

# Proceedings

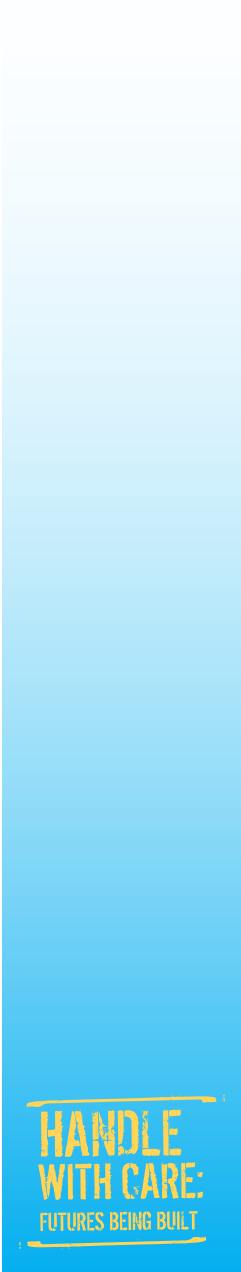


## Handle with Care: Futures Being Built

Invitational Symposium on Educational Accountability

2006 02 02-03, Fairmont Hotel Macdonald, Edmonton

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## BACKGROUND

Hosted by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), the province's first-ever invitational symposium on accountability in education was held 2006 02 02-03 at the Fairmont Hotel Macdonald in Edmonton. A select group of 150 leaders representing the business, community and education sectors of Alberta engaged in a conversation about how to ensure that K–12 students are prepared for the emerging Alberta. Participants were encouraged to offer opinions, express concerns and make recommendations about the current educational accountability system in Alberta, including processes for making the improvements.

The theme selected for the symposium was "Handle with Care: Futures Being Built" to underscore the importance of carefully attending to the current and future learning needs of every student during the discussions on educational accountability. To support this theme, symposium materials were illustrated with a photograph of five students at different stages in their schooling, each symbolically holding objects or wearing uniforms that suggested alternative future roles in society. The symposium started with a short interview with these students about their hopes and dreams for the future. The eldest student reminded participants to think of students as real people during their deliberations, not just as statistics in an accountability report.

The symposium program was organized around key questions and included

keynote speakers and panellists to stimulate discussion among participants. Participants were organized into small discussion groups of seven or eight that included a diverse mix of people with business, community and educational backgrounds from all regions of the province. A facilitator in each group encouraged full participation of group members in the discussion on each question. The discussion groups recorded their responses to the questions.

The symposium was facilitated by Catrin Owen from Calder Bateman Communications, who served as an independent moderator throughout the symposium. The attached Moderator's Summary (printed in green) contains Owen's personal observations of the proceedings.

***A select group of 150 leaders representing the business, community and education sectors of Alberta engaged in a conversation about how to ensure that K–12 students are prepared for the emerging Alberta.***

### **Why Do We Need a Symposium on Educational Accountability?**

Frank Bruseker, President of the ATA, explained why the teaching profession is concerned about Alberta's educational accountability system—its direction and the limitations it places on student learning and society, both now and in the future. He emphasized the value of a broad education for students, citing Jacques Delors, Chair of UNESCO's International Commission on Education for the 21st Century and the Commission's recommended "Four Pillars of Education." He also noted the work of Barry McGaw, Director for Education, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

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(OECD), on reconceptualizing the role of education in building “human and social capital” in the knowledge age.

Bruseker drew attention to the Alberta Government’s 20-year strategic plan and illustrated how the current educational accountability system is out-of-step with the plan. He pointed out the narrow range of academic core learning measured by provincial assessments; yet, the diploma exam and achievement test results form the backbone of the government’s accountability pillar. For example, only 32 per cent of the learning outcomes of the Grade 9 Science curriculum can be measured validly on a machine-scorable achievement test. Of the 20 broad learning outcomes that define the goals of education, only some aspects of the six learning outcomes can be properly measured on provincial tests.

Under the circumstances, Bruseker said that it is necessary for Albertans to hear from each other about their expectations for student learning and what, in their view, constitutes success in the education system. Such a symposium, by its very intent and design, would engage participants in a collective inquiry on how an improved educational accountability system could build capacity in education and support better learning opportunities for students. Albertans need an opportunity to discuss the issues, offer opinions, express concerns and suggest solutions in an open and trusting climate.

### **What Does It Mean to Be Educated?**

Participants in their small groups addressed the broad issue of “What does

it mean to be educated?” by discussing the three questions below. The discussion notes from the 20 groups indicate remarkably similar responses to all three questions. Participants appeared to have achieved consensus on the qualities they would like to see in students leaving the K–12 education system.

***Participants felt that schools, while preparing students for a diversity of possible futures, must also ensure that students enjoy learning while at school.***

They were in agreement that education must focus on a broad range of learning outcomes so that students can become well-rounded, balanced people. They felt that schools, while preparing students for a diversity of possible futures, must also ensure that students enjoy learning while at school. To achieve

this, education in Alberta must go beyond its current emphasis on academic core learning and promote a learner-centred system that encourages lifelong learning and the development of the interests, aspirations and talents of all students.

