that it is the year 2020! In light of your positive stories of aspirational teaching and your identified personal and organizational strengths, envision the best version of your teaching environment and dynamic. In imagining the scenario that would best energize and excite you, consider the categories that appear below: personal attributes, resources, relationships, infrastructure, leadership, protocols and procedures.

in 2020: Six Elements

Personal Attributes

1. **Passion** for students, teaching, learning and subject area (for example, for the written word)
2. **Creativity, flexibility, open-mindedness and willingness to taking risks** (for example, trying new things, out-of-the-box thinking, trying new teaching approaches)
3. **Energy, enthusiasm and engagement** (for example, positive, optimistic and loving energy; well rested, fit and healthy; ability to motivate and inspire students; engaged with and engaging to students)
4. **Knowledge** of pedagogy, subject areas, trends in education and curriculum; and **drive for self-improvement** (for example, commitment to lifelong learning; curiosity and research orientation; seeking intellectual stimulation, professional development opportunities)
5. **Humility, authenticity and a sense of humour** (for example, not taking oneself too seriously; recognizing one's own weaknesses and personal limits, and others' strengths; being human)
6. **Caring and commitment to students** (for example, respect, kindness, patience and calmness, acceptance of differences, compassion, empathy, and commitment to success for all)
7. **Trust, collaboration and connectedness** with students, parents, colleagues and community

Resources

1. **Time** (for example, to plan and implement new ideas, provide feedback to each student, organize interesting learning activities, locate resources for professional development)
2. **Technology and related support** (for example, open access to resources at school and home; reliable, interactive, unlimited technology; open Internet access for students; professional development on new applications; onsite technology assistance; iPads for every student)
3. **Flexible and adaptable learning spaces** (for example, movable furniture, flexible grouping, comfortable chairs, lap desks, room for students to spread out in groups, carpets and bean bag chairs)
4. **Access to field trip opportunities/ community resources/expert visitors** (for example, grocery store for math, airport for aerodynamics)
5. **Opportunities to collaborate** (for example, to plan and organize activities and field trips, take courses on new approaches, collaborate with colleagues)
6. **Personnel** (for example, enough teachers and educational assistants to work with small groups, help high-needs students, create smaller class sizes)
7. **Basic resources** (for example, adequate resources for each student, high-quality and unbiased print resources and props for hands-on learning activities)
8. **Focus on teaching tasks, fewer clerical and administrative tasks** (for example, no individual program plans, less onerous report card processes, less fundraising for basic resources, no excess paperwork for specialist referrals)
9. **Student readiness** (for example, students are well fed each day, have suitable clothing, have support at home)

“More listening, less telling; more helping, less demanding”

“A provincial government that values teachers and provides resources so teachers are not subsidizing the education system themselves”

“Shared leadership and responsibility among the staff, school board and government”

“Unique learning spaces large enough for students to move around in, and interactive space—a home for students”

“We need a school system that supports teachers, not leans on them.”

Relationships

1. **Collaborative:** Teachers need ongoing, sustained time for staff to collaborate.
2. **Collegial, constructive, compassionate relationships:** The best relationships are based on dignity and respect for individual knowledge, and acknowledge the human element in teaching and learning.
3. **Trusting and mutually respectful:** Trust and respect are a must between students, teachers, parents, administrators and community members.
4. **Responsible:** Good relationships improve learning and help people pursue common goals.
5. **Facilitative:** Teachers need to forge good relationships and assume a variety of roles to help students explore learning.
6. **Whole and authentic:** Good relationships foster warmth and caring, recognize and celebrate others, and allow for humour, too.
7. **Encouraging and empowering:** Good relationships mean being positive about new ideas, allowing for risk taking, being noncompetitive and not based in compliance.
8. **Inclusive:** Good relationships reduce boundaries between roles, and between school and community.

