

Board Evaluation Report

SCHOOL AUTHORITY: Almadina Language Charter Academy

EVALUATOR: Dr. Jim Brandon

DATE: June 18, 2019

INTRODUCTION

This report provides an evaluation of the performance of the Board of Directors of the Almadina Language Charter Academy (ALCA) based on data collected over the past two years. The ALCA provides service to approximately 1120 students in its two Calgary schools, which are staffed by approximately 60 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) teachers and 30 FTE support staff members. In addition to the part time Superintendent, two full time administrative staff members, and a part time secretary treasurer provide administrative leadership to the system through the Almadina Board Office.

The report begins with brief explanations of the evaluation's purposes, processes, and criteria. The fifth section assesses the Board's performance in relation to four research informed domains of effective board performance. A summary table of strengths from which to continue ongoing improvement efforts with a clearer focus on policy governance concludes the report.

EVALUATION PURPOSES

There are two purposes of this evaluation. The first is to assess the processes and approaches used by the Board in carrying out its responsibilities under the Alberta School Act, the Alberta Charter Schools Regulation, and the 2013-2028 Almadina Charter Academy Agreement. The second purpose is to identify Board strengths from which to continue its ongoing improvement efforts with a clearer focus on policy governance.

EVALUATION PROCESS

The plan for this evaluation was developed through discussions over time with the Superintendent and the Board as a follow up to the Superintendent's evaluation tabled at the February 1, 2018 Board Meeting. As a first step, relevant findings from data gathered through an initial assessment process that paralleled the Superintendent's evaluation were presented orally at the Board's February 15, 2018 meeting. Subsequently, a more detailed longitudinal assessment process was undertaken. This report was generated from data gathered from October 2017 through to the present. The following data sources were used:

- Participant observations of meetings with the Board:
 - April 2017 meetings during the Superintendent Selection Process
 - November 4, 2017 (Policy Review Meeting)
 - February 1, 2018 (Presentation of Superintendent's Evaluation)
 - February 15, 2018 (Informal Oral Board Assessment)

- o December 8, 2018 (Policy Review Meeting)
- o Individual interviews based on a general leadership questionnaire administered to Directors, school leaders, and board office administrative staff on November 8, 2017
- o Relevant ALCA policy and procedural documents available online or provided at the December 8, 2018 Policy Review Meeting.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

Recent studies of educational governance in Canada (Brandon, 2016; Galway, Sheppard, Wiens, & Brown, 2013; Leithwood, 2010, 2011, 2013; Leithwood & McCullough, 2016; Seel & Gibbons, 2011; Sheppard, Brown, & Dibbon) inform us of the importance of adopting a policy governance model well suited to the local context. No governance model is the one size that fits all (Brandon, Turner, Donlevy, & Parsons, 2017, p. 1)

Although this report is not based on a singular governance model, the descriptive and evaluative comments in Section Five below are arranged in relation to four domains of Board Performance that are well supported in the research literature:

1. Strategic Governance through Shared Vision and Policy,
2. Fiduciary Governance through Assurance and Accountability,
3. Generative Governance through Team Learning and Community Engagement, and
4. Effective Governance Relationships

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The descriptive and evaluative comments in this section are framed within the four domains of Board Performance listed in Section Four above. Each performance domain begins with guiding research insights followed by descriptive and evaluative statements that illustrate Board performance in the domain. A summary assessment of performance completes each sub-section.

Domain One: STRATEGIC GOVERNANCE THROUGH SHARED VISION AND POLICY

Guiding Research Insights

Highly effective board members focus their work on supporting and monitoring progress on the system's strategic multi-year plan while nurturing the wider community's understanding and support through a policy governance model. Systems adopting a policy governance model should provide ongoing training for all elected board members, system leaders, and staff. This approach fosters collaboration and interdependency between professional and elected system leaders (Leithwood, 2010, p. 13).

The descriptive and assessment commentary in this section illustrate ways in which the ALCA Board is progressing in the solidification of its policy governance approach through an increasingly strategic focus on its established vision. The Board has a clearly stated and prominently displayed vision and mission that are connected to a well detailed, multi-year plan characterized by high, but realistic and well-supported, expectations. The Board and Superintendent allocate resources in support of the plan's goals and accountability is prioritized through regular monitoring of evidence of student achievement. Through *Policy # 2 – Role of the Board*, processes are in place to monitor the Board's own performance as a basis to take action toward continually improving its governance processes.