### **What kind of people do we want coming out of our schools?**

The following are typical examples of group responses:

*—People with the ability to learn effectively. People who are caring and compassionate. People who are globally aware and respect diversity. People with a sense of their potential and a confident sense of self. People with a healthy sense of cynicism, questioning minds. People who are actively involved in their community.*

*—People who contribute human and social capital, not just physical capital, and who can both work at a job and build community. People who are both independent and interdependent and who actively engage in citizenship. The purpose of learning is not just*

to prepare students for the next grade or course, or for postsecondary education.

—They must be people who are problem solvers, able to engage in team work and practice responsible citizenship. This links to the four pillars described by Delors. They must have skill sets plus be relevant, dynamic, deeply engaged, multiliterate, democratic people who are responsible for and to society.

### **What student learning matters most?**

The groups typically responded in the following ways:

—Problem solving, self-reliance and self-esteem, appreciation of knowledge in others, how you use the knowledge imparted, critical thinking and questioning, how to be critical and receive critiques.

—Critical thinking and ethical behaviour. Problem solving. Multiple literacies. Strategies for analysis. Integrated literacy and citizenship. Interactive, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Learning processes in groups. Application in new contexts. Specific learnings are measurable, proxies for larger skill sets. Need to balance specific learnings with broad outcomes in terms of accountability.

—The following student learning outcomes from Alberta Education's list: (b) write and speak clearly, literacy and communication; (n) critical thinking and problem solving, adaptation; (q) manage time and other resources, ability to grow and continue pursuing knowledge; and (r) demonstrate initiative, leadership, flexibility and persistence, not necessarily buy into modern values and expectations. Value individual choices.

### **What changes, if any, would you like to see in Alberta's education system?**

The following are typical of group responses:

—Less emphasis on what to learn, more on how and why to learn. Many of the key attributes are not measured by current test protocols.

—More emphasis on students not bound for university. More emphasis on students identifying their gifts and talents. Less emphasis on standardized tests and school profiles.

—Less pressure on students and teachers. Returning the joy of learning to the classroom. Synergy with other areas, so the system as a whole supports student learning.

—Attitude shift to value a wider range of knowledge and skill development; university, college, apprenticeships and work need to be valued more equitably in our society. Re-examine the provincial examination system.

—Students with overall averages of 85 per cent see themselves as not good enough because they can't get into postsecondary programs. The school system focuses on skill sets for a narrow percentage of the population. Need to address tangible and intangible aspects of learning. Eliminate the fear factor in a system where success is narrowly defined.

### **How Can We Be Sure That the Public Education System Is Preparing Students for the Emerging Alberta?**

Kenneth Leithwood, Professor of Educational Leadership and former Associate Dean at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), spoke for about one hour and responded to questions from participants for about

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20 minutes on the effectiveness of the educational accountability system in Alberta. The system in Alberta is best characterized as a test-based accountability system, and such a system is not adequately preparing students for the current and future society.

He said that accountability systems are largely ideologically driven, rather than based on evidence of how schools actually work. He outlined the challenges of a test-based system and pointed out that the evidence of the effectiveness of these systems is, at best, mixed. A serious problem is that important goals are hard to measure on a test. Measurement is a problem because the core technology of schools is not about producing more “widgets”; it’s a technology that requires huge amounts of professional judgment.

Leithwood introduced the simple theory of change that is implicit in test-based accountability. The “No Child Left Behind” policy in the US is based on the same theory and leaves little alternative but to implement standards-based education. Many states now speak of “power standards,” focusing efforts on those standards that will produce the best test results.

He outlined the damage that high-stakes tests have on the education system—the higher the stakes the more damage. He said we need an accountability system, but “moderate pressure” and “high levels of support” for schools will yield better results than the current system of “high pressure” and “low levels of support.” He described what this would look like in practice and emphasized the importance

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of capacity building, quoting Richard Elmore’s work in this area.

Leithwood quoted Margaret Wheatley in support of the kind of leadership we need in education today. It is the opposite of the power and control model of leadership associated with current test-based accountability systems. Leithwood is a supporter of transformational leadership

and believes that “the harder and more risky things are, the more you have to let go.”

## **What Should We Measure?**

In their small groups, participants explored the fundamental issue of measurement in an accountability system and discussed whether the accountability pillar currently being implemented by Alberta Education addresses what should be measured. Their discussion was facilitated by the two questions below. The discussion notes from the 20 groups consistently show concern about the emphasis on provincial testing and core academic learning to the detriment of other important measures and accountabilities. Participants felt that the current accountability system falls far short of what is needed.

## **Are we measuring the right things?**

(If not, list what we should be measuring.)

Participants’ responses to this question were similar to the following samples from the group recording sheets:

*—Not at the government level. A number of attributes mentioned in the first session are not measured adequately or at least given enough emphasis in the big accountability*

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FUTURES BEING BUILT

picture, that is, at the provincial level. We support the position expressed by Leithwood, the keynote speaker.

