Alberta

Among all the provincial and territorial cases in this study, Alberta stands out as the province experiencing the strongest curricular leadership for global education at the ministry level. The recent development of a new curriculum that pays considerable attention to global education in the elementary years, particularly in Grade 3, is matched by a substantial commitment of provincial resources for curriculum implementation.

Alberta also illustrates many of the limitations of global education experienced in other jurisdictions. The provincial curriculum is still strongly focused on national citizenship and rarely links local to global issues. The challenge of implementing it will fall at the school level, where previous curricula have instilled an emphasis on responsible (as opposed to active) citizenship and an aversion to tackling contentious issues. At the school level, global education teachers still feel that global education issues are a low priority in the formal curriculum. Much of what school-level actors describe as global education revolves around intermittent extracurricular activities that focus on charitable fundraising. Opportunities for school-wide learning and for collaboration among teachers, schools and districts are limited. Interaction with non-governmental actors is constrained and unstructured, and the province has perhaps done less than it could to encourage the participation of external actors in the implementation of the global education components of the curriculum.

The challenge in Alberta will be to find ways of bringing all the players to the table – teachers, districts, Social Studies trainers, local non-government organizations (NGOs) and international development groups – during the implementation phase of the province’s new curriculum.

Background

Alberta is currently undergoing an economic boom, which has spurred new funding for education and a province-wide sense of optimism about the future. The province continues to attract immigrants from across Canada and internationally and, demographically, is highly diverse. The political climate has been stable, with the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta in power since 1971. Table 5.1 offers key demographic details to set the socio-economic and political context of global education in the province.
In the early 1990s, Alberta began a process of reforming its education system. The introduction of substantial budget cuts, the centralization of education budgets, and a new focus on choice and private sector engagement raised heated opposition from provincial teachers’ associations. In subsequent years, the centralization of education policy-making continued through the introduction of new performance and accountability measures, including province-wide testing. Both school districts and teachers unions continue to raise questions about the adequacy of current resourcing for education in the province (Taylor et al., 2005). Nonetheless, Alberta’s ranking in international student assessments such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation’s Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) suggests that it has one of the most effective school systems in Canada.

Alberta’s school boards consist of an array of public, separate (Catholic or Protestant), Francophone, charter and independent schools. At the time of this study, there were 62 public, separate, and Francophone authorities [regional boards] (Alberta Education, 2006e). In addition to Francophone education, the Alberta system allows individual schools and districts to incorporate languages of their choice into the curriculum, including Blackfoot, Chinese, Ukrainian, and Punjabi, among others. This is part of the Alberta government’s overall emphasis on providing school choice for parents and students, a policy which has also extended public support to 173 independent schools and 18 charter schools. In 2003/04, there were 33,592 teachers in the province, with a total student enrollment of 592,731. Elementary students attended 1,468 schools across the province (Alberta Education, 2006a).

To understand how global education is faring in the Alberta context, we collected province-level curriculum documents (Alberta Education 1990; Alberta Education/ Alberta Learning 2003; Alberta Education 2005c, 2006c, 2006d), and analyzed them according to the matrices attached in Appendix A. We conducted interviews with one provincial-level official, one district official, and staff at two urban public schools, as presented in Figure 5.1. In addition, we interviewed one exemplary teacher of global education.

### TABLE 5.1
**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: ALBERTA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>3,256,800 (2005)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Ethnic Groups</td>
<td>German; Chinese; Ukrainian; Native peoples; Dutch; East Indian, French; Polish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>215,858 million (CDN$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Economic Sectors</td>
<td>Energy; Agriculture; Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant Political Parties</td>
<td>Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta (PC); Alberta Liberal Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at the Provincial Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premier</td>
<td>The Honourable Ralph Klein, (PC)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[1] Alberta

[2] CDN$ = Canadian Dollars

[3] In 2003/04, there were 33,592 teachers in the province, with a total student enrollment of 592,731. Elementary students attended 1,468 schools across the province (Alberta Education, 2006a).
Global Education at the Provincial Level

Global education in the Alberta curriculum

The Alberta government recently reorganized Alberta Learning (the provincial Ministry of Education) into two separate ministries: Advanced Education and Alberta Education. In 1999 the government began to design new elementary-level curricula for the province, including a new Social Studies curriculum. Most attention to global education is concentrated in Social Studies. Other curricular subjects also have a few learning outcomes that point to global education themes: cooperation, multiple perspective taking, conflict resolution, and tolerance and respect for different identities appear, for example, in English, Health and Life Skills, Drama, Music and Information and Communication Technology. Curricular documents developed after 2000 tend to have a larger emphasis on teaching these attitudes and dispositions.

