

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School

Leduc County, Alberta

Charter School Evaluation Report

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I. INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (MECCS) was established in 2003 to give First Nations, Métis and Inuit students an education grounded in Indigenous cultures.

Since 2009, MECCS has been located in Leduc County on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River near Genesee, Alberta. The school leases the school facility from the Friends of MECCS Education Foundation Society, which purchased the former Saint John's School of Alberta site in 2012. In addition to the school building, the 140-acre property includes several smaller buildings, including a maintenance shop, cabins, small houses, and a church. Over the last year, the school has developed *Oski Kisikaw Ena Mahkochih*, an outdoor cultural camp and classroom space.

MECCS provides educational services to 43 students. All of the students enrolled in the school have self-identified as First Nations, Métis or Inuit, and the majority of students reside in Paul First Nation.

Enrolment per instructional group as of March 28, 2023, was as follows:

School year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Total
2022-2023	3	5	1	7	4	8	5	3	4	3	43

The school has four instructional groupings: grades K-2, grades 3-4, grades 5-6 and grades 7-9. For 2022/2023, the funding system currently has 9 provincially funded children/students and 34 federally funded (3 ECS) for a total of **43**. (Source: *Alberta Education – Business, Operations and Stakeholder Supports*)

Foundational Statements

The essential elements of education as articulated in the MECCS Charter are:

Our Vision

Rediscovering the gifts and potential given to them by The Creator, our children will achieve personal excellence and fulfillment.

Our Mission

MECCS exists in order to support and encourage the whole individual's development of strength, resiliency and personal, cultural and academic growth.

Key Values

- *We value the Medicine Wheel as a philosophy of balance*
- *We value the Seven Sacred Teachings (Respect, Love, Courage, Wisdom, Honesty, Humility, Truth) as a basis for action*

- *We value Spiritual Connectedness as a means of realizing personal excellence*
- *We facilitate Culture through spiritual and social connectedness, together with academic excellence*
- *We value Respect for self, Culture and accomplishments*

Philosophy

MECCS believes that there are four needs that must be met for every child to succeed. Every child feels the need:

- *For belonging (I mean something to you)*
- *For mastery (I am good at something)*
- *For independence (I have power to make decisions), and*
- *For generosity (I have a purpose in life)*

Indigenous Cultural Program

MECCS offers an educational program focused on Indigenizing education and spiritual connectedness.

For MECCS, Indigenizing education involves connecting with Elders and engaging in experiential learning and land-based learning opportunities. Cultural programming and language instruction is offered in Cree and Stoney; historical concepts are taught through Indigenous perspectives, and students regularly participate in the ceremony and cultural traditions, including daily smudging, feasts, and pipe ceremonies.

The outcomes and performance measures for MECCS' charter goals are included in MECCS' 2022-25 Education Plan.

Charter Goal: Indigenizing Education

Outcomes:

- Students will gain an understanding of the concept of relationality, connectedness, talking circles as Indigenous pedagogy, appreciating Seven Sacred Teachings as part of daily life and interactions with others, etc.
- Students will perceive how learning from Indigenous and Western knowledge systems can complement each other.

Performance Measures:

- Students have made continual progress in their Stoney vocabulary over the past four years and are showing the same improvement as they learn Cree.
- Student participation in experiential learning activities followed by their ability to teach others the same skills and learnings.

- Question: How well are students able to demonstrate proficiency in the knowledge and use of Indigenous language?
- Question: How well are students able to discuss and teach others the cultural skills they are introduced to?
- Question: To what extent do you believe MECCS supports your child's development of strength, resiliency and personal cultural and academic growth?
- Question: To what extent do you value your child's ability to learn in an Indigenized environment?

Charter Goal: Spiritual Connectedness

Outcomes:

- Students will demonstrate (in a variety of ways) how they connect with their culture and will recognize that they possess gifts and strengths given to them by the Creator.
- Students will demonstrate a practical application of the Seven Sacred teachings (among other culturally appropriate teachings) in their work at school.

Performance Measures

- Question: "How am I connected to my Traditional Culture?"
- How strongly do you feel that sending your child to MECCS (where spiritual connectedness is embedded with academics) makes them better learners?
- To what extent do you believe your child's individual gifts are celebrated (valued) at MECCS?

TERM OF CHARTER

The term of the current charter is from September 1, 2020 to August 31, 2025.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The *Charter Schools Regulation* requires that all charter schools in the province be evaluated at least once in the term of their charter. There are a number of purposes for the evaluation of a charter school:

- To provide evidence to the Minister and the board that the charter school is in compliance with provincial requirements and the requirements of the charter, inclusive of charter amendments, approved by the Minister.
- To report to staff, parents, and the community on the success of the charter school and to identify areas of strength and areas that may require additional attention.

- To focus the attention of the board and staff on the goals and objectives of the charter and the need to establish and confirm measurable outcomes and measures.
- To facilitate continuous improvement in the charter school consistent with the assurance requirements of the Ministry and with the local direction established by the charter school community and authorized by the board of directors.

The criteria by which the charter school is evaluated are:

1. The school meets the terms and conditions of its charter and has performance measures that show clear evidence of success.
2. The school operates in a manner consistent with all applicable provincial requirements.
3. The charter school is governed effectively.
4. The school is administered effectively.
5. The school is fiscally viable and responsible.
6. The students, parents, staff, school council and community members consider the school program to be successful.
7. Student success is determined in accordance with Ministerial Order (#028/2020)
8. The charter school shares its innovative practices and learning outcomes with the education community.
9. Student achievement at the charter school is consistently strong or improving.
10. The charter school exhibits in multiple ways an ongoing commitment to engaging students, teachers, parents and community members in a model of continuous improvement.
11. The charter school works collaboratively with stakeholders and demonstrates broad and sustained levels of community engagement.
12. The charter school uses research-informed practices to create innovative learning environments and improve student learning.