—Not measuring success for every student. The measures are too narrow and mechanical. Testing is being done to support the business plan, not the education plan.

—No, current measures tell you more about socio-economic status and the family circumstances of the students, not the performance of the system, school or teacher. Also, the measures are not telling parents and society what they want to know (safety, diversity and citizenship). The system is too preoccupied with measurement, surveys are flawed and tests are a snapshot.

—Academic knowledge is overmeasured. Measurements are largely provincial and proxy measures of what is really happening. Process skills are undermeasured. Largely classroom-based achievements are not valued. Happiness is not measured at all. Those things that can be most easily measured are overmeasured and overemphasized. The system is strongly biased toward equating high academic achievement with system success. This does not align with the province's needs.

—Too much of what schools are doing is being left out. Teachers' judgments of student learning are being left out. Tests have a limited scope. Their results are easily abused and misinterpreted in reporting.

### **How well are we being served by the current accountability system?**

The following samples selected from the group response sheets are representative of the views expressed by all groups:

—Under the current system, we know a lot about not much. What can be measured easily drives what is measured—which drives priorities. Generally a few skills are well evaluated, but are then taken as proxies for a wide range of outcomes. The current system

does not measure inputs at all. This lets government (which is responsible for several critical inputs) off the hook, while depriving the system of information essential for diagnosing the causes of outcomes and for developing effective interventions.

—(i) We need to extend or broaden our focus, such as evaluating a full range of outcomes (20). But how? (ii) Schools and school systems need to profile their accomplishments and improvements to their communities. (iii) Two-way accountability needs to be clearly delineated—supports and structure. (iv) The accountability system needs continual evaluation to remain relevant and responsive to student needs.

—We need to decentralize accountability and control. Local expectations must align with local measures and methods of measurement. We need to respect accountability processes undertaken by actors other than the provincial government. Classroom Assessment Materials Project (CAMP) provides a model for measuring learning processes, as well as outcomes, but attention must also be paid to developing teacher and school capacity.

### **How Do We Measure What Matters and Hold People Accountable?**

To address the issue of measuring what matters and holding people accountable, four people from different sectors of society were invited to speak about accountability and the challenges and successes they have experienced in their respective organizations. They each spoke for about 15 minutes in the following order. Approximately 30 minutes were provided for questions from the floor.

**Murray Lyle, Executive Director, Performance Measurement Group, Office of Budget and Management, Alberta Finance** spoke from the perspective of government on accountability. He outlined the *Government*

**HANDLE  
WITH CARE:  
FUTURES BEING BUILT**

*Accountability Act* and government's annual reporting of results in relation to the goals and desired outcomes set out in the business plans. Departments are expected to align their business plans with the government plan and the 20-year strategic plan. Standing Policy Committees approve the measures used by the departments. He pointed out that government finds it difficult to collect data on the effect of its decisions.

He outlined a number of challenges, acknowledging that, although the accountability framework has been in place for over 10 years, many areas for improvement remain. He noted that high-level-outcomes measures are not useful for making budgetary or day-to-day management decisions. They are not sensitive to change because long-term goals take years to accomplish. It is difficult to assess the effect of strategies on outcomes. Relationships are fundamental to success in any organization and it is necessary to be clear about who is accountable to whom. He also said that the data needs to be free of bias because the public is increasingly skeptical of such reporting. He said that government struggles with having the right measures, especially with how to measure the truly important goals. Government needs to work on the area of qualitative measures.

**Colleen Purdy, Senior Financial Officer, Capital Health Authority (CHA)** spoke about accountability in the health sector. She explained that Capital Health must address reporting outcomes set by Alberta Health and Wellness on access, quality,

healthy living, workforce planning and information management, but the CHA has indicators that look at processes, inputs, outcomes and outputs. The CHA thinks in terms of a "balanced score card," noting that outputs are not achieved in isolation. People who have a vested interest in a particular area of accountability are the ones who are developing the measures, and it is critical

that they believe that the measures are meaningful. Accountability is seen as a means of continuous improvement, not as a big stick. However, qualitative measures are important as well in ensuring that the system recognizes the uniqueness of each student.

**Colin Jackson, President, EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts in Calgary** noted that the arts community is engaged in the same conversation about accountability as

other sectors, often discussing the issues of responsibility and leadership. He expressed concern that we let the government measure efficiency with metrics that are strong on transparency, but that we don't request similar measurements for effectiveness. We fail to focus on making a difference in people's lives and building a robust and extraordinary community in the 21st century. We focus on efficiency measures because they are easy to do. Although efficiency measures are valuable for management purposes, they have little to do with what we are becoming as a people. Although measuring dropouts may be useful in an accountability system, we do not look at the number of students

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in school who are dying inside. As Jackson said, “Just because people show up at the theatre doesn’t mean that they are enjoying the experience and learning and growing.” A number of countries are using what Jackson calls “Buddhist economics”—looking at GDP measures in relation to public happiness. His sector in Calgary is interested in crosscultural, interdisciplinary and intergenerational collaboration measures.

