

Almadina Language Charter Academy Board Evaluation

Background

Almadina Charter Language Academy has two campuses in south east Calgary. There are more than 970 students in ECS-9. The academy has been in operation since 1995 and recently applied to Alberta Education for a 15 year charter. As a supplement to that application, the Almadina Language Charter Academy's Board of Directors, requested that the writer conduct an evaluation of its performance. In accordance with that request, interviews and surveys were conducted during the months of April and May 2013.

In recent years, concern has been expressed by members of the Almadina Charter Language Academy as well as by Alberta Education that the board of directors' tendency to be directly involved in management activities is adversely impacting the school's operation. As a result, it has been suggested that superintendents do not remain with Almadina for extended periods and consequently the school and its stakeholders have not benefitted to the greatest possible degree.

In 2012-13 the Board, with a new superintendent in place, has undertaken a significant number of initiatives. They include: Acquisition of and move to a new middle school facility (Ogden School); The subsequent increase in enrollment; Move into a new central office facility; Revision of its policy and procedures manual; Application for a 15 year charter; Participation in two major board professional development activities (Governance vs. Management workshop and Strategic Planning workshop); Formal evaluation of its superintendent and self; and the institution of a student uniform policy. It has been a very busy but, in the opinion of the participants in this evaluation, a successful year.

Process

In 2011-12, the writer conducted two board development workshops with ALCA and was familiar with both the directors and circumstances of ALCA. As a result, the exchange of information and the nature of discussions were candid and open. This information, while not documented specifically, served as a sub-text for the evaluation and the conclusions reached.

Specifically, each of the five directors was asked to complete two surveys. The first survey examined the performance of the board's chairperson while the second examined the individual director's understanding of his role and the contributions he made to the board and its stakeholders over the past year. Further, the superintendent provided information concerning her experience as ALCA's CEO throughout the year. Finally, staff members and parents were chosen at random and asked to anonymously complete a survey regarding their perceptions as to how the board carries out its mandate. Seventeen (17) staff members and twenty five (25) parents completed the surveys.

Not unexpectedly, those individuals who are most familiar with the board (administration and staff) are slightly more positive than those who are not (parents). Nevertheless, the findings are significantly supportive of the Almadina Board of Directors' work. (Please see attachment for all survey results).

General Findings:

1. Directors responded positively to the chairperson's performance evaluation, especially as it relates to insuring members remain focused on governance rather than management issues.
2. Directors indicate they are continually improving in their operation as a governance board and are concerned that they are still being judged as a management board.
3. Directors confirm that meetings are being more effectively conducted with a focus upon priorities rather than administrivia.
4. Directors indicate strong support for the performance of the Superintendent and she in turn, is very supportive of them and their commitment to the school and its stakeholders.
5. Directors value and respect the professionalism of the teachers.
6. Directors are very committed to the needs of the school and its mission.
7. Directors have earned the trust of the people they represent.
8. Directors are focused upon future planning, especially as it relates to moving towards a K-12 school.
9. Directors indicate their desire to improve communication with their parents.

Specific Findings

Based upon the template entitled "Best Practices of Charter Boards" (see attachment) used by the Association of Alberta Charter Public Schools to assist its members with their evaluation processes, the following findings are provided:

1. New Board Policies have helped to delineate the governance structure with only one staff member (the Superintendent) reporting to the Board. The AGM in May examined certain bylaws that encourage a management board approach rather than a Governance model approach. These bylaws will be changed. Development in this area is significant.
2. Changes have taken place in the revision of policy and procedures regarding board training and development. Mandatory training/orientation will now be required of new directors. As well, a Directors' Handbook has been developed. During the 2012-13, ALCA conducted policy reviews and engaged in four days of Board roles and responsibilities training. This is an area which is being aggressively addressed.
3. All meetings are properly posted as well the minutes from those meetings.
4. No decisions are made based upon e-mail discussions. All decisions are made during the monthly board meetings.
5. ALCA does not have executive sessions.
6. Future board members are not engaged in committee work.
7. ALCA has scheduled a two day Strategic Planning sessions for September 2013.
8. A Finance sub-committee looks at financial procedures, budget, policy, internal and external audits.
9. Board packages are sent one week prior to the meetings.
10. New Board policy is easy to understand.

