

Rich Accountabilities for Public Assurance: Moving Forward Together for a Great School for All



Informed by international research partnerships with Finland, New Zealand, Australia and Norway, the Association continues to work with forward-thinking schools and researchers committed to broadening the definitions of school success. This work advances an emerging body of research on adaptive capacity that reinforces the principle that schools are complex ecosystems that need to be understood and evaluated as such (Murgatroyd and Stiles 2015; Sellar 2015).

In 2012 the Alberta Teachers' Association brought together a panel of international experts to assist in the development of a blueprint for sustaining innovation in Alberta's K–12 education sector. *A Great School for All—Transforming Education in Alberta* outlined a comprehensive model for mobilizing research to build the capacity for informed change. In the summer of 2015, a follow-up research report, *Renewing Alberta's Promise: A Great School for All*, described how reform in curriculum and assessment must involve a number of dimensions, including the complex interrelationships among the optimal conditions for teaching and learning, support for professional development and autonomy, and new approaches to accountability that reflect the value of excellence through equity.

Accountability Has Become the System

As this brochure outlines, Alberta teachers believe that without a collaborative effort to develop a shared understanding of what a public school education should be and what the broad indicators of success would look like, the promise of educational renewal in Alberta will continue to go unfulfilled. The growing influence of technology vendors, of private consultants and of policy entrepreneurs driving the datafication and commercialization of Alberta's public education system is increasingly apparent. Consider that aside from the declining support for students with special needs, the greatest sources of increased time and workload (56 hours per week) for Alberta teachers are ill-advised technology acquisitions, including digital reporting tools and learning management systems.

ACCOUNTABILITY— WHO'S COUNTING AND WHAT?

In the last administration of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 42 per cent of the variation in student scores was related to factors outside of school, such as personal and environmental stressors like poverty.

BUILDING ADAPTIVE CAPACITY

Recognizing schools as complex ecologies, a growing body of research points to the promise of focusing on locally determined measures of school success. Such approaches focus on building the capacity for response-ability rather than bureaucratic accountability.

RICH ACCOUNTABILITIES

The growth of 'big data' and data analytics should not become a distraction from a focus on the policies and practices that will ensure equity in Alberta's increasingly complex and diverse school communities.



Three Design Elements for Rich Accountabilities

1 Values—Achieving Excellence Through Equity

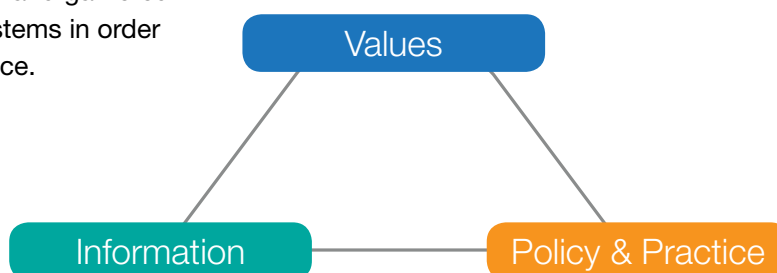
Any meaningful strategic approach to educational reform must begin with a consensus on what a society values in terms of the purposes of a public school education (Biesta 2013; Jónasson 2015). However, the current taken-for-granted values that have been driving accountability in Alberta for the past decade are informed by vaguely defined notions of efficiency, by competitive comparisons and by value rankings that too often ignore the one value that Albertans hold most dear when it comes to public education—namely, the value of equity. The result is that Alberta, along with many other OECD countries, has been doing the wrong things better by measuring student learning according to indicators that either are narrow and/or have little to do with what actually happens in school (Sahlberg 2016; Berliner 2014).

2 Information—Moving Beyond The Datafication and Commercialization of Public Education

Stephen J. Ball (2003, 216) has argued that what matters most in informing practice and policy is “who controls the field of judgment” in which information is produced and how it is used. Whether it is the continued push for digital testing platforms or learning management systems, the risk is that educational research and innovation strategies will remain encumbered by business interests. For example, in the United States, testing software and digital reporting products are now outselling digital learning resources four to one. Information generated by large-scale assessments and other forms of student testing are useful resources for monitoring schools and school systems, as well as developing school policies and programs. The important question about rich accountabilities is: What information is required to demonstrate that practice and policy is producing desired outcomes or to achieve a great school for all?