**Jerry Handford, General Manager of Human Resources, Syncrude Canada** emphasized the importance of setting goals for improved results and building capacity for the future. The design of Syncrude’s accountability system includes outputs such as production costs, operating costs, environmental impacts and safety, but does not stop there. It also includes inputs and process-improvement measures. Handford acknowledged, however, that an effective accountability system remains elusive in practice. Still, this has not deterred Syncrude from continuing to work on the tough parts. According to Handford, it is important to define the required contribution of people at different levels of the system, and this is best done through an upfront agreement on the unique responsibilities of each player and what constitutes success. People should not be allowed to determine responsibilities and success on their own. Success, although difficult to define, should include capacity-building measures for improved employee

engagement and for creating an inclusive culture. The accountability framework should include measures for the quality of

the indicators, too. When Syncrude employees had difficulty assuming responsibility for things that were not within their area of control, Syncrude expanded their area of responsibility. A good accountability system aligns individual energy through collaboration and shared learning. Phenomenal results are then possible.

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### **Where Should We Go with Accountability?**

Participants discussed in their small groups the direction that accountability should take, considering that the current approach in

place since 1994 no longer serves students’ or society’s needs. The discussion notes from the 20 groups indicate remarkably similar responses to the three discussion questions below:

### **What is our preferred direction in accountability?**

Participants were provided with a diagram that represented four different perspectives on accountability in education arising from the interaction between administrative decisions that address system coherence and curricular decisions that address the integrity of learning programs. System coherence was shown as a vertical continuum and program integrity as a horizontal continuum. The two axes intersect at the middle, creating four quadrants that

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represent four distinctive ways of looking at accountability:

- Quadrant A represents sporadic accountability in the form of reporting on the outcomes of specific school or board projects or initiatives as needed.
- Quadrant B represents top-down, centrally imposed accountability that drives the system toward a limited set of specific outcomes.
- Quadrant C represents a centrally imposed accountability system that drives education toward a broad range of outcomes.
- Quadrant D represents shared leadership and accountability among education partners, long-term capacity building processes and assessment for learning.

Almost all of the groups indicated Quadrant D as the preferred model, largely because people at all levels of the education system would be fully engaged and contribute meaningfully in their respective areas of responsibility. Such an accountability system would result in increased capacity for all stakeholders and improved learning opportunities for students.

—*Quadrant D. Create supportive structures such as professional learning communities and collaborative, reciprocal processes that build shape and measure responsive programs. Figure out ways to engage students in learning.*

—*Move from Quadrants B and C to D. Some of the advantages of Quadrant D include sharing information and buy-in; an open, honest and transparent system; everyone*

*working in the same direction; shared accountability among organizations; and shared understanding of success. This would remove the accounting model of accountability from education and provide for a more horizontal structure, shared ownership and engagement. Less shaming and blaming would stop putting the highest-risk students out of the system. The only disadvantage is that openness and honesty are hard to achieve.*

—*Consensus on Quadrant D. We need to move from a culture of accountability to a culture of responsibility. Advantages of such a system are a common language and goals, shared responsibility and reciprocity. Disadvantages include the difficulty of working with factors external to the system. Also, some people may like the current accountability system because it supports exclusion and privilege. Government's preoccupation with numbers may be an excuse for not being in the field working and supporting education.*

**Almost all of the groups indicated Quadrant D as the preferred model. Quadrant D represents shared leadership and accountability among education partners, long-term capacity building processes and assessment for learning.**

### **How are students, parents, school and system administrators affected by your preferred quadrant?**

Participants responded in the following ways:

—*You could expect a higher level of engagement and collaboration on everyone's part. More people would become involved. There would be a cultural shift from disengagement to engagement. Empowerment and input would be valued and appreciated.*

—*You would need a flat hierarchical model characterized by ownership, shared commitment, empowerment and participant leadership. Students would be engaged in a*

*culture that supports their interests, challenges them to think and makes their learning relevant. This will help them learn important lifelong skills.*

*—You would see increased emphasis on professional development for all partners. Input from teachers would be valued. You would also see increased engagement in processes, a decrease in defensiveness, a focus on process and building bridges and solutions together. There would be more student involvement, and increased trust and shared responsibility in the system.*

### **How can we design an accountability system that honours all students?**

Participants described the following elements that would be needed in such a system:

*—You would need to use accountability mechanisms that support student success, such as moving away from paper-and-pencil tests to authentic performance assessments (portfolios), goal setting, self-evaluation and reflection. You would need to recognize student learning styles and programs, and assess accordingly.*

*—Measure important processes and outcomes. Three actions are needed: create a structure in the schools that leads to lifelong, relevant learning for students; place the support where it makes the greatest difference; and promote learning-centred leadership.*

*—Provide more chances and options as to how students are assessed, that is, does a one-size assessment measure fit all? For example, use performance-based testing or a portfolio instead of multiple choice. Assessment of learning should result in improved learning for students. The existing accountability measures are too narrow and should be broader based and include the other goals of schooling, such as citizenship. Put more trust in the professionalism of teachers.*

## **What Factors or Guiding Principles Would Help Us in Our Accountability Roles?**

A panel of six people representing the voices of key stakeholders in the education system spoke about the factors or guiding principles that should be the basis for a new accountability framework. Each panel member had 10 minutes to present their views. Their presentations sparked a lively response from symposium participants, who for about 40 minutes interacted with panel members, asking questions and offering additional ideas for consideration.