Alberta’s new Social Studies curriculum was introduced in kindergarten through Grade 3 in 2005, and will be added to Grades 4 and 7 in 2006, Grades 5, 8, and 10 in 2007, and Grades 6 and 9 in 2008. It replaced a kindergarten through Grade 9 Social Studies curriculum, which was developed in the early 1980s and last revised in 1990. Each grade in the new curriculum contains several “Social Action” learning outcomes, which try to bring alive the notion of active citizenship.

In a marked change from the previous curriculum, global citizenship is now introduced in Grade 3 as a major topic in Alberta. This change derived from research showing that young children can comprehend global issues and must deal with them beyond the school yard.

We conducted one interview at Alberta Education, the provincial department responsible for basic education. The staff member we interviewed had been actively involved in the consultations, writing, piloting and roll-out of a new Social Studies curriculum (2005), and was highly optimistic about its future. This Alberta Education representative suggested that the ministry views global education as an important and integral part of the new Social Studies curriculum; it is “at the heart of the new curriculum” (Alberta Provincial 1). At the provincial level, global education was defined as developing “an increased level of
awareness that individual people can make a difference globally” (Alberta Provincial 1). There is a strong focus on the idea of active citizenship in contrast to the emphasis on “responsible” citizenship in the old curriculum.

Despite the positive steps made in the development and preparation for implementation of the new curriculum, it is notable that there is no provincial-level mechanism to systematically evaluate school-level implementation of the new curriculum. At the time of our study, Alberta Learning was working with the new curriculum, while the participants at the district and school level were still using the old curriculum while undergoing in-servicing for the new. Therefore, it is still difficult to assess how successfully the global education ideals in the new curriculum will be implemented in the classroom.

**How does the Alberta curriculum compare to the global education “ideal type”?**

The new Social Studies curriculum has opened the way for a new infusion of global education ideals into the curriculum. The old kindergarten to Grade 9 Social Studies curriculum (1990) made only limited reference to elements of global education, focusing mainly on “responsible citizenship.” The new curriculum “has at its heart the concepts of citizenship and identity” (2005c, p.1) which it begins to foster in the early grades, concentrating on global citizenship in Grade 3. Other key concepts include multiple perspectives, diversity and respect for differences, pluralism, and a sense of belonging and acceptance. The role of Social Studies in the elementary curriculum is to develop students’ attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to “become active and responsible citizens, engaged in the democratic process and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world” (2005c, p. 1).

The notion of citizenship advanced in the new curriculum emphasizes the importance of critical thinking and active citizenship. Individual agency and responsibility, as well as participation in the democratic process, are vibrant streams within the curriculum. Instead of learning facts about events and places, the new Alberta curriculum takes an issues-focused approach, in which students respond to provocative questions that foster critical thinking. As opposed to the 1990s curricular emphasis on content, the new curriculum emphasizes skills, which require an implicit child-centred approach. The teachers are not provided with answer keys, per se, because the focus is on student exploration.

“Multiple perspectives” are strongly encouraged throughout the curriculum, reflecting a view that “Students bring their own perspectives, cultures and experiences to the Social Studies classroom” (2005c, p. 5). This approach is complemented by encouragement for teachers to engage with controversial issues. However, this may be difficult to trickle down to the school level, given the previous curriculum’s avoidance of controversy. For example, in our interviews one teacher cited an incident under the old curriculum where a gentle warning had been given that it was “risky” to introduce the topic of the Gulf War in her classroom.