Infrastructure

1. **Smaller classes:** Fewer students per grouping in all grades and subjects, with 20 students maximum in secondary classes.
2. **Schools as optimal learning sites:** Schools must be clean and comfortable, with open rooms, flexible spaces, dedicated collaborative spaces, storage, plenty of natural light and operable windows with places for plants, and unique learning spaces such as lofts, study carrels, large rooms, and spaces outdoors.
3. **Fewer expectations:** Ideally, there should be fewer subject areas to teach, no achievement testing, fewer supervision assignments.
4. **Dedicated time for professional tasks:** Teachers need time for preparation, assessment, collaboration, parental contact and professional development.
5. **Realistic district and provincial visions:** Administrators and decision makers must be aware of socioeconomic realities and of the need to guide more than prescribe. They also must remember that they are dealing with real kids in real communities.
6. **Program Support:** The following kinds of support are necessary: technology personnel for troubleshooting; better programming for English language learners and for high-needs students; flexible scheduling for cross-grade learning projects.
7. **Ready access to resources:** The following resources are necessary: knowledge access points, tools and hands-on props, spare spaces, buses for field trips, enough for everyone.

Leadership

- 1. Distributed collegial leadership:** Teachers are meaningfully involved in site-based and system-level decision making; trusted in their professionalism; free to engage in inventive, creative practice; respected by their colleagues for their expertise.
- 2. Supportive jurisdiction and provincial leadership:** Leaders and decision makers recognize workload; assign time-consuming, nonteaching tasks to support staff; implement fewer system-driven goals and initiatives; schedule to support engaging practices and structures; ensure adequate dedicated professional development and preparation time; provide adequate resources without complicated restrictions.
- 3. Leadership that invites and supports teacher autonomy:** This kind of leadership encourages teamwork, risk taking and acting on teachable moments; respects various learning and teaching styles; trusts the learning process; and promotes democracy in decision making and school structures.
- 4. Involved and supportive school-based administration:** A supportive administrator empowers, is directly involved in teaching and learning, offers to participate during hands-on activities, encourages risk taking and provides feedback, invests in creative learning practices, promotes collaboration in decision making, identifies resources and negotiates access to them, promotes autonomy, and respects everyone's contributions.

"Choices, not mandates"

"Time given for planning, assessment, collaboration and self-chosen professional development"

"Trusting the learning process, respecting various styles, honouring and supporting roles within the school"

"More freedom of choice and less driven by hours necessary to obtain credits"

"A discipline process based on citizenship, with both flexibility and consistency"

"Less supervision and more prep time, time to prepare and discover resources"

Protocol and Procedures

- 1. Support learning:** Protocols and procedures are required that allow freedom, flexibility and student-driven choice; focus on citizenship; are flexible but with consistent expectations; and support learning through organized chaos.
- 2. Create a structure that supports professional responsiveness:** Teachers need a fluid, collaboratively built structure that is teacher guided but student centred.
- 3. Dedicate time realistically:** Teachers need adequate time to respond to individual student needs, less structured time spent in class, and time for professional development, assessment, communication, collaboration and planning.
- 4. Recognize the variability of context:** Teaching contexts vary widely. Having protocol and procedures in place that take this variability into account ensures safety for students and teachers and encourages a variety of learning environments,
- 5. Are based on respect and value for the school community:** respect for the community means an insistence on positive learning behaviours and respect for students' and teachers' ability to make responsible choices.

The Future of Teaching in 2020:

Focus-group participants were asked to describe what their ideal teaching situation would look like in the year 2020. They were asked to speculate on what would energize their practice and what would attract others to the profession. Following each heading (originally embedded in a prompt) is a sample of responses that depicts the range and depth of the participants' ideals.

“In the future, my teaching situation ...

“encourages students to learn through inquiry by using a variety of teaching techniques or strategies that meet individual learning styles. Students will be held responsible for their own learning. Teachers act as facilitators and encourage students to work to their potential.”

“involves self-directed students with access to global resources.”

“includes all teachers working together for kids. There is a spirit of collaborative learning to engage and educate kids.”

“is more relaxed because I have time to fully explore and master the important objectives in the curriculum.”

“has less central control and more professional choice.”

“I am energized by ...