11. Focus on outcomes is developing. As the board becomes more familiar with a governance approach there is more attention being paid to outcomes rather than on process.
12. No one on the Board has taken on the role of networking with key members of the community to monitor legislation which can/does impact charter schools.
13. The Board is becoming more proactive as ongoing education has been provided.
14. Board members are recognizing each others' individual strengths as evidenced by the election of their new chairperson.
15. An external Board review is currently underway and will be completed by June. The Board has embraced this process.
16. ALCA has an annual Board calendar which reflects major initiatives throughout the year.
17. Meetings are becoming far more productive and efficient as evidenced by the two hour time limitation the board has imposed upon itself.
18. Roberts' Rules of Order are being used consistently. Staying on task and on time is evidence of the effectively implementation of this meeting strategy.
19. The Board has conducted its financial affairs in a very prudent and well accounted for manner.
20. Board members are not overly familiar with the charter schools' educational issues. Rather the focus has been on ALCA's own roles and responsibilities.

Continue Recommendations:

1. Continue to work on the implementation of a governance model approach.
2. Continue to recognize the superintendent as CEO for ALCA.
3. Continue, as directors, to engage in board development activities.
4. Continue to visit other charter school boards to learn more "best practices" from them.
5. Continue to place the needs of students as the top priority when engaged in planning and decision making.
6. Continue to recognize the dedicated work of staff and administration.
7. Continue to explore ways of connecting more fully with community members.
8. Continue to be prudent and accountable with the expenditure of funds.
9. Continue to be forward thinking in your planning.
10. Continue to engage in a board annual self-evaluation process.

Consider Recommendations:

1. Consider having a number of non-parent representatives on your board of directors
2. Consider developing an annual board action plan (not necessarily related to the Three Year Plan) of two to three goals for the upcoming year (e.g. Investigate the expansion of ALCA to an ECS-12 school)
3. Consider how to increase community members' feedback concerning school initiatives/plans.
4. Consider becoming more involved with The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools as a means of networking and acquiring more information regarding provincial matters impacting upon charter schools.

5. Consider the identification of future board members who are not only committed to the mission of Almadina Language Charter Academy but who also have the expertise and skills to assist in achieving that mission.

Conclusion

The Board of Directors for the Almadina Language Charter Academy is clearly dedicated to the school's students, staff and parents. The Directors understand that while the school itself is doing exceptionally well in providing for the needs of English language learners, success will be even greater if leadership at the board level improves as well. Since 2011-12 the writer has witnessed significant improvement in the manner the board conducts its business and concurs with the directors' observation that they are mistakenly being judged as being overly involved in management rather than as the governance board they are now becoming. While development is ongoing, the Board of Directors for ALCA is to be commended for the improvement they have made in adopting a governance approach. The results this year, as evidenced by the successful acquisition of a new school building, the move into a new central office, the increase in enrollment, the revision of policy and procedures manuals, the commitment to board development and the institution of a school uniform policy, are impressive. Congratulations.

Thank you to the individuals who so willingly and openly contributed to this evaluation process. It is much appreciated.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Garry Andrews, Executive Director

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools

May 28, 2013.