### **Kelly Lowry, School Trustee, Wolf Creek School Division**

opened the session with a reaffirmation of the important role education plays in helping students become loving, caring, active citizens, citing Lois Hole, who once said, “Caring about one another is more important than anything. Teach that.” Lowry said that we cannot measure caring on an achievement test, nor should we. As a trustee, it is her right and duty to question government decisions and to hold free and open dialogue with her constituents, even though the board of trustees is considered an arm of the government. She recounted discussions with government about the accountability pillar and wondered how useful it will be for improving learning and if it will only lead to comparing jurisdictions. She wondered why we do not trust teachers’ judgment or rely more on students’ success stories that do not include tests. She expressed concern about quantifying everything because data is used to compare schools, which undermines the goals of education.

**HANDLE  
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FUTURES BEING BUILT

**Susan O'Neil, Parent, Action for Education** spoke about the relationship between the parent and the teacher, and the critical importance of partnership and trust in the education of children. As a parent, she holds teachers accountable for four things: know my child, create an environment for success, challenge my child and respond to the best of your ability or find the expertise. When she compares her son's report card with the 20 student learning outcomes defined by Alberta Education, she sees a high correlation. This cannot be said about provincial measures. We need agreement about the level at which certain measures are used because provincial measures are not very helpful for assessing individual students. The district and the provincial government should be held accountable for the adequacy of resources and for the extent to which they have organized supportive environments for learning.

**Christine Romanko, Teacher, Elk Island Public Schools Regional Division** described the various aspects of her role as a teacher. A particular challenge is to prepare her students for a future that becomes harder and harder to predict every day. She said that she must gather and use valid and relevant information about each student, use current research to inform her practice and assess *for* learning to ensure that her students have every opportunity to learn. She must also prepare her students to write paper-and-pencil achievement tests because the results are reported and the success of her

school depends on how well they do. She described how provincial achievement test results can be misleading. Administration had created a smaller class to address low achievement scores in previous years. These students hated math and saw themselves as failures, so she worked hard with the students to build their self-esteem and their understanding of math. The students passed the math achievement test, which was a great achievement, and their attitudes toward math had improved as well. The test results, however, when viewed externally, appeared mediocre at best and did not reflect the teacher's and students' hard work, the students' attitudinal improvement or how much the students had gained. She said that it would be helpful to have valid and reliable information and an accountability system that is evaluated on an ongoing basis.

**When O'Neil compares her son's report card with the 20 student learning outcomes defined by Alberta Education, she sees a high correlation. This cannot be said about provincial measures.**

**Hans Smits, Associate Dean, Division of Teacher Preparation, University of Calgary** expressed concern that accountability becomes nothing more than a competition and a sorting mechanism when we focus too much on the results. Good can come from the accountability process, though, but we must look closely at the following: the extent to which the broader aims of education are fostered; a clear notion of what constitutes learning, especially in harder to measure areas like the joy of learning and citizenship; the perspectives of students and how they experience schools; and the expression of responsibility at all levels in the system. Smits pointed out the many laudable outcomes in curricula, such as in the new

social studies curriculum, which cannot be measured on a provincial test. He said that this presents a challenge for everyone in the system. We should focus on how we take up teaching practice and how we are responsible for the difficult outcomes. We should not be asking for more provincial testing.

**Barbara Gammon, Associate Superintendent, Palliser Regional Division and President of the College of School Superintendents** outlined four foundational principles in educational accountability. She pointed out the importance of goal compatibility with the values and beliefs of teachers and society.

Educators today often find themselves in conflict with provincial directions largely because of a lack of collaboration and dialogue in the system. She also described the importance of meaningful measures. Testing, which tends to narrow the curriculum, needs to be balanced with holistic models of assessment. We must go beyond the measurement of academic learning in the system to become a culture of learning and improvement. Most parents and teachers would agree that testing is necessary, but not sufficient. Statistics are insufficient because the story of success is what matters and what needs to be told. A third important principle is relational accountability. To develop mutual understanding and values in accountability, we need time to collaborate and seek clarity in language and format. We need to rebuild trust among the various stakeholders so that we can work

together effectively. More discussion from the bottom up and the top down would increase trust and reciprocity. Such capacity building strategies within the system would also improve student learning. A fourth principle is dedication to improving student outcomes on all the goals of education. We must also ensure that we are being inclusive of all students.

**Bob Garneau, Principal, Parkland School Division** outlined the elements of a good accountability system and placed consideration of students at the heart of the system. He spoke about the

complexity of addressing the needs and interests of students in his school because of the ever-changing context. He also spoke about the important role that parents play in the education of students and how students need their support and unconditional love to thrive. He pointed out that, although each of the partners has their specific roles and responsibilities, they do not work independently. It takes trust and integrity for the partners to work

together on accountability. We need to work together toward a shared understanding and commitment to key values that underlie an accountability system.

