



January 31, 2010

The Honourable David Hancock  
Minister of Education  
Government of Alberta

Dear Minister Hancock,

I am writing to you in response to the Arts Education Framework Draft of June 2009. I write wearing two hats: that of a curriculum and instruction specialist in music education from the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and as the President of the Canadian Music Educators' Association, the national voice for music education.

First, I commend you for recognizing the importance of the arts in the education of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and for your government's decision to initiate curriculum reform in arts education. This is long overdue. I note several positive changes in the proposed draft: the addition of dance to the arts education curriculum, the potential to engage more students and expand the scope of fine arts offerings at the secondary level, and the vision expressed in the general philosophic statements in the first ten pages of the document. Planning the curriculum so that each child learns *in, through, and about* the arts ensures a broad-based arts education. I have also been encouraged by the assurances on your website that indicate that the intent of this new curriculum is not to replace the already well-developed programs at that secondary level such as choral and instrumental performing ensembles.

Nevertheless, I feel compelled to express some serious concerns:

- A single Arts Education Program of Studies for Grades K-6. The Arts Education Framework overstates the case for commonalities among the four arts disciplines and the value of integrating the arts across the curriculum. While these disciplines do share some common artistic elements and there is value in drawing in arts content into other subject areas when such connections naturally occur, each artistic discipline has a discrete set of

knowledge, skills, and attributes that requires rigor and depth of experience if meaningful learning is to occur. Furthermore, integrating aspects of the arts across the curriculum is no substitute for explicit instructional time for each of the arts. Singing songs to teach the alphabet is still teaching the alphabet, not singing! Furthermore, a common set of General Learning Outcomes fails to address the uniqueness of each arts discipline and the specificity of learning required in each. As was the case when Arts Education was implemented in Saskatchewan in the early 1990s, integrated arts curricula typically result in little meaningful learning in any one of the arts.

- Generalist arts teachers. The Framework suggests that it is intended to be either generalist or specialist friendly. Research consistently and unequivocally indicates over time that specialist teachers are by far the most effective teachers of the arts. In teaching the arts you cannot simply read up on the content, attend some professional development sessions, and hope to be an effective music, art, dance, or drama teacher. Most artists and arts educators have devoted much of their lives to learning their art and craft. Teaching is a giving profession - you simply cannot give what you do not have. If you are not a musician, artist, actor, or dancer yourself you have little chance of teaching anyone of these disciplines effectively. If a single Arts Education program is to be taught in the K-6 grades it is likely that, even in a best-case scenario, the teacher will be a specialist in only one of the four areas. Teaching and learning is most assuredly going to be compromised if the single program of studies model is used at the K-6 level.
- Multiple entry points, no prerequisites in the secondary grades. In the Arts, subject content knowledge, skills, and attributes are developed over time. Most arts curricula are based on a spiraling continuum whereby a concept or skill is encountered repeatedly in ever-greater depth or at a higher level of difficulty. The lack of prerequisites at the secondary level implies a lack of rigor and ensures that the arts cannot be studied in any sort of meaningful depth.
- The one-credit modules based on 25 hours of instruction replacing three or five credit courses. Despite assurances to the contrary posted on the government website, I am concerned that high level performing ensembles and courses that allow for learning in, through, and about the arts *in depth* currently offered in Alberta secondary schools will be lost in favor of more cost effective offerings that may not require specialist teachers.
- The June 2009 Draft is very short on details under the headings of ‘General Learning Outcomes’ and ‘Program Organization’ (a total of 4 pages for four arts disciplines and 13 grade levels!). These two areas are crucially important and should comprise the vast majority of the document, even if just a preliminary framework. As the saying goes, “the devil is in the details.” Because there are few details, it makes one wonder what is being hidden, forgotten, ignored, or purposely omitted. I would hope that future iterations would disclose the details. The lack of specificity in these two areas is, to a large extent, what is making arts educators throughout this province very nervous.
- The process in the preparation and disclosure of the Framework lacked transparency and due process. Despite claims about extensive consultation with ‘stakeholders,’ Alberta arts educators were largely caught by surprise when this document surfaced this past fall. No one seemed to know anyone who had actually been part of the process. The fact that we

were initially told we had until December 1, 2009 when most of us had only become aware of the document a few weeks earlier understandably resulted in suspicion (what is the government's agenda?), great concern, and frustration. I appreciate that the deadline was extended to the more reasonable January 31, 2010 date.

These concerns all point to a superficial approach to teaching and learning in the arts. I urge you to reconsider. The children of Alberta deserve better! Furthermore, 'dabbling' in the arts is largely a waste of the taxpayers' money. While I cannot see into the future, I can only predict that the arts can and should play an increasingly important role in the education of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. In particular, music is one of the very few truly universal human phenomena and is one of our most powerful forms of expression. The arts enable us to better understand and express what it means to be human. Furthermore, the type of critical and creative thinking musical activity requires is exactly what will be needed to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to contribute to global harmony, both literally and figuratively. What could be more basic? What could be more important?

Thank you for considering my concerns.

Sincerely,



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