“fewer students at one time—more time to share/collaborate with other teachers to improve my practices and help my students succeed. I have more attention and resources available for students with special needs.”

“my students, who can readily experience success and feel successful.”

“possibilities for all those involved—seeing growth and fostering growth.”

“the fact that I am set up to succeed, and as a result students are set up to succeed.”

“more freedom and a more calming, confident environment for everyone.”

“field trips, which allow kids to explore the world around them.”

“having the time to develop thoughtful programs and develop a personal rapport with each of my students.”

“the atmosphere of yearning for learning.”

“students who are intellectually curious—they seek to be socially, emotionally, intellectually better than they were when they began the day. Passion for growth becomes contagious.”

“not being bogged down with so many expectations so that I can do what I am here for: working with kids.”

Teaching Environment and Assets

“In this future, others would consider a career in teaching as compelling and attractive because ...

“they will have a reasonable number of students to teach, outstanding support available in terms of infrastructure/resources and access to collaborative processes to help them develop their teaching skills and help students succeed.”

“there will be a sense of direction by teacher leaders, who will motivate and inspire others. I feel a sense of deep satisfaction that the possible has become the probable.”

“as professionals they will be able to structure their classrooms to meet the needs of their students and have time and resources to do so.”

“teaching is more self-directed by the teacher and respects the professional autonomy of the teacher.”

“they will be able to have an effect on fellow human beings while instilling self-confidence.”

“they will experience a feeling of achievement/satisfaction, and the feeling of making a difference/being a positive role model in the lives of students.”



In the Teaching to

At the conclusion of the focus groups, participants were asked to draft a personal statement. They were given the stem below and asked to write about their aspirations for their teaching practice. As the products of a culminating activity in the focus-group experience, these statements serve as illustrative examples of Alberta's teachers' professional aspirations: their hopes, dreams and ideals for the future of teaching.

In the teaching to which I aspire ...

I will be dedicated to providing students with the opportunity and freedom to learn in the style that best appeals to them. I will aspire to encourage students to take risks and develop skills that can be used and applied in all areas of learning, at present and in the future. Through collaboration and teamwork of staff, the needs of all students can be better met. Students will have the freedom and flexibility to work in an environment that encourages learning with a range of materials and physical spaces.

Each person will be able to teach, discuss and support learning, attaining the best for him- or herself and those around them. The support and infrastructure will be available to all. Learning will be a journey and teachers will not be distracted by the idea that they have to constantly best others. The journey will be exciting and inspiring, and each participant will have an unconditional interest in getting the best learning experience for all. In this new teaching environment I will have time to prepare, time to teach, time to reflect.

I will be able to teach from the premise of what is best for the students, both as a group and as individuals. The curriculum or program will be expressed in broad terms, not as a list of 10,000 outcomes. I will be free to design exciting, creative lessons. I will be free to learn from failure, so I can reteach a lesson or concept creatively and learn from experience. New approaches to teaching and learning would take place daily in my classroom.

I will be treated as a professional who can make decisions about the learning needs of my students rather than have specific outcomes dictated to me. I will have the trust and confidence of my administration to be creative and inventive in planning engaging and meaningful lessons. There will be no provincially-mandated or school board-mandated exams to distract my students and me from learning. Students will take more responsibility for deciding what their learning needs are, and there will be enough staff available to accommodate those needs. Staff will work together in a climate of mutual respect and collaboration. Students will have the opportunity to work on personally relevant self-directed projects.

Which We Aspire

I will create a classroom environment in which all students feel welcome and safe, one which I would want my own child to experience. The ideal classroom situation will allow each child to reach his or her full potential, academically and socially. There will be support and I will feel that I can do the best for each child in my class.

I can allow each student to be an individual. I can encourage students to guide their own learning and inform the assessment of their skills. Students will no longer be passengers on a fast bus ride down the highway but, instead, participants in a field trip to the field of their choosing. Top-down, mandated policy focused on increasing test scores will be replaced with guidelines created with teachers that allow for a deeper learning. Teachers will be encouraged to participate in professional learning, because the work teachers do outside of class time is just as important as the work they do inside the school.

