

# **WESTMOUNT CHARTER SCHOOL**

## **EVALUATION REPORT** **May 2014**

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## **A. INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

Westmount Charter School (WCS) has been in operation since 1996. It serves approximately 1200 students, is located in northwest Calgary and occupies two campuses; the elementary school (K-4) at the former Parkdale School and the mid-high school (grades 5-12) at the former Sir William Van Horne School. The buildings are owned by the Calgary Board of Education (CBE). The Parkdale site is shared with CBE Area I personnel who occupy the north-wing, main-floor office spaces.

### **Definition of Giftedness**

Students are gifted when they perform, or show potential for performing, remarkably high levels of accomplishment in learning rate, depth of knowledge, and reasoning and problem-solving abilities when compared to others of their age, experience and environment. (Modified from Book 7, Alberta Education, 2000).

The school also subscribes to the Columbus Group definition of giftedness which adds depth of meaning to the definition as: “Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create an inner experience and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally” (The Columbus Group, 1991, in Morelock, 1992).

WCS looks at giftedness “*from the inside out*”, which means that this school community strives to first know and honour who their students are and to help them become the best they can be. From this perspective, giftedness is not equated only to high achievement; giftedness is “how you are wired, not what you produce”. At Westmount, achievement is the outcome, not the starting point.

### **Purpose**

The mandate of WCS is to provide qualitatively differentiated educational programming for students who are gifted.

### **Charter Goal**

Each gifted student is provided with opportunities to optimize his or her own unique potential.

## **B. EVALUATION PROCESSES**

The findings of the evaluation were established using the following processes:

1. A self-evaluation report prepared by the school and reviewed by a team from Alberta Education.
2. An onsite visit from the Alberta Education team that included focused conversations with:
  - eight teacher groups (32 teachers);
  - the two principals and three assistant principals;
  - the superintendent; and
  - the board chair and two directors.
3. The following artifacts were reviewed:
  - Self Evaluation Report December 2, 2013;
  - Three Year Education Plan 2013-2016 and the Annual Education Results Report 2102-2013;
  - Charter Agreement, Revised 2011; and
  - Westmount Charter School Evaluation Report (2009).

## C. EVALUATION CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and evidence obtained throughout the evaluation process, WCS meets the evaluation criteria on the eleven essential questions of a Charter School Evaluation. The specific conclusions are as follows:

1. **The school meets the terms and conditions of its charter and has performance measures that show clear evidence of success.**

### *Yes*

Since the school's inception the definition of gifted has evolved. From the early days of focus on the multiple intelligence approach, the current definition is centred in the phrase: "understanding the student from the inside/out" that focuses on enabling students to manage in a world which is predominately outside in, external and success driven in its orientation. The school is committed to the concept of giftedness with respect to the whole child.

A key focus of the school's professional development plan is to have staff understand gifted students from this perspective. The elementary campus has developed a conceptual model of "inside/out", entitled the Matrix, to articulate more clearly the expectations for staff, students and parents in the four pillars/domains of affective curriculum, social responsibility, health and wellness and academic achievement. This approach has resulted in a more intentional, collaborative and shared understanding of the gifted students, the school's charter and the pedagogical approach used by the staff. The school has a wealth of dedicated and creative teachers who have an expertise not only in their subject areas but an important understanding of giftedness and the uniqueness of each student. The evaluation team heard and observed many examples of engaging learning opportunities for students, such as the integrated learning classroom, the junior genius project, and the locally developed courses. Teachers are encouraged to be innovative and risk takers to provide the best possible learning for students. The school is well informed about the transformation process based on *Inspiring*

*Education* in the province and is committed to ensuring the school's charter, pedagogy and curriculum are consistent with this direction and the school's notion of gifted education.

Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska, founding director of the Center for Gifted Education at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia and Dr. Linda Silverman, a clinical psychologist who is director of the Studies for Advancement of the Gifted Education Center in Denver, Colorado, are two experts in the area of gifted education who are having a significant influence on the school's shared understanding of the gifted student, associated pedagogy and the school's charter evolution.

**2. The school operates in a manner consistent with all applicable provincial requirements.**

*Yes*

Based on the findings and evidence, WCS meets the provincial requirements of the *Charter Schools Regulation (Alberta Regulation 212/2002)* and the *School Act*. The school follows the *Alberta Programs of Study* and provides the required amount of instructional time. Students participate in Provincial Assessment Tests and in Diploma Examinations. The school also participates in the Advanced Placement exams. The school complies with Alberta Education planning, reporting and funding requirements in providing complete and timely information.