To continue this movement forward, the Board needs to more fully embrace a policy-in-action approach. On paper, the ALCA has developed a policy governance model well suited to its context. Yet, the Board, like many others, struggles to consistently and effectively enact one of the fundamental principles of policy governance as described in this excerpt from *Policy # 9 – Policy Making*:

Board policies shall provide an appropriate balance between the responsibility of the Board to develop the broad guidelines to guide Almadina Language Charter Academy and the opportunity for the Superintendent to exercise professional judgement in the administration of the Almadina Language Charter Academy.

While the Board is making notable and impressive progress in this policy governance direction, ongoing education is fostering greater interdependency among professionals, Directors, and the wider community. Most important, however, is the need to persist in attempts to demonstrate policy governance through its everyday actions. One of the November 2016 interviewees captured this challenge with the following words:

The Board should continue to keep the focus of all school board decisions and activities on student achievements and on the best educational interests of students and be a governance board.

A recommendation to better reflect a governance orientation and at the same time to more effectively manage time at Board Meetings is to place action and policy items at the beginning of the meeting. Decisions to act can then be based on discussion at preceding meetings. Of course, the flexibility to be provide for consideration of emergent items should remain at the discretion of the Board. In well-functioning boards, discussion items, reports, and information items are given full, but time limited, attention.

The wisdom of the Board speaking with one voice after debating and determining a position was another view expressed by several Directors. Directors expressed appreciation for the Chair's ability to encourage diverse perspectives during discussion of decision options, leading to a well-supported choice. Directors also expressed appreciation for the training sessions on governance, rules of order, and strategic planning.

The ALCA website has well organized and useful information on the system's goals, priorities, and strategic initiatives. It is important to ensure that all Board information is current.

Domain One Assessment Summary: *Strategic Governance*

The evidence is clear that the ALCA Board is progressing in the solidification of its policy governance approach through an increasingly strategic focus on its established vision. To continue this movement forward,

- the ALCA Board should **continue** to
 - exhibit a strong commitment to the ACLS vision and multi-year educational plan.
 - focus planning on the learning and well-being of all students.
 - celebrate and visibly demonstrate pride in the numerous accomplishments of their students and staff.

- the ALCA Board should develop and enact a plan to **strengthen** its
 - visible demonstration of its policy governance approach in Board Meetings.
 - governance approach to deal with strategic priorities and to better manage time at Board Meetings by re-ordering agendas so that action and policy items come before discussion and reports.

Domain Two: FIDUCIARY GOVERNANCE THROUGH ASSURANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Guiding Research Insights

Fiduciary governance attends to financial discipline, informed oversight, and mission fidelity (Chait, Ryan, & Taylor, 2005, p. 34). School boards are responsible for directing the activities of the school district in terms of organization, strategic planning and operations, and accountability for finances and student learning (Seel & Gibbons, 2011). School board members do not hold administrative positions but are members and representatives of the public and are legally responsible for the organization (Shields, 2007). The school board functions as a legal entity, which exercises its authority as a single corporate body; therefore, individual board members do not possess any authority as individuals (Carpenter, 2007).

Although the fiduciary component is a strength within the Board's governance approach, the data gathered and analyzed in this section yielded one important recommendation. In addition, the data underline the value of two specific fiduciary approaches employed.

An often-expressed governance challenge for educational Trustees and Directors is to remove themselves from of the day-to-day operations of the organization, while still retaining sufficient oversight so that they have a collective sense of operational accountability. Said another way, they need to have enough knowledge to be able to trust and support administration's operational efforts, while safeguarding the public interest. In the case of ALCA, Board committees sometimes have difficulty taking on governance oversight rather than getting mired in the operational details that should remain the purview of administration.

In partnership with their Superintendent and Secretary-Treasurer the ALCA Board consistently demonstrates that it is an good custodian of resources. Financial control, cost effectiveness, and conservation of resources are strong aspects of the ALCA system. Clear direction on fiscal and resource management is provided in accordance with statutory, regulatory and legislative requirements. Effective alignment of financial and human resources support achievement of the goals of the multi-year education plan.

Domain Two Assessment Summary: *Fiduciary Governance*

The ALCA is a well-managed school system. In partnership with their Superintendent and secretary-treasurer the Board demonstrates that it is an effective custodian of resources in support of student learning. Financial control, cost effectiveness, and conservation of resources are strong aspects of ALCA school system management. To progress further in the realm of fiduciary governance:

- the ALCA Board should **continue** to
 - operate a well-managed, fiscally responsible, and efficient school system.
 - communicate high, but achievable, and well supported expectations.

