

## History of public education in Alberta

The history of education in Alberta is one of dedication by lay and professional people... of innovation in curriculum and school organization...of growth and change. This history coincides with Alberta's evolution from a subsistence rural society into a complex urban industrial society. In less than 50 years, a society which once accepted an elementary education as sufficient for the province's primary industries, today, demands post-secondary education for the tertiary industries, which dominate employment opportunities.

### Protestant and Roman Catholic churches establish first schools

The Roman Catholic and Protestant churches started Western Canada's first schools. Father Thibault established a mission at Lac Ste Anne in 1842 and Reverend Rundle established day and Sunday schools in Fort Edmonton in the 1840s.

### Public schools part of Canadian fabric since mid-1800s

Egerton Ryerson, Ontario's first superintendent of schools, established the foundations on which Canada's public education system is based. Ryerson's travels to the United States and western Europe led him to believe public schools should be social agencies through which the children of the multi-cultured settlers could be assimilated into the Canadian way of life. He believed the primary purpose of school was to make children good and useful members of society by exposing them to children from various cultures and backgrounds. This tenet was most recently reiterated in 1984 by Alberta's Committee on Tolerance and Understanding. In 1996, the Alberta School Boards Association adopted principles for public education which echo this belief.

The Alberta School Boards Association's position on Public Education in the Twenty-first Century is:

Public Education is the right of every child in Alberta.

Therefore, we believe that public education in Alberta should:

1. be accessible to all children;
2. aim for the optimal development of children;
3. provide all children with equitable learning opportunities;
4. require all participants to be publicly accountable;
5. strive to meet the highest standards possible;
6. be a responsibility shared by students, parents, teachers, and the community;
7. be governed by locally-elected boards of education who are responsive to the community;
8. be directed by professionally prepared educators who are committed to the beliefs of public education and responsible for the quality of education; and
9. support and advance a democratic society.

Public funding shall be directed only to those school jurisdictions that reflect these beliefs.

## Territorial government starts funding schools in 1880

In 1880, the territorial government provided the first financial support for schooling. Mr. Glass, teaching in an Edmonton mission school, had one-half his salary paid from the Territories' capital at Battleford. The Northwest Territories government followed the Quebec model and provided assistance to Protestant and Roman Catholic schools. The minority in any community had the right to establish a school of its own. An 1880 Territorial Ordinance provided for establishment of school districts. Edmonton established the first district in Alberta. In 1895, there was one separate and 58 public school districts. Within six years, there were 243 public and 11 separate school districts. When Alberta was created in 1905, 602 school districts existed.

## Who makes laws for education in Alberta?

While the province of Alberta may exclusively make laws in relation to education, (Section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867 Alberta), the province's right to make laws regarding education is subject to section 17 of the Alberta Act, which states:

Nothing in any such law shall prejudicially affect any right or privilege with respect to the separate schools which any class of persons have at the date of the passing of this Act, under the terms of Chapters 29 and 30 of the Ordinance of the Northwest Territories, passed in the year 1901, or with respect to religious instruction in any public or separate school as provided for in the said Ordinances.

## One-room school serving students within four-mile boundary

In the decades after Alberta became a province in 1905, the small one-room rural school characterized schooling. These schools served students living within a four mile by four mile area – or district. A local school board operated the district, which was in turn supervised by a Department of Education school inspector. The mid-1930s saw a shift toward larger school units and the establishment of Calgary's Western Canada High School – Alberta's first comprehensive high school.

## Late 1930s see consolidation of districts into larger school divisions

In 1937, in a bid to consolidate Alberta's almost 4,000 school districts, 11 large school divisions were created. This and other reforms stalled as Alberta was in the throes of the Great Depression and funds were diverted to the war effort. The end of World War II saw resources redirected to peaceful endeavors including education. As dollars flowed and people returned, the changes launched in earlier decades came to fruition. Larger schools replaced the old one-room school as students were bussed to the new facilities.

## And today...

In 2010-2011, the Government of Alberta will spend \$5.9 billion on public education (Early Childhood Services to Grade 12 students attending Alberta's public, separate and francophone schools). This is about \$30 million for each day students are in school. Some 558,000 students attend public, separate or francophone schools where they are taught by about 32,000 teachers. Some 446 trustees serve on Alberta's 41 public school boards, 16 separate school boards and five francophone education authorities.