2017 EVALUATION AND MINISTERIAL EXPECTATIONS

The *Alberta Education MECCS Evaluation Report of 2017* identified a number of commendations, four recommendations for consideration, and three required changes. In 2020, the charter renewal letter from the Minister of Education to the charter school encouraged MECCS to implement supplemental qualitative measures that illustrate strong academic improvement and achievement, explore more comprehensive metrics for charter goals, and explore strategies to increase student enrolment.

2023 EVALUATION PROCESSES

The findings of the evaluation were established using the following processes and activities:

1. The charter school was asked to develop and submit to Alberta Education a self-evaluation report based on the 12 criteria named above. (See Appendix)
2. Alberta Education established a team of five staff from Field Services, as well as one staff member from Capital Planning and one from Business Operations and Stakeholder Support to review the self-evaluation report submitted by the school and to determine appropriate school site evaluation processes.
3. Focus group sessions were established to provide opportunities for the board, superintendent, principal, teachers and support staff, students, and parents to share insights about the school's successes and ideas about how the charter school might become more effective. On March 13 and 14, 2023, the following processes were conducted:
 - Focus group interviews were conducted with the superintendent, principal, board chair, secretary-treasurer, maintenance coordinator, and teachers.
 - One focus group was held with two school support staff (family liaison and school assistant cook).
 - One focus group was held with three parents.
 - Two focus groups were held with students.
4. Evaluation team members participated in classroom observations throughout grades K-9 to observe instruction, the design of student learning activities, and student engagement.
5. The evaluation team considered Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy in First Nations education as they undertook this review.

II. EVALUATION CONCLUSIONS, COMMENDATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS & REQUIRED CHANGES

1. The school meets the terms and conditions of its charter and has performance measures that show clear evidence of success.

MECCS meets the terms and conditions of its charter. The school remains committed to the development and delivery of cultural-based programming, which is intended to embed the Alberta Programs of Study into an Indigenous pedagogy highlighting essential cultural knowledge, teachings, understandings, perspectives, values and beliefs. The MECCS charter aims to honour the whole child and to model itself on the concepts of the Medicine Wheel and Seven Sacred Teachings.

In response to the last charter evaluation in 2017, the MECCS administration engaged with staff, parents and the board to renew and update the charter originally written in 2003. They used a stakeholder consultation process to examine foundational statements, mission, vision, and key elements, and to clarify charter goals. They examined which actions and measures could bring more focus to the way MECCS supports students. The conversations are ongoing in a spirit of evolution and growth.

Commendations:

Evolution of the charter: There is evidence of MECCS working on the school's vision, mission, and student success, and refocusing the charter mandate as part of the school's action plan following the last charter evaluation. Teachers and administration spoke of discussions centered on teaching, learning and supporting students. Posters with the school's vision, charter mandate and focus were prominently displayed in classrooms.

Expression of the charter: MECCS has created unique learning environments in an effort to promote the school's identity. Examples include the construction of the outdoor classroom/culture camp, increased use of the school's forests and trails, teaching of Indigenous games and other First Nations and Métis cultural traditions, as well as expanding the instruction of Cree and Stoney languages.

Required change:

Charter update: That MECCS engage with stakeholders in accordance with the school's charter amendment process to update the school's charter and create a stand-alone charter document that aligns with the 2022 Charter Schools Regulation prior to requesting a charter renewal in the 2024/25 school year. The charter amendment process may be an exercise on its own or may accompany the charter renewal request to be submitted prior to December 1, 2024.

The charter amendment process should include a review of:

- the vision, purpose, charter goals, and foundational statements to ensure alignment throughout;

- the way measurable outcomes are expressed for each charter goal; and
- all other elements of the charter, ensuring that all requirements in Section 4 of the regulation are addressed and align with the school's vision and purpose.

The department will provide support in reviewing the draft charter document should MECCS request feedback prior to submitting charter amendments to the Minister. When the charter amendments are approved, the charter is to be posted on the school's website.

2. The school operates in a manner consistent with all applicable provincial requirements.

Based on the findings and evidence, MECCS meets the provincial requirements of the Charter Schools Regulation (Alberta Regulation 85/2019) and the *Education Act*. The school follows the Alberta Programs of Study and provides access to the required amount of instructional time. Regular monitoring of the school by Alberta Education staff confirms its coherence with Ministry expectations. The school complies with Alberta Education planning, reporting and funding requirements in providing timely information.

Commendation:

Calls to Action: MECCS displays a commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action as MECCS promotes the learning of background knowledge and appreciation of First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures and history, and shares that knowledge and appreciation with other school authorities who are exploring ways to address the Calls to Action.

3. The charter school is governed effectively.

The board has been largely stable, with a mix of long-serving and newer members. As new members join the board, board training has been available to support members in their roles. There is a collaborative working relationship between the school administration and the board, partly attributed to long-serving school authority administration. Key members of the school authority leadership team have shared that they are considering a transition to retirement in a few years' time.

Board policies are available to parents and other stakeholders on the MECCS website, but a review of some of these policies revealed that the scheduled review date on several of them had passed.

Recommendations:

Policies and procedures: That the board continue to review board policy and administrative procedures to ensure alignment with current legislation.

Succession planning: That the board and administration create succession plans in the event that long-serving staff, administration or board members vacate their present roles.

4. The school is administered effectively.

MECCS is administrated by a committed leadership team, including a principal, superintendent, secretary-treasurer, and maintenance coordinator. The leadership team has been in place for many years and report having effective and collaborative working relationships. All documentation required by the department is submitted in a timely manner. Administration follows the legislative, regulatory, and policy requirements of Alberta Education.

Declining student enrolment has created cost pressures, leading to the principal teaching full-time. While school staff are understanding of the situation, they also expressed a desire for more active school leadership, as well as greater opportunities for dialogue with senior leadership and the board. Some teachers also expressed a desire for more professional development opportunities.

