

LEADERSHIP UPDATE

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Concerns Raised about Government's Approach to Educational Accountability on a Number of Fronts: Alberta's Test-Based Accountability System Needs Review

Kenneth Leithwood, Professor of Educational Leadership and former Associate Dean at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), spoke on the effectiveness of educational accountability processes in Alberta in February 2006 at the ATA-sponsored symposium *Handle with Care: Futures Being Built*. In Leithwood's view, the system in Alberta is best characterized as a test-based accountability system, and such a system is not adequately preparing students for current and future society.

The Association has worked with classroom teachers, administrators and jurisdiction staffs in taking a proactive approach to reporting student progress and educational accountability in general. The publication *Issues in Education: Student Assessment and Evaluation—The Teaching Profession's View*, directed at teachers and the educational community, reviews current Association policy related to student assessment and evaluation. As the document suggests, policies and expenditures on testing programs that overemphasize the role of high-stakes provincial testing have narrowed the public's understanding of educational accountability, and pressured teachers, students, parents and school jurisdictions to focus on test scores in a few subjects rather than on the broad goals of student learning. For example, the diploma exam and achievement test results form the backbone of the government's accountability

pillar. Yet, only 32 per cent of the learning outcomes of the Grade 9 science curriculum can be measured with any validity on a machine-scoreable achievement test. Of the 20 broad learning outcomes that define the *Goals of Education*, only some aspects of six of these learning outcomes can be properly measured on provincial tests outlined in the *Guide to Education*.

The Association has invited education partners to engage in a renewal of the current educational accountability regime and has developed a discussion paper to facilitate these discussions. Meanwhile, two recent government initiatives (GLA and CAA, discussed below) show the government's inability to focus on building capacity and trust among the education partners in documenting and reporting student progress.

Grade Level of Achievement Reporting (GLA)

Grade Level of Achievement (GLA) was unilaterally imposed by Alberta Education in 2005. Initially it called for teachers and school jurisdictions, by 2007–08, to assign and report a whole-number grade in the four core subjects in Grades 1–9 to identify a student's level of achievement in terms of the learner outcomes for that grade. These grade determinations would then be uploaded to



Alberta Education for analysis and comparison to provincial achievement results. In response to numerous concerns expressed by the Association and other education partners, and the failure of the 2005–06 pilots to demonstrate any real benefit of GLA reporting, the government backed off its initial implementation schedule.

The recent October 2006 revisions to the government's GLA scheme, calling for a staggered roll-out of GLA reporting in language arts and mathematics from 2006–08, does little to address the fundamental problems already identified with this program. Concerns continue to be raised about the comparisons to be made with GLA and provincial achievement test results, as well as the marginal benefit students and parents will derive from this added layer of reporting.

As the GLA reporting scheme rolls out, it is apparent that the elaborate data-submission requirements and supports through *EduLink* will represent considerable time and costs both to jurisdictions and the department. Beyond these obvious concerns, some overriding questions remain: Who asked for GLA? Why is implementation proceeding when the pilots demonstrated no significant benefits for students?

Computer Adaptive Assessment (CAA)

In September 2005 some \$1 million was committed annually over the next

three years by Alberta Education to the generation of an online databank of multiple-choice test questions in four core subjects in selected grades from 3–12. The announcement of the CAA project and the awarding of a contract to a private corporation, Castle Rock Research, has caused considerable concern. Not only were teachers and education partners not consulted on this costly online testing scheme, CAA will duplicate the efforts and expenditures dedicated to the current provincial achievement and diploma examination testing program. Even more perplexing has been government claims describing CAA as similar to the Classroom Assessment Materials Project (CAMP), developed in the 1980s and early 1990s, which involved multiple stakeholders and focused on a rich array of performance-based assessments.

As a result of these concerns, the 2005 Annual Representative Assembly unanimously called for an immediate halt to any activity related to the CAA project, recognizing that the millions of dollars being spent on this online test bank over the next few years would be better spent on other priorities. Since the 2005 ARA resolution, reports from pilots conducted in May and June 2006 point to a lack of teacher interest in the initiative not to mention numerous technical and logistical difficulties. Given these concerns, the Association has requested that teachers not participate in the voluntary piloting and item writing associated

with CAA. CAA needs to be considered in the context of the government's ongoing refusal to consult with education partners before launching initiatives that draw scarce resources from the classroom.

Leadership in Assessment: What Can You Do?

As the instructional leader in the school, administrators have an opportunity to support professional reflection about assessment that enhances student learning. The Association publication *Issues in Education: Student Assessment and Evaluation—The Teaching Profession's View* could be used by a school staff to review its reporting policies and practices.

The Association has prepared a brochure, *Getting to the Heart of Learning: A Parent Guide to Reporting Student Learning*, to engage parents in a conversation about how teachers diagnose and respond to the learning needs of students. Distribution of this brochure to parents would assist school staffs in illustrating how high-quality teacher and school-based assessments are critical in improving learning outcomes for students.

Further information on the Association's position on accountability or the resources identified above can be found on the Association website (www.teachers.ab.ca) or by phone from J-C Couture at 447-9462 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 (toll free in Alberta).

For further information, visit www.teachers.ab.ca or contact Member Services at the Alberta Teachers' Association, 447-9400 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 (from elsewhere in Alberta).

Saying Goodbye

—Konni DeGoeij

Joy mixes with sadness as we say farewell to two of our colleagues.

There is joy for Calvin Fraser, who after years of dedication and hard work, is leaving the ATA to join the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) as their Secretary General.

Calvin joined the staff of the Alberta Teachers' Association in 1990, after 18 years as a teacher and administrator in secondary schools in both Saskatchewan and Alberta. In 1992 he became Coordinator of the Association's Member Services program area, dealing with teacher terminations, transfers, evaluation difficulties, criminal matters, discipline and professional-relations problems. In that capacity he has contributed provincially and nationally to understanding and resolving issues affecting teachers and education.

Along with my joy for him, I also feel sorrow—sorrow for myself and the other members of our profession who will miss his knowledge, wit, boundless energy and willingness to give of himself.

Calvin is an outstanding choice for Secretary General, and his appointment is excellent news for the CTF and demonstrates national recognition for his educational leadership, competence

and diplomacy. He will have the very important task of steering the CTF in the years ahead. We wish him all the best.

In addition, we would like to wish former Member Services Associate Coordinator Susan Fraser all the best in her retirement. Prior to her retirement in July 2006, Susan Fraser worked primarily in administrator assistance. Before assuming this position, she assisted teachers and administrators as an Executive Assistant in the Association's Southern Alberta Regional Office, in Calgary. Susan's experience in education ranged from

being the Assistant Director, Teacher Certification and Development, with the Department of Education, to being a teacher and administrator with Edmonton Catholic Schools.

Susan, yours is a life filled with accomplishments, in education, to be sure, but also in human terms that cannot be measured by charts or accounts or report cards. No matter what capacity you were working in, you were always willing to work with teachers, students and members of the public to bring out their full potential. Susan, we all wish you a happy retirement.

ATA Materials for Parents

The Learning Team is an Association publication that contains articles of interest to parents about public education and the schooling of their children. It is published four times yearly—September, December, February and May—and is distributed to the school principal and to members of the school council. Additional copies may be ordered at no additional cost from the ATA.

Parenting through the School Years—a Guide for Parents of K-12 Students is a new publication that will be mailed to school principals and chairs of school councils the last week in October. The first 12 copies of this 20-page booklet are available at no cost to principals. Additional copies may be purchased from the ATA at a cost of \$2 each.