

The logo for Story Engine, featuring the words "story" and "engine" stacked vertically in white lowercase letters inside a red speech bubble shape with a blue tab at the top.

story
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A story

CALGARY ARTS ACADEMY

March 13, 2012

CALGARY ARTS ACADEMY Prologue

Calgary Arts Academy is purpose-built for the 21st Century, for its needs and gaps and thirsts and desires.

It is wholly unique and a true innovator in an industry bound by tradition. In a time when people don't vote and bullying is endemic, the school transforms children into young people who are curious and kind, empathetic and engaged: responsible citizens. By emphasizing creativity and collaboration — the underpinnings of pure entrepreneurship — it prepares them like no other school for the vagaries of an uncertain economy.

The place pulses with warmth, confidence, belief and faith that this model, these new processes and principles, these teachers and these parents and these students create something magical that's not just worth preserving but replicating around the city, the province, and the world.



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Backstory

In 1989, the National Gallery of Canada inspired broad public outrage when it purchased *Voice of Fire*, by American artist Barnett Newman, for its permanent collection. The price tag: \$1.8 million.

The country was in the midst of a recession. Taxpayer groups and populist political parties were outraged that three strips of colour could cost so much. The controversy followed similar media events in the United States, all demonstrating that artists were not the leaders we had thought they were: they were strange elitists — out of touch with regular families.

The anti-arts lobby was born.

Traditionally, conservatives supported art and culture. The idea of *noblesse oblige* was attractive in the United Kingdom and in North America. Wealthy individuals and the state were patrons of art and culture, of order and beauty.

Yet the neoconservative movement saw an opportunity with *Voice of Fire* and similar pieces of public art, and it exploded into a new evaluation of culture. There were normal Canadians, working hard to pay their taxes and live decent and godly lives.

And then there were artists: pampered by the state and given to perversion.

It was a useful political wedge. The Klein Revolution and the birth of the Reform Party adopted this view of arts and culture, which captured the imaginations of Albertans who had grown tired of recessions and tired of Central Canadian elites controlling economy as well as politics and culture.

Arts funding dried up. So did funding for arts programs in schools.

Meanwhile, a technology-based economy in Northern California's Silicon Valley was beginning to affect the broader culture: computers were fundamentally changing the way we lived our lives. The "innovation economy" spread to New York, to parts of Europe and, more slowly, to cities like Austin and Portland and Boulder and Raleigh, North Carolina.

Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, spoke broadly of this new culture as an entrepreneurial fusion of creativity and science.

It took 10 years for Canada to realize it was falling behind in this new science and technology-based economy. In our funding for education, from primary to post-secondary, we quickly developed a strategy to privilege science, technology, and computer engineering.

To make this happen without bankrupting ourselves, we cut back — again — on fine arts and liberal arts education.



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The Status Quo: Arts Education in Calgary

As all this was happening, a principal in the Calgary Board of Education named Dale Erickson had made a discovery. It was terrific to teach the arts to children, outside of their core subjects. But it was altogether revolutionary to teach the core subjects, the Alberta curriculum, through the arts.

That is, a true fusion of creativity and science, creativity and math. If children approached every subject actively, through the arts, it *did something* to them. They were more curious, more confident, more collaborative, more active. They were calm and happy. They solved problems, together, instead of memorizing answers, alone.

The school board sent Dale to close Belfast School in the early 1990s. Closing schools wasn't his specialty.

His first teaching assignment had been a junior high class, children with severe disabilities. It was clear to him that a traditional approach wouldn't work with these kids. He became a music therapist. The piano and music had been important forces in his own life, a way out of a strict small-town childhood. He instituted an arts program at Belfast.

The school he was supposed to close grew from 79 kids to 350. He started an adult choir, affiliated with Belfast School and its arts focus.

But the bureaucratic structure of the school board, and strict rules and guidelines around preserving traditional views of education, made it difficult for him. His success at Belfast led to a transfer: now the board wanted him to remake other institutions, first Sir Wilfrid Laurier and then Willow Park School in Southeast Calgary.

“He was dying on the vine,” says founding board member Ken McNeill. “He had this vision of how kids ought to be taught. We'd seen it work, inasmuch as he could do it in the Calgary Board of Education. But without him, things were not going well at Belfast. And it certainly wasn't working for Dale at Willow Park. It was like he was being punished for being different, for being successful. But so many of us believed in his mission.”

