

## CASS CONFERENCE SPEAKING NOTES

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. When your CASS/Alberta Education conference planning committee first met last fall, the education community was in the midst of a series of budget sessions to discuss how and to what extent education funding would be reduced in year. Additionally, the provincial budget news was not great and we were anticipating a significant reduction in funding for the 2010-2011 fiscal year. Many in this room had experience with the reductions in the 1990s and memories are still very sharp on the effects of those reductions.

However, you planning committee members know that delegates to this conference and your colleagues who were unable to attend were hopeful that any reductions would not be excessive and that the effects on the education system would not be profound. Additionally, we knew that superintendents, secretary-treasurers, and Alberta Education staff were and are resilient. Typically, we always plan for the worst but hope for the best; we also bounce back, mindful of the old adage that “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” As educational leaders, all segments of the educational community look to you to model hope and resilience. It was for this reason that the planning committee chose the theme for this year’s conference.

Resilience and hope go beyond fiscal and financial concerns. As educators, we not find ourselves in the midst of what could be significant change in our education system. The Minister has said on numerous occasions that he is desirous of transformation change in the education system. To this end, Inspiring Education, a significant and vast consultative process, has been undertaken with Albertans. We hope soon to have formalized direction for the revision of legislation and concomitant regulation.

*Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans, Provincial Forum Community Reflections, October 18-20, 2009* noted that “there has never

been a more opportune time to consider relevant ways to meet the changing needs of learners.” Given that transformational change is values-based, Albertans identified a number of values that need to be the foundation of the education system:

- **Opportunity:** Learners must have opportunities to achieve their highest potential. Education is responsive to individual abilities and learning styles.
- **Fairness:** Learners have equity of opportunity regardless of widely differing ability, economic circumstance, cultural and ethnic background and geographic location.
- **Citizenship:** Learners cooperate and help others and consider the impacts of their choices on others. Education strives to develop citizens who are full, active participants in the economy, society and democracy and who contribute to their communities and who are sensitive to the social and environmental footprints they leave.
- **Choice:** Learners have a choice of programs and methods of delivery. Parents, who have primary responsibility for their children’s education, may choose from schools that are public, separate, charter, francophone or private. They may even opt for home education.
- **Diversity:** Individual learners’ needs and ways of life are respected and valued by the education system.
- **Excellence:** Learners are motivated to exceed expectations. Those involved in the delivery of education, notably teachers and administrators, work together to achieve excellence in teaching and student performance.

Please note that all of these values reflect the notion of hope—responding as effectively and efficiently as we can to provide our students, our future, with curriculum, learning opportunities, and teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attributes they need to be successful as 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.

The concept of hope is deeply rooted in the human condition and is described in the oldest legends. I would think that many of you are familiar with the story of Pandora’s Box for it is in this story that hope

first emerges. There are two stories about Pandora; the first, and the one with which you are probably most familiar, has Pandora, as the first woman in the world and she had come with a box containing all the evils of the world. Ever inquisitive and ignoring advice to the contrary, Pandora opened the box and the evils escaped into the world. Upon further examination, she found Hope trapped in the box.

The second story, and the one that scholars of mythology support, has Pandora sent into the world by Jupiter with a jar containing the great blessings and virtues. Hope was amongst these and was not hidden.

Irrespective of the story to which you might ascribe, Hope remains a human condition. I think that outside of religion, education represents how important Hope is for our children. On a personal note, I really hope we get the changes to education right as our granddaughter starts kindergarten in one year and begins a lifetime of formal education and learning. My hopes for her include fabulous and caring teachers, solid skills, knowledge, and attitudes, a safe and caring environment, good friends, and happiness while she is in school.

I have said on many occasions that no sensible mother and father would ever turn their child over to someone whom they have never met before and trust that the child will be cared for and taught well. Only in education does this happen. This trust comes with Hope that all in education will do their best, do the right things in the right way, for the child and student. What an awesome responsibility. It is no wonder that as educational leaders you feel such a sense of responsibility and obligation to deliver. It is no wonder that when change occurs, you feel a sense of upset, a lack of comfort, and a tad of apprehension that the change will be at least as good as that to which we had all become accustomed and that generally worked well. And when we talk of transformational or seismic change, the apprehension becomes worse.

However, it is in the context of resilience—much like the Marine motto that says “First in, last to leave”—that superintendents and Alberta

Education staff excel. Why? Much research has occurred in the area of resiliency in the past 30 years. Those demonstrating resiliency are found to have and I want you to think of yourself and your colleagues as these are read:

- The ability to cope with stress effectively and in a healthy manner
- Good problem-solving skills
- The desire to seeking help
- A belief that there is something one can do to manage feelings and cope
- Social support
- A connection to and with others such as family, friends or colleagues
- Spirituality
- An identity as a survivor as opposed to a victim
- A desire to help others
- The ability to find positive meaning in the change event

I believe all in this room possess these attributes in abundance. Some amongst you might cut to the quick and advance the old adage, “*Illegitimus non carborundum*” although we should try not to use this in mixed company too often. The keys to avoiding being ground down include inner strength, the strength that comes from others of like minds, and the desire to serve others. Another key, and equally important, is the ability to adapt to the change.

In a technical sense, resiliency is defined as “the capacity of an ecosystem to tolerate disturbance without collapsing into a qualitatively different state that is controlled by a different set of processes.” A resilient ecosystem withstands shocks and rebuilds itself when necessary. Resilience in a social system like education has the added capacity of humans to anticipate and plan for the future. Resilience is conferred in human and ecological systems by adaptive capacity that is defined as “the capacity of a system to adapt if the environment where the system exists is changing.” It is applied to ecological systems and human social systems.

In human social systems, adaptive capacity is determined by:

- The ability of institutions and networks to learn and store knowledge and experience.
- Creative flexibility in decision making and problem solving.
- The existence of power structures that are responsive and consider the needs of all stakeholders.

I very much enjoyed the literature on resiliency and Hope. It was even more enjoyable to know that the professionals in this room and our absent colleagues with whom we work on a daily basis possess both in abundance. I hope that you find the conference thought provoking and demonstrative of the theme.

It is my pleasure to introduce our first speaker of the morning, Keray Henke, Deputy Minister, Alberta Education who will bring greetings on behalf of the Department.