### **Are We on the Right Track?**

Participants discussed in their small groups the direction for improving educational accountability in Alberta, based on the seven principles proposed by the Alberta Teachers' Association in its *Accountability in Education Background*

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**HANDLE  
WITH CARE:  
FUTURES BEING BUILT**

*Paper.* Generally, the notes from the small groups indicated support for the principles, with some groups offering suggestions for improvement. The primary issue of concern was with implementation. Many of the groups wondered what a new accountability system guided by these principles would look like, and they offered specific ideas such as redefining the role of provincial testing in accountability, including qualitative measures, using teacher judgment, sharing accountability among the partners, using collaborative processes to engage the partners and recognizing local accountability processes. Many groups also expressed the necessity of focusing on change through a grassroots movement because Alberta Education seems unlikely to support the kind of improvements envisioned by symposium participants. Small group discussion focused on the following questions:

**Are the seven principles proposed by the Alberta Teachers' Association in its *Accountability in Education Background Paper* the right ones?**

(If not, list what we are missing or what needs to be changed.)

Participants' comments were similar to the following samples:

—*They are broad and general and we do not oppose them, but how they are implemented will determine if they are effective principles.*

*Principle 3 needs to include that data is used in a way that does no harm or has no negative effect on the outcomes. Overall, the principles are good and positive.*

**Many of the groups offered specific ideas such as redefining the role of provincial testing in accountability, including qualitative measures, using teacher judgment, sharing accountability among the partners, using collaborative processes to engage the partners and recognizing local accountability processes.**

—*Principle 1 is key. We must work toward this. There is some evidence, which even the speakers at this symposium felt, that the province has taken unilateral action.*

*Because all groups perceive that they have been left out, they fight for their own power. We need to work together.*

—*Principle 1: Respect and trust will come when common ground is stressed in terms of what is good for kids here and now and in the future. Ask "Who cares?" What are the different partners' agendas? Is accountability being used for the right things? Principle 2: Don't create more measurement. Principle 3: Discussions on this principle would be valuable for change. We need to discuss the alignment of purpose and*

*means, limitations of the data-collecting process and doing harm to the child's psyche. Principle 4: Research can be in a local context, also. We use research from other cultures and situations, not our own. Principle 5: Accountability right now equates to provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations. The teaching profession is seen to be anti-accountability when really they aren't. Teachers just have problems with the current provincial examinations and testing programs.*



## **Do you support mobilizing for change in educational accountability?**

(If yes, list actions that should be taken and who should take them.)

Participant responses included the following:

—*Yes. Perhaps meetings of parents and trustees with Conservative Party hopefuls to leverage their search for support would be helpful. There must be a concerted effort to convince Alberta Education that change needs to happen, and to let them know of the consensus that exists in this room. Maybe all parents need to exempt their kids from provincial achievement tests for one year. That would get movement from government. The Parkland Institute should undertake high-level research that can be presented to school boards and school councils on this issue as part of a concerted campaign. The work of this symposium needs to be disseminated broadly to the ATA membership and other supportive groups to get broad buy-in.*

—*Accountability has been imposed from above. The stakeholders need to take responsibility for the accountability system because it affects and is implemented by stakeholders. We must therefore continue to work together. School boards and districts have a special responsibility as elected representatives to participate and champion this process, together with the ATA and the universities.*

—*There is a huge disconnection between the Ministry, the profession and boards. The teaching profession is on the right track, but the profession needs the support of government. More detailed and diagnostic information from tests is needed to support teachers and school boards in instruction and to use for accountability. What political strategy can we use to get the attention of the provincial government and make a difference? Governmental accountability is never addressed, for example, in regard to sufficiency of funding. We need a report card on the government's performance. Can the Auditor General engage in such a process (without creating more tests)?*

## **REFERENCES**

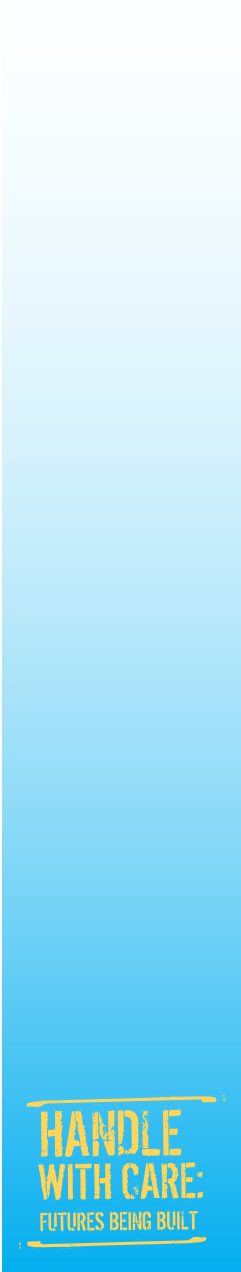
This statement of the proceedings of the *Handle With Care: Futures Being Built* symposium is a synthesis of the following records:

- DVDs that recorded the speeches and panel presentations, and questions and comments from the floor
- Discussion notes recorded by 20 small groups

Actual copies are available from the Alberta Teachers' Association, Barnett House, 11010 142 Street, Edmonton, Alberta T5N 2R1.