There is a tension between fostering global citizenship and promoting a clear sense of identity in the new curriculum, although the provincial participant felt that global citizenship was present. The identity promoted by the curriculum, although multicultural, is predominantly national or provincial; it does not extend to promoting a post-national or cosmopolitan global identity, as found in the ideal type. For example, in areas where an international perspective could be mentioned, such as in a discussion of human rights, the environment or protected wilderness areas and natural parks, the examples given are exclusively Albertan or Canadian. In fact, mention of the United Nations, commonly found in other provinces’ curricula on human rights, does not appear in the new curriculum until Grade 9 – except once in Grade 5 in an examination of the role that Canada plays as a peacekeeper.

In contrast to the global education ideal type that we elaborated on in Chapter 2, the new curriculum is
predominantly anthropocentric. The environment is often dealt with in terms of competing “land-use” (e.g. natural parks vs. industry). Sustainability is addressed through how the land sustains communities, instead of looking at how communities sustain the land.

**Provincial-level curriculum supports and resources**

Alberta Education communicates with and supports its teachers predominantly through the creation of the formal curriculum, which the ministry official we spoke with stressed as the key to ensuring the presence of global education in the schools. Classroom material for the new curriculum was still being collaboratively developed at the time of our research, and the participant mentioned that opportunities existed for groups to work with the ministry and publishers on the creation of these resources.

Provincial staff emphasized the participatory nature of the design of the new Social Studies curriculum. In 2002, there had been over a dozen consultation forums reaching 500 individuals, 642 online responses and written submissions from interested stakeholders. A variety of organizations had replied in writing, and some became actively involved in the creation of the curriculum. For example, the John Humphries Centre contributed to sections pertaining to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Aboriginal and Francophone consultations were purposely and frequently sought.

The new curriculum requires “a shift in mindset for the teachers,” necessitating substantial professional development. With additional funds from the province, implementation is planned through the professional development consortia that exist in the province, with a lead teacher coordinating events in each of the six zones, in order to ensure consistent coordination. Professional development is usually the jurisdiction of the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA), which hosts both workshops in the schools, as well as compulsory, annual two-day teachers’ conventions at the regional level. Many topics at these conventions relate to global education.

Alberta Education does not connect school districts directly with each other, and there is no network to facilitate this, according to our provincial informant. However, Alberta Education indirectly facilitates communication with and between teachers. Its quarterly newsletter, “Connections,” gives news of changes at the ministry level, as well as a forum where a school’s project might be highlighted. The province has also funded the Summer Institutes, where 200 to 400 teachers from across the province are brought together for four days. The teachers spoke highly of this gathering, with the theme of the kindergarten-Grade 3 summer 2005 program “A Culture of Peace.” Funding for these conferences is assessed annually, although there were hopes to institutionalize these events.

One resource not mentioned by the provincial participant, but that both teachers and the district official spoke highly of, was the ministry’s “Online Guide to Implementation,” (Alberta Education, 2006b) which aids teachers with assessment in the new skills-based curriculum and provides supplemental content. Although still growing, the current online guide contains several global education-related materials corresponding to relevant learning outcomes in each grade, as well as streamed videos, including the 2004 Summer Institute which featured speakers such as Roméo Dallaire and Stephen Lewis.

**Global Education at the District Level**

In the district we visited for this study, we had the opportunity to speak with the former district-level curriculum specialist responsible for Social Studies and Language Arts. Although there was no formal definition of global education employed by the district, the official we met understood it as a two-pronged concept, which included knowing the world and teaching an understanding of it, including tolerance, differences in opinions and freedom of thought.
Global education is present at the district level primarily because of the introduction of the new curriculum: indeed the district official we spoke with felt a new awareness of the importance of teaching global education issues primarily as a result of preparing schools for the new curriculum. However, in a parting remark, this official also suggested that the global education components of the curriculum are not recognized at the district level as being part of a much wider movement towards global education/global citizenship education. The official noted:

_I never thought of global education in this way, you know, as a separate thing. I wish I had talked with you last year when I was preparing to in-service our teachers on the new Social Studies curriculum._ (Alberta District 1)

From the district perspective, the overarching challenge of the new curriculum is its emphasis on taking “a more integrated approach.” Instead of “teaching 900 basic facts” about a country, teachers are asked to simultaneously look at several countries from multiple perspectives.