Recommendation:

Administration time: That school administration have dedicated time in the school day to perform administrative and leadership duties and tasks.

5. The school is fiscally viable and responsible.

The department has expressed ongoing concerns about the impact of the school's declining enrolment on its financial and educational stability and viability. In the 2020 charter renewal letter, the Minister asked MECCS to explore strategies to increase enrolment. Since that time the school's enrolment has continued to decline.

School Year	Provincially Funded Students	Federally Funded Students	Total Number of Students
2019-2020	6	45	51
2020-2021	6	46	52
2021-2022	7	35	42
2022-2023	9	31	40

Source: Financial Reporting & Accountability (April 2023)

As well, over the prior 4 years, the charter's surplus position has been in steady decline.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23 (Projected)
Annual Deficit	-77,379	-79,047	-106,345	-141,253
Accumulated Surplus from Operations (ASO)	410,588	350,748	249,902	175,200

The school facility is owned by the Friends of MECCS Education Foundation and is leased to MECCS for an annual rent of \$350,000, which is provided by Alberta Education as lease support. The existing lease expires on December 31, 2025. School authority administration raised concerns that the lease support funding is not sufficient for the ongoing repairs needed for the aging building, though according to the lease agreement, the landlord is responsible for such repairs. The skill of the maintenance coordinator has allowed the Foundation and school authority to undertake repairs of aging school infrastructure, equipment and systems for a modest cost.

MECCS has invested in a number of improvements to the facility in recent years, including a new fire panel, sensors, and suppression system with the replacement of sprinkler lines. A new heated and air-conditioned outdoor washroom has been installed for students to use at the school's culture camp, and upgrades have been made to the playground. In 2015, Alberta Infrastructure replaced a large beam in the lunchroom that was compromised and caused the ceiling to sag. The school would like to invest in upgrades to their plumbing and lighting fixtures, as well as purchase a security system for the building.

Expensive infrastructure challenges facing the school facility, as identified by the maintenance coordinator, are repairing or replacing the aging roof and soffits which are both showing signs of fatigue. The school's plumbing, electrical and the five boiler systems are dated and in need of regular inspection and maintenance in order for the facilities to operate appropriately.

MECCS identified the treeline which is in close proximity to the school as a potential fire hazard. They have outlined a plan to remove a number of trees surrounding the school and approached the fire department for assistance with this task.

The ongoing repair of the facility's systems is a primary responsibility of the maintenance coordinator, who is experienced and very capable of ensuring that they are regularly inspected and well maintained to the best of his ability within the confines of the budget that is afforded. As time proceeds, the school facility will need more extensive work to renovate and repair its infrastructure, which will eventually require a large capital investment.

MECCS has worked to establish several partnerships that provide some financial support to the school, but the two main sources of funding are Alberta Education and the federal government. Two long-term corporate partners have notified MECCS that they will be ending their support at the end of this year as they wind down their business operations in the region.

The secretary-treasurer and superintendent spoke of the strict budgeting process which is in place to ensure their limited funding is managed appropriately. The secretary-treasurer expressed confidence that the support from the Friends of MECCS Education Foundation will allow the school to continue to be viable at current enrolment levels. Obviously, the school would like to grow student enrolment to enhance program offerings and supports and services to students.

Commendation:

Sponsors and partnerships: MECCS has worked to establish effective and long-term partnerships. Corporate sponsors and the contributions of community partners, such as Spirit North, Heartbeat Theatre, and author David Bouchard, help ensure the financial viability of the school at a modest cost.

Required change:

Student enrolment: That MECCS board and staff implement programming and promotional strategies to increase student retention, recruitment and enrolment to ensure educational and financial viability. The board shall set a target for increased enrolment as part of an action plan.

6. The students, parents, staff, school council, and community members consider the school program to be successful.

Overall, students, parents and staff who have chosen MECCS see it as being successful and parents report high satisfaction. Provincial survey results show that parents, teachers, and students feel that the school is successful and improving. The school has maintained high/very high results in both education quality and citizenship.

Yet, declining enrolments cannot be ignored and MECCS must increase its efforts to share the value of its program to families and to the community while continually seeking ways to engage students. Stakeholders spoke to the ongoing and long-term challenge for the school to strengthen the relationship between Paul First Nation and the school, as the majority of MECCS parents and students live in Paul First Nation.

Commendation:

Safe and caring environment: Teachers, students and parents stated that MECCS is providing a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners. Strong, supportive relationships between the students and staff members, particularly at the K-6 level, were observed by the evaluation team.

7. Student Success: Student success is determined in accordance with Ministerial Order #028/2020.

In response to the Ministerial Order (#28/2020) the schools' Self-Evaluation Report acknowledges the importance of meeting the needs of the whole child, in order to create a solid foundation of skills and attitudes that contribute to their ability to meet the needs of a changing world. The school has hired a Learning Loss teacher to address literacy and numeracy goals. The teachers and parents expressed satisfaction with this new support for students.

8. The charter school shares its innovative practices and learning outcomes with others in the educational community.

The staff at MECCS continue to express support for partnerships with other education stakeholders, allowing MECCS to share teaching practices within an Indigenous environment. Since the lifting of restrictions during the recent pandemic, the school is working to re-establish and expand connections with other schools and community partners such as Spirit North, David Bouchard, and HeARTbeat Theatre. The school is hopeful that the recent creation and development of the outdoor classroom/culture camp will enable the school to gather and host community partners and organize school events/exchanges more frequently in order to share innovative practices.

In the past, MECCS had given presentations and had partnered with the University of Alberta. MECCS continues to send newsletters with information on special events at the school to community members and education stakeholders.

Commendation:

Sharing teaching practices: MECCS is rebuilding and expanding partnerships with schools throughout the province to share teaching practices in an Indigenous environment.