Best Practices of Charter Boards

1. A clearly delineated, written governance structure with only one staff person reporting to the board.
2. Ongoing board training based on identified needs plus orientation and mentors for new board members.
3. Once a monthly, properly posted meetings focused on leading the charter school in alignment with the vision and mission statements.
4. Zero tolerance for email discussions or decision-making.
5. Less than half of the business meetings have an Executive Session.
6. Involved future board members on subcommittees or projects in order to acquaint them with the work of the school and give the current board an idea of how that individual would conduct themselves as a board member.
7. A strategic plan to guide them in meeting long-term and short-term goals.
8. A board subcommittee that develops the school budget, financial policies and procedures and an internal/external audit process.
9. Board packets sent to individual board members a week before the meeting.
10. A board policy manual that is easy to understand and clearly communicates the board's values.
11. A focus on outcomes rather than process.
12. Individual board members that network with key individuals in the community and monitor charter school legislation.
13. A proactive rather than a reactive mindset.
14. An understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses.
15. A practice of evaluating itself at least annually.
16. A standard board calendar with items that are addressed on a regular basis.
17. Efficient, productive meetings.
18. A practice of using Roberts' Rules or Order (or modification thereof) to conduct meetings.
19. Financial checks and balances that provide for good oversight of public funds.
20. Individual board members always learning about charter school or education issues.

Almadina Board Self-Evaluation -Results

May 2013.

The Board of Directors for Almadina Language Charter School is engaged in a process of self-evaluation. In order to make the process as meaningful as possible staff and parents (randomly selected) were asked for their anonymous responses to several questions.

Seventeen (17) staff and twenty five (25) parents responded. It should be noted that where neither “Yes” nor “No” was selected, it was interpreted as “Don’t Know”.

1. Does the Board of Directors understand the needs of the people they represent? Please explain your answer.

Staff: Yes (11) No (1) DK (5)

Parents: Yes (17) No (5) DK (3)

“I think they do but I have concerns about the number of special needs students who are arriving without supports in place and the inadequate library services” (S)

“The board understands that all our students are ELL. They provide numeracy and literacy programs in the school to support ELL students’ language proficiency” (S)

“Being parents themselves of Almadina students allows them to understand the needs of other parents”

“[The board]motivated teachers with appreciation night. [Provides] a budget for resources. [Board supports]parent council so they have a voice. [Board supports the celebration of] student diversity” (S)

“They have placed strong leaders to guide the programs – i.e. language focused teaching and learning” (S)

“No. Calendar decisions not made together. PD money asked for by staff not given. Programs like DR not first asked by staff if needed” (S)

“They listen to our concerns” (S)

“There is no vehicle to determine what the needs of parents are” (P)

“Yes. By properly staffing student to teacher ratio” (P)

“No. My child has issues paying attention in class and extra help is needed for him” (P)

“I believe they do a good job of it” (P) (2x)

“They should be more engaged” (P)

2. Is the Board of Directors forward thinking in its planning for the future? Please explain your answer.

Staff: Yes (16) No (0) DK (1)

Parents: Yes (19) No (3) DK (3)

“They submitted a proposal for a 15 year charter renewal and they always communicate the long range plan for the school” (S)
“[Planned for] enrolment increases and expansion of school” (S) (3x)
“The board of directors is always willing to listen and to move in the direction that best serves the needs of all students” (S)
“Supportive of new school initiatives that improve student learning” (S)
“[Directors are] always striving for the betterment of the school, staff and students” (S)
“Planning to expand to Grade 10 [is good]” (P)
“15 year charter [is an example of future planning]” (P)
“Yes. They are always looking out for the students’ and their families’ best interests” (P) (2x)
“No. There have been times when we have been notified about things at very last minute” (P)
“More planning in advance could be done” (P) (2x)

3. Does the Board of Directors appear to act as a team? Please explain.

Staff: Yes (11) No (1) DK (5)

Parents: Yes (20) No (2) DK (3)

“All board members attend the monthly board meetings” (S)
“Yes, it is through teamwork that Almadina has reached its evident success” (S)
“Decisions seemed to be made together and efficiently” (S)
“Appear to be a team” (S)
“They all work towards positive goals for the school” (S)
“No. If a team was in effect we would have advanced greatly” (P)
“Yes they do” (P) (2x)
“They can do more teamwork together” (P)
“I think they do” (P)
“They all seem to work together towards a single goal” (P)
“Yes. Always together” (P)

