

GIFTED EDUCATION: From the Inside Out

15-YEAR CHARTER RENEWAL SUBMISSION

May 2016

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THE CHARTER SCHOOL

BACKGROUND

Westmount Charter School was founded in 1996 by the Action for Bright Children (Calgary) Society, under the name ABC Charter Public School, initially offering classes for grades 1-3 children who are gifted. The

school opened in the former Bridgeland School and kindergarten was soon

added.

In 1998, ABC school moved to a larger location on the old Currie Barracks in southwest Calgary and added grades four and five. One additional grade was added to the school each year until 2005, when the school reached its full kindergarten to grade 12 (K-12) continuum. In the interim (2002), the program moved again from the Currie Barracks to the Viscount Bennett Centre.

In 2005, when the ABC program expanded to include middle school and high school, it was decided that the school should be renamed. The name Westmount Charter School was selected after considerable consultation: a name chosen in part because it did not come with preconceived connections - it would be up to the school's students and staff to create a reputation of excellence associated with the new name.

In 2011, the school moved again into two separate buildings:

- Elementary Campus (K-4); 728-32 Street NW, Calgary, AB T2N 2V9
- Mid-High Campus (grades 5-12); 2215 Uxbridge Dr. NW, Calgary, AB T2N 4Y3

Westmount is the only K-12 congregated setting in Alberta for students who are gifted. The school serves approximately 1200 students who represent a broad range of diversity including race, sex, gender identity, gender expression, English as an Additional Language (EAL), special education needs (twice exceptional), under-achievement and high-achievement.

The Charter Board Office is located at: 728-32 Street NW, Calgary, AB T2N 2V9

VISION AND MISSION

Vision

Fostering gifted education from the inside out.

Mission

To provide students who are gifted an authentic educational experience that:

- supports need, ability and potential;
- provides opportunities for inner growth;
- develops genuine relationships; and
- is facilitated by empathic, passionate, creative educators whose ethical practice develops lifelong learners.

Students at Westmount learn early on to identify their strengths and most importantly, weaknesses that help them deal with some of the more challenging traits that accompany being gifted, including social and emotional issues. (Parent, grade 11)

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

At Westmount Charter School, we believe:

- 1) students who are gifted are capable of exceptional performance;
- 2) students who are gifted require comprehensive, specialized educational programming if they are to understand and maximize their varied abilities;
- 3) teachers of gifted students require specialized training and experience in the education of the gifted if they are to effectively guide the development of those students' learning;
- 4) parents and guardians are vital partners in their children's education; and
- 5) members of the community at large have an important role to play in the education of students who are gifted.

DEFINITIONS

Giftedness:

Students are gifted when they demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement) when compared to others of their age, experience and environment. Asynchronous development, a critical aspect of giftedness, combines advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively atypical and require modifications in teaching and counselling.

Inherent in the Westmount definition is the Alberta Education definition of gifted and talented (Alberta 2000), the Columbus Group definition of giftedness (Columbus Group 1991) and the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC).

Congregated Setting:

Westmount is considered a "congregated" setting because students congregate to one specific school from all areas of the city to be involved in special education programming intended for qualified gifted students.

Achievement:

Achievement is the accomplishment - through a combination of skill, effort and courage - of meaningful goals established by and of interest to the gifted learner.

We support gifted learners from the inside out by aligning their achievements with educational outcomes.

Assessment:

Assessment is an orientation toward personalized learning that uses a variety of tools to facilitate student development as autonomous learners. This process involves assessment for learning, of learning and as learning, while incorporating student metacognition. The Ministerial Order: Student Learning (#001/2013) is a framework for instructional design that provides students who are gifted opportunities to develop competencies from the inside out.

Innovation:

Westmount Charter School encourages and supports a culture of innovation. This culture manifests in research and development of evolving practice leading to increased levels of student engagement and achievement. Innovation occurs when staff is encouraged and supported in new or enhanced programming strategies and in organizational structures and services for learners who are gifted. Such a culture requires a safe, secure environment where opportunities for enhanced development are recognized, time for research and professional development are provided and where risk-taking, failure and success are integral parts of the learning process. This culture of innovation inspires and supports engagement among staff, students and curriculum. Based on ethical and authentic practice, this is a dynamic example of entrepreneurship as defined by Alberta Education.