All students become active participants, passionately learning through a variety of traditional and nontraditional means. Students engage in active participation using their strengths, talents and struggles in their work toward success. Students and teachers build relationships based on shared personal and learning goals, and are informed by principles of mentorship.

I am able to be the best that I can be with a manageable class size of 20 or fewer. I have a supportive principal who shares my vision, will let me experiment with new methods of instruction and technology and who supports my time away from the classroom for professional development. I will work in an environment where students are held accountable for their actions, and respect learning and others around them. Each student will have appropriate supports and will not be left to flounder, because I have educational assistants available to help. I will have time to build relationships and rapport with my students. Students will be just as important as the curriculum documents. My classroom is a community where everyone is respected. There is enough technology for each student to access frequently. I am also appreciated by the community at large. The public will have more of an understanding that teaching and learning are complex processes.

I have absolute support with respect to time, resources, equipment and curricular support. There is time for curricular adaptation and implementation. There is a healthy balance between instruction and facilitation. I will have a group of kids whom I can engage and relate to in order to achieve the best outcomes for all involved, not just in terms of marks. This learning environment is partly facilitated by adequate time and a supportive environment, and not because of student ability or groupings but true student engagement. There will be risk-taking in learning and planning and spontaneity in classroom activities. There are opportunities to address current issues that relate to curriculum, initiated by students or teacher. I will feel satisfied and confident without excessive pressure to finish on time or devote my family time to marking.

The Future of Teaching

At the time of this study, the landscape of education in Alberta is changing rapidly. There is a strong awareness on the part of the profession and community stakeholders that educational transformation is not only possible, but necessary if we are to sustain the extraordinary quality of Alberta's education system while continuing to meet increasingly complex demands on teachers and learners. Despite the quantifiable success of Alberta's education system, this study reveals that the essential elements that sustain the lived experience of teaching and learning are fragile and ephemeral. It will take the resolve of all stakeholders to preserve and strengthen conditions necessary for teachers to honour their aspirations for every student. The Alberta focus group participants' conversations and written statements yielded themes similar to the national study, yet the particulars clearly reflect the characteristics of the Alberta context. The following section comprises a synthesis of central themes and includes specific recommendations for educational reform to support aspirational teaching and enhanced student learning.

Students are the central focus in the work that teachers do. Focus teachers' efforts on teaching and learning.

Teachers communicated that their energy, resources and expertise should be directed to nurturing student learning. Teachers noted that their best teaching moments came from lessons that required significant preparation: it is no simple matter to bring a moose carcass into the lab, arrange a mock legislature or set up components for electrical experimentation and design. Yet, teachers' time is increasingly absorbed by nonteaching tasks. The net result is less time to design thoughtful and creative lessons and assessment tools. There was significant support for the idea that teachers must know their students as individuals, recognize the multiplicity of perspectives and respond to individual life stories in the classroom. It was important to teachers that they have the ability and resources to respond to diverse students in a strengths-based manner. Many acknowledged that meeting the needs of every student was central to their purpose as a teacher.

Teachers' aspirational teaching can be best served by a reduction or reassignment of nonteaching tasks so that teachers can focus on knowing and responding to their students.

Teachers have a strong sense of the personal attributes that they bring to their work. Capitalize on these strengths.

Commitment, passion, humour, humility, compassion, creativity, and connectedness with oneself and others were only some of the qualities that participants recognized as present in moments of aspirational teaching. They also expressed the importance of subject knowledge and engaging in ongoing professional learning and research to maintain exemplary practice. They understood the importance of risk-taking and the power of empowering their students through facilitative actions.

To enhance teachers' aspirational teaching, a systemic culture should be nurtured that will identify and support the development of these teacher characteristics, particularly in early career teachers, and provide for sufficient professional learning opportunities to enhance teachers' professional capital.

Trust and mutually supportive relationships are key dimensions of the teaching/learning dynamic. Create spaces for authentic relationship building.

