

# Transformation and Alberta's schools: a time for action



The Alberta  
Teachers' Association

# Introduction

During the last couple of years, the prospect of educational transformation in Alberta has engendered considerable public interest and discussion.

The Alberta Teachers' Association, in collaboration with a team of international experts, has developed its own blueprint for the way education needs to change to ensure that Alberta continues to have one of the best education systems in the world. This blueprint is detailed in the 2012 publication *A Great School for All – Transforming Education in Alberta*, which identifies 12 dimensions of transformation that the profession believes will help bring about real educational reform for the next generation of Alberta students.

## The Association's blueprint sees schools as the hubs of vibrant communities whose citizens support public education as the cornerstone of Alberta's future.

Supported by sustained funding, schools in such communities are innovative, creative environments in which students are fully engaged in their learning and teachers constantly strive to enhance student learning. Rather than relying on standardized tests, teachers use their own professional judgment to assess student progress and to assure the public that students are acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to function in today's complex world. Working collaboratively, teachers adapt the curriculum to reflect local priorities and take the lead in determining the role that technology can play in facilitating student learning. School boards, for their part, eagerly share promising innovations with each other and, in collaboration with the provincial government, ensure that teachers have the resources they need to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students.

What follows is a condensed version of *A Great School for All – Transforming Education in Alberta* in which each of the 12 dimensions is summarized. The Association urges teachers to discuss the ideas presented here with each other and with members of the larger community. See the inside back cover for information on obtaining copies of the full report.



## 12 dimensions of transformation

1

Assessing  
and reporting  
student  
learning

2

Curriculum  
development  
and  
implementation

3

Digital  
technologies  
and  
learning

4

Inclusive  
education

5

Optimal  
conditions  
of practice

6

Differentiation  
for learning

7

Professional  
development  
and  
autonomy

8

Public  
assurance

9

School  
leadership

10

Teacher  
leadership

11

Early  
learning

12

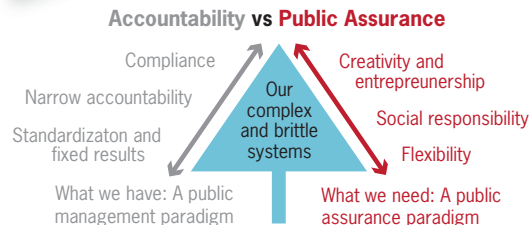
Governance  
and vibrant  
communities

# 1

## Dimension One: Assessing and reporting student learning

*Despite the sheer number of examples showing negative effects, many people still believe that high-stakes assessments are a viable way to improve education. They are wrong. Such people intend to build systems that defy a perfectly valid social science principle. And to defy scientific principles is an act of great foolishness.*

David Berliner



## Current context

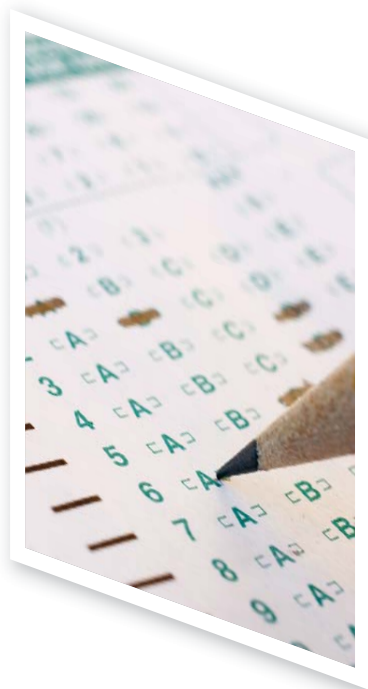
- Test-based provincial assessments cannot adequately measure the complexity of students' learning as called for in *Inspiring Action on Education*.
- The rush to adopt digital reporting tools is distracting us from developing high-quality assessments of students' progress.

## Getting started

- In partnership with government, work with the profession to develop alternatives to the current provincial testing programs and provide job-embedded professional learning for teachers.

## What will success look like in five years?

- Teachers' professional judgment is considered primary in responding to the individual gifts and talents of all students.
- School performance reporting reflects both the breadth and depth of Alberta Education's *Goals of Education*.



# 2

## Dimension Two: **Curriculum development and implementation**

*Where does the world  
go when schooling is  
about schooling and  
not about life?*

Madeline Grumet





### Current context

- Although the Alberta curriculum is recognized nationally and internationally for its high quality, it is excessively prescriptive and fragmented.
- The process for rolling out new curricula is inadequate: teachers are seldom provided the time and supports they need.

