



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
ALBERTA

Brian Mason, MLA

Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood Constituency

April 29, 2011

Bill Campbell and Lyle Bennett

Co-chairs

Save Our Fine Arts Committee

Dear Bill Campbell and Lyle Bennett;

Thank you for your letter of April 22 asking for input from the NDP Opposition regarding education. I commend your good work on behalf of a strong place for fine arts in Alberta schools and share your conviction that a good education and a healthy civil society depend on fine arts having an important place in the school experience of every young person.

I will address the questions in your letter, but offer the preamble that the arrival of the new *Education Act* may also be a development that requires more attention than documents such as *Inspiring Education* and *Setting the Direction*, since it moves on from a level of concepts for discussion to the actual proposal of new legislation.

Your questions:

1. Our caucus believes fine arts should be fully integrated in the school curriculum from Kindergarten through Grade 12, provided by skilled and qualified teachers complemented by other artists and experiences to encounter professional fine arts, supported with the necessary resources. Our vision of the fine arts in education sees every student having opportunity to not only develop skills but also to grow in appreciation and pleasure for the significance of fine arts in the living of a full and complete life and arriving at a sense of commitment to have a place in their lives for fine arts.
2. As indicated in #1, our view is that fine arts will be fully integrated into the curriculum at all grade levels in the school system. At the post-secondary level it is vital to ensure institutions are

not driven only by the agendas of commerce, but also support the importance of a role for fine arts in the lives of everyone and fund the sustainability of programs in colleges, universities and technical schools that are involved with fine arts of all varieties. Excellent training and opportunities must be available for the wide range of occupations that are associated with fine arts as well.

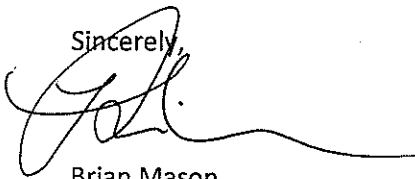
3. The NDP Opposition is not very supportive of the *Inspiring Action* initiative because it is generally very vague and little concerned with key issues of public policy such as transparency and accountability measures. We have seen the current government ignore many excellent recommendations of the Learning Commission of about a decade ago and we are concerned about the likelihood of a similar fate to this initiative. The new *Education Act* will be a far more important government initiative to study carefully and comment on as it will result in new legislation that could have a profound influence on schools for many years, given that it has been nearly 25 years since the last time the core education legislation was revised. The critical measure in relation to schools and education is the action of the government to funding and schools are presently in an environment where classes are getting larger, staffing is shrinking, and many elements of schooling are being discussed as “extras” in a curriculum driven by subjects seen more simplistically as having “economic value”.
4. No, the funding of schools is not adequate for a province that aspires to be in the vanguard of the future. In this spring of 2011 we are seeing more school jurisdictions every week announcing staff reductions or other changes that will have negative implications for children (such as longer bus routes and larger classes). There is a consistent analysis across the province by those who are experts in education that funding currently does not permit providing education that meets what is considered necessary for children. When there are funding challenges created by provincial government approaches to financing education a culture of fear is created and interests within education may be drawn into advocacy that competes—sciences against physical education, math or music—when what is needed is a strong common voice from Albertans about the duty of government to ensure all children can receive a full and rich education that prepares them for success in the world of the future in a wide range of labour market and life options. The current government fails to do long-term analysis and planning for education and so a year-by-year approach leaves local leaders unable to plan properly and avoid ups and downs that play havoc with good educational programming. For example, decisions about how many teachers to train in what areas of specialization must be done on a term of decades, but annual changes in the approach to post-secondary funding can make this impossible.
5. I am attaching a recent policy paper of the NDP Opposition with a little more information, but our perspective is that the current claims of fiscal difficulty being charged by the current provincial government are entirely unnecessary. This government is guilty of very expensive spending that is foolish, such as the unproven idea of carbon capture and storage. It is also guilty of failing to bring in the revenue it easily could, for example, by modest changes to the royalty approach for oil sands/bitumen.
6. I do not want to make a specific commitment related to timelines to implement *Inspiring Education* because if an NDP government were in place this would not necessarily be a guiding

document. Our commitment would be to provide the best schools and post-secondary education in Canada and to do so in a well-designed and cost-effective way that would follow our own framework, developed with excellent input from all key stakeholders.

7. As indicated in #1, fine arts are not seen by the NDP as an “extra” or optional element of education, but as a full part of the proper delivery of excellent schooling and this will be done by policies and funding approaches that provide this dignity to this element of life.

Thank you for your dedication to working on behalf of the place of fine arts in education. The NDP Opposition is available to work with you further on these important matters and we welcome you to be in contact when you wish.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Mason', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Brian Mason

Leader

NDP Opposition

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and to join the minister in congratulating the many volunteers, artists, and community members for their commitment to Alberta Arts Days and for their subsequent contribution to the success of this event. Support for arts and culture in our province is vital to developing vibrant and diverse communities.

There is no doubt that arts and culture enrich our daily lives and help give meaning to our experiences. That is why Alberta's NDP opposition advocates for support for the fine arts and cultural activities year-round rather than simply on a few limited showcase days. While showcases have their place in arts and culture programming, they are meaningless without sustainable and predictable support to artists and cultural groups throughout the year, support that this government has consistently cut. Over the last three years this minister has overseen over 50 per cent cuts to his ministry's budget.

Rather than taking the advice of the arts community in terms of the needed programming and funding for sustainable arts and the cultural production sector, this government is content to declare a three-day public relations showcase to raise awareness of the work of the artisans who struggle throughout the year due to a lack of government support. The superficial nature of the PC government's commitment to the arts is demonstrated by the fact that the minister has just announced an increase in designated celebration sites, from five to 60, but has not announced a corresponding increase in project funding.

The minister's call for students to get their parents out of the house for three days is particularly frustrating in light of this government's ongoing disregard for the role of fine arts within the education system. The image of the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit lauding a three-day event as promoting arts appreciation to schoolchildren while at the same time the Department of Education consistently underfunds the fine arts, considering it an expendable luxury rather than a crucial pillar of a full education, is disappointing.

Alberta's NDP opposition believes fine arts and culture should be fully integrated in the school curriculum from kindergarten through grade 12, provided by skilled and qualified teachers, complemented by other artists and experiences to encounter professional fine arts supported with the necessary resources. Our vision of the fine arts in education sees every student having opportunity to not only develop skills but also to grow an appreciation and pleasure for the significance of fine arts in the living of a full and complete life.

Alberta's NDP opposition is proud of the wonderful tradition of arts and culture in Alberta and will work to ensure it remains accessible to all Albertans via their education throughout their lives and through increasing sustained, predictable funding for professional artists. Unfortunately, for the moment Alberta's vibrant arts and cultural sectors survives in spite of the PC government, not because of it.