

# Foundations for the Future

*A back-to-the-basics charter academy is sparking change in mainstream schools.*

By Candis McLean

The kindergarten students wear uniforms and sit in ruler-straight rows, eyes glued to the teacher while reciting answers in a carefully-choreographed chorus — and they look anything but stifled.

The teaching process may seem foreign to most parents of primary-school-aged children, but it's a tried-and-true-technique known as direct instruction. Grade 3 student Bevan Prasad explains: "You don't mind sitting still because she's telling you something."

At the Foundation for the Future Charter Academy (FFCA) in Calgary, the average kindergarten student is reading at a grade 1.7 level by June; some are reading *Harry Potter* novels.

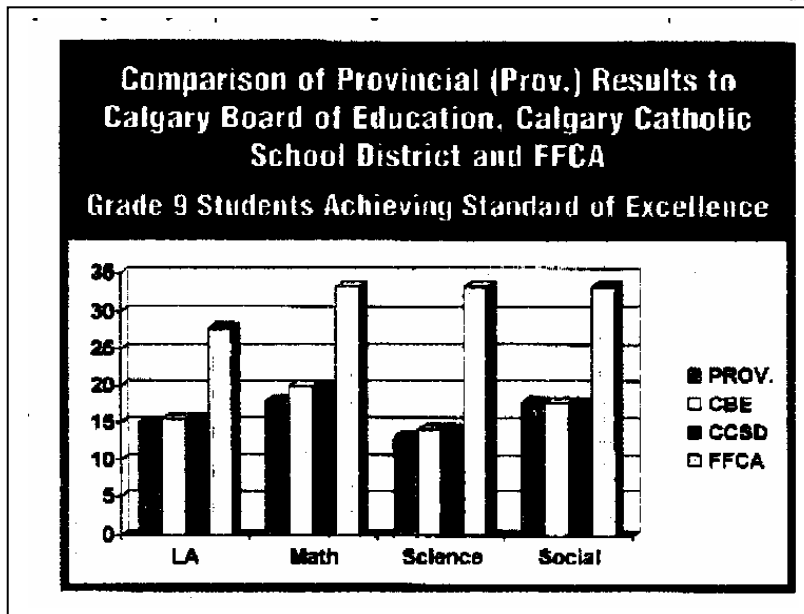
With word-of-mouth advertising alone, the school has a total of 6,300 students on its waiting list, including eight children already in the queue for kindergarten in 2008.

Under far-reaching reforms introduced by the Alberta government in the mid-1990s, charter schools receive full funding from the province but operate independent of the public system (although their establishment must be approved by a local school board.)

The first FFCA school opened in 1997, despite the Calgary Board of Education's (CBE) having twice rejected it as "retrogressive," provoking an appeal to the provincial government. The FFCA now operates four schools.

The most common reason parents give for their eagerness to sign up for the FFCA is dissatisfaction with other options. Given this fact, it's not surprising the charter school has already inspired public school reform.

Last year, a newspaper ad touted "a new Calgary Board of Education initiative that emphasizes structure, discipline and diligence while promoting academic success for all students."



When few parents turned out for the information evenings, the venture was re-advertised as an initiative "based on the model used by the Foundations for the Future Charter Academy." Placements were soon filled, the Traditional Learning Centre opened last September, and a second such centre is expected this fall.

Certainly, the charter school has its critics, such as Sharon Friesen, co-founder of the Calgary-based Galileo Educational Network, which recommends a return to Plato's "inquiry-based" education — giving children purposeful questions to investigate in order to help them learn, in combination with an early introduction to computers.

Friesen believes FFCA "provides the look of a school hearkening back to 1950 with lessons scripted for teachers, nice benchmarks, and a level of certainty for teachers, students and parents. But it is preparing children for yesterday's world rather than the knowledge era."

Henry Zondervan, the principal of FFCA, responds, "They say we're stifling children, making them robots, that children don't learn that way. Well, ours do."

Adds FFCA founder Dan Levson, "A substantial emphasis on student use of computers in the early school years is premature when students have not acquired and mastered basic skills. An anonymous author says it best: 'If you don't know how to do something, you don't know how to do it with a computer.'"

One problem FFCA faces is obtaining new buildings. Two new locations opened last year, but the FFCA did not learn that the Calgary Board would be making the buildings available until the end of June. Five administrators had to spend the summer hiring staff, renovating, furnishing and registering 600 students.

"No wonder we were tired in the fall," says Mr. Zondervan. "As long as the Calgary Board sees itself as competing with charter schools, it's not going to create a win-win situation. We should be co-operating partners in serving the public."

Ultimately, the proof of education's worth is in the product. Amy Maxwell, 17, a grade 12 student (with an 86% average) aiming for medical school, looks back on her three years in the school with gratitude.

"It really prepared us well for high school," she says. "We hated the uniforms and we hated the rules, but we had tons of fun and today we really appreciate it."

*(Adapted with permission from "Foundations for the Future," The Report, February 3, 2003)*