9. Student achievement at the charter school is consistently strong or improving.

Overall, it is evident that MECSS contributes to a welcoming, caring and respectful learning environment which is essential for this group of students to be engaged intellectually, to feel a sense of belonging and to progress in their learning. Students, staff and parents often spoke about the positive atmosphere and strong sense of community at MECSS, which impacts achievement.

The outdoor classroom/culture camp creates potential for students to apply knowledge, understanding and skills in real-life contexts and to enable teacher collaboration and professional development. It was difficult to ascertain the impact of these strategies on student achievement.

The recent pandemic has had a significant impact on student attendance and continuity in programming. While Provincial Achievement Test results contribute to understanding student growth and achievement within a school and across the province, it is difficult to draw fulsome and accurate conclusions about student achievement at MECCS from this data alone. A continued focus on the development of local measures to provide evidence of student success and to communicate results with students, parents, staff, and the community about the impact of Indigenous education remains important.

A required change noted in the 2011 and 2017 evaluations, as well as the Minister's 2020 renewal letter directed the school to continue to implement supplemental qualitative measures that illustrate strong academic improvement and achievement, even for the MECCS students who face significant challenges.

Recommendations:

Student success and achievement: In the spirit of continuous improvement focusing on student success and achievement, that MECCS

1. continue to monitor and track student attendance and develop strategies that will support student engagement,
2. continue its initiative to develop a common understanding of student success and successful teaching practices that lead to successful student outcomes,
3. continue development of supplemental quantitative measures and qualitative evidence of student success, including academic achievement and other areas of growth, and
4. ensure that student assessment of achievement is reported to students and to parents on a regular and timely basis.

10. The charter school exhibits in multiple ways ongoing commitment to engaging students, teachers, parents and community members in a model of continuous improvement.

It is evident that the positive relationship between students and staff is foundational to MECCS. Many staff commented on the discussions on the general vision of student success and were able to share an understanding of whole-school goals and cultural practices. MECCS identified that re-establishing and strengthening the relationship with parents and the community is a primary goal. The loss of the receptionist position and administration time for the principal have impacted community engagement and create challenges for continuous improvement. Some parents spoke of a desire to have more effective communication from the school about school events and their children's progress.

Commendation:

Strong relationships: There is a positive atmosphere and a strong sense of community that stakeholders describe as "family."

Recommendation:

Communication: That MECCS review communication processes from and to parents, teachers, school administration and the board to ensure that calendars, events, deadlines, board meeting dates, etc. are shared with all parties and that stakeholders are aware of the many communication channels available to them. MECCS should explore the effective use of various communication media (e.g., teacher and administration phone calls, in-person meetings, virtual meetings, social media, website, and paper summaries of information).

11. The charter school works collaboratively with stakeholders and demonstrates broad and sustained levels of community engagement.

Over a number of years, MECCS has created and fostered lasting partnerships with community members and stakeholders in the greater community. Partnerships with

industry have served to assist MECCS to remain financially viable and also created opportunities for these companies to engage with the First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities they support. Some of these financial and community partnerships are ending as companies move their operations away from the area surrounding the school.

Many of the community events that were traditionally held at the school were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and are slowly returning to pre-pandemic levels.

MECCS is intricately linked to the community through ongoing participation and input of Indigenous worldviews as expressed in their vision statement, Elder participation, and board meetings. The Family Liaison Coordinator provides constant support between their communities, families, and school members. As unique emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual needs arise for their learners, Elders provide a source of support to make sure the school has a quality learning space that respects individual and community relationships.

Recommendation:

Ongoing collaboration with First Nations: That the school continue to invite families to traditional activities and ceremonies while initiating new targeted and planned relationship-building activities with families and the community of Paul First Nation. Leadership is also encouraged to seek new opportunities for community engagement with other First Nations and communities that would increase staff knowledge of Cree, Stoney and Métis traditions, protocols and knowledge that can be incorporated into school programming.

12. The charter school uses research-informed practices to create innovative learning environments and improve student learning.

MECCS recognizes the expectation that charter schools conduct their own research to evaluate innovative and unique aspects of their charter. MECCS has limitations in undertaking large research projects due to its small size and rural location.

Several MECCS teachers have incorporated land-based teaching practices into their programs. MECCS has sought ways to maximize the unique learning and teaching possibilities offered by the property on which the school is situated. MECCS administration has engaged with school authorities from across the province and created partnerships to share Indigenous teachings with other stakeholders.

Recommendation:

Action Research: That MECCS encourage all teachers to engage in action-research and to record observations, data and evidence of the success of implementing promising practices that lead to student growth and success, while continuing to seek opportunities to present and collaborate with post-secondary and school division partners.

III. MOTHER EARTH'S CHILDREN'S CHARTER SCHOOL SELF EVALUATION 2022-23

Overview

Two years of pandemic restrictions affect our responses on key criteria. Community engagement was limited, as parents, community members, and partners were not allowed into the school for two years. Student achievement did not increase as we had hoped. We essentially lost one year to online learning, which was a disaster for us. Learning loss was also an issue that we have not yet overcome. The impacts on achievement have been substantial.

Some issues arising from the previous process remain. We were directed to increase and stabilize our enrollment. That hasn't happened. In fact, enrollment continues to decrease. We have decreased from 75 students in 2016-17, with 18 AE funded and 57 federally funded, to a low of 49 in 2022-23, with 6 AE funded, 43 federally funded. (There are also decreased enrollments at Paul Band School and for reserve students at Parkland schools.)

For many years, we had a stable student population that was intensely loyal and committed to the school. Those students have now grown up and moved on with their lives. We now find turnover in families and students affecting us in many ways, particularly attendance and academic results. Where it once was typical to have students start school here and stay for 10 years, now only 12 of our current students have been here for four years or longer. In the last two years, 16 students left us for a variety of reasons. That makes it hard for teachers to offer continuity in their programs.