The attached Summary of Participants' Feedback contains comments recorded on the Participant Feedback forms.

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# Moderator's Summary

Catrin Owen, Calder Bateman Communications

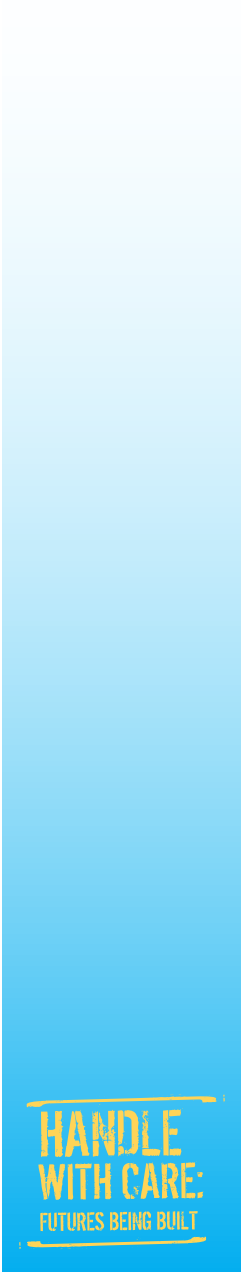


## Handle with Care: Futures Being Built

Invitational Symposium on Educational Accountability

2006 02 02-03, Fairmont Hotel Macdonald, Edmonton

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## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Catrin Owen, Calder Bateman Communications, as moderator, said the symposium marked only the beginning in a lengthy process of change toward an improved accountability system. She characterized the symposium as “one big think aloud” on a number of issues central to improving the system. Participants said that being educated is in many ways

about being a full, well-rounded, confident, compassionate member of society who loves to learn. Some participants said there must be a greater purpose to being in school than just scoring well on tests. We must commit to knowing our students as individuals instead of reducing them to statistics in the same way that the testing system reduces their learning. Participants talked about the risk and the harm of such a system. Participants didn’t want students to see themselves as failures of the system. There is an apparent appetite for depth and shared accountability, and information about inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes are all important but we must be clear about which aspects we measure and why.

Participants talked about the importance of trust—trusting children, professionals, parents, trustees and one another. Owen said that perhaps the biggest accomplishment of this symposium was fostering trust.

Her comments included the following:

*—We talked about what it means to be educated, and we determined in many ways and through a range of examples that it’s about*

*being a full, well-rounded, confident and compassionate member of society who loves to learn.*

*—We learned that each of us is the sum*

- of our scores, our headlines and our stories; or*
- our applause, our reviews and our stage fright.*

**Owen said that perhaps the biggest accomplishment of this symposium was fostering trust. She characterized the symposium as “one big think aloud” on a number of issues central to improving the system.**

*—We talked about how there has to be a greater purpose to being in school than just doing well on the tests.*

*—We have to commit to knowing our students as individuals and not to reduce them the way the testing system reduces their learning.*

*—We heard about the risk, the danger and the harm that can be perpetrated by an exam-driven system how it is key that students not see themselves as failures of our system.*

*—We heard throughout the symposium an intense appetite for depth—from teachers, parents and students.*

*—We learned from Panel 1 that there is a huge difference between imprints/processes/outputs and outcomes, and we need to be clear about which of these we measure and why.*

*—We heard about schools as hubs and switchboards, which further underscores the theme of collaboration and shared accountability.*

*—We heard about the importance of alignment between the 20 goals of basic education and a process of annual goal setting by students, parents and teachers—together.*

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—We talked about the importance of preparing students for an unpredictable future. They will need to be agile and brave to deal with the many unknowns that lie before them.

—We heard about how important it is to find meaningful ways to measure growth in student learning.

—We heard about the traditional one-sidedness of Western education and how it is key that we start listening on a provincial scale to the wisdom of students.

—We heard about the importance of trust:

- Trusting children
- Trusting parents
- Trusting professionals
- Trusting one another

—In many respects this was a forum for fostering trust, which we hope will continue as we work on this important topic.

She invited participants to share their observations and their thoughts about next steps. A number of participants spoke about the value of the symposium and how similar forums should be conducted in each community in Alberta. One participant commented on the disconnection between government's good intentions and what is actually happening in the province as a result of its accountability system.

## NEXT STEPS

Owen recommended the following:

—Participants want the discussion on accountability to continue and believe that it's important to identify where the political will for reform in education accountability lies.

—The ATA needs to be clear about how it will use the energy and enthusiasm expressed by those who want to continue to be involved.

—The sense from the Alberta Education staff who were present was that the current system is adequate and may only need some tweaking. The deputy minister was present at key points during the symposium and I recommend strategic follow-up with him. The outcome of the symposium should not be more testing.