The Inciting Incident

Dale was on a familiar career track. He would incrementally fight traditionalists within the Calgary Board of Education and within Alberta Learning, to change the system from within. It was unlikely and no doubt incredibly frustrating, but he loved kids enough to try it. He had a

stable job as principal of a large elementary school. Soon enough, the board would send him off to fix another institution.

In 2002, Ken and some other passionate Calgarians, parents and otherwise, spoke to Dale about another option. A much riskier option.

What about a public charter school?

It would give them the independence they needed to allow Dale to apply his methods freely. A private school was another option but it would exclude parents who could not afford the tuition. This was contrary to Dale's core philosophy: this is for all children. None of the enthusiastic parents and community leaders knew much about charter schools. None of them knew how much work it would be.

Dale said he would help but he had no intention of leaving his post. He was loyal to the Calgary Board of Education and saw charter schools as competition. They asked again. He said he'd think about it. Ken being Ken, he continued to ask until Dale said he'd think about it more seriously. The group met. They met again.

He took several walks. One day he decided to say yes.

Over a lot of coffee and a lot of meetings, they wrote the charter. At its core is the idea of immersing children in the arts the way language schools immerse children in French, in Spanish, in Mandarin.

"I always knew it would work," says Dale. "But I also knew there would be resistance to the model. Tradition is much easier than creativity and innovation."

Just as French immersion schools in Calgary did not produce thousands of French professors, Calgary Arts Academy would not strictly produce artists. The goal was to make passive learning active, to replace rote memorization with creativity, to wire children differently. A graduate of Calgary Arts Academy would be prepared for a community and an emerging economy that privileged risk-taking, innovative and entrepreneurial thinking, collaboration and problem-solving.

Most importantly, Calgary Arts Academy would teach empathy. Children would learn to see and understand the world through the eyes of others. This is one of the most important skills artists teach themselves.

At Calgary Arts Academy, teachers would be artists and artists would be teachers. Artists would be in the classroom, working with students. There would be no desks. Doors would be open. Children would work in the hall if it felt right to them. Dale had come to believe so strongly in the charter, in this invention, that he quit his secure job as principal before he knew if the charter would be approved.

The minister of Alberta Learning at the time, Lyle Oberg, believed fundamentally in choice. He felt charter schools should be incubators for new ideas in education, that this particular idea deserved an opportunity. Minister Oberg approved the charter.

Calgary Arts Academy was born. Now what?

“You see the planning model and you see the work involved, from the point of view of a teacher,” says Dale. “This isn’t for everyone. You have to train your mind, from a teacher’s perspective, to do all this work creatively. It’s so much easier to fall back on tradition.



“You have to find people who are willing to take risks.”

Pat Cavill and other board members were enchanted by these ideas, when they were introduced to Calgary Arts Academy.

“If they had set math to rock music, I would probably be a mathematician today,” Pat says.

The Calgary Board of Education was less than enthused by the minister’s decision. Dale’s initial reaction to the idea of a charter school resonated throughout the system: “Their response was basically, ‘We consider charters competition,’ says Dale. ‘Cease and desist.’”

The Curtain Rises

In the summer of 2003, Josh Van Beers had just finished a year in the public school system as a probationary teacher. His contract was not renewed with the Calgary Board of Education, as it was a year of cutbacks.

“I was okay with that because I really didn’t fit in,” he says. “I struggled with the rigidity.”

He struggled with it so much he wondered if his calling, as a teacher, was a calling at all. A friend of a friend had heard about this new charter school that was about to open and suggested Josh look into it. It’s perfect for you, she said.

“I started pursuing the school,” says Josh. “I found Dale’s phone number somewhere and I began to pester him. A lot.”

At the time, they had a preliminary staff. The Calgary Board of Education was in the midst of stripping Glenmeadows School of everything. That is: everything, right down to the bookshelves in the library. Interviews and early meetings were held on a green plastic picnic table and some cheap chairs.

Even so, Dale could not ignore Josh’s persistence. Dale called him for an interview.

“It was inspiring,” says Josh. “The main question was: are you willing to do whatever it takes to make this work?”

Neither Josh nor anyone else was dissuaded by the bizarre emptiness of the building. They had an opportunity to invent a new school, a new model of education, not with an awkward transition from a normal public school to a wonderfully abnormal public school but from nothing. Nothing but walls and a ceiling.

“It ended up being the best thing for us,” says Dale. “All that tradition was gone. But I was still thinking, what do we do now? How are we going to open? I maxed out my credit cards, to \$15,000, hoping somehow I’d be paid back.”