**District-level supports and resources**

The district-level official we spoke with indicated that almost all work time had been taken up in-servicing teachers for the new curriculum, and that the province had injected many resources to support this. The official also mentioned that the Online Guide for Implementation had been very helpful.

The official also stated that community support was important at the district level. Several external groups, such as Free the Children, the Central Alberta Refugee Effort, and the Council of Canadians have worked alongside and within schools and the district to promote ideas related to global education. While UNICEF boxes were mentioned, the official did not link them to learning activities.

Most extracurricular global activities, according to our district informant, occur because of the personal interests of the teachers. Although the formal curriculum does not endorse charity, many of the informal global education activities mentioned had a charitable focus. At the district level, students were involved in projects to raise money for Hurricane Katrina and the Indian Ocean tsunami, and our informant noted that “Students are very eager to support those kinds of things” (Alberta District 1).

The district itself receives between five and 15 e-mails per month from various groups offering ad hoc curricular support. Such offers were usually turned down because they were not made far enough in advance to allow teachers and schools to integrate them into their curriculum planning - which occurs a year in advance. There is no system for forwarding these opportunities on to individual schools and a resistance to taking on such a role.

**Challenges**

The main challenge highlighted at the district level was “time.” Teachers are challenged to teach the new curriculum in a way that real learning takes place, and yet are constrained by a lack of time to get through the required curriculum. NGO activities, as add-ons, are bypassed for similar reasons. Our informant suggested that these activities have to be something that “fits into what schools already do” in order to be integrated. While speakers are welcome and appreciated, teachers can rarely put in extra effort into making the event happen.
Global Education at the School Level

Educators and principals at the two schools we visited in Alberta revealed different perspectives on global education. Many closely associated global education with “multiple perspectives,” a theme that runs through the new curriculum. There was also an emphasis by several on developing an understanding of the impact of an individual on the world, global interconnectedness, and the effect of our actions on others. This approach, in turn, matched the new curriculum’s focus on active citizenship and global interdependence.

Another strand was an emphasis on learning about how different people live, while promoting tolerance and respect for these differences. This emphasis connects strongly with the new curriculum’s focus on identity. However, several teachers emphasized that global education was about understanding how “others” live – one participant felt that it involved problem-solving for issues in other countries. Non-formal and extracurricular activities appeared to emphasize helping others through charity but less on linking local issues to global concerns.

In contrast to the provincial curricula, where global education appears to be concentrated in Social Studies, several participants mentioned that it was integrated into many subject areas, such as Art, Music, Language Arts, Math and Special Education classes. Although global education was infused into Science at one school, at the other school Science was notably absent, even though one of the participants was the Science coordinator.

One participant mentioned that the provincial curriculum did not make the connection with marginalized or minority groups in Canada. In this participant’s view, socio-economic and demographic factors shape the way that global education is taught; particularly where students “experience conditions that are similar to the conditions we study about in the South” (Alberta School 1a). On the other hand, participants in one school suggested that a large population of First Nations students allowed aspects of their culture to be drawn into global education activities and other aspects of the school.

School-level supports and resources

Both of the schools we visited had a Social Studies lead teacher. However, neither these teachers nor anyone else in the schools played a specific leadership or motivational role in relation to the introduction of global education.

Nonetheless, teachers and principals were very positive about the support that the new Social Studies curriculum received from both the provincial and district level. Several individuals mentioned that funds were available to buy materials for the new curriculum (where global education was embedded), as well as to provide in-servicing at the district level.