4. Does the Board of Directors allow its staff to do their jobs without interfering too much? Please explain.

Staff: Yes (16) No (0) DK (1)

Parents: Yes (18) No (3) DK (4)

“As I have not seen members at the school I don’t believe they are interfering” (S)
“Teachers in the school never feel any pressure from the board of directors regarding making their classroom decisions” (S) (2x)
“The board of directors follow outlined procedural polices synchronous with ATA standards” (S)
“We collaborate on setting school year calendars [therefore decision is not forced on us] (S)
“Allowed to be accountable for our curriculum decisions – e.g. field trip decisions” (S)
“This year. Yes” (S)
“They are very professional as far as I have seen. They communicate correctly with the teaching staff through the proper administrative channels” (S)
“Have never interfered with staff to my knowledge” (S) (2x)

"It appears that is not the case at all times" (P) (2x)
"Yes. I think they do" (P)
"They trust the teachers" (P)
"Yes [but] administration must be more strict in their dealings with students" (P)
"No. They like to suggest better and effective ways" (P)

5. Does the Board of Directors communicate well with the people they represent? Please explain.
Staff: Yes (14) No (2) DK (1) Parents: Yes (21) No (4)

"Some seem stern but otherwise are approachable". (S)
"I believe they do [communicate well] through the AGM, newsletter and website" (S)
"The board always invites people they represent (parents and staff) to attend monthly board meetings (S)
"Communication channels are always open for constructive criticism" (S)
"Sometimes we are just informed of decisions and sometimes we are involved in making them" (S)
"Yes. Parent council/surveys/staff appreciation dinners" (S)
"Communicate well with staff" (S)
"They should respect all parents" (P)
"There is no channel for communication. Board does not actively seek input from parents" (P)
"They seem to communicate on a regular basis" (P)
"I think so" (P) (2x)
"I think more surveys could be done to better understand our needs" (P)
"Need more feedback" (P)
"Need more interaction with the parents. More regular updates needed" (P)
"No. I don't want to sound rude but it is good to take ESL classes" (P)

6. Do people trust the Board of Directors to insure that money is being spent wisely and is properly accounted for? Please explain.
Staff: Yes (15) No (1) DK (1) Parents: Yes (23) No (2)

"The board seems generous and accommodating" (S)
"I believe they are trusted. I have never heard anything to the contrary" (S)
"We always find that the school money is spent on the school's equipment and supporting students' education. The school is always provided with appropriate furniture, educational programs, school supplies and educational assistants" (S)
"Not sure whether the cameras were necessary or useful" (S)
"There is a great deal of trust across various levels and accountability through transparency" (S)
"If we request money we complete a form explaining our needs and how it connects to the Alberta Program of Studies. Transparent process" (S)

“Monies spent shared [with stakeholders] annually through reports (e.g. Three Year Plan and AERR). Also through shared action plans for improvement” (S)

“Was some music money not accounted for?” (S)

“Yes. They spent lots of money on our new Ogden campus” (S)

“Yes. It appears there have been positive changes in the school” (P)

“No. It appears that more money can be used wisely” (P)

“Yes. It shows that money is being well managed” (P)

“Yes. They do” (P)

“Yes [but] would like to be more aware of the spending details” (P) (2x)

“[They are trusted because] their own children are enrolled at ALCA” (P)

Notes compiled by Dr. Garry Andrews, Executive Director, The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools.

May 22, 2013.