### Getting started

- Ensure that curriculum redesign incorporates a significantly reduced number of learning outcomes and provides the profession with the responsibility for developing curriculum that is appropriate for each community.
- Establish an expert provincial advisory body to develop a comprehensive five-year provincial curriculum-implementation plan and a funding framework the supports provincial and local goals.

### What will success look like in five years?

- Curriculum is implemented on an ongoing basis and is supported by provincial, national and international learning networks that enable teachers to collaborate and share their innovative practices.
- The high school curriculum provides multiple pathways for student success.



# 3

## Dimension Three: **Digital technologies and learning**

*It is clearly easier for  
us to imagine ourselves  
living among better  
appliances than among  
better human beings.*

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi



## Current context

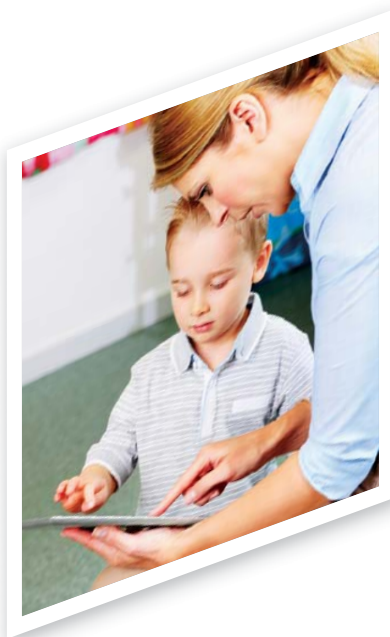
- With the current over-emphasis on acquiring technology for technology's sake, valuable instructional time is eroded as teachers are expected to trouble-shoot poorly implemented technology initiatives.
- School boards and the provincial government do not adequately consult the profession when acquiring and implementing technology.

## Getting started

- Encourage the education partners to collaborate on research that explores the kinds of technologies that optimize student learning and enhance teachers' conditions of practice.

## What will success look like in five years?

- Teachers have primary responsibility for determining the appropriate role of technology in shaping students' learning environments.
- Alberta schools recognize that teaching and learning are highly relational activities.



# 4

## Dimension Four: **Inclusive education**

*When examining the highest-performing jurisdictions in the world today, one lesson is clear – the path towards educational excellence is built on seeking equity, insuring a great school for all students.*

Pasi Sahlberg



## Current context

- Large class sizes and inadequate resources limit teachers' ability to meet the learning needs of all students.
- The language of transformation is mistakenly leading some stakeholders to expect that all students will have personal learning plans, personal supports and the opportunity to learn at any time, in any place and at any pace.

## Getting started

- Ensure that the funding framework for inclusion reflects the true costs of providing supports and services to diverse learners.
- Urge the government to fund all aspects of its inclusion initiative, including staffing, technology, learning resources and professional development.



## What will success look like in five years?

- Schools have the funding they need to honour the right of all students to learn.
- Wraparound supports and services are available to help schools meet the unique needs of students.
- School administrators and classroom teachers have the time and resources necessary to maximize student learning and create a great school for all students.

## 5

## Dimension Five: Optimal conditions of practice

*The 56-hour workweek of Alberta teachers, coupled with the rise of multitasking and lack of flexibility in controlling their work, is simply unsustainable.*

Linda Duxbury



### Current context

- Class sizes have increased dramatically, and the student population has become more diverse.
- Teachers are increasingly assigned duties not connected to instruction.

### Getting started

- Learn from high-performing jurisdictions such as Finland where teachers teach fewer than 600 hours per year, compared with the more than 1,000 hours that teachers in Alberta teach.
- Urge the education partners to undertake model projects that enhance organizational well-being and optimal teaching and learning conditions.

### What will success look like in five years?

- Alberta schools are vibrant, creative working environments that enable teachers to grow professionally and personally.
- As professional employees, teachers view school authorities as progressive employers.





## 6

## Dimension Six: Differentiation for learning

*Creativity, innovation, intellectual agility, teamwork, problem solving, flexibility and adaptability to change are essential to the new economy. But if these skills are all there is to 21st-century schools, they will convert personalization into mere customization in a fast-forward world of swift solutions and temporary teamwork. Twenty-first century schools must also embrace deeper virtues and values such as courage, compassion, service, sacrifice, long-term commitment and perseverance.*

Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley





## Current context

- Differentiated learning is important in helping students to develop the skills and knowledge that they need to function in today's world.
- The personalization of learning should be driven by pedagogical considerations rather than by corporate interests and technology.

## Getting started

- Urge the education partners to collaborate in undertaking model projects to explore how innovative learning environments can help teachers to differentiate learning.
- Encourage schools to embrace experiential learning and to offer students multiple pathways to high school graduation.