They didn't know how many students would register, and they were so busy cleaning and preparing the school that Dale couldn't hire Josh in the beginning. Josh decided to volunteer, just to be part of the school. Dale, Josh and a handful of other teachers spent a week talking about philosophy, and the pillars that form Calgary Arts Academy's intellectual foundation.

It included:

- The notion of **Arts Immersion**, using creative expression to approach every aspect of the Alberta curriculum, rather than separating the arts and “regular school.”
- **Democratic discipline**; that is, children are involved in maintaining order and values in their classrooms and in the school, rather than autocratic control by teachers.
- The **Circle of Courage**: an educational outlook aligned with First Nations beliefs about individual mastery and strong communities.
- Children and their parents participate in **Contract Learning**: they take an active role in what they will be learning and the measures of success.
- The school identifies key **Developmental Assets**, like empathy and curiosity and confidence.

Enough parents were convinced by the ragtag school with its courageous if untested model to get started. There were enough students, by the fourth week, to sign up Josh.



Canada's New Economy

Ken McNeill wanted the school to operate as a microcosm. To paraphrase Gandhi, they would be the change they wanted to see in the world. Its conception and early life followed the model of a business start-up more than a school. An entrepreneurial spirit infused the place.

“We had all this flexibility as a charter school, and independence,” says Ken. “We wanted to make sure we used that.”

Parents saw the school as a leap of faith (a feeling that still endures today). Dale wanted to make sure his teachers felt encouraged to take risks, to try something new, to fail and try again.

“I see entrepreneurship in terms of toddlers,” says Pat Cavill. “In the regular education system we’re taught to be something else. But the point of Calgary Arts Academy is to make sure we retain some of that magic we have as toddlers. This is what an entrepreneur is: you still have that two-year-old in you.”

In Canada, between 1999 and 2009, we turned our institutions of higher learning into science, technology and research centres. Walk across any campus in the country and you’ll see

crumbling, outdated liberal arts and fine arts buildings next to gleaming glass towers housing high-tech research facilities. We invest more, per-capita, into research than almost any other advanced country in the world. Yet when it comes to transforming that research into new companies, Canada is near the bottom of the G20.

Meanwhile, our “lagging productivity” has prompted national newspapers to wear out clichés about the impact this has had on Canadians: a “productivity trap has been sprung” and that’s “hitting us in the wallet.”

This is, fundamentally, a cultural problem.

“What I’m trying to do is help kids think creatively in the workplace,” says Dale. “Whatever that workplace turns out to be. The school has been designed to build emotional intelligence. Compassion, empathy, kindness, reflection, a spirit of citizenship and fair play. The more you think about it the more you think about broader goals: you can take the strain off the health care system, off the justice system.”

Todd Hirsch, co-chair of the Calgary Arts Academy board and one of Canada’s most important economists and public intellectuals, is a patron of the arts. But it’s this aspect of the school that has most enchanted him.

“This is really the best model I’ve seen to help raise creative, engaged learners,” he says. “Everyone uses these words — creativity and innovation — but no one really knows what they mean. How do we actually achieve that? How do you teach people to approach problems in a new way? All wealth creation starts with an idea. What I think Calgary Arts Academy does so well is it encourages ideas. It was a good idea, as a school, and now it’s creating the sorts of thinkers who generate ideas. We’re a little beacon but we can really be a catalyst for the City of Calgary, for Alberta.”

For Canada and beyond.

The Government of Alberta held a summit on the future of education. When they allowed themselves to think in an unrestrained fashion, leaders worked together to imagine the school of the future.

It was, in essence, Calgary Arts Academy.

Erickson has travelled to Europe, the United States and China to talk about the model he invented, about what it does to children, their communities and, potentially, their countries. In China, campus coordinator Michelle Stonehouse — who was in Xiamen to teach children using the CAA approach — was featured on a bus billboard.

“I couldn’t believe it,” she says. “We’re famous in China!”

Josh Van Beers, who harassed principal Dale Erickson into giving him a job, and who struggled with taking the model from philosophy to action, took over from Dale as principal. He is now its most eloquent spokesperson.

“What’s my goal?” says Josh Van Beers. “I want to change the education system. I would like to remove all of that rigidity, all of those rules we’ve taken as truths, and use the arts to unlock creativity in children, to make creative, innovative, independent, empathetic thinkers.”