Board Chair Performance Review Survey Administrative Procedures

SA – Strongly Agree, A- Agree, D – Disagree, SD – Strongly Disagree

I. Policy

	SA	A	D	SD	Comments
The Chair ensures Directors work well together.	2	2			
The Chair ensures the Board behaves in accordance with Policy.	3	1			
The Chair runs meetings in accordance with bylaw/policy expectations.	3	1			
The Chair allocates adequate time on meeting agendas for Board discussion of issues.	3	1			
The Chair ensures all Directors are heard prior to decisions.	3	1			

	SA	A	D	SD	Comments
The Chair is the spokesperson for the Board.	3	1			
The Chair liaises effectively with the Superintendent.	3	1			
The Chair acts at the direction of the Board.	3	1			
The Chair and Vice-Chair proactively represent the Board with ALCA stakeholders and external partners.	3		1		

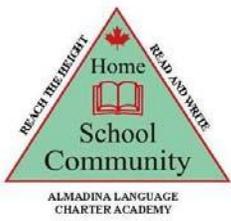
Other Comments:

II. Leadership:

	SA	A	D	SD	Comments
The Chair ensures Directors work well together.	3	1			
The Chair ensures the Board behaves in accordance with Policy.	3	1			
The Chair runs meetings in accordance with bylaw/policy expectations.	3	1			
The Chair allocates adequate time on meeting agendas for Board discussion of issues.	2	2			
The Chair ensures all Directors are heard prior to decisions.	2	2			
The Chair is the spokesperson for the Board.	3	1			

Self and Board Assessment Survey Administrative Procedures

ALCA Board Performance Review Survey:



A) Self-Assessment:

The following survey is composed of two sections, a self-assessment and an assessment of the Board as a whole. Please place a checkmark in the column that best reflects your response to the statement on the left. (SA – Strongly Agree, A – Agree, D – Disagree, SD – Strongly Disagree)

	S A	A	D	SD	Comments and/or examples in support of your response
1. I understand and support the vision, mission and guiding principles of this school	5				
2. I effectively use my time and skills to further the work of the Board	5				
3. I understand the role of the board and my legal and ethical responsibilities as a director and of the board as a whole	4	1			
4. I prepare for meetings by reading background materials and researching issues for discussion	4	1			
5. I make measured and appropriate contributions to board discussions and deliberations through listening, responding and presenting information as required	5				
6. Beyond board meetings, I willingly attend and become involved in a variety of other events requiring board participation	2	3			
7. I carry out my responsibilities in an effective and timely manner and make meaningful contributions while serving on board committees	4	1			
8. I support and help other board members in their development	4	1			Committee meeting involved board member
9. I participate in development opportunities including workshops, information sessions, conferences, and retreats	4	1			

	SA	A	D	SD	Comments and/or examples in support of your response
11. I avoid participation in board issues that are self-serving or may be perceived as a conflict of interest	5				
12. I have a clear understanding of what I should or should not be communicating outside the board	5				
13. I recognize the board must be unified by "speaking with one voice" and thereby publicly support all Board decisions	5				
14. When it is appropriate, I communicate privately and constructively with the Chair	1	3			One director abstained
15. When I have a different opinion than the majority, I feel there is value to raise it	1	2	1		One director abstained and one who disagreed said "I go with the majority".
16. I demonstrate and express my support of the school and the Superintendent to the school community	4	1			
17. I understand the difference between governance and operations and do not interfere with the day to day business of the school	4	1			
18. I am willing to consider and when necessary, promote new ideas and alternatives to traditional problems/issues	4	1			
19. I maintain an understanding of the legislative, business, social and political impacts that affect the environment within which ALCA operates	2	2			One director abstained
20. I promote the organization's interests externally		4			One director abstained
21. I am aware of the general and financial strengths, challenges and priorities of the organization	3	2			
22. I stay informed about issues related to our mission and bring information to the attention of the board	2	3			
23. As a whole, I enjoy my service as a board member of the school	3	2			

Reflection: What are you most proud of in your work as a Director this past year?