PHILOSOPHY

Perspectives on giftedness: How are we different?

Gifted students not only think differently from most others, they also feel differently. They were born with a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to their surroundings, as well as enhanced cognitive ability. This heightened awareness can lead to isolation. "Why don't I fit in? Why do I feel things so deeply? What's wrong with me? Who is there to turn to who really understands?" Our students need others who understand and empathize with their complex lives, their need for meaning, and their difficulties living in a world in which they often feel alien.

At Westmount, we look at giftedness "from the inside out." What does this mean for us? It means we strive to first know and honour who our students **are** before we can help them

become the best they can be.

It means we know our kids are often not in sync with society. Why? Most people think in terms of simple cause and effect. The gifted tend to be more aware of interdependence. Our students see cause and effect as many pebbles thrown in a pond, which may look like chaos but in fact follows a logical pattern and structure. Our students tend to be highly aware of themselves and others, which can make them unusually concerned for others and critical of themselves. They see shades of grey - the overlap, exception and contradiction. No wonder our students are at times out of step in the world.

I thought you might like to know that our son loves Westmount. He really likes his teachers and the overall structure of the school. He's also making friends and fitting in with the student population, which are things he struggled with in the past. His mom and I haven't seen him this happy in a really long time, so I wanted to thank you for making this possible.

(Parents, new grade 7)

From this perspective, giftedness is not equated only to high academic achievement. Giftedness is *how you are wired*, not what you produce. At Westmount, we encourage students to choose to demonstrate their abilities in their individual ways. When students are not achieving what we believe is their potential, we work to understand the gap and help them bridge it, modeling perseverance, resilience and respect. From our perspective, achievement is the outcome, not the starting point. **And that makes all the difference.**

(Gifted 101, Silverman, 2013; Off the Charts: Asynchrony and the Gifted Child, Neville et al., 2013)

The atmosphere of support and understanding available for our gifted kids, who are not always appreciated in other environments, is the most valuable aspect of Westmount. (Parent, grades 5 and 7)

CHARTER GOAL and OUTCOMES

Goal:

To improve gifted pedagogy from the inside out.

Outcomes:

- 1) Students will understand giftedness from the inside out.
- 2) Students will demonstrate increased resilience.
- 3) Students will recognize the importance of goals.
- 4) Students will comprehend the connection between personal wellness and strong communities.



PROGRAM DELIVERY

Research literature in gifted education overwhelmingly indicates the need for ability grouping for highly able students (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Gross, 2006; Rogers, 1991, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, Cross, & Olenchak, 2009). The more commonly practiced forms of ability grouping are flexible and multifaceted. These include: congregated settings in a specialized school such as Westmount; full-time classes; pull-out programs; cluster grouping; regrouping for specific subject instruction; and cross-grade grouping (Gross, 2006, Rogers, 2002).

Strategies:

Westmount Charter School implements the following strategies to support student attainment of the desired outcomes above:

- 1) provide a safe, supportive learning environment that acknowledges similarities and honours differences:
- 2) teach, model and support the development of lifelong learner goals and aspirations;
- 3) provide a variety of learning experiences that supplement or extend the scope and requirements of the Alberta Programs of Study;
- 4) support the development of critical and creative thinking, problem-finding, problem-solving and decision-making;
- 5) provide students with access to many, varied and advanced human and material resources within and outside the school; and
- 6) foster on-going professional development to enable school staff to enhance their ability to meet the needs of students who are gifted.

Instructional Methods:

Westmount embraces asynchrony as a driving principle in defining giftedness; therefore modifications in the delivery of curriculum and selection of content and resources are of paramount importance. Asynchronous development – an uneven pattern of growth characterized by differing patterns and rates of intensity, interest and skill development – negates the typical singular dimension and linear developmental pattern most often described in curriculum scope and sequence (Hutton, 2013). In other words, Westmount's content and curriculum delivery are modified to account for this asynchrony, thus affecting the way the school implements each of these instructional methods in particular circumstances.

