

## Report to Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) Board of Directors From the ASCA Advisory Panel on Teaching Excellence (APTE)

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It is with great pleasure the ASCA **Advisory Panel on Teaching Excellence** submits their report to the Board of Directors. Our discussions have been lively, informed by research, existing legislation, policy and the views of parents.

### **Background**

The APTE is of a group of parents from school councils who share an interest in teaching excellence for every Alberta student. The panel met face-to-face in October and November to discuss what changes are needed to better support teachers, so that teaching excellence is the norm for every student. In their discussions the group referred to reports, research, current policy and processes which guide teaching in Alberta.

In addition, panel members spoke with peers— one-on-one and at school council meetings and Council of School Councils (COSC) meetings.

To better understand the views of Alberta parents on this important topic two short surveys were developed, posted on the ASCA website, and communicated to a broader audience through Twitter.

What follows is information about the questions we posed and our subsequent findings and observations.

### **Observations – Survey Responses**

The initial survey asked parents to consider the following:

*What qualities are demonstrated by an excellent teacher?*

*What impacts teaching excellence?*

Over 110 complete responses were received from parents. The comments reflected knowledge of the system, an understanding of work related issues from the teacher perspective and a strong desire for their children, because they will have benefited from teaching excellence, to be successful in school.

Comments on the qualities of an excellent teacher can be summarized in three areas:

1. Competence (i.e. confidence, expertise, ability, flexibility),
2. Communication (i.e. as demonstrated by/through the engagement of students, respect, clarity, empathy) and
3. Commitment (i.e. reflective practice, diligence, dedication and personal investment).

Interestingly enough, comments that fit within each of these three categories are in many ways representative of the themes of *Knowledge, Skills and Attributes* – categories which exist in the current Teaching Quality Practice Standard.

Comments on the impacts on teaching excellence can be summarized under three main themes:

1. Environment (includes both physical and sociological factors)
2. Supports (includes human and financial resources)
3. Commitment (includes perspectives and attitudes of individuals and collectives)

There was an inclination on the part of some responders to revert to describing characteristics of excellent teachers in these responses as opposed to describing system-wide teaching excellence. It is clear however that system-wide teaching excellence is dependent on individuals each striving to achieve professional mastery and accept the assistance and role of others in the system that have a vested interest in the learning success of students. The whole is only as good as the sum of its parts.

The responses from the first survey were so encouraging that the panel determined a follow up question was in order.

The second survey asked parents to provide feedback on:

*How could I and/or my school council support/advance teaching excellence?*

Although fewer complete responses were received (100), the statements support that parental understanding of the role they play as individuals or through school councils could be a contributing factor in the development of province-wide teaching excellence.

Parents have a desire to support teaching excellence by being recognized by teachers and administrators as willing and contributing partners in the learning successes of their children. Parents are also seeking recognition from school leaders for the contributions they can make from their 'place at the table' through school councils.

Parents identified that as individuals and as school council members they have a responsibility to acquire and gain an understanding of the school and system as well as the factors that impact teaching excellence.

In addition, comments point to parents wanting to advocate for their children both individually and as members of a school community. In the bigger picture, parents recognize that an opportunity and ability to network with other parents in the province will increase awareness and knowledge about supports for a system of teacher excellence.

## **Observations – Panel Members**

The discussions of Panel members can be captured under the following themes:

### ***Teaching Excellence Assurance and Teacher Accountability***

Panel members felt strongly that teaching excellence is more than a “nice to have”. As their children’s first and primary educators, parents need assurance that teaching excellence is something to which each and every teacher strives, and therefore is something that must be both supported and evaluated.

Teaching excellence begins with an individual teacher’s fundamental passion to be the best they can be. While it is not realistic to assume every teacher can achieve ‘teaching excellence’, parents need to know teaching excellence is being promoted, assessed and addressed with individual teachers on an ongoing basis.

In addition, panel members (and some survey respondents) felt parents have an important role in the performance assessment of teachers. While the role of parents was not defined, it was felt that parent (and student) involvement in evaluating teachers was missing and could add value and considerably benefit individual teacher professional growth.

### ***Recognizing and Rewarding Excellence***

While it was generally recognized that there are ‘degrees’ of teaching excellence, panel discussions also focused on incentives and recognition for positive teacher evaluations, either financially or through other employment initiatives. The role of teacher includes mentor, coach, guide and role model as well as one who imparts knowledge and encourages academic success in his or her students. The notion of ‘master teacher’ was also discussed, however no conclusion was reached as to how or when teaching excellence would be recognized and/or rewarded.

Panelists did agree though, that the concept of teaching excellence was comprised of many and varied elements and should not be assessed against single indicators (such as standardized test results).

### ***The Role of the Principal & a Learning Partnership Model***

Panel members discussed the role of the school leader in creating an environment that promoted teaching and learning excellence. The principal as instructional leader should be empowered to establish evaluation frameworks that promote and support teaching excellence and reward those who achieve it. The school principal could also use various approaches with teachers who are struggling to achieve excellence, including recommendations for remediation or removal. It was recognized, however, that principals are also teachers within the same union group, and that this perhaps would need to be addressed in order to provide that ‘empowerment’ to school leaders.

The concept of the school supporting a “learning partnership” was also explored by the group. Principal, teachers, support staff, school council and parents are colleagues in a type of ‘joint venture’ that exists to support students and their learning. The teacher plays an integral role in this partnership, but the partnership is also an essential component to teacher and teaching excellence.

## **Conclusions**

From the responses received from the three questions the panel asked parents, from the discussion of the panel members themselves, and based on the discussions they were able to have in their respective school and district communities, the following conclusions can be drawn:

### ***Individual teachers contribute to a system of teaching excellence***

Teaching excellence rests with individual teachers who have the characteristics, personal investment and passion to commit to lifelong learning – both for themselves and their students. A teacher’s competence, expertise, confidence and ability to be flexible is gained in a variety ways – including their preparation to become teachers, their introduction to the classroom, their development professionally through formal ongoing training, mentoring, collaboration with peers and support from their superiors/supervisors. Recognizing and rewarding teaching excellence could provide an incentive to teachers to pursue a career-long course of action to constantly improve practice.

### ***The need for a formal, regular teacher evaluation process***

Although it was recognized that individual teachers need support (mentoring, guidance, networking, collaboration and professional development), it was felt a process of evaluating teachers formally would be a key factor in assuring excellence over time. Panelists and parents alike were surprised that teacher growth plans were not used for evaluative purposes, and that there was no formal, regular evaluation process in place. Re-introducing a formal process, and providing principals with the tools to take action in cases where teaching excellence was not evident would go a long way to providing parents and the public with assurance that teaching excellence was expected and supported for every Alberta student.

It was also apparent that participants on both the panel and through the survey felt the individual teacher’s pursuit to provide teaching excellence should be unmistakable, and demonstrate a willingness on the teachers’ part to learn from an evaluation process comprised of many elements, including feedback from parents and students.

### ***Attitudes/Environment contribute to teaching excellence***

A system of teaching excellence is possible when teachers recognize and respect others’ contributions as partners in the learning journey of students. This includes all those who are engaged in the education enterprise, including parents and school councils. Everyone who interacts in a school, but particularly the principal, is key in creating, nurturing and sustaining an environment that supports teaching and learning excellence. That environment and the attitude of those who are in it, including teachers’ interactions with parents and school councils, impact and contribute to a system of teaching excellence. The notion of a “learning partnership” existing within a school to promote and support excellence was also an ‘environmental’ factor in teaching excellence.

*Respectfully submitted to the ASCA Board of Directors by the **Advisory Panel on Teaching Excellence***