Hired superintendent. Uniforms. Urdu language (optional subject). Donation of two ping pong tables. Clear audit report.
 On community relations committee. Resolving problems which arise from time to time with our society. Clearing up misunderstandings with our community.
 Obtaining Ogden School for Almadina.
 New school campus. Uniform implementation in the school. Lifting of cap on student numbers (increased enrollment).

Additional Comments:

Would like to see this Board avoid conflict and stay as one voice for the best interest of the school and community.

B) Board Assessment:

	SA	A	D	SD	Comments
1. The Board establishes and supports a clearly defined vision and mission of the organization	3	2			Board operates based on respecting bylaws and board policy.
2. The Board operates with clearly defined annual goals in support of the long term strategic plan	4	1			Have had Three Year Planning workshop (strategic planning). Had board development workshop regarding governance vs. Management.,
3. The Board regularly reviews its work in relation to its goals and plans	3	2			
4. The Board follows its policies, Bylaws and Charter which are reviewed and updated regularly	3	2			
5. Board members have a shared understanding of their role	2	2	1		
6. Board members understand and willingly fulfill their responsibilities and commitments	2	3			

7. The Board uses committees with clear mandated tasks to further the work of the Board	3	2			
8. Committees provide pertinent information and feedback from each of the following:					
a) Community Relations b) Human Resources c) Executive	3 1 1	2 2 2	? ?		Brd. moving away from being a mgmt brd. Only directly involved with community relations and not with human resources. Role of Executive committee is not clear to ALCA.
9. Board members understand and fulfill their legal obligations	4	1			
10. The Board represents the interests of the society's membership	4	1			
11. The processes to manage director succession and to nominate candidates for the Board are effective	2	3			
12. The Board has an established orientation process for new Directors	4	1			
13. Respectful relationships exist among Board members	2	2			One director abstained
14. Respectful relationships exist between Board members and other individuals/groups within the school:					
a) Administration b) Staff c) Parents	3 3 3	2 2 2			

	SA	A	D	SD	Comments
15. Board members openly express their opinion when participating in discussions	4	1			
16. The Board communicates in a timely and appropriate manner with all stakeholders	2	3			
17. Board meetings deal primarily with policy, planning, allocating financial resources, and system advocacy	5				
18. Directors receive information on a regular basis about ALCAs:					
a) Financial performance b) Operational performance	3 3	1 1			One director abstained
19. The Board has access to the information necessary to effectively review student results	2	2	1		
20. The Board has the opportunity to provide input to the Annual Education Plan prior to its finalization	4		1		
21. The Board ensures adequate resources are available to undertake the work of the school	4	1			
22. Directors place the interests of ALCA as a whole	4	1			

above any personal interests they may hold					
23. Directors communicate openly with one another	4	1			
24. Directors regularly receive information and stay informed about:					
a) Education	2	2	1		
b) Charter Schools	2	2	1		
c) ALCA	2	2	1		
25. Directors participate in learning opportunities in pursuit of their responsibilities	3	2			Have had board development workshops.
26. The division of authority and the allocation of responsibilities between the Board and the Superintendent are clear	2	3			
27. There is a climate of mutual respect and trust between Directors and Superintendent	3	2			

	SA	A	D	SD	Comments
28. Board members take reasoned, independent positions on topics and issues	1	4			
29. Board members have opportunities to share relevant knowledge and experience in Board discussion	2	3			Any item for discussion will be debated by directors and final decision will be reached by vote.
30. The atmosphere of the Boardroom encourages critical thinking and problem solving	2	3			
31. Directors maintain confidentiality	2	3			
32. The Board fosters a spirit of excitement and has a genuine sense of progress and achievement	2	3			

Reflection: What are you most proud of that the Board accomplished this year?

New school. Increased enrollment.
 Ogden school. Raised student number cap.
 Having agreement on various issues for the interest of the school.
 Three Year Education plan. Revision of board policy manual.

What is the most important thing that you think the Board of Directors should work on next year?

Obtaining high school.
 To get approval for a new school – to upgrade to classes Grade 10-12.