Several teachers mentioned that they had received training on global education from professional development at district-level workshops, conferences, and the annual district-level Alberta Teachers’ Association convention. A leadership conference by Free the Children, which was supported by the district, was mentioned as a highlight. However, despite the support for district-level professional development opportunities related to global education, there were more global education professional development opportunities at the high school level than for elementary or middle school teachers. Teachers also noted that there were a lack of special education sessions dealing with global education.
Challenges

The multiple demands placed on teachers, combined with lack of time, were identified by many participants as the major constraints to integrating global education into the curriculum. Educators felt that the curriculum was so full that it was difficult to integrate new activities from NGOs or other groups. Beyond the curriculum, there were other substantial demands being placed on teachers. As one principal expressed:

*I think global education is critical, but so is meeting the needs of different learners, so is teaching the kids how to read when they don't come with any readiness [etc.]... I can go on and on... and that is all overlaid on top of the regular business of the classroom. So when you say, how important global education is, it is critical, but so are these 20 other things... Where do we fit it in?* (Alberta School 2a)

Other challenges included finding teaching resources that were timely, relevant and at the appropriate reading level. This was particularly problematic for a teacher of Special Education. Some participants were skeptical about introducing global issues to elementary level students: they suggested that because global education requires high levels of literacy, it is better suited to older children.

Partnerships and innovations

Although numerous non-formal global education projects were mentioned in our interviews, very few appeared to have been undertaken on a school-wide level – most appeared to be the one-off initiatives of individual teachers. As one participant stated, the activities were not part of the long-term planning of the school, but rather ad hoc, as the opportunities arose. In one school, the principal received weekly packages in the mail from a variety of different groups. Because the principal was concerned that teachers were “overwhelmed” with material, the material’s use was made optional. The principal suggested that this was not the most effective use of the senders’ resources.

As an example of a school-wide partnership, both schools we visited described their involvement in the Indian Ocean tsunami relief effort. This started as independent teacher-led initiatives, but organically expanded to connect the schools to the community, and then to other schools in Canada. It is significant that the jump to the national level occurred when the Free the Children organization took advantage of these independent initiatives to create an online forum where schools could communicate with each other and integrate their local activities on a global level. This included a website that was updated daily by young people. Independent of each other, the participants from both schools spoke highly of a leadership conference offered by Craig and Mark Kielburger of Free the Children.

One school highlighted the Central Alberta Refugee Effort (CARE) as always available to support schools. CARE assists in finding information and sharing resources for the teachers, and also travels to schools to make presentations.

Several participants mentioned having the UNICEF boxes in the school on a regular basis. One principal characterized the UNICEF Halloween campaign as the only regular event that engaged students with the community. Although one teacher mentioned the ability to use the UNICEF event to bring more human rights into the curriculum, as well as the opportunity to bring in speakers, most of the other participants did not mention any activities beyond sending the boxes out to the community.

One school’s best practice pertained to a school-wide ‘leadership’ initiative, whereby all Grade 4 and 5 students were involved as active members of their school or community. One participant stated that some children enjoyed the leadership opportunity of the UNICEF box collection. Although this activity presents
an opportune time to integrate global education, most activities tended to be centred around or within the school.

One participant was cautionary about the amount of time and commitment the non-formal education and extra-curricular activities take. As that participant expressed, “Even something as simple as a penny drive is hours of teachers’ time. People don’t always realize how much extra teacher time it takes to do these things” (Alberta School 2b).

**Legacy of a global education network**

In the early 1990s, a provincial global education network was established, first known as the “Alberta Global Education Project,” then as a smaller organization called the “Learning Network.” With funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the network focused on teacher professional development, and included a summer institute for teachers, workshops, a global education library, and a fund to support teacher innovation at the school or district level. As a result, a very strong group of roughly one hundred global educators emerged, linked by their commitment to transformational global education work with an agenda of social justice. Because of funding cuts, the group stopped its work in 2001, although members still operate an informal network.

We interviewed one of the lead educators from this organization, in part to better understand the benefits of a formal professional network of global educators. From our interview, we gathered that even though global education issues were absent from the 1990s curriculum, this network was able to stimulate global education activities in many Alberta schools.

Individual teachers, according to this informant, were the driving force behind global education. Because of the “meatiness” of global education, this educator often felt labelled the “serious” teacher at her school. Attendance at a summer institute sponsored by the Learning Network, and connecting to other teachers involved in global education helped give her the sense of belonging necessary to continue global education work. As the teacher expressed it:

> You have to connect with people who have similar values so that you feel supported, so you feel nurtured, so you feel that you are not alone. Because global education is tough. Bottom line, it is risky business. (Alberta School 3)

The other educators we interviewed inadvertently referred to several of the global education projects in the Learning Network’s global education library, suggesting that such a network had a unique ability to act as both a professional development organization and as a clearing house for learning materials on global issues.