Most of the children served by MECCS live with some form of adversity. The socio-economic issues faced by families can be overwhelming at times. Many students experience broken homes, and drug and alcohol problems are rampant on the reserve. Families moving from reserve to off reserve or back and forth to various communities has a major impact on operations. There remains little to no engagement with Paul Band School or Paul Band Chief and Council for the same reasons that have always existed. We are not partners, and MECCS is seen as direct competitors for the same students.

Resilience is the innate human ability to rebound from adversity with even greater strength to face future obstacles. Research has shown that resilience is the norm for kids. This means that it is never too late to make a difference, and we believe that with proper and timely adult intervention we can and do make a difference. With the support of adults who care and believe in their potential, our youth can discover their hidden talents, develop personal responsibility, and find a purpose to their lives despite the underlying challenges they face growing up.

MECCS work has always been and continues to be about culture, community, and students learning. MECCS operates much like that of a family. We believe that our students gain a sense of belonging, discover what they are good at, become independent thinkers, and find purpose in life when their learning is founded within a cultural context, encourages positive attitudes, and promotes a sense of pride.

At the school level, MECCS has developed a strong leadership team consisting of the Superintendent, Secretary-Treasurer, Principal, Maintenance Coordinator, Family Liaison

Coordinator, and a group of dedicated, experienced teachers. Together, this team guides, supports, mentors, manages, and leads by example to provide a solid educational framework.

Evaluation Criteria and Descriptions

1. Charter Conditions: The school meets the terms and conditions of its charter and has performance measures that show clear evidence of success.

The charter document notes that MECCS will honour the whole child and will model itself on the concepts of the Medicine Wheel and Seven Sacred Teachings. Evidence of the use of the Medicine Wheel to inform planning and instruction is present in the classroom and in the instructional materials the teachers choose.

The original charter application from 2002–03 made some overly ambitious and idealistic claims that were found to be unrealistic given the funding that is available to schools within the province. One thing we have always followed from those initial ideals, however, is that we put the needs of the child first.

Our charter has evolved over the last few renewal cycles. Its main focus is now on indigenizing education. Over the last year, we created what has been and will continue to be the feature of our school: *Oski Kisikaw Ena Mahkochih*, an outdoor classroom/culture camp. Its name is based on a combination of Cree and Stoney words that roughly translate to “New Day for Mother Earth.” Our hope is that this cultural addition will help us define who we are and what makes us unique. Regular and focused use of this space by both our students and visitors will drive our efforts for the foreseeable future. The culture camp includes a fire pit area, two tipi areas (including one with all-weather artificial turf), an outdoor lean-to classroom, an archery target course, and an all-weather washroom that is heated in winter and air conditioned in summer. The outdoor area also serves as the base for outdoor activities, including cross country skiing with Spirit North, traditional Indigenous games, and shelter building.

Driving our vision of fully indigenizing education for our students are three basic ideas:

- We value the Medicine Wheel as a philosophy of balance.
- We value the Seven Sacred Teachings (Love, Respect, Courage, Wisdom, Honesty, Humility, and Truth) as a basis for action.
- We facilitate culture through spiritual and social connectedness, together with academic improvement and achievement.

Educational indigenization involves connecting with Elders and engaging in experiential learning and land-based learning opportunities. At MECCS, cultural programming and language instruction is offered in Cree and Stoney, the two heritage languages of most of our students. (Paul Band has both Stoney and Cree components to its population.) We teach historical concepts through Indigenous perspectives, including views on treaties and agreements, residential schools and their legacy, and reconciliation. Students participate in ceremony and cultural traditions, including daily smudging, feasts, and pipe ceremonies.

We offer a stable environment where children feel safe and valued, and where they are nurtured as they grow. Our students tell us that MECCS is a place where they feel connected and cared for, and where their needs are met. Their responses on provincial surveys are overwhelmingly positive.

Despite the negative effects of the pandemic and recent issues in retaining students, MECCS has the support of the community and meets our charter.

2. Provincial Requirements: The school operates in a manner consistent with all applicable provincial requirements.

MECCS operations are consistent with all applicable provincial requirements. We provide the provincial government with mandatory financial reporting as well as annual budgets and fall updates to the budget. We contract nationally recognized auditing firm MNP LLP to audit the finances each year to make sure that we are working in accordance with all provincial and professional accounting standards. The administrative team works closely to make sure that we adhere to all provincial financial guidelines. The auditors have consistently reported that we are performing well and meet or exceed the necessary standards for all financial compliances, including on our latest audited financial statement.

The Transportation Department operates under the supervision of the Secretary-Treasurer, the Maintenance Coordinator, and the Family Liaison Coordinator. Vehicles are properly repaired and maintained according to Alberta Transportation safety and maintenance standards. School busses are inspected semi-annually by a licensed repair facility to make sure that they meet required safety standards. All safety-related repairs are performed at a licensed repair shop. Additionally, busses are inspected semi-annually by the Maintenance Coordinator. The safety of our students is our top priority. Bus drivers must provide a commercial driver abstract, criminal record check, and a child intervention record check. Our drivers personally know our students, which is an added bonus.

Operations and Maintenance falls under the supervision of the Secretary-Treasurer and Maintenance Coordinator. The Maintenance Coordinator is diligent in inspecting the school and equipment, keeping it in top running order. He employs trusted repair companies to help with plumbing, heating, refrigeration, and any structural issues that may arise. He is also responsible for grounds maintenance, keeping our school road, parking area, playground, and green space well-maintained and safe. The support of Friends of MECCS Education Foundation is indispensable to our success in this area.

3. Governance: The charter school is governed effectively.

A concern in previous charter reviews was the issue of stability at both the administration and board levels. In the first several years of operation, there was a series of superintendents and a revolving door of board members.