**3. The students, parents, staff, school council and community members consider the school program to be successful.**

*Yes*

Students, parents and staff see the school as being effective and successful. There is strong stakeholder support for all areas of the school's operation including the delivery of the instructional program. A very high percentage of stakeholders consider the school program to be successful according to the Accountability Pillar (School Improvement 84% and Education Quality 93.9%). In addition to participation in provincial surveys, the school conducts student, parent and Alumni surveys which indicate strong support for the school. For example, 82% of parents indicated on a fall 2013 school survey that they chose Westmount for their children based on a comparison to other gifted programs offered in the city.

**4. The school is financially viable and responsible.**

*Yes*

Based on a review of financial information WCS has been in a healthy and viable financial position and is able to support its programming. The school has an accumulated surplus from operations of \$1,389,267.00 representing 9.66% of total expenses. WCS has been compliant with all financial reporting requirements.

**5. The charter school shares its innovative practices and learning outcomes with others in the educational community.**

*Yes*

With the closing of the Centre for Gifted Education at the University of Calgary (U of C), WCS is emerging as the leader of gifted education in the city. In March 2014, the school

hosted a parent conference entitled, “The Gifted Child, From the Inside Out”. This provided the school with the opportunity to share its innovative practices with the parent community from WCS and other school jurisdictions. The conference was attended by educators as well. In the past, WCS hosted a Conference for Gifted: “Pillars of Gifted,” with internationally known keynote speakers, multiple presentations by Westmount staff and attendees from two major school jurisdictions in Calgary, Rocky View School Division, Grande Prairie Public Schools, the University of Calgary, as well as other charter schools. The pre-conference involved pairing teachers from other schools with WCS teachers for classroom observations and question/answer sessions.

The staff is keen to share their experiences and insights and do so through partnerships and research projects with the Partner Research Schools (PRS) initiative at the U of C, presentations at The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) conferences, and international conferences such as National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children (WCGTC) and Dabrowski Congress.

**6. The charter school is governed effectively.**

*Yes*

WCS is being effectively governed by a cohesive Board of Directors and with the support and cooperation of the staff, including the leadership team, and the parent body. The board adheres to the by-laws, the charter, board policies, the *School Act* and provincial regulations. The board indicated that they support and understand the vision of the school and are aware of the priorities of the school. The board has made key decisions in the last few years in moving the school from one campus facility to two. The board followed regulations and procedures in hiring appropriate system and school based leaders. Parent satisfaction ratings with respect to accessibility to the community, communication with stakeholders and support for programming is high. The staff views the board as operating in an open, transparent, and supportive manner.

**7. The school is administered effectively.**

*Yes*

The school is being administered effectively by a focused and committed administrative team (superintendent, principals, and assistant principals) who are fulfilling their roles and responsibilities in regards to the safe and effective management of the school’s operations. This leadership team is very knowledgeable in gifted education and experienced in working in congregated settings for gifted learners. The superintendent is highly visible and is working collaboratively with the board, ensuring that the school is in compliance with all requirements, and providing leadership to the school leadership teams. The principals and assistant principals are providing strong instructional leadership and supervision of the school staff.

**8. Student achievement at the charter school is consistently strong or improving.**

*Yes*

A review of the Provincial Achievement Test and Diploma Examination results confirms achievement has been consistently strong and/or improving. The school is always seeking

ways to improve and refine their assessment practices to provide feedback to students and parents about student progress. Some of the assessment strategies are:

- Using a balance of formative and summative assessment practices;
- Using pre and post testing to determine appropriate learning outcomes for each student;
- Teachers are co-creating assessment criteria (rubrics) with students; and
- Use of flexible assignments.

The school uses a software program (Home Logic) to provide ongoing student assessment information to student and parents. The highly collaborative school culture encourages teachers to be self-reflective about their pedagogical approach including assessment. Staff and school leaders indicated that this broadening approach to student achievement has resulted in more informed and engaged students and parents.

**9. The charter school is committed to engaging students, teachers, parents and community members in a model of continuous improvement.**

*Yes*

The entire school community demonstrates positive energy and passion for the work it is doing. The commitment of the staff to provide the best possible education results in a culture of shared responsibility and a social/emotional environment in which inquiry, risk-taking, sharing and collaboration are encouraged to optimize student learning. The staff is consistently reflecting on what is working or not, and providing input on ways to improve. The school regularly uses surveys and listens to the “student voice” to gather data on focus areas for improvement. These include: *Tell Them From Me* survey, Alumni survey and annual parent survey (e.g. Why Westmount?). One of the leadership strategies going forward is to ensure the Three Year Education Plan and Annual Education Results Report reflect the priority work of the school and the resources are strategically allocated to support the priorities. The school has addressed the required change from the previous evaluation and is working to improve the Individualized Program Plan (IPP) documentation process for each student.