**Advice from educators for external partners**

The clear message we received from educators? To be regularly and sustainably addressed, global education resources need to be integrated into the formal curriculum. This approach means working directly with the ministry of education and publishers on resources for the new curriculum. These resources could take the form of one main idea or one or two worksheets that would help teachers meet the learning outcomes. We heard several direct suggestions about ways of incorporating global education issues across the curriculum. For example, materials relating to Francophone countries could be used in both French Immersion programs, while the creation of storybooks with global education themes would be a welcome addition to Language Arts.
Participants made a variety of suggestions about the non-formal curriculum, although they emphasized that NGO resources could be better spent by making sure that their “kits” actually reach the classroom, instead of having them stuck on shelves in the district offices or libraries. Speakers are welcome, participants agreed, particularly if they come with activities that can be incorporated into the curriculum. Electronic and multimedia resources (print, videos, DVDs, pictures) are even more welcome, especially if they can be edited and updated. Resources should contain appropriate and multiple reading levels (especially for special education classes).

NGO involvement in professional development was also highlighted. Either as speakers or workshop leaders, NGOs could integrate more global education learning opportunities into the professional learning communities that already exist, such as the Alberta Teachers’ Association groups. NGOs could also participate, help with, or sponsor summer institutes, or develop social action programs to meet students’ needs in dealing with current issues, with the long-term goal of engaging students as global citizens.

**Summary**

The new Alberta curriculum closely matches the global education ideal type in many ways, particularly in its emphasis on global interdependence, tolerance, diversity, critical thinking, and active citizenship. However, there are still ways in which the curriculum could be more closely aligned, especially in promoting global and post-national citizenship. Recognition of social and economic injustice and attention to conflicting views is limited in the curriculum. The curriculum is anthropocentric: a holistic view of “the world as one system,” including environmental awareness, is also missing.

Alberta’s Ministry of Education has done an excellent job of integrating certain aspects of global education into the formal curriculum, and it was clear in our interviews at both the district and school level that educators knew about the new curriculum. The vision of global education held at the provincial level is clearly trickling down to the district and school levels. Although the process is positive, the subsequent result is that elements of global education not in focus in the formal curriculum, such as the environment or post-national citizenship, do not get expressed at the school level.

Participants in all levels of this research believe that the implementation of global education depends upon the choice and will of individual teachers who are engaged about the subject. There was rarely any mention of taking on global education issues through “whole school” initiatives of the type documented in Davies et al’s UK study. However, almost everyone had several examples of a non-formal project in a school that had been spearheaded by an individual teacher. One global education teacher suggested that this “individual” approach was difficult to create and sustain without having a community of like-minded people to draw upon. Although many of the non-formal projects had some sort of learning goal, and all were done with good intentions, projects mentioned during our interviews focused predominantly on fundraising, instilling a ‘charity’ perspective in the students that does not match the global education ideal.

While teachers and district officials know about the global education components of the new curriculum, it is too early to know how global education will actually be expressed in Alberta classrooms, as the roll-out for Grade 4 did not occur until 2006. Participants stressed that what is required is a ‘change in mindset.’ For global education and global citizenship education ideals to be realized, however, that change in mindset must also move beyond the formal curriculum to build collaboration across formal and extracurricular activities in Alberta elementary schools.
ENDNOTES:

1 Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this table is available from the Government of Alberta (n.d.). Government at a glance.


3 Charter schools are autonomous non-profit public schools that operate under the direction of a charter, instead of a locally elected school board (Alberta Education, 2005b).

4 From 1999 to 2005, the two departments existed as one department known as ‘Alberta Learning.’ Prior to 1999, they were separate departments.

5 In 2005, there were select Gr. 4-6 pilots of the new curriculum. A description of Alberta’s curricular cycle of design and implementation can be found in Alberta Education (2005a).

6 A full description of the consultation process, and those involved (p. 9-14, 37), can be found in Alberta Learning (2003).