This is no longer the case. The Superintendent has been with MECCS for 14 years, the Principal has been in her role for 10 years and employed at the school for 18 years, the Secretary-Treasurer and Maintenance Coordinator have each been at the school for 13 years, and the Family Liaison Coordinator has been in that position for 12 years and employed at the school for 19 years. While we welcomed the perspective of two new board members this year, stability and continuity are provided by our most experienced members who have served in this role ranging from 10 to 18 years. Our board also has two members who have served on it for the last four years.

4. Administration: The school is administered effectively.

The managerial team consists of the Superintendent, Secretary-Treasurer, Principal, and Maintenance Coordinator who work under the guidance of our dedicated board members. Our school's small size does not permit additional clerical or maintenance assistance. This is sometimes taxing but we are able to comply with all provincial and federal standards in all departments.

The Superintendent is currently completing his 29th year in senior system administration, making him the most experienced Superintendent in the province. He serves as the primary liaison with Alberta Education on all matters. Two key functions are leading the preparation of the Four-Year Education Plan and the Annual Education Results Report as well as taking the lead on the charter renewal process.

The Principal is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school including supervision of staff, curriculum, and instruction issues in addition to her full-time teaching assignment.

The Finance Department is the sole responsibility of the Secretary-Treasurer. It is her job to perform all reporting required by provincial and federal governments (most of our students are federally funded). She oversees payroll, accounts payable, and accounts receivable, as well as the Operations and Maintenance and Transportation departments. She works closely with the Superintendent on the school budget and the administration of all expenditures. She monitors the IT requirements of the school, and she maintains its website and the Student Information System.

The Operations and Maintenance Department is responsible for the Breakfast/Hot Lunch Program. The Secretary-Treasurer shops for the groceries, keeping watch over not only costs but the quality and quantity of the food. This allows for securing the best food possible and avoids waste, all the while maintaining the program's budget. Annual applications fall under the umbrella of Operations and Maintenance for insurance and adherence to Alberta Health Services safety guidelines. Our cook makes sure that the groceries purchased are utilized fully while providing quality, tasty, nutritional meals. The kitchen is spotless and consistently meets or exceeds AHS standards during annual inspections.

The Secretary Treasurer also works with the Maintenance Coordinator to ensure consistent maintenance and safety of the school and that of the Transportation Department. The Maintenance Coordinator is a licensed journeyman autobody mechanic and holds a welding certificate. He is a valuable jack-of-all-trades whose talents have saved the school countless dollars over the 13 years he has worked for us. He works three days a week doing more than many would accomplish in five days. He repairs the roof, plumbing, electrical, mechanical, boilers—you name it, he can repair it. He is always safety conscious and consults with the Secretary-Treasurer when he feels the repairs require a more specialized tradesperson.

The Maintenance Coordinator ensures the safe operation of the building and all equipment, carrying out repairs where required. He works alongside outsourced workers and contractors when qualified repair companies are on-site and ensures efficient use of their time to keep costs down. He performs road maintenance and snow removal. He cares for all the school maintenance equipment, performing as many repairs as possible to keep costs down.

The Transportation Department faces challenges due to the road conditions our busses endure each day. Ruts and bumps shake the busses, causing many problems. Mud cakes up the undercarriage and any exposed wiring. These issues are responsible for a large portion of repair costs. The Maintenance Coordinator has helped us to control transportation costs thanks to his regular monitoring of the busses. Thanks to his automotive mechanical abilities, the Maintenance Coordinator has taken on the added responsibility of maintaining the school busses. In previous years, we would send busses out for oil changes and minor repairs. He makes sure that the busses are inspected semi-annually as per Alberta Transportation regulations. He also performs a semi-annual inspection of his own in the six months between commercial vehicle inspections. He also watches for minor issues and repairs them before they become more serious issues. He works closely with the repair shop and has formed a close relationship with them to make sure that we get good, quality service at fair prices.

We have hired a .4 teacher for the balance of the year using the Learning Loss grant of \$10,000 and another \$10,000 we had set aside for substitutes (which we have been unable to get). Her role will be providing individual assistance to K–4 students to work on the learning loss issues each student has. She will also provide some admin time for the Principal. After several months of work, we have also been successful in getting case numbers for our Jordan’s Principle applications. We still don’t know if we will get the funding to hire speech therapists, mental health therapists, occupational health therapists, and others needed until the applications work their way through the system, but it is a promising start.

While all of us are stretched a bit at the seams, we continue to function productively and successfully. This is because our staff is made up of committed, hard-working people who care about the students and the school. They care about the school’s sustainability and are willing to devote the time and effort to see it continue and flourish.

5. Fiscally Viable: The school is financially viable and responsible.

MECCS operates on a strict budget. Everyone at MECCS is mindful of our limited funds. We are cost-conscious and spend our dollars wisely and with as much efficiency as possible. Revenue comes from the province, Indigenous Services Canada, and various committed donors. MECCS also has a fundraising arm. This group of dedicated volunteers work behind the scenes enlisting the aid of various donors. The generosity of these donors allows the school to operate successfully.

Since the last cycle, Friends of MECCS Education Foundation purchased the school and property outright. MECCS leases the school from them. AE provides \$350,000 annually in lease support, which is essential for our long-term viability.

We operate a Breakfast/Hot Lunch Program with assistance provided annually by TransAlta (funding ceased in 2021) and Enbridge Corporation (funds committed up to the 2022–23 school year). This support lets us provide well-balanced, nutritious meals. We deliver daily breakfast and hot lunch to all students at no cost, as we recognize the importance of healthy eating and its relationship to enhanced learning.

Everyone at MECCS is committed to doing their part to ensure the sustainability of the school. While small in numbers, we manage to keep up with the demands of operating a successful school. Many of those demands equal those of schools with budgets that are far larger than ours. We contribute our time and labour willingly and frequently to make sure our students have the best possible education and enjoy the same benefits they would in any other school.