Furthermore, research confirms the hallmark of giftedness is abstract thinking ability. Those who are gifted learn more and learn faster; they remember more and make more original connections compared to those in the normal range. Those who are gifted also have a depth of feeling with levels of intensity (Silverman, 2013). This is an important factor in considering the type of ability grouping, including congregated settings, to be implemented.

A high level of abstraction is critical to include in curriculum for students who are gifted. Westmount provides opportunities for students to engage in hypothetical reasoning, discuss complex issues, make abstract inferences, and utilize systematic procedures in their quest for knowledge. Curriculum involves critical analysis, creative synthesis and evaluation. Material containing several levels of meaning, such as metaphor, analogy and paradox are integrated in various instructional methods to address the advanced abstract reasoning abilities of students who are gifted (Silverman, 2013).

Westmount employs a number of different instructional methods, including:

- 1) enrichment;
- 2) course or grade acceleration;
- 3) individualized and personalized programming and supports in recognition of each student's unique profile;
- 4) differentiation of content, process and product;
- 5) flexible pacing;
- 6) cross-grade or multi-age grouping;
- 7) early entrance;
- 8) independent study and research skills;
- 9) seminars and tutorials;
- 10) content related to broad-based themes and integrated within and across disciplines; and
- 11) career development.

Westmount has created a unique knowledge, skills and attributes (KSA) guideline to complement the provincial Teaching Quality Standard (TQS) document. This KSA reflects a developmental, empathic orientation that supports "teaching gifted students from the inside out." The instructional methods at Westmount are embedded in the new KSA with 18 descriptive elements that guide excellence in gifted pedagogy. These include:

- Implications of asynchronous development: the teacher shows extensive understanding of asynchronous development, seeks opportunities to discover how it demonstrates itself in each student, and adjusts lessons to accommodate it;
- **Criteria for success:** the teacher determines student success, including assessment of academic success, in terms of the development of the whole child;
- **Decision-making for instructional design:** the teacher's instructional designs reflect identified student needs and place each child's needs at the centre of educational decision-making;
- Addressing affective and cognitive aspects of learning: the teacher integrates knowledge of students' affective and cognitive needs into plans for instructional experiences and tasks;
- Adjustment of curriculum to meet gifted needs: the teacher extensively
 adjusts curricular scope and sequence and instructional pacing to accommodate
 individual student's asynchronous development;
- Support for student understanding of their strengths and areas for growth: the teacher provides systematic and extensive feedback about the student's strengths and areas of growth. Students are required to reflect on their learning and to establish goals and strategies based on that feedback. The teacher helps gifted students understand their strengths and areas for growth in the context of the broader population;
- Effects of interactions between cognitive, social and emotional factors on instructional design: the teacher's instruction is designed to maximize or mitigate the effects of the interactions between cognitive and affective factors in students' individual contexts;
- Sensitivity to changes in classroom environment: the teacher fosters a classroom environment that is sensitive to emergent situations and invites students to share for the teacher to become more aware of these situations;
- Supporting students' heightened sensitivities: the teacher understands, accommodates and welcomes the heightened intensity of gifted individuals;
- Supporting student management of their own intensities: the teacher incorporates a variety of strategies to foster students' understanding of and ability to manage their heightened intensities;
- Nature of inquiry demonstrated by students: the teacher's instructional designs consistently encourage deep, complex and authentic inquiry to address students' intellectual needs;
- Lesson design and student interests: the teacher's lessons integrate opportunities for students to explore their interests at a level appropriate to their heightened intellectual needs and heightened intensity and validate a wide range of student passions;
- **Interpretation of behaviour:** the teacher effectively determines the degree to which negative behaviours are a result of giftedness rather than being merely problems to be addressed;
- Scaffolding student understanding of giftedness: the teacher consciously embeds into lesson designs opportunities to explore the nature of giftedness and its impact on the lives and learning of both individuals and groups;
- **Providing level of differentiation:** the teacher embraces and applies the principles of developmental differentiation when designing learning experiences for individual learners in the class. This involves simultaneous and evolving differentiation that takes into account individual social and emotional development as well as curricular and instructional goals;

Understanding
my students and
what makes them
tick, from the
inside out,
allows me to
better teach
them according
to how they
interpret their
world, thus
learn.
(Teacher, MidHigh)

- Teacher as student advocate: the teacher consistently advocates for individual student needs in
 conversations with parents, counselors, administration, student resource group meetings, colleagues,
 and if appropriate, with other students;
- **Teacher flexibility:** the teacher consistently and willingly adjusts to a wide range of circumstances and educational demands using extensive knowledge of giftedness, awareness of individual student needs, and a range of pedagogical strategies; and
- Managing ambiguity: the teacher embraces the ambiguity that comes from working with students who are gifted and views this as providing opportunities for growth and learning.