A Bold Choice

Visiting Calgary Arts Academy, at either the Glenmeadows elementary campus or the Knob Hill middle school, is an extraordinary, moving experience. Classical music plays everywhere. Children wander freely and quietly. Some sit in the hall, writing. In the library, students with Mac laptops cluster sit alone on bean bags and on the floor, researching. In language arts, students use pop art to build images of fashion and society from Elizabethan England. Here is a girl with her hoodie on backwards. Here is a boy in a shirt tie.



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girl
and

The art on the walls at Glenmeadows is not from “art class.” The beautiful computer-generated images demonstrate osmosis, from a science lesson. Complex bead work is from math.

An image of Leonardo Da Vinci at Knob Hill, using the tiny words of an essay to outline his face, is iconic. Da Vinci, the ultimate creative thinker, is a renaissance version of what these children are striving to be: curious, well-rounded, artists and scientists and mathematicians and spirited citizens at once.

Children move about in one of the classrooms, engaged in brain gym: connecting their left and right hemispheres before a discussion about math. A young girl relies equally on chemistry and rhetoric in a presentation that’s part food politics, part *Super Size Me*-styled attack on McDonald’s. Young boys dance to pop music, with no self-consciousness.



“The school belongs to the kids,” says Dale.

The teachers conduct a building full of improvisation. Yet there is a sense of order and discipline, of calm. Outsiders with children who go to school elsewhere — even schools that

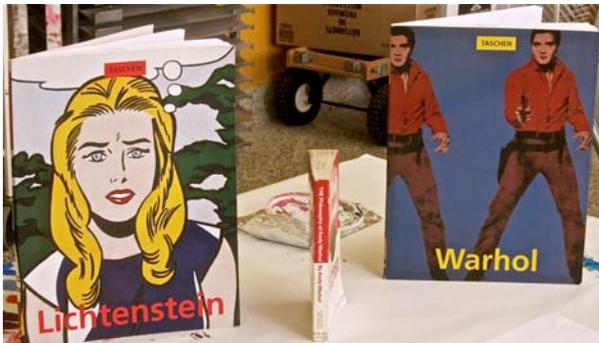


claim to be arts-enrichment or arts-focused or arts-integration — visit Calgary Arts Academy and come to one conclusion: I want my kids in this place.

What is this place?

Ironically, Calgary Arts Academy had forfeited extra funds in the past because it had used its space so efficiently and creatively. Dale jokes that when officials from Alberta Education arrive to inspect the campuses, he almost wishes for uncharacteristic chaos and disorder. It's

difficult to make a case for a new building when the current classrooms, at both locations, in the main buildings and in the boxy portables, have a special elegance about them.



But at more than 450 students and a long waiting list, Calgary Arts Academy is ready to grow. The current buildings are old and expensive to maintain, even if there is a pleasantly funky atmosphere about them.

At about the time it became painfully obvious Calgary Arts Academy needed a new building, the Calgary Stampede realized it needed a youth campus.

“Our CEO had been looking at a partnership with Olds College, which seemed natural,” says Warren Connell, vice president of park development for Calgary Stampede. “But if you look at our mandate, for a hundred years it’s been clear: to promote and preserve western heritage and culture, and to support innovation in Calgary.”

The dual foundations of Calgary Arts Academy’s influence on Calgary are culture and innovation. “It’s an absolutely perfect fit for us,” says Warren. “Our other educational initiatives are exclusive. You have to be the very best, for example, to get into The Young Canadians. Anyone can go to Calgary Arts Academy. Even I could get in!”

Dale met with Warren. These meetings expanded. The Youth Campus, a collaboration between the Calgary Stampede and Calgary Arts Academy will become an architecturally notable K-12 school. In the evening, arts organizations from across Calgary will use the performance and rehearsal spaces.

On November 17, 2011, at Calgary Arts Academy's Cinq à Sept cocktail party, Warren formally announced the partnership with a PowerPoint presentation.

It is a timely partnership.

The City of Calgary and the Government of Alberta are committed to innovation and creativity, to economic diversity, to a new kind of leadership based not only on oil and gas but on ideas, on ingenuity, on changing the world from a base in Western Canada. It is an elegant notion that informed one-half of a now-abandoned provincial tagline: Freedom to Create...

Michelle was joking about being "famous in China," but Calgary Arts Academy is a model the world is noticing.

Dale, Josh, Michelle and the board want to influence education Calgary, then Alberta, then Canada... and then the world.



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