6. Success: The students, parents, staff, school council, and community members consider the school program to be successful.

Anecdotally, our parents, students, and staff are extremely happy with the program. Our results on provincial surveys back this up. They show that parents, teachers, and students feel that the school is successful and improving. In 2012, 68% of respondents felt that the school was improving, 80% felt the school provided a safe and caring environment, and 82% were satisfied with the quality of the educational experiences the students were provided. In 2016, we saw a dramatic increase in all three areas. We saw the percentage of teachers, parents, and students who felt MECCS was a safe and caring place increase more than 10%. The belief that MECCS provided an environment that fosters citizenship improved by nearly 15%. Respondents indicated that they felt the overall quality of educational experiences improved by nearly 10%.

Despite the immediate and long-term impacts of the COVID pandemic, we have seen our survey results continue to strengthen as parents and students increasingly see us as their safe haven. In 2022, 94.7% of the respondents felt that the school was improving, 97.1% of parents and 91.4% of student respondents felt the school provided a safe and caring environment, and 94% of parents and 97.9 % of students were satisfied with the quality of the educational experiences the students were provided. The three-year average of 94.5% satisfaction of parents is a real strength for us. In four of the last five years, there has not been one parent responding as dissatisfied.

Other stakeholders are supporting MECCS as well. We have several long-standing partnerships with private companies who see the benefit of creating a safe, caring, and supportive learning environment for FNMI learners. As mentioned, TransAlta and Enbridge have both contributed to our Breakfast/Hot Lunch Program, and Company of the Cross and St. John's Legacy Foundation have supported our indigenizing education mandate for the past few years. Unfortunately, TransAlta is reducing their carbon footprint in the area with the closing of the Genessee coal-fired generating station. Company of the Cross has wrapped up their operations as well, and this will be the last year for St. John's Legacy Foundation funding. These partners have helped sustain MECCS in the past to make sure we were able to maintain delivery of a quality educational experience. These contributions will be sorely missed and difficult to replace.

7. Student Success: Student success is determined in accordance with Ministerial Order #028/2020.

By meeting the needs of the whole child, our program at MECCS helps our students create a solid foundation of skills and attitudes that contribute to their ability to meet the needs of a changing world.

Our program allows for creative thought, reflection, and exploration, and the caring and nurturing environment creates opportunities for risk-taking and trial and error. Students feel safe at MECCS, which is the key to becoming engaged in their learning. On the provincial surveys, 91.4% of our

students indicated that they felt they were safe at school, and that they are learning the importance of caring for others, are learning respect, and are treated fairly at school. This continues a six-year trend of our survey results being significantly higher than the provincial average on this measure.

At MECCS we say that “we grow great kids,” and part of that is embracing the philosophy that we are preparing our students for a greater role within society. We look beyond our walls when offering them opportunities to build relationships and give them the chance to experience people and situations that they would not normally have access to. In 2016, 82% of our survey respondents indicated that they felt students at MECCS model the characteristics of active citizenship, which was a remarkable improvement from the 2012 data. This positive trend has continued and resulted in a high-water mark of 86.5% in 2022, showing as one of our biggest strengths despite the negative impact of the pandemic.

Self-motivation comes from a sense of optimism and persistence as well as the ability to deal with failure. Encouraging the individual interests of students, celebrating their achievements, and making sure they have a supportive environment provides a solid foundation from which they can grow with self-determination. For too long, the ability to dream and visualize a positive future has been difficult for FNMI learners to grasp, but MECCS creates learners with hope through attending to the whole child. In our 2016 survey, 70% percent of respondents indicated that they were satisfied students demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning. Undoubtedly, the COVID pandemic impacted us in many areas, including this measure. Still, we were able to generate a modest gain in survey results with a three-year average of 77.1%, and notably with an 81% this past year. Our students face many challenges, but we strongly believe that our interventions make a difference for them now and for the future. We do not have the luxury of extra specialized staff or easy access to programs of support that many schools have, but as a team we make a difference.

8. Sharing Practices: The charter school shares its innovative practices and learning outcomes with others in the educational community.

We do not have the resources or staff to take on research partnerships like most charter schools. Our contribution in this area has always been to share our knowledge of Indigenous culture with other schools through our partnerships and through our school newsletters.

For the last two years, we were unable to continue our partnerships with other schools (Wildwood in Grande Yellowhead SD, Academy at King Edward in Edmonton Public, and Suzuki Charter) due to pandemic restrictions. We were unable to fully introduce new partnerships with CAPE and Connect Charter Schools as planned. This year will see us expanding our partnership program to include those schools. We have also begun discussions with the new Thrive Charter School, which will open in 2023, about partnering with them starting in September. We were unable to bring in our outside partners such as author David Bouchard and HeARTbeat Theatre. More devastatingly, we were unable to have our parents join us for school celebrations and cultural activities.

Now that we do not have pandemic-related visitor restrictions, we have been able to re-establish and expand school partnerships. MECCS can once again welcome approved visits from other stakeholders throughout the school year. Taking part in our smudge circles, daily routines, ceremonies, feasts, powwows, sports events, and culture camps offers them an opportunity to

support and learn from each other and respect different worldviews. The Medicine Wheel and Seven Sacred Teachings are reflected in every interaction and activity. Visitors experience our Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing that celebrate student strengths and achievements.

9. Student Achievement: Student achievement at the charter school is consistently strong or improving.

Our PAT scores for the previous five years had been on a definite and measurable upward trend. Although there was room for continued improvement, the fact that we had come from having less than 25% of students meeting acceptable standards to nearly matching the Alberta average was a major achievement.

In 2014, only 33% of our grade 9 students met the acceptable standards in ELA, while in 2016 70% of our grade 9 students met acceptable standards. This was below the provincial average. However, it was indicative of an upwards trend in our results. Although we did not have 100% participation, the number of students writing remained quite high and showed continued improvement over previous years.