Assessment:

Some or all of the following formative and summative assessment techniques will be employed:

- 1) self appraisal;
- 2) student work samples;
- 3) interview and observational data (teachers, students, parents, mentors);
- 4) teacher-developed tests;
- 5) rubrics;
- 6) standardized provincial assessments;
- 7) student progress reports;
- 8) student portfolios;
- 9) student Individual Program Plans (IPPs); and
- 10) contracts or independent study records.

To me, Westmount is a rare refuge for children like me - children who are gifted. It is a place of security, where I can be myself. The staff understands that we, as gifted students, question and challenge. Similarly, we all are different. We all move at a different pace and at Westmount those who are ready can accelerate, and those who need elongated and detailed lessons are assisted. Westmount is the first place I have not been bored in class. I can accelerate my strengths and be aided in my weaknesses.

I have been able to skip a grade at my school and as a result have found a school, and a peer group, that I can fit into. In short, I love my school. It is my favourite place to be. It is my sublime sanctuary. (Student, grade 9)

CURRICULUM

Westmount provides instruction in the Alberta Programs of Study. In addition, the curriculum incorporates enhancements such as:

- 1) Internally developed programs:
 - a) Human Condition 15 which typically includes an international field trip;
 - b) Enhanced English for Business, Engineering and Social Sciences 35; and
 - c) integrated curricula projects in mid-school including Project Earth (science, physical activity and environmental focus).

- 2) Externally developed courses:
 - a) Advanced Placement courses in: Biology, Physics, Art, English, Mathematics and European History;
 - b) Dual-credit post-secondary courses;
 - c) Jane Goodall Institute's Roots and Shoots curriculum incorporated into our regular curricula; and
 - d) virtues programs that outline character traits we wish to develop within our population of students who are gifted.

RESEARCH SUPPORT

Westmount will continue to engage in a number of research projects focused specifically on giftedness and gifted pedagogy with universities and other research institutes. For examples of current and past research initiatives, refer to the Three-Year Education Plan and Annual Results Reports at: http://www.westmountcharter.com/charter_board/index.html.

A bibliography of research and readings supporting educational programming for our students is included in the Appendix.

COMMUNICATION PLAN

Westmount Charter School will share its innovative practices with the educational community through various means including, but not limited to, the following:

- 1) publishing regular newsletters with updates for our school community;
- 2) establishing partnerships with other educators and researchers within the broader gifted community;
- 3) welcoming university and college students for education, counseling or social work practicum experiences;
- 4) attending and presenting at educational conferences and workshops;
- 5) networking with other gifted education programs;
- 6) participating in appropriate research studies related to our mandate;
- 7) presenting at and participating in Alberta Education sponsored forums; and
- 8) encouraging staff members to become actively involved in professional associations in their areas of interest.

Updates to the communication plan are provided annually in the Three-Year Education Plan.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL

Students to be served by Westmount Charter School

- 1) Westmount Charter School serves students who are gifted (K-12).
- 2) Westmount Charter School's inclusive student population is highly diverse with up to 12% requiring special educational supports and other accommodations and approximately 20% English as an Additional Language Learners (EAL).

People always laugh and ask me if I'm being serious when I tell them stories of learning how to calculate the area of a circle using a bicycle wheel or making ice cream cones in math because they look like tangents. But at Westmount, this is how the teachers inspire and motivate their students to learn. (Student, grade 12)

Student Selection Criteria

Prospective students must be assessed, either by or under the supervision of a registered psychologist prior to registration in the school to determine their suitability within the context of the school's Charter. In addition, a multi-dimensional assessment process, conducted by qualified school staff under the direction of the principals, will be utilized and may include:

- 1) a parent questionaire, such as the Parent Inventory for Finding Potential (mandatory);
- 2) a teacher questionaire, such as the Teacher Inventory for Finding Strength (optional);
- 3) a psychological assessment yielding a General Ability Index (GAI) and/or Full Scale IQ score, i.e., a WPPSI, WISC or Stanford Binet;
- 4) an activity-based observation such as the Performance Task Evaluation (mandatory for kindergarten and grades 1,2);
- 5) an interview with individual students (grades 3-12); and
- 6) other assessment tools as applicable, e.g., report cards.