As part of the charter renewal process, the board is in the process of refining the planning and reporting process to reflect a stronger role for the board in developing the vision of the school.

One of the current challenges facing the school is to review and revise the school’s admission policy to ensure that the selection criteria identify gifted students which the school is intended to serve according to its charter. Using a K-12 intake committee to provide consistency in the application of the school’s admission policy, the school will be developing a more concise and focused approach to student admission based on multiple assessments.

**10. The charter school uses research-informed practices to create innovative learning environments and improve student learning.**

*Yes*

WCS has many research initiatives that are resulting in innovative approaches to learning and teaching. The environment of inquiry, collaboration and continuous improvement empowers

all stakeholders to “seek and find a better way”. WCS has a number of research projects under way with the University of Calgary. Two of these projects are:

- “A case study on how teachers come to understand, identify, connect, teach and assess key mathematical concepts across Grades 5 – 9,” with Dr. Krista Francis-Pocente; and
- “Relationship between Parenting Stress and Children’s Attribution Style in Childhood Anxiety,” by M.Sc. student Maisha M. Syeda, School of Applied Child Psychology, Educational Studies in Psychology, Faculty of Education, U of C.

Examples of other research projects are:

- “Overexcitabilities in Gifted Students OEQ-IIc,” November 2012, with Dr. Frank Falk, Director of Research, Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, University of Akron. Follow-up to occur during the 2013-2014 school term.
- “An Online Study of the Emotional and Cognitive Mechanisms of Cyber Bullying, Victimization and Kindness,” with Dr. Joan Stevenson, Queen’s University.
- “Socialization of Gifted Children in Schools in Canada,” a study by Masters Degree student, Ms. Luliia Khilko from the University of Ukraine.

The school has turned to research on how best to team teach as well as providing opportunities for staff to share their ideas and research they have worked on. The staff indicated that there is more emphasis on giftedness and gaining more understanding of giftedness.

**11. The charter school reaches out beyond its walls to demonstrate broad and sustained levels of community engagement.**

*Yes*

There is clear evidence that the school is doing an excellent job of being a high functioning learning organization with a strong desire to build sharing partnerships with other educational authorities. As a school community that is characterized by expertise in gifted education, the school is fast becoming a research hub for gifted education throughout the province.

Through the combined efforts of the board, superintendent, administrators, school staff and school stakeholders, the school has reached out beyond the walls of the school to engage with the community. Some examples are:

- Hosting conferences with keynote speakers such as Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska and Dr. Linda Silverman. These conferences were well attended by parents and educational staff from surrounding school jurisdictions;
- WCS provides practicum opportunities for student teachers from the University of Calgary and the University of Mount Royal;
- The school hosts visitors and encourages professional collaboration with teachers from a variety of jurisdictions. Administration from Westmount has provided professional development support for teachers at New Horizons Charter School. Staff members from New Horizons have visited Westmount to better understand alternative assessments for student intake processes to ensure students exhibit a gifted profile;
- Westmount collaborates with the Calgary Girls’ School, Connect Charter School (formerly Calgary Science School) and Foundations for the Future on strategies for technology integration; and



- Westmount administration has recently held discussions with staff from Rocky View School Division to explore collaborative activities in gifted education. Westmount administrators held preliminary discussions with administrators from Queen Elizabeth Junior/Senior High School in Calgary as both schools serve gifted student populations and are new members of the provincial Moving Forward with High School Redesign project.

## **Final Conclusion**

As a result of our evaluation processes, the team is satisfied that WCS is meeting the current requirements of legislation and regulations for charter schools and the 11 criteria of this evaluation.

## **D. COMMENDATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, REQUIREMENTS**

The review team provides the following commendations, recommendations and required changes as part of continuous improvement.

### **COMMENDATIONS**

It was discovered through the evaluation process that WCS has many areas of strength. There are a number of areas that deserve special commendations:

- **Welcome, Positive and Student Centered Culture**

The self-evaluation provided by the school shows an extensive list of partners many of whom visit the school on a regular basis. WCS is to be commended for the welcoming, positive and supportive school culture that has been established. It is a wonderful atmosphere to promote learning and teaching. Students are engaged in their learning. Students demonstrated a disposition of inquiry and curiosity about what they were learning. There is a deep respect in the relationships among the students, staff and parents that results in a strong focus, a productive learning atmosphere and calmness to the work.