- the ALCA Board should develop and enact a plan to **strengthen** its
 - committee structure to emphasize the governance role over the operating role.

Domain Three: GENERATIVE GOVERNANCE THROUGH TEAM LEARNING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Guiding Research Insights

The practice of governance needs to change, moving from predominantly fiduciary and strategic domains of governance to include "generative governance". As stewards of the community conversation about schools, board members have to provide a range of invitational forums - formal board meetings being only one - for such conversations characterized by inclusion, dialogue and deliberation. This requires a proactive stance that: (a) seeks out multiple voices and ensures that they are listened to; (b) fosters a process whereby different perspectives are properly explained and understood; and, (c) when choices are to be made between different courses of action, they are well reasoned and carefully articulated. (Chait, Ryan, & Taylor, 2005).

Like many Alberta school authority boards, the ALCA Board is making some progress in the complex area of generative governance. One strategy that is having impact in recent years is the use of the ALCA website to facilitate regular and quite transparent public communication from the system, including Board biographies, meeting minutes, policies and bylaws. Notices of Board initiatives such as AGM and elections are increasingly evident. As the Board moves into this public space, it will be increasingly important to ensure that all pages are kept current or, if not updated, removed.

Although the Board is increasingly active in this way, it is still advisable to more regularly engage with educators and parents in the creation of policies that affect them. Involving school leaders in providing input and feedback on the Three-Year Plan and Annual Results Report is a good example of efforts of this sort. Through the leadership of the Superintendent, the Board should encourage and support further development of leadership capacity of principals so that the voices of teachers, students, and parents have greater influence in shaping direction within each school. This is a common consideration in many Alberta school systems.

ALCA Directors have been noticeably active in advocating for increased recognition of the Charter School movement and have played a leadership role in promoting the interests new Canadian English Language Learners. Additional efforts to actively engage with government initiatives and resources in order to strengthen support for their own strategic directions is suggested. In their provincial relations, proactive Boards actively take part in the larger policy discourse. They realistically advocate for local needs, and regularly convey their input and feedback to the Ministry on important policy matters.

Domain Three Assessment Summary: *Generative Governance*

The evidence collected, analyzed and reported in this section indicates that, like many Alberta school authority boards, the ALCA Board is making some progress in the challenging area of generative governance. As steps toward further advancement in this realm,

- the ALCA Board should **continue** to
 - demonstrate the Board's commitment to individual and team learning.
 - invest in ongoing teacher, leader, and Director capacity building in areas of strategic importance.
- the ALCA Board should develop and enact a plan to **strengthen** its
 - desire to engage with new and innovative ideas, openness to public input, and commitment to transparency in decision-making.

Domain Four: **EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE RELATIONSHIPS**

Guiding Research Insights

The terms reciprocal, collaborative, and interactive begin to capture the types of governance relationships that have the best chances of supporting student success within the dynamic realities of contemporary Canadian education (Brandon, 2016, from Manzer, 1994). Establishing and sustaining productive working relationships with the Superintendent, the school community, and the government, based on mutual trust, respect and integrity are key (Brandon, Turner, Donlevy, & Parsons, 2017).

In his November 2017 interview, one Director indicated that the Board's main goal was to work as a team. He was pleased with what he saw as improvement in his colleagues increasing ability to disagree with less emotion and greater respect. Stability in the school and in the boardroom was critical in his estimation. Each of the other Directors in both the 2017 and the 2018 Boards placed high priority on establishing constructive relationships with central and school administration, students, staff, school councils, parents, employee organizations, the Ministry, and a number of other stakeholder organizations.

Interview and survey data collected in November 2017 indicated that both the current Superintendent and his immediate predecessor were seen to be positive educators who have worked thoughtfully and patiently with the Board to develop more effective governance relationships. Observations in meetings with the Board in the 2018-19 school term reveal that such relationships are now the norm rather than the exception. There is also increasing evidence of effective team-building, use of solution-focused processes to resolve challenges, and a more congenial feeling tone in public as well as private meetings of the Board of Directors.

The recent establishment of the ALCA Collegial Committee (made up of teachers, school leaders, and the Superintendent) is more specific example of active relationship building on behalf of the Board, as is the ongoing relationship with Alberta Education Field Services' representatives. Board and central administration participation in student recognition ceremonies, graduations, and teacher appreciation events are additional ways in which relationships of trust and respect are kindled and sustained.

