

Executive secretary announces resignation

Gordon Thomas to retire Jan. 1, 2018

Cory Hare
ATA News Managing Editor

Gordon Thomas has announced that he'll retire from his position as executive secretary of the Alberta Teachers' Association as of Jan. 1, 2018. Thomas announced his decision to members of Provincial Executive Council and Association staff on Oct. 20. The Association is now recruiting for the position in the hope of having a replacement in place Jan. 1, 2017. That timeline is designed to allow Thomas to work closely with his successor for a full year before he leaves, which is the same process that he experienced when he took over from Charles Hyman in 2003.

"It just provides, in my view, the best possible transition," Thomas said.

Originally from Lethbridge, Thomas began his career in education in 1977, teaching social studies and drama at Sturgeon Composite High School in Namao. He joined the Association in 1984 as an executive staff officer in Professional Development.

Currently 61, Thomas said the timing of his departure comes at a good time for the Association, given that the provincial government is in the middle of its term, and a new PEC will be in place



Gordon Thomas, ATA executive secretary

prior to his departure, but he stressed that his decision to leave is a personal one.

"In some respects my mother's death this past April helped me crystallize some of this. You think a bit about the time left," he said.

"I've been here a very long time and I've enjoyed it very much. I have enormous respect for the profession, for our members, for the people I work with, the governance of the ATA, but you also get your turn at retirement, so in that respect I'm ready."

Thomas said he's looking forward to starting a new chapter, which will involve a lot more reading, cooking

lessons, woodworking and travel. Topping his travel list are Amsterdam and Rome, as he has a daughter living in each city, as well as more frequent visits to a residence that he and his wife own in Palm Springs.

"I suspect the first few months of retirement may consist of stuff like that, just kind of sitting like a blob somewhere and sleeping in a lot," he said.

Association president Mark Ramsankar said Thomas is valued for his extensive knowledge of ATA history and his ability to build solid relationships with senior bureaucrats outside the organization.

"I think Gordon's contribution has been tremendous," Ramsankar said. "He's a stabilizing force at the provincial level."

For Ramsankar, Thomas's main strength lies in how he works with those around him.

"Gordon has helped me do this job but he's allowed me to be myself," Ramsankar said. "He's got a way of allowing people to express their strengths — that is Gordon's strength."

Ramsankar also said, somewhat jokingly, that Thomas is viewed as the grandfather of the organization.

"When there is no other place, people will go to Gordon for an answer," Ramsankar said. "You know you're getting the straight goods." ■

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– ATA president Mark Ramsankar

Exclusive club

The Alberta Teachers' Association has had seven executive secretaries in its nearly 99-year history.

John Barnett	1920–1946
Eric Ansley	1946–1958
Stanley Clarke	1959–1968
Bernard Keeler	1968–1988
Julius Buski	1988–1998
Charles Hyman	1999–2002
Gordon Thomas	2003–present

Note: L. D. Hyndman was acting general secretary during the last few months of 1958, and Nykolay Hrynyk was acting executive secretary in 1974/75 while Keeler was on sabbatical.

Province shuts down private home school

Trinity Christian School takes matter to court

ATA News Staff

The Cold Lake private school that had been shut down by Alberta Education has been granted a temporary court injunction allowing it to continue operating, albeit without public funding, until an application to reverse the education minister's decision can be heard in January.

Alberta Education had shut down the Trinity Christian School Association on Oct. 25 after an investigation turned up alleged questionable spending and conflicts of interest.

In its application for an injunction, filed with the Court of Queen's Bench in Grande Prairie, Trinity sought a declaration that the decision to cancel the accreditation and funding of its school "is unreasonable, violates the principles of natural justice, is contrary to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, or is otherwise invalid."

Supervising home education for 3,500 students across the province, Trinity is Alberta's largest supervisor of home education. Alberta Education alleges that the school has failed to provide appropriate supervision and demonstrate accountability for public funds. Trinity contracted out the supervision of home schooling students to the Wisdom Home Schooling Society, an agency Trinity established.

In a letter to school board chair Lynn Gullackson, sent Oct. 25, Alberta Education deputy minister Curtis Clarke says his decision to cancel Trinity's registration as a private school is final.