- **Continuous Improvement**

The staff, including the school's leaders, is to be commended for the implementation of a continuous improvement approach. Innovation, risk-taking and seeking partners permeate the school culture, particularly in the areas of understanding the gifted student and improved student learning. The staff utilizes an excellent body of research along with participation in activities and conferences that assist teachers to develop more in their work with gifted students. The school has taken steps to implement the recommendations and required changes from the previous evaluation. The charter school has made significant positive changes.

- **Commitment to the Charter**

There is a strong awareness of the charter in the school: the gifted student inside out. There was clear evidence that the school is working hard to develop a shared understanding of the gifted student and how teaching pedagogy is impacting student success. The school recognizes that the charter goals are evolving and continuous enhancements are being made, including being consistent with *Inspiring Education* and its associated components, such as the *Ministerial Order on Student Learning*, Inclusive Education, and Curriculum Redesign.

WCS is making a concerted effort to adhere to the mission and vision of its charter. Teachers are clearly reexamining their understanding of giftedness through focused whole school professional learning provided by experts in the field. To further align their thinking, the entire staff is reading and discussing the book *Giftedness 101* by Dr. Linda Silverman during this school year. “Giftedness: from the inside out” has become a well-used phrase in conversation and in school documents. This use of a simple phrase to describe the school’s approach has provided great leverage for staff, parent and student understanding and reflection.

- **School Leadership Team**

The school leadership team including the superintendent, principals, assistant principals and learning leaders is to be commended for inspiring a shared vision, modeling the way, challenging the process, empowering others and encouraging the heart. The leadership team has been working hard to make a smooth transition to two campuses, build its leadership capacity and provide ongoing support to each staff member. The leaders have established a strong sense of “team”, characterized by a culture of learning and shared responsibility. A focused effort to develop leadership capacity through ongoing role clarification and professional learning opportunities for Learning Leaders is contributing to a sense of distributed leadership.

- **Board of Directors**

The board is to be commended for managing challenging and significant issues that will have long term impact on the direction of the school, such as moving to new facilities three years ago in creating a two campus school and hiring an exemplary leadership team.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

### **Continue and Enhance the Creation of a Shared Vision of Gifted Education: Learning, Teaching and Leading**

- The school is making considerable efforts in developing a shared vision for gifted education and is intending to make this the keystone of its revised charter. It is recommended that the current dialogue continue and the results be clearly articulated at both campuses, including the development of models, such as the *Matrix*, which outline the expectations for the learning, teaching and leadership of gifted education. Further, it is recommended that the board take a more engaging and strategic role, beyond understanding and support, for the

development of the vision and priorities that are articulated in the planning and reporting documents.

### **One School; Two Campuses**

- Stakeholders reported that moving to two campuses is, for a number of reasons, an overall positive direction for the school. Each campus is more able to focus on the specific needs of a narrower range of students. However, there are some downsides of separating the student population into two groups. The board and leadership team are aware of these potential areas of concern such as creating a smooth transition for students from one campus to another. It is recommended that the school continue its due diligence and strategic thinking in creating organization structures, such as a K-12 Intake Committee, administrative procedures to ensure that the nature of separateness that emerges from the school having two campuses is minimized and attention to a seamless transition for students moving from Grade 4 at the elementary campus to Grade 5 at the mid-high campus as well as consistent programming between campuses.

### **Technology Integration: Capacity Building**

- A wide variance of the use of technology in an integrated manner was observed at the school. The school is developing a technology integration plan. The board and superintendent are initiating a revised planning and reporting structure that identifies and resources priorities. It is recommended that the integration of technology, including the capacity building of the staff to integrate technology, be given serious consideration as one of the school priorities and aligned with the *WCS Three Year Education Plan and Annual Report (2014-2017)* using the recently developed *Alberta Education Learning and Technology Policy Framework 2013*.

### **Student Support Services**

- WCS serves gifted students, including several who have additional learning needs ranging from severe to mild/moderate and also many students who have English as an Additional Language (EAL). Considering the complexity of the school's population, WCS provides support services for its students, including allocating a position of student support services coordinator. It is recommended extending the student services model at the elementary campus.

### **Individual Program Plans**

- The school has focused on making changes to the Individual Program Plans (IPPs) as required by the last charter school evaluation in fall 2008. This process is evolving with the school investigating models such as piloting the provincial Inclusive Education Planning Tool (IEPT). The K-4 Elementary campus has developed the "Best Me I Can Be" form which is used with all students. A growth area for both campuses is the need to develop and work on a model IPP for severe-coded students which involves more teacher and parent

input. Since all students in the school have specialized needs, the school is discussing how IPPs for every student in the school can be of value and what a manageable process for their development is. It is recommended that the school continue to refine the IPP process to ensure that the needs of the students are appropriately documented and monitored.

### **REQUIRED CHANGES**

- None.