Attendance Area

Westmount Charter School will draw students from the City of Calgary and surrounding areas.

Enrolment and School Building Requirements

- 1) Westmount Charter School currently operates two campuses which it leases from the Calgary Board of Education. The campuses are organized as: Elementary (K-4) and Mid-High (5-12).
- 2) The request for an increase to the student enrolment cap from 1200 (K-12) students to 1400 (K-12) students was declined by the Minister of Education in 2016. The Westmount Charter Board may request an increase to the enrolment cap in the future.

Being challenged and going beyond the basic curriculum definitely helped in preparing me for university. (Alumni 2015)

GOVERNANCE

Society

- 1) Westmount Charter School Society is the sponsoring body for Westmount Charter School and holds ultimate authority and responsibility for the operation and management of the school.
- 2) The Society Bylaws describe the authority, mandate and responsibilities of Westmount Charter Board and the Society and are accessible at: http://www.westmountcharter.com/charter_board/index.html.

Charter Board

Pursuant to provisions of the *School Act* and other relevant legislation, the Society has established a charter board with a mandate to act on behalf of the Society in the operation and management of the school in accordance with the *School Act*, the Charter, the Society Bylaws and the Charter Board Policies accessible at: http://www.westmountcharter.com/charter_board/index.html.

School Council

Our mission is to foster the well-being and effectiveness of the school community and thereby enhance student learning.

Westmount School Council facilitates communication in our School Community so that we may work together to create an effective learning environment and to accommodate gifted education from the inside out.

We will strive to uphold the guiding principles when making decisions or providing advice with respect to our school.

The School Council organizational documents describe the philosophy and bylaws of the School Council.

The School Council may engage in a variety of fundraising activities in compliance with all municipal and provincial laws. School Council and the principals will mutually agree upon the use of funds generated through the efforts of the School Council.

Role of Parents

Parents have the primary role and responsibility for teaching their children. By participating in a publicly funded education system, parents choose to share the responsibility of teaching their children with teachers, principals, support staff and other members of the larger school community. Parents support their children's development physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. As the strongest advocates for their gifted children, parents bring valuable information about those children to the learning environment at Westmount.

Westmount has been a godsend to our family, as one of our children is exceptionally gifted and has required specialized knowledge and supports to understand and facilitate her learning from a very early age (began grade one at age 4). The unique programming at WCS and the ability to have this gifted education available from grades K-12 is simply not available elsewhere. (Parent, K-4)

TRANSPORTATION POLICY

Bus transportation is provided on a cost-recovery basis for eligible students as defined by the *School Act*.

AMENDING THE CHARTER

Basis and Process for Amendment

- 1) Any member of the Charter Board or the Society may request that the Charter Board review a term or condition of the Charter.
- 2) The Charter Board shall meet within four to eight (4 to 8) weeks to consider the amendment request. The Charter Board's decision shall be communicated, in writing, within 48 hours to the requesting member. If the amendment proposal is rejected, it may be discussed again after one year.
- 3) If the amendment proposal is accepted, the Charter Board shall have between four and eight (4 and 8) weeks to provide Society members with a copy of the proposed amendment and call a general meeting of the Society. At this meeting, the proposed amendment will be either approved or rejected by the Society members. Minor rewording of the amendment, which does not affect either the substance or intent of the amendment may also be considered at this meeting.
- 4) The decision of the Society is final and the result of the vote will be conveyed in writing to the requesting member within 48 hours. If the amendment proposal is rejected, it may be discussed again after one year.

5) In the event the proposed amendment(s) are approved by the Society, the Charter Board shall seek to obtain the necessary approval from the Minister in accordance with the regulations.