"Trinity has failed to demonstrate that it has the ability or willingness to oversee an education program, or to properly account for its spending of

public funds," Clarke wrote.

Trinity's application for the injunction says that Wisdom was created in 1997 to provide home education administration at the request of Alberta Education and that Alberta Education has since reviewed Trinity's curriculum and finances "from time to time" while approving that Trinity and Wisdom continue operations.

However, in July 2016, citing "serious concerns," Education Minister David Eggen ordered a financial review of Trinity. The subsequent report to the minister, authored by department staff, outlines evidence of alleged failures to comply with government regulations and to demonstrate accountability for public funds. The report recommends that, "the Deputy Minister cancel Trinity's accreditation and registration commencing immediately."

Parents advised to re-register

The government had advised parents of affected students to re-register with another public or private school authority. Trinity denied the accusations contained in the report and advised parents to "await the intervention of the Courts prior to taking steps to find new placements for their students."

Alberta regulations allow parents to home-school their children as long as the program is supervised by a public, separate or francophone school jurisdiction or an accredited private school. Regulations require parents to develop an education program with defined outcomes, but those programs don't have to follow Alberta's programs of study. The associate board or private school

is then required to approve the educational program, have teachers evaluate student progress at least twice a year and maintain student records for the home-schooled students.

Alberta Education provides \$1,671 in funding to the associate board or private school for each home-schooling student it supervises. The supervising authority is required to offer at least half of the funding to parents to defray the costs associated with the instruction of the students, but that funding cannot be used to pay remuneration to the parents or to pay for travel costs that would normally be borne by a parent at a traditional school. The report alleges that Wisdom was charging parents to provide its online and mediated learning courses and allowing parents to use their grants to pay the tuition, a practice the report says is inconsistent with regulations.

Alberta Education's allegations that Trinity failed to appropriately supervise home education students arose because Trinity didn't employ teachers to conduct student evaluations. Instead, the report says, Trinity transferred 90 per cent of the funding it received from government to the third party Wisdom Home Schooling Society, which contracted certificated teachers as "facilitators" to supervise the home-school programs.

The Alberta Education report says this approach is "inconsistent with legislation," which calls for the supervising teachers to be employed by the school authority. Clarke's letter says that Alberta Education advised Trinity directly in February 2014 that this arrangement was in direct breach of regulations.

“ Trinity has failed to demonstrate that it has the ability or willingness to oversee an education program, or to properly account for its spending of public funds. ”

– Curtis Clarke, Alberta Education deputy minister

Trinity denies accuracy of financial review

Further allegations about failed accountability for public funds raised by Alberta Education in its report relate to questions about leases, capital transactions, administrative compensation and administrative costs. In its application for an injunction, Trinity and the other applicants state they "contest and deny the accuracy, findings and recommendations" of the report.

Trinity and Wisdom lease space in two buildings in the Cold Lake area. Trinity's 2014/15 audited financial statements show that Wisdom's director Kenneth Noster was paid \$105,000 in that school year for rent on premises that he owned.

PRIVATE HOME SCHOOL
continued on page 7

A day of firsts

Students experience reading to a horse during visit to new Rogers Place arena

Cory Hare
ATA News Managing Editor

It's not often a person gets to meet a horse for the first time and visit Edmonton's new downtown arena all in one day, but that's exactly what happened recently for a class of Grade 2 students from Brightview School.

For about an hour on Nov. 2, about 24 students from the west-end school visited the ICE School classroom at the new Rogers Place arena, then headed to the loading dock to meet Trifon, an Arabian horse with an unusual interest in books and magazines.

Meeting Trifon was part of the Arabian Horse Reading Literacy Project, created by former teacher Gary Millar. He told the class that he discovered by accident that Trifon liked to read magazines over his shoulder. After borrowing his neighbour's kids for an experiment, Millar then discovered that kids also like to read to Trifon. Since that discovery 10 years ago, Millar and Trifon have been visiting schools throughout the Edmonton area.

Millar's program has two parts. First, he brings Trifon to a school, where students meet him for the first time, get a book of their own and a poster of Trifon for their classroom. They are instructed to practise reading to the poster. Then, months later, the students visit Millar's farm, where they participate in activity centres and read to horses that are posted at each station.