## What will success look like in five years?

- Alberta schools offer creative learning environments in which all students feel connected to their teachers and are fully engaged in their learning experiences.
- Differentiated learning is driven by considerations of relationships and community engagement rather than by technology and business models of customization.





## Dimension Seven: **Professional development and autonomy**

*The successful transformation of Alberta's schools will rest on the enhancement of teachers' collaborative professional autonomy and high-quality teaching practices supported by ongoing professional development.*

Carol Henderson



## Current context

- While adequate professional learning opportunities are available, they often lack the coherence, coordination and sustained funding needed to enhance high-quality teaching practices.
- Teaching and learning are become more complex, resulting in the need for professional development that enhances teachers' collaborative professional autonomy.

## Getting started

- Ensure that professional learning opportunities are equitably funded throughout the province, implemented in a manner that allows for coherent professional growth and designed to put teachers at the centre rather than at the edges of school-improvement efforts.
- Education partners agree to protocols that ensure that professional development supports collaborative professional autonomy and is embedded in the daily work life of teachers.

## What will success look like in five years?

- Teachers actively improve their teaching practice by collaborating and participating in communities of practice.
- The Alberta Teachers' Association governs the teaching profession in ways that ensure the growth of the profession and inspire public confidence in teachers.



## 8

## Dimension Eight: **Public assurance**

*One of the greatest issues in our society is the collapse of trust in institutions... Trust has been replaced with written performance standards, standardized tests, managerial supervision, and government requirements and legislation.*

Andy Hargreaves



## Current context

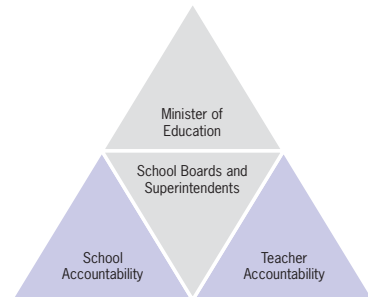
- The current testing culture distorts teaching and learning processes by inappropriately comparing schools.
- The accountability framework focuses more on system performance than on the learning outcomes of students.

## Getting started

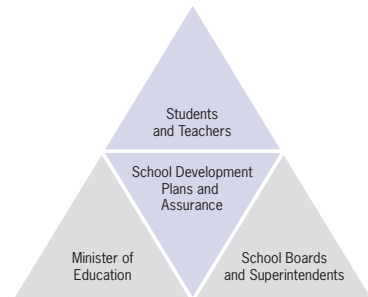
- Urge the education partners to develop a provincial protocol for reporting school performance based on Alberta Education's *Goals of Basic Education*.
- Urge the education partners to develop performance-based assessments that are conducted on a sample of students.

## What will success look like in five years?

- Alberta schools have implemented a locally focused public assurance model.
- The Alberta curriculum is relevant and responds to the needs of the local community.



Bureaucratic accountability  
in the *Third Way*



Public assurance  
in the *Fourth Way*

## 9

## Dimension Nine: **School leadership**

*Organizational change is a  
dance, not a forced march.*

Margaret Wheatley



## Current context

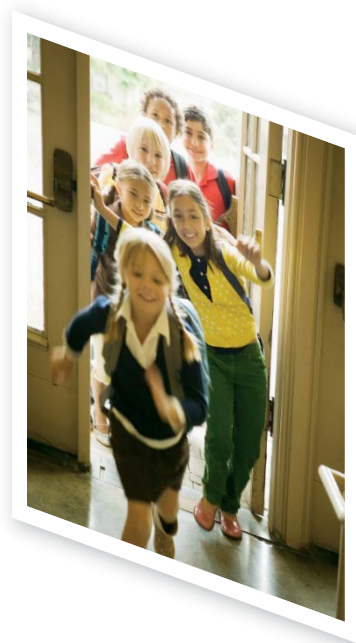
- School leaders, while highly committed to their work as instructional leaders, are facing a number of challenges, including competing expectations, work intensification and a lack of appropriate support.
- A significant proportion of school leaders will retire within the next five years.

## Getting started

- The minister of education approves the *Framework for School Leadership* as a provincial regulation.
- Support for equity through investments in early learning becomes an immediate government priority.

## What will success look like in five years?

- School leaders across the province have the resources they need at the school and district levels to support student learning.
- The Alberta Teachers' Association, in collaboration with other stakeholders, provides programs and services that support the development of effective school leaders.





# 10

## Dimension Ten: **Teacher leadership**

*I've come to believe that a leader is anyone who holds her- or himself accountable for finding potential in people and processes.*

Brené Brown





## Current context

- While a growing body of research demonstrates that distributed leadership is the best way of improving schools, bureaucratic compliance remains a pervasive force in many school jurisdictions.
- Teachers are increasingly finding inspired ways to improve student learning and advocate for sustainable support.