Minor Amendments

6) The Charter Board may, on its own authority, initiate and approve minor amendments which do not affect the substance or intent of the Charter. Following Charter Board approval, any such amendments shall be forwarded to the Minister for final approval.

TERM OF CHARTER

Charter Renewal

1) The renewed term of the Charter will be fifteen (15) years commencing September 1, 2016 and continuing to August 31, 2031.

Additional Renewals

2) The Charter Board will consult with and consider the opinions of stakeholders regarding the renewal of the Charter. The Charter Board will consider recommendations made in evaluation reports and will comply with all required changes. The process to renew the Charter should begin a minimum of six months before the renewal application deadline set out in legislation and will follow the guidelines in place at that time.

DISSOLUTION PROCESS

Basis and Process for Dissolution

- 1) If, at any time prior to the expiration of the Charter:
 - a) a decision is made not to apply for renewal of the Charter;
 - b) the student enrolment falls below the minimum limit prescribed by the regulations;
 - c) the basic terms of the Charter cannot be fulfilled nor satisfactorily amended; or
 - d) the Charter has been repealed pursuant to the regulations, then
 - the Charter Board will call a special meeting (the "dissolution meeting") of the Charter Board to determine the effective date of dissolution and to begin planning the dissolution process.
- 2) Ideally, the effective date of dissolution will coincide with the end of a school year.
- 3) The Board will ensure that the Minister of Education is notified in writing by January 31 of the proposed year of termination of the school, seeking Ministerial approval.
- 4) The dissolution process shall begin immediately following the dissolution meeting and shall be carried out by the Charter Board with the assistance and guidance of the School Council, if necessary. The Charter Board shall use its best efforts to meet financial and other obligations of the school throughout the dissolution process.

Advice to Stakeholders

5) Within two (2) weeks of its decision, the Charter Board shall, in accordance with relevant legislation, give written notice to all stakeholders of the decision to dissolve the Charter. Stakeholders include the Minister, the Society members, the teachers and all other employees of the Charter Board, and the parents and students. Notice of dissolution shall provide the reasons for, the effective date of, and the proposed plan for dissolution.

Disposition of Property and Finances

- 6) After providing notice to stakeholders as provided above, the Charter Board shall proceed to:
 - a) provide notice pursuant to any rental agreements for buildings, land, property or facilities;
 - b) determine a value for any owned buildings, land, property, facilities or other assets;
 - c) liquidate any owned assets either by public auction or private sale;
 - d) discharge the liabilities of the school;
 - e) provide the Society and the Minister with a full accounting of the finances of the school;
 - f) return any surplus attributable to provincial funding to the Provincial Treasurer; and
 - g) turn over to the Society any residual funds at which point the Society shall be dissolved in accordance with the Society Bylaws.

Transfer of Students

- The Charter Board shall provide each registered student with a transfer of records form to be completed with information regarding the school to which records are to be transferred. Upon receipt of a written request from the new school, the student's original record will be forwarded as per the request.
- 2) The Charter Board shall remain responsible for the transfer of a student's records for a period of three (3) months from the date it provided the transfer form. Thereafter, any remaining student records shall be forwarded to the Minister with a request that they be held on record until claimed by the student.

It isn't just the gifted programming – it's the understanding that just because a child is gifted doesn't mean they are a smarter version of another child – they have areas of development that are delayed compared to areas where they are advanced. Westmount nurtures the whole child, not just the 'smart part'. (Parent, grade 9)

Appendix

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RESEARCH AND READINGS SUPPORTING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

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AR94176

MAY 1 6 2016

Mr. Graeme Finlay Chairperson Westmount Charter School 728 - 32 Street NW Calgary AB T2N 2V9

Dear Mr. Finlay:

Thank you for your April 21, 2016 letter providing me with a copy of Westmount Charter School's revised charter, which includes the changes I requested in my February 12, 2016 letter.

I appreciate Westmount Charter School's co-operation in preparing the revised document. Alberta Education staff and I have reviewed your revised charter and determined that it complies with our requirements. I am pleased to approve your school's amended charter.

Congratulations on your charter renewal. I applaud your board's commitment to continuous improvement, and I wish Westmount Charter School continued success.

David Eggen

Minister

Sincerely