Teachers' practices are enriched when they are afforded time to build relationships and collaborate with administrators, colleagues and paraprofessionals. They are able to collectively create and design hands-on and engaging problem solving situations for students, and enhance their own professional efficacy through shared reflection. In cases where participating teachers' best moments were designed independently, they yearned for the ability to share and celebrate their successes. Vibrant learning communities require structures and supports to enable collaboration: we know that students do not flourish in isolation, and the same is true for teachers. An important aspect of

aching in Alberta

effective teaching is the ability to create trusting relationships with students and their parents, and to nurture community relationships that will lead to partnerships in learning.

Teachers' aspirational teaching can be supported by creating time and opportunity within the school day for relationship building with those engaged in teaching and learning.

Being valued and recognized as professionals are foundations for a positive teaching and learning environment. Enhance teacher autonomy and reduce systemic obstacles.

The belief that parents, the public and school and district administration trust teachers to do their jobs well is necessary for teachers and school communities to thrive. Teachers are, and need to be seen as, competent professionals capable of making a wide range of thoughtful teaching and learning choices. Restrictive practices that hinder teachers' capacity limit learning. Teachers are restricted by practices such as excessive administrative demands that discourage field trips, intensely prescriptive curricula, or top-down school and jurisdictional policies that curtail the range of pedagogical choices teachers can make. The same holds true for assessment; there was a general sense among participants that teachers working in the shadow of standardized tests and the resulting scrutiny are less able to engage in authentic assessment practices.

Supportive and respectful relationships, rather than externally imposed restrictions within the educational community, are an important condition that enhances teacher autonomy.

Visionary, responsive and shared leadership is needed to support teachers. Reconsider top-down leadership practices.

Participants valued leadership that trusted teacher practice, supported instructional risk taking, and embraced a variety of teaching styles. They admired administrators who encouraged them to try inventive methods and supported them by ensuring sufficient resources. Participants reflected positively on distributed, collegial models of school and

jurisdictional leadership, in which teacher leadership was deliberately developed and decisions were made collaboratively.

Positive school-based leadership practices must be informed by jurisdiction and provincial leadership that supports the work of teachers in the classroom, seeks to reduce obstacles to this work, and establishes a consistent vision for learning that is paramount in decision making.

Schools exist within and not apart from the larger community. Redesign learning places.

Teachers and students need school environments that are modern, clean, adaptable, comfortable and designed to promote participatory learning. Ideally, schools should serve as a hub for the community. It is surprising that in Alberta, one of the nation's wealthiest provinces, teachers express concerns regarding the suitability of their schools. Some facilities are old, cramped, outdated or poorly suited to 21st-century learning. These schools, planned and built within the paradigm of the factory model of teaching, limit learning. Just as important, teachers know that community-embedded learning strengthens engagement and relevance for students. Teachers stressed the importance of access to community experts and field trips. When teachers and students capitalize on community experts and local facilities, it builds a sense of involvement in education for all.

To support teachers' aspirational teaching, school and curriculum planners will need to reconsider how schools look and feel, and create engaging and flexible spaces that enhance rather than "house" learning; that create a centre that strengthens community ties.

Flexibility is key when designing the policies and infrastructure that govern teachers' work. Reconceptualize the parameters binding teaching and learning.

Teachers expressed a desire for flexible structures. They particularly asked for creative scheduling that allowed for student choice and individual contact with their students, and dedicated time for planning,

assessment, resource development, communication and collaboration. Teacher participants felt strongly that rules, procedures and policies should be based in citizenship ideals and mutual respect, designed to support learning in a safe environment that is not unduly restrictive. Policies based in a one-size-fits-all philosophy were seen as restrictions that reduce teachers' ability to meet individual student needs.

In the transformation of Alberta's education system, a re-examination of the parameters governing the work of teachers and students will be necessary to create the conditions for teachers' best aspirational practice.

A variety of material, intellectual and human resources are critical supports to teachers. Invest in the future.