Domain Four Assessment Summary: *Effective Governance Relationships*

The evidence examined in this portion of the evaluation indicates that the ACSA Board is working hard to maintain strong and reciprocal governance relationships. Building trust and supporting effective working relationships within the school system community and across the education system remains a high priority. The evidence indicates that:

- the ALCA Board should **continue** to
 - cultivate and celebrate strong relationships with educators, parents, the community, the Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools, and the Ministry of Education.

- the ALCA Board should develop and enact a plan to **strengthen**
 - efforts to separate parental and Director roles when engaging with the schools.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: STRENGTHS-BASED PLANNING FOR FURTHER GROWTH

The preceding descriptive and evaluative illustrations along with the assessment summaries for each the four domains of performance were based on analysis of data from multiple sources over a two-year period. A systematic review of policy documents and other reports, observations of and participation in multiple meetings of the Board, formal interviews and survey submissions from 14 participants in the fall of 2017, and many conversations with Directors, system administrators, and school leaders have led to the conclusions

Well informed polices and processes are in place, educational results are good, governance relationships are strengthening, and the Board is making notable progress on its efforts to better enactment of its policy governance model. The limited survey data collected reported *agreement or strong agreement* on 29 of the 32 Board Assessment items. This is a very positive finding.

Each of the 3 items of the 32 items in total, which indicated *combined disagreement* has been addressed in the body of the report but are noted here for clarity.

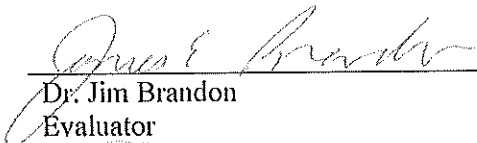
- #4 The Board follows its policies, Bylaws and Charter which are reviewed and updated regularly.
- #17 Board meetings deal primarily with policy, planning, allocating financial resources, and system advocacy.
- #26 The Division of authority and the allocation of responsibilities between the Board and the Superintendent are clear.

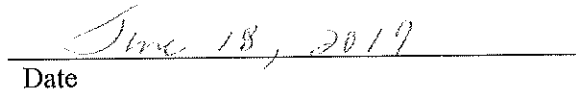
In sum, this report indicates that the Board is in a very positive position from which to build on their current strengths to continue its ongoing improvement efforts with a clearer focus on policy governance. The following table summarizes 8 key governance actions to continue along with 5 specific areas to enact plans for improvement.

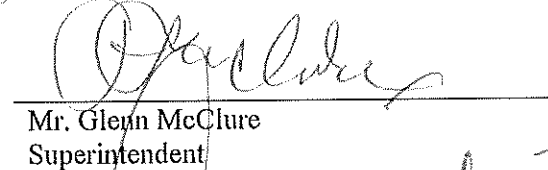
Performance Domain	The ALCA Board should <u>continue</u> to	The ALCA Board should develop and enact plans to <u>strengthen</u> its
Strategic Governance through Shared Vision and Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exhibit a strong commitment to the ACLS vision and multi-year educational plan • focus planning on the learning and well-being of all students • celebrate and visibly demonstrate pride in student accomplishment 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. focus on the ALCS vision and policy governance approach at in Board Meetings 2. governance approach to deal with strategic priorities and to better manage time at Board Meetings by re-ordering agendas so that action and policy items come before discussion and reports
Fiduciary Governance through Assurance and Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • operate a well-managed, fiscally responsible, and efficient school system • communicate high, but achievable, and well supported expectations 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. committee structure to emphasize the governance role over the operating role.

Generative Governance through Team Learning and Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ demonstrate the Board's commitment to individual and team learning ◦ invest in ongoing teacher, leader, and Director capacity building in areas of strategic importance 	4. work with the Superintendent to consistently demonstrate a clearly articulated, effective, and open functioning structure
Effective Governance Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ cultivate and celebrate strong relationships with educators, parents, the community, the Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools, and the Ministry of Education 	5. efforts to separate parental and Director roles when engaging with the schools 6. distinctions between the governance role of the Board and operational role of the Superintendent and other members of the administrative team

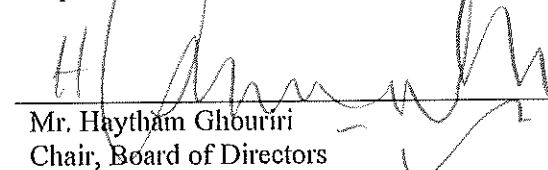
SIGNATURES


Dr. Jim Brandon
Evaluator


Date


Mr. Glenn McClure
Superintendent

Date


Mr. Haytham Ghourini
Chair, Board of Directors

Date

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