Achievement in grades 6 had been on a steady increase. In 2016, 100% of our students who wrote the grade 6 Science and Math exams met acceptable standards. This was unprecedented. Our grade 9 students also showed remarkable progress, and at least 50% of our students met acceptable standards in each subject area. One of our students met standard of excellence in ELA and Social Studies. We had never had a grade 9 student achieve excellence in Social Studies before.

The pandemic had a devastating effect on this progress. The year of at-home/online learning was devastating to our achievement levels, and we have not yet been able to fully recover. From students not writing at all one year to reduced numbers at the grade 9 level, we have no statistics to use as measurements. Our grade 6 results took a huge hit as well. Student attendance was significantly reduced at times, enrollment was lower, and student engagement suffered as a result. We are working hard to help our students recover from this learning loss.

10. Continuous Improvement: The charter school is committed to engaging students, teachers, parents, and community members in a model of continuous improvement.

The last two years have changed our environment so dramatically that it is extremely challenging to compare where we were to where we are and to demonstrate continuous improvement. That in no way means we aren't committed to engaging our stakeholders in moving in that direction. We must make re-establishing our relationship with parents and community a primary goal. Not having them in the school for over two years has had negative impacts on other aspects of working together. Apart from Facebook, other means of possibly engaging do not seem to work. Our declining enrollment has limited what our teachers can do. The changing dynamics of our student population has proven to be a roadblock in teachers' continuous improvement efforts with them. It is frustrating to see how the pandemic has caused us to slide in our achievement results after so many years of continuous progress.

11. Community Engagement: The charter school reaches out beyond its walls to demonstrate broad and sustained levels of community engagement.

MECCS has, in the past, created and fostered lasting partnerships with many community members

and concerned stakeholders in the greater community. Our partnerships with major oil and gas companies served to not only give us financial stability but also created opportunities to engage these companies with the FNMI community we support.

For the past eight years, TransAlta has connected students at MECCS with employees in their head office in Calgary for our TransAlta Christmas. The students wrote letters to Santa. TransAlta staff prepared cards that each showed a student's name, gender, and age on them, then displayed them on a Christmas tree in the lobby of the building. The employees chose a name, received the child's Santa letter, and were encouraged to purchase requested gifts as well as mitts or a toque. These gifts were delivered by TransAlta employees serving as Santa and his Elves. Our students were always so grateful and excited to receive them. It makes a huge difference to our children and their families to know that there is someone out there who cares for them. Unfortunately, this event has also become a victim of the pandemic and other factors. Santa and his Elves were not allowed into the school for two years. In addition, this is the last year of TransAlta support for this annual Christmas event as TransAlta will no longer have a corporate presence in the community.

Previously, we offered many opportunities throughout the year for the local community at Paul First Nation to join us in celebrations. The pandemic resulted in less-than-ideal engagement opportunities. We have always held four Traditional Feasts to mark the changing of the seasons. We have had the honour of welcoming a local Elder to perform a Traditional Pipe Ceremony and teach our boys the traditional and proper protocols as they assisted with the ceremonies. Parents, grandparents, and other community members were always welcome to attend, and many did in the past. With two years of not being allowed to have visitors join us, our engagement level plummeted. We also have always had a Christmas celebration, where members of our local community could come and see the children perform, and a celebration of learning at the end of the year, where we recognized the efforts of our unique population. It has been very detrimental to only be able to do these things with gathering size limitations and with no community or AE in-person support.

The only opportunities for engagement over the last two years have been for outdoor occasions, such as our continued engagement with Spirit North, our culture camp grand opening (held in minus 25-degree weather), and our long-awaited return of partners David Bouchard and Wildwood School for a culture day this fall. More days like this are planned as we try to return to pre-pandemic levels of engagement with partner schools and others such as HeARTbeat Theatre.

This lack of engagement should be acknowledged and understood by Alberta Education, as none of their personnel was allowed to come to the school for any of our activities over the last two years. Previously it would have been unusual for our AE Liaison Manager to miss out on being here for any of our events such as Feasts, concerts, and exchanges.

MECCS is intricately linked to community through ongoing participation and input of Indigenous worldviews as expressed in the vision statement, Elder participation, and board meetings. Our Family Liaison Coordinator provides constant support between our communities, families, and school members. As unique emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual needs arise for our learners, Elders provide a constant source of support to make sure we have a sustained quality learning space that respects individual and community relationships.

12. Research Informed: The charter school uses research-informed practices to create innovative learning environments and improve student learning.

As the first Indigenous charter school in Canada, MECCS derives its philosophy from the lived worldview of the Cree and Stoney First Nations. These worldviews generate specific notions of the relationships that honour body and spirit. Our instructional practices and innovative learning environment flow directly from our cherished Indigenous worldviews. At the core of our worldview is the respect for the Medicine Wheel, which esteems mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects of each learner in our care.

Elder and community wisdom provide flexible and culturally appropriate guidance as the core foundation for student learning. We have access to Stoney Elder Theresa Bird to teach oral Stoney to all students. Key participants at our culture camp are Cree Elders Edna Paul and Annie Thomas, who introduce things like traditional foods to students. Simon House, an Elder from Paul Band, performs cultural ceremonies and teaches students and staff about protocols. Emil Durocher, our longest serving board member, provides valuable guidance about appropriate protocols.

Unlike other larger charter schools, our small numbers and limited resources affect our ability to contract with university researchers on major projects. As a result, our research is all action research, which results in our staff and students learning on the land and subsequently sharing our knowledge with our partner schools and any other schools expressing an interest. Each year, through a series of 6 to 10 professionally produced newsletters, we reach out to and share our experiences with to a wide audience. That audience includes Education Ministry officials, TAAPCS leaders and teachers, our partner schools, and a variety of friends of MECCS. These newsletters receive overwhelming support from colleagues.