3 Practice and Policy—Moving to Multilateral or Rich Accountabilities

Too often the primary focus for student testing and other accountability mechanisms obscures the boundaries between teachers’ professional judgment and the need for systemwide indicators of performance. Although information can be used to inform teachers’ practice, parents’ decision making, school leadership, system administration and policy making, it is important to ask how judgments about different kinds of information are translated meaningfully into practice. Any information can serve as a catalyst for change (Lingard and Sellar 2013), the risk for accountability mechanisms, particularly those linked to generating big data infrastructures and high stakes, is the encouragement of unintended behaviors and consequences. A commitment to equity for Albertans must be reflected in the information that is generated and gathered about schools and educational systems in order to support sound policy and practice.



Alberta's Design Opportunity: Professional Responsibility Enhancing Public Assurance



Teacher-Developed Classroom Assessments

- Perform ongoing classroom assessment to diagnose and respond to the learning needs of students.
- Foster teacher observation and interaction with students and parents.
- Differentiate assessments to address individual student learning needs.
- Demonstrate professional capacity in order to interpret evidence, determine level and report student learning.



Teacher-Selected Collaboratively Developed Assessments

- Support identifying jurisdiction priorities such as groups of at-risk students.
- Support teacher assessment capacity in their use of multiple sources of information and evidence, such as observations, conversations, tests, projects and portfolios.
- Develop performance tasks, rubrics and unit tests with the help of teacher teams in communities of practice.
- Focus on responsibility and adaptive capacity.



Province-wide Assessments

- Focus on responsiveness to build capacity in targeted areas.
- Sample programs to support program development, evaluation and services in priority areas.
- Compare provincial performance benchmarks through sampling (PISA), and through national and provincial programs such as the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP).

DAILY

ONGOING ASSESSMENT OF AND FOR LEARNING

PERIODIC

Rich Accountabilities: Giving an Account of What Matters in Alberta Schools

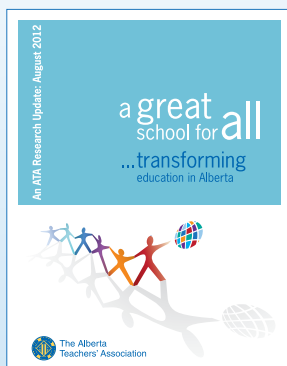
Whenever a tire is flat, the flatness is manifested at the bottom of the tire. But the hole isn't always at the bottom. In education, the evidence about teacher and student performance is generated at the school level. The temptation is to blame the teachers or school-level factors for inefficiencies or poor performance. —Lant Pritchett, The Rebirth of Education

Cobbled together following the unprecedented cuts to education in the mid-1990s, the current Accountability Pillar exemplifies the culture of surveillance and control (Pritchett 2013). In this ecology, or “ego-system,” Alberta schools are *subjects of* and *subject to* external lines of authority and bureaucratic control.

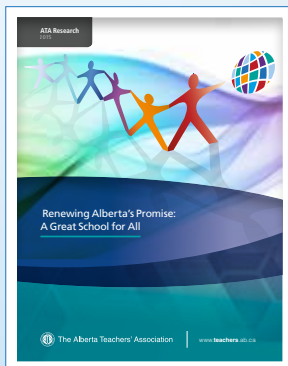
It is time for the Alberta government to take what Pritchett calls “the long route”—one that embraces accountability as a system property that recognizes the broader societal circumstances that influence school success and advance excellence through equity.

The Association continues to work with the international research community, Alberta school communities, and government to develop rich accountabilities that will demonstrate what it means to have a great public school education in Alberta.

1. How do we ensure equity and engagement for all learners—no matter what their home conditions, physical or mental challenges, or levels of support in the community?
2. How do we provide learning pathways that meet the different needs of different learners while at the same time, through adaptive capacity, ensuring the quality of all learning taking place in the school?
3. How do we appropriately leverage technology and innovation to support engaged and inclusive learning for all without succumbing to the growing influence of commercial and private interests?
4. How do we engage Albertans in a democratic dialogue concerning their aspirations regarding what a great public school education would look like and the multilateral accountabilities to ensure a vibrant future for the province?



<http://bit.ly/atagreatschool>



<http://bit.ly/atarenew>

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