It is no surprise that resource availability was one of the factors cited that inspired teachers to teach to their aspirations. There was a strong connection between their best practices and up-to-date resources that reflect current methods, including basic texts, readily accessible online resources and technology that supports student innovation. They expressed the need for technology support personnel and inservicing on new technologies. Human resources needs included an increase in paraprofessional personnel to assist with high-needs students, access

to specialists and enough teachers to ensure that class sizes were reasonable.

Moving forward, it will be essential for Alberta to adequately resource the education system so as to fully benefit from teachers' considerable expertise, enthusiasm and skills.

This study was conducted amid a climate of concerns about high school completion rates, the relative success of Aboriginal students, the system's ability to meet the needs of exceptional learners, teacher workload, teacher burnout, the high attrition rate among early career teachers and the absence of thoughtful knowledge transfer and succession planning processes. In this ethos, it is imperative that we celebrate the elements that contribute to teachers' ability to reach their aspirations for themselves and their students. In their ideal future, participants imagined that teaching would be a compelling and attractive career because of a deep sense of purpose and satisfaction, coupled with an environment supporting authentic and engaged professional practice. Teachers seek the ability to enact their highest aspirations, not just in rare and treasured moments, but regularly and with all their students. As participants in the Alberta focus groups told us, we have a long way to go before teachers are *always* able to teach in a way that honours their aspirations for themselves and their students.



Appendix

Teaching The Way We Aspire To Teach Facilitation Notes

Focus 1—Discovering the Vision in our Teaching Stories

Paired Interviews

1. Thinking back on your own teaching experience recall a specific time over the past couple of years when you felt like you were “at your best”—a time when everything seemed to click, and you and your students felt like you were “in the zone”.

Tell your story

- Describe as clearly as possible what was happening in your classroom. Try to recall as many of the specific details as you can!
 - Who else was involved in the story? Students? Other adults?
 - What were **you** doing? What were your students doing?
2. Without being humble, what were some of the specific things that **you** brought to this experience that made it so successful (and memorable)?
 - What are some of the things that **you** did to contribute to its success?
 - What do you recall **feeling** and **thinking** during the experience?
 - What about the experience were you particularly proud of?
 3. What were some of the ways that **others contributed** (even those who may not have been present at the time) to the success of the experience?
 - In what ways did your school leadership contribute to the experience?
 - In what ways did your students contribute to the experience?
 - In what ways did other adults contribute to the experience?
 - How would you describe the relationships in your story?

Focus 2—Recognizing The Positive Core of Our Work

4. In your small groups, introduce your partners and share the **high points** of your partner’s stories of “Discovering the Vision”.
 - As you listen respectfully, focus on the common themes that emerge from each story.
 - After being exposed to all of the stories in your group, choose one that best exemplifies the idea of *teaching the way that we aspire to teach* and share that story with the larger group.
5. After hearing all of the story highlights, what are the **themes** that have emerged in terms of strengths, assets, resources and other factors contributing to aspirational teaching? What are the **conditions** that allow us to teach in the way that we aspire to teach?

Focus 3—Imaging Your Ideal Teaching Environment

Individual Reflection and Small Groups

6. You have fallen into a deep sleep, waking to find that it is the year 2020! In light of your positive stories of aspirational teaching and your identified personal and organizational strengths, envision the best version of your teaching environment and dynamic. In imaging the scenario that would best energize and excite you, consider categories such as:
 - Personal attributes
 - Resources
 - Relationships
 - Infrastructure
 - Leadership
 - Procedures/Protocols
7. Write a brief personal statement describing the situation.
 - What is it that most energizes you about your new teaching environment?
 - What is happening in your imagined environment that would be compelling and attractive to others considering a teaching career?

Personal Statement (In the teaching to which I aspire...)

Focus 4—Consolidating the Vision

Large Group Activity

Facilitation Guide based on Appreciative Inquiry for Collaborative Solutions: 21 Strength-base Workshops by
Robyn Stratton-Berkessel
Prepared by Stephen Hurley for the Canadian Education Association and the Canadian Teacher Federation, 2011
Email: stephen.hurley@sympatico.ca

Used with permission

