

THRIVE ELEMENTARY

A Charter School for Edmonton's Low-Income Families

THE REAL ALBERTA ADVANTAGE—Educational Choice in Action

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Profile

Located in central-west Edmonton

Opened in 2023

Public charter school

Serves local low-income families

Full wraparound support for families

First K-6 STEM school in Alberta

Thrive Elementary has built the blueprint for making multigenerational, community-wide change. Located in central-west Edmonton, the school has emerged from a sincere care for others, a generous philanthropist, and a radical vision of how to support families. In just its fourth year of operation, Thrive is already serving more than 180 students and has expansion plans firmly in-hand.

Thrive is a charter school, offering STEM programming. More than that, it's a school whose mission is to close the opportunity gap for low-income students in the community. To be eligible to attend, students must live in surrounding neighbourhoods (the "Thrive Zone") and have an interest in STEM studies. They must come from families in a low socioeconomic situation and, crucially, who also agree to be active partners in the student's academic journey.

Somehow Thrive has cracked the code for how to fill in practical gaps that parents in these circumstances cannot fill, while also emphasizing that this is not a school in which parents are hands-off. For both students and parents, the school is high-expectation, high-engagement, and high-support.

In traditional schools, so many students fall through the cracks because their needs aren't seen or there aren't resources or time to meet those needs. This is not an option at Thrive. The entire ethos of the school is based on seeing the individual needs and potential of every child and their family. From there, they are committed to accessibility. Each student receives a Personal

Opportunity Plan, which is a tailored education-and-beyond program to support their strengths and growth, and to fill in any learning or social-emotional gaps.

The Basics: What's a Public Charter School?

Thrive Elementary is a public charter school, a type of school that is integral to Alberta's educational ecosystem. These schools are community-built and innovation-focused complements to the traditional public system. Alberta mandates that charter schools are directly accountable to the Minister of Education, they cannot charge tuition, they must offer a unique pedagogical approach, and they cannot be religious. These schools hire certified teachers and adhere to the provincial program of studies curriculum.

Thrive does all this, plus goes one step further. Families pay nothing for their child to attend Thrive: no tuition, no school fees, no extra costs. Everything is included in the program, including yellow bus service to and from school, extracurricular activities, and daily meals and snacks. The school's STEM focus sees the Alberta curriculum overlaid with enriched teaching, which includes computing, robotics, and engineering elements to provide students with hands-on, real-world skill preparation at an early age.

The school's charter structure gives it maximum flexibility to address challenges rapidly. Free from the bureaucracy and red tape of major school boards, Thrive has a deliberate leadership rhythm in which school administrators meet weekly to review operations and implement needed changes. Whether it is addressing a new student's needs, evolving macro-situations such as COVID-19, or a family's changing circumstances, students and teachers see results and resolutions more quickly.

What Makes Thrive Different?

Enriched Program

Life at Thrive goes beyond the traditional 8:30–3:00 school day. It runs from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Busing is provided to all students free of charge. Students arrive at school at 8:15 a.m. and are served breakfast. Classes run from 8:20 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. (with a nutritious lunch provided at noon), followed by two and a half hours of "Thrive Time." This after-class block is not simply supervised free time but is specifically tailored toward the school's mission of removing barriers and providing equal opportunities for its students. The enriched mixed-grade programming during this block is designed to enhance learning and provide some of the extracurricular options, such as sports and art, that other families pay for. Students arrive home at 6 p.m., and this timing is intentional for protecting and encouraging family connection during dinner and the evening.

Every Thrive student receives running shoes, a full set of Thrive gear, a backpack, and all needed school supplies. The school also invests in specialized staff members to provide developmental, occupational, literacy, emotional, behavioural, and English language learner support to every student who needs one or more of these kinds of assistance.

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Wraparound Family Support

Family involvement is critical to mission success at Thrive, especially since the school takes on many responsibilities that are typically seen as those of a family. But the school isn't trying to replace parents. Rather, supporting parents in all aspects of life and ensuring there is a strong home-school nexus is embedded into the community's operational structure. The goal is to build parental capacity as much as possible, knowing that the more empowered parents are, the more they can pour that support out on their children, especially in their educational success. In practice, it means hosting an on-site family resource worker at the school, who is in contact with each student's parents to help them access social supports and community services. It means having an open-door policy, by which parents can come to the school anytime to observe classes and daily life. And it means intentionally bringing together students, parents, teachers, and leaders for a monthly dinner, catered and hosted at the school, to build those direct relationships and encourage interaction and trust in every direction.