—The leadership that the ATA demonstrated and the tone of collaboration that was set will be invaluable in moving this issue forward. Participants did not seem to question the authority that the teaching profession had in asking these important and provocative questions, and this unspoken permission to lead needs to be leveraged.

Owen closed the symposium by wishing participants a safe journey home and encouraging them to complete the Participant Feedback forms and the Expressions of Continuing Interest forms in their packages and to leave them at the registration desk.

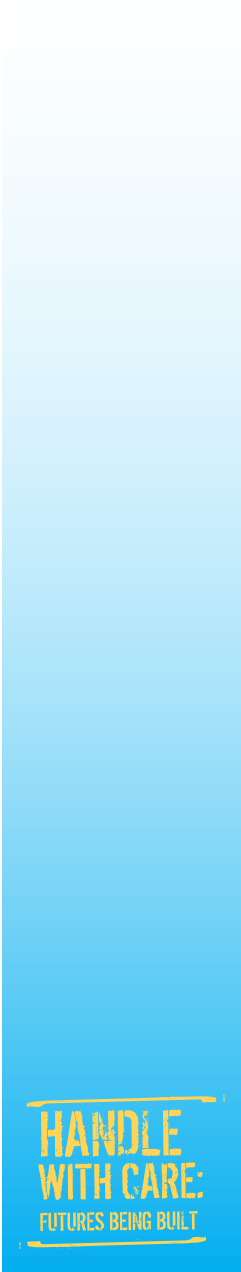
# Summary of Participant Feedback



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## PARTICIPANTS' FEEDBACK

1. A total of 95 out of 149 (63 per cent) participants turned in feedback sheets.
2. Based on participants' responses, the Association appears to have established recognition and appreciation of the teaching profession's leadership role in this area. The Association also achieved consensus that Alberta has a serious problem with its current accountability system and that students' futures are at stake. Participants also recognized that it matters that accountability measures are aligned with the goals of education and that the goals are broad, extend beyond the academic core and address the needs of all students.
3. Participants appreciated the mix of people at their discussion tables and enjoyed discussing this issue with other Albertans, not just educators. The process worked. It included a discussion on essential questions and a keynote speaker and panels, followed by small group discussion. Catrin Owen, who was an external moderator, was invaluable in helping the process work.
4. Summary of responses to each question:

**All respondents agreed (32 per cent) or strongly agreed (68 per cent) that they were pleased with the symposium program.**

Sample comments:

*—Well organized, deep in the way it facilitated thought.*

*—Excellent materials.*

*—Particularly liked how the representation of a variety of stakeholders as both listeners and presenters was honoured.*

*—Excellent work of the ATA to bring this about—professionalism incarnate.*

*—Sessions were excellent—Dr Leithwood's presentation was thought-provoking and challenged us to look at accountability in a new light.*

**All respondents agreed (18 per cent) or strongly agreed (82 per cent) that the symposium was engaging and thought-provoking.**

Sample comments:

*—The organization of the table groups was inspired. A superb mix of interests, experiences and points of view.*

*—Many people who didn't previously question accountability now understand it can be questioned and needs to be questioned.*

*—This was a profoundly thoughtful and reflective experience. Wonderful opportunity to hear the voices of panels of people from a variety of contexts and to converse in groups—a model of sound pedagogy.*

*—The ATA is to be commended for their initiative in starting the conversation on shaping our accountability framework*

*—As a trustee, I felt that many issues were touched upon—accountability, yes, but also questions of governance, clarity of task, the need to look for innovation and growth*

**Almost all respondents agreed (21 per cent) or strongly agreed (77 per cent) that they could express their ideas openly and ask questions freely. Only 2 per cent disagreed.**

Sample comments:

*—I felt safe and empowered in all discussions. Others, too, at my table were open and shared great insights.*

*—Our group had diverse backgrounds but respected each other and our opinions, eventually realizing that we all agreed.*

*—I was able to express my opinion. The one voice we did not hear is the one that says what is currently done is the right way and why.*

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**Not everyone was optimistic about the potential for improvement in accountability. 61 per cent of participants agreed and 19 per cent strongly agreed that there is potential for improvement, but 20 per cent disagreed.**

Sample comments:

*—Obvious consensus of thought and beliefs among participants. How will this become actualized in policy and practice?*

*—Concerns remain about government's willingness to incorporate change.*

*—The rep at our table from Alberta Education refused to see that there was a concern and thought the system was fine as it is.*

*—Accountability is on the right track now. There is a shift to increased support. What happens now requires the partners to come together to look at education and how accountability is clearly defined and agreed, such as AISI.*

**Almost all participants agreed (12 per cent) or strongly agreed (86 per cent) that they would like to see work on improving the accountability system continue. One participant did not.**

Sample comments:

*—Many people I have connected with over the last couple of days strongly expressed the need to continue and use what we have done here.*

*—My congratulations to the organizers. Best 1.5 days I have ever spent.*

*—I need to say thank you to the ATA for being a leader. Appreciate the opportunity for doing this.*

*—Very informative. Do more of this so that we can "THINK ALOUD."*

*—This symposium demonstrates the strength of the professional organization of the ATA.*