## Getting started

- Implement the Education Research Framework to facilitate the development of evidence-informed initiatives that foster local innovation and strengthen teacher leadership.
- Enhance provincial, national and international networks of schools that explore innovative practices.

## What will success look like in five years?

- Teachers will be at the centre of educational reform, not on the sidelines.
- Alberta teachers will be recognized globally as leaders in educational transformation.

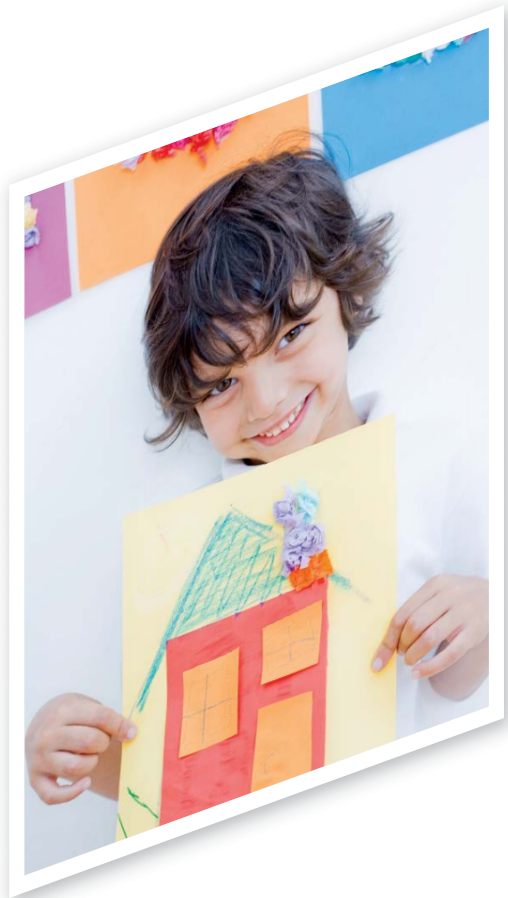


# 11

## Dimension Eleven: Early learning

*There is a growing consensus among economists and sociologists that high-quality early childhood development programs are in fact good 'investments' that have long-term economic returns ranging from \$7 to \$17 for every dollar invested in such programs.*

Lawrence Schweinhart and David Weikart



### Current context

- Alberta ranked second last on the most recent national comparison of early education services across Canada.

### Getting started

- Hold the government accountable to its promise of expanding early-learning initiatives, especially with respect to full-time kindergarten.

### What will success look like in five years?

- Alberta is recognized as a world leader in early childhood development research and programming that is committed to equity.



# 12

## Dimension Twelve: **Governance and vibrant communities**

*It is not about Alberta being  
the best place in the world;  
it is about being the best  
place for the world.*

Ken Low



## Current context

- Alberta's economic boom and the resulting growing population have challenged the capacity of many municipal governments to sustain vibrant neighbourhoods and communities.
- The various levels of governments do not adequately work together to coordinate their efforts and to financially support strong schools and communities.



## Getting started

- Public education is a logical starting point for exploring how communities can better coordinate the delivery of education, health and other public services that enhance the well-being of an increasingly diverse citizenry.
- Adopt a distributed approach to leadership at the school and district levels that fosters public engagement through deliberative democracy.

## What will success look like in five years?

- Schools are the hubs of vibrant communities that engage citizens to become their best possible selves.
- Albertans recognize that visionary leadership, engaged citizenship and a commitment to equity are the key to effective community development.

## Afterword

### Transforming education in Alberta schools – A time for action

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Rather than tinkering on the edges of reform, we need, more than ever, to address the systemic obstacles limiting learning opportunities for students and the conditions of practice of teachers. As the international expert panel that assisted in the development of *A Great School for All* concluded, “unless government can work with education partners to address the systemic barriers driven by top-down management practices, misplaced technology applications and bureaucratic accountability, the higher goals of equity and access to a great school for all will not be achieved.”

Given the highly relational nature of teaching and learning, we need leadership that will avoid short-term distractions and instead focus on sustained improvement that will enable children to fully realize their individual gifts and talents.



The Alberta  
Teachers' Association

Questions and comments are welcomed  
and should be sent to [jc.couture@ata.ab.ca](mailto:jc.couture@ata.ab.ca).

For a more in-depth exploration of the Association's  
views on educational transformation, see *A Great  
School for All: Transforming Education in Alberta*.

Download a PDF of *A Great School for All* at  
[www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/  
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