Millar says the experience regularly brings wide-eyed wonder and excitement in the children. Their fascination and connection with the horse, and the fact that this experience also involves reading, fosters an interest in reading.

"A lot of Grade 1 teachers like to use our program to get their new kids engaged and motivated to learn," he said.

Teacher Erin Whelen said her students were indeed very excited about this meeting.

"Lots of our kids have never had an opportunity to see a horse in real life," she said. "To have this opportunity to meet the horse here is so exciting for them."

The class will visit Millar's farm sometime next year.

ICE School

Meeting the horse for the first time at Rogers Place rather than at Brightview School was the idea of Diane Gurnham, a teacher who is the program co-ordinator for ICE School.



Loyd Sansaet takes a turn meeting Trifon during a recent visit to Rogers Place in downtown Edmonton. Meeting the horse was part of a literacy project that will see Loyd's class visit a farm next spring to engage in a variety of activities and read to horses.



Chloe MacLaren, a Grade 2 pupil from Brightview School, writes in a workbook she received as part of the ICE School program that the Edmonton Oilers Community Foundation operates at Rogers Place.

ICE School (ICE stands for In Class Education) operated for 14 years at Rexall Place and is now getting set to begin operation at Rogers Place, which opened in September. The program enables a class to spend five days at the site, engaged in hands-on learning that includes discovering the behind-the-scenes intricacies involved in hosting

Edmonton Oilers hockey games and other large events at Rogers Place.

The program also endeavours to enable students to discover the city's history and beauty.

With Rogers Place having just opened, ICE School won't officially open until December. Whelen's class was the first to visit the classroom as

a special sneak preview that Gurnham suggested. The class is scheduled to attend for a week in May.

When it operated at Rexall Place, the ICE School program naturally included interaction with horses, due to the close proximity of the Northlands racetrack, Gurnham said. Now that the program is located in downtown Edmonton, Gurnham is reconfiguring it.

"We're still trying to get to know the building and build the program," she said. "It's the same program but we have to build brand new planning because we're in a brand new situation."

ICE School is one of several sites that belong to the Inquiring Minds program, which involves students spending a week at a site like a museum, fire hall, civic venue or nature preserve, engaging in learner-led, hands-on, inquiry-based learning and exploration through tours, journaling and a host of creative activities.

According to the Inquiring Minds website, this immersive learning model began in Calgary in the 1990s and has since grown into an international movement from Newfoundland to Singapore. ■

PRIVATE HOME SCHOOL

continued from page 4

The Alberta Education report says that this 2,600-square-foot space, used as office space for Wisdom, started as a school portable costing \$12,000 and while there have been improvements and upgrades made to the building, Wisdom has paid \$493,800 over four years on the lease for this space. The report suggests a more appropriate lease

rate would be "almost one tenth of the rate being charged to Wisdom."

According to the report, a second 6,600 square foot space is leased from Living Water College of the Arts, another organization run by Noster. Trinity allegedly pays a \$10,800 annual lease for the facility, which it built with public funds and then sold to Living Water 10 years ago. Alberta Education's report says that Trinity started constructing the facility in 2001, used \$560,000 of funding from the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement to fund construction and then sold the building to Living Water for \$150,000 in the fall of 2006.

The Alberta Education review says that the "boards and administration of

both Trinity and Wisdom are largely represented by two families" and that their review found numerous instances of family members approving and paying employment contracts for other family members.

According to the 2014/15 audited financial statements, Noster and his relatives received nearly \$830,000, all combined, for services and expenses that year, including the rent paid for the office building. The Alberta Education report says that total compensation to members of the two families exceeded \$2.76 million over a three-year period.

While Trinity School receives \$5.4 million in annual funding from Alberta Education, the report alleges that 90 per

cent of the education grant funding is sent by Wisdom in lump sum payments that follow the same timing as Alberta Education grants sent to Trinity. The report charges that, "Trinity was not able to demonstrate any oversight by Trinity of the administration of the parent portion of the grant" and that "all financial policies are set by Wisdom."

Because Wisdom is charging fees for programming it offers to students and parents, the report alleges that Trinity is not making the required 50 per cent of funding available to parents. The report says that, over three years, Wisdom has accumulated \$988,000 in unclaimed funding for parents. ■

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