Supports for the Most Vulnerable

The Thrive student population is diverse in every possible way: in language, culture, ethnicity, religion, and learning challenges. Many students come from backgrounds with deep trauma; for example, several families have recently fled the war in Ukraine. To identify and address the needs that may arise from these experiences, the school employs a social-emotional behavioural specialist. This specialist works individually with students to determine the unique pathway needed to reach each student and assist them in learning, behaviour, and well-being.

The Thrive "edge" here is not simply in resources and flexibility, but in specialization: In most other schools, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are a subset of the larger population, but at Thrive, they are the entire group. And over the school's first three years, the leaders and teachers have continually adjusted their curriculum, structure, schedules, and delivery to be as targeted to this demographic as possible.

The recognition that each student's needs are different is revolutionary in this school. No two children are the same. Teachers frequently describe working with students to identify what they are interested in, what they like doing, how they can access resources, and how teachers can develop new learning methods to reach them best.

In what is both a benefit and a challenge, the team at Thrive knows that (at least for now) their mission ends with the elementary grades. They are relentless about working to "see" and help the students who might be able to just disappear into the crowds in a bigger school. The goal is to ensure that the children are successful while at Thrive and also that they will graduate into seventh grade, at a new school, confident in their abilities.

School Culture: Community

Thrive is a community-focused school, and it acts like it. The school sees itself, students, and staff as an integral part of a wider social fabric—which it is. That means giving back to people around them, whether through visiting residents, singing carols, or delivering Valentine's cards at the nearby seniors' home or the Easter Seals residence.

Thrive is focused on building community within the education world, too. The Thrive property backs onto a public Catholic high school, whose students come to Thrive to volunteer. While not part of existing traditional public-school sports leagues or intramural programs, the Thrive athletics team works with other public, separate, and independent schools in the vicinity to coordinate unofficial sports competitions so that its students can experience the fun, team spirit, camaraderie, and discipline that students at other schools experience. Thrive belongs to the vibrant charter school community, which includes nearly forty other charters with which to connect, provide mutual support, and explore professional development opportunities. The school also holds membership in the official provincial charter school association, Alberta Public Charter Schools.

Community within Thrive itself is just as important and embedded. Each day, staff meet the children as they arrive and personally greet them. This kind of individual attention and recognition is crucial to building solid foundations and helping students feel safe. It also ensures that students feel seen and not lost in a system. They know that the teachers know who they are.

For teachers, seeing the students graduate from grade six is heartwarming but also sad: They know that the Thrive journey ends at that point and there is not yet a similar program for the students to move on to for grade seven and beyond. This inspires the staff daily to ensure that they are supporting students at present, so that they can be successful wherever they go in the future.

Conclusion: Looking Forward (and Back)

When Thrive started, its mission to focus on low-income students was trailblazing in Alberta. There was no roadmap, no template. As a result, there were frequent adjustments to programming, curriculum, and processes during the first three years. This kind of real-life, real-time adaptability will continue as the school grows and matures.

Data are already showing that the Thrive approach is working. Student achievement between 2023 and 2026 grew steadily and dramatically, and satisfaction surveys of both parents and students show deep enthusiasm and gratitude to be part of such a community.

Even so, Thrive isn't settling for things as they are today. They continue to pursue greater excellence and impact. They have a vision of serving even more students, and this vision is already coming to life with approval received for a second Thrive campus in north Edmonton, which will offer kindergarten through grade nine, expanding the program and ensuring stability for students straight through to the end of junior high. The idea of operating in more than one city isn't off the table either. Perhaps down the road, a Thrive school in Calgary might come into existence.

The Thrive mission sounds almost too good to be true: An excellent, student-centred education with no tuition, free transportation, family-centred supports, meals, and extracurricular activities. For many families, it sounded like a fairy tale, so the Thrive team has worked diligently to build relationships and trust from the moment the idea was conceptualized. That is precisely what makes the school such a happy community and glowing success: It is not a "top-down" school but rather a collaborative one. The school exists fundamentally to support students and empower their parents to be able to do the same. By easing many of the practical pressures that vulnerable

families face, Thrive helps parents build their capacity to support their children's education and helps the students to mature into capable citizens in our society.

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