



The Alberta Teachers' Association

Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) Analysis of Curriculum Advisory Panel 2020 Recommendations on Direction for Curriculum

At First Glance

The following are key considerations from the Alberta Teachers' Association (the Association) in response to the Government of Alberta's Curriculum Advisory Panel recommendations on direction for curriculum (Report 2020-01-29: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/curriculum-advisory-panel-recommendations-on-direction-for-curriculum>).

The considerations below are organized under four areas of the Panel's report: Curriculum Development, Curriculum Content, Assessment and Draft Kindergarten to Grade 4 Curriculum. They reflect the Association's 2014 Declaration of Key Principles on Curriculum (www.teachers.ab.ca/News%20Room/ata%20news/Volume-48-2013-14/Number-14/Pages/ATA-declaration-of-key-principles.aspx).

Curriculum Development

- **The Association believes that in matters of designing programs of study, Alberta teachers must take the leading role.** While the directions provided in recommendations 6, 23 and 24 are potentially helpful, care must be taken to ensure against overly narrowing the curriculum or aligning it with particular interests at the expense of providing students with a broad and diverse educational experience. Teachers must be meaningfully engaged as the curriculum content is finalized.
- **The Association believes that curriculum implementation must be properly supported.** Ensuring appropriate and adequate resourcing and supports, within reasonable timelines, for both curriculum development and implementation (recommendations 1.1, 1.2, 1.3) is an important and positive direction. If curriculum implementation is to be successful, sustained professional learning opportunities and high-quality, current and context-based resources must be accessible to all teachers. Alberta teachers have historically been involved in the development, validation and field testing of curriculum in advance of full implementation, and would see this as a role into the future. Further to recommendation 1.3, teachers would support the development of a long-term plan for curriculum development and renewal.
- **It is of concern that “single stream course offerings” (recommendation 3), and the deletion of CALM (recommendation 10) may create even larger and more complex high school classrooms with fewer certificated teachers supporting student learning (recommendations 6, 23, 24).** The K–12 education system is currently under intense stress, with growing class sizes and increasingly complex classrooms lacking in resources and supports for inclusive learning; these recommendations would exacerbate these systemic challenges. Jurisdictions that have “single stream” course structures typically offer them within multiple, segregated schooling streams, an approach that actually reduces students'

choice by forcing them to commit early on to a schooling stream and making transfers between streams very difficult. In relation to the skilled trades and curriculum content, reference to the Germanic Model needs to be further deconstructed and analyzed for efficacy in the Alberta context. In particular, Alberta must guard against creating a two-tiered education system that would disadvantage individual students and, potentially, segments of the student population. We note that Canada's education system is recognized by the OECD for its contribution to promoting social and economic mobility. Canadian students' success in school, while definitely influenced by their socioeconomic status, is less dependent upon socioeconomic status than is typical in other countries.

- **Bringing students together at the high school level in “single stream course offerings” (recommendation 3), while also recommending that the system be divided into “dual structures” (recommendation 9.1) in order to develop the skilled trades, is a confusing and contradictory proposition.** In terms of vocational and academic pathways for student success, the Association has been supporting several Alberta public high schools over the past decade to explore and learn alongside high schools in Finland, where dual structures are well established and contributing to high quality learning opportunities, but within a unified school system. Indeed, these and many other Alberta high schools already offer multiple pathways for student success, including options facilitating entry into the skilled trades. Pulling the curriculum into a single stream at the high school level would limit choice for students and narrow pathways for student success. While the current structure honours differentiated needs of students and allows students to experience success at their own level, the proposed approach would encourage disparity of opportunity and outcome. It is also unclear how relegating different pathways to different schools would be a sustainable model in rural areas that lack the population to support multiple schooling models.
- **It is the responsibility of Alberta teachers to lead students to mastery of the curriculum and it is the responsibility of government and school boards to provide the resources and supports to teachers in their efforts to create great schools for all.** Throughout the panel's report, there is a lack of clarity as to who will fund and support the professional growth and development of teachers (recommendation 2) as curriculum is implemented across the system. More broadly, the Advisory Panel, in its repeated calls for “subject area expertise,” seems to be oblivious to the fact that, quite apart from content, teachers teach students. Teaching is a highly specialized skill, and teachers' input is essential if the curriculum is to be transformed from a litany of knowledge objectives to a viable model capable of supporting instruction.

Curriculum Content

- **Alberta teachers' professional judgment seems to be questioned in this report, especially in terms of a desire to examine teacher certification, professional learning and teacher education programming related to curriculum (recommendations 16, 17.7, 23, 24).** To what extent are teachers to be further marginalized by removing their autonomy over professional development, and is the government planning to allow noncertificated staff to deliver curriculum? Will these recommendations in practice dilute the integrity of the profession and undermine the current standards of teaching excellence in Alberta? Will teachers be required to seek recertification on an ongoing basis as suggested by the inclusion of the phrase “continued support for teachers” in recommendation 16? The unstated premises

underlying these recommendations remain unproven; what evidence is there that teachers cannot deliver curriculum or manage assessment?

- **The Association believes that business has a legitimate contribution to make, but that curriculum must address much more than short-term economic objectives.** The recommendations have a clear and strong focus on the workplace skills and development, trades, and financial literacy as a focus of new content (recommendations 8, 9, 10, 11). This signals that government intends to seek greater involvement of corporate and business interests to advance economic imperatives within future curriculum (recommendations 11, 25). Government should not lose sight of the fact that in a rapidly changing economy, the skills that appear most in demand today may not be those required in the future. In these circumstances, students and society are best served by an education system that can deliver a broad, challenging curriculum that fosters students' curiosity and creativity.
- **The Association believes that curriculum should allow room for inclusion, local innovation and adaptation.** The recommendation to develop a senior high school program of studies in world history (recommendation 14) should be referred to the ATA Social Studies Specialist Council for study and report. The potential relationship between a world history curriculum and the current social studies curriculum must be clarified with the understanding that social studies plays an important part in the preparation of students to be active citizens and participants in Canada's democracy. On a practical note, should an additional course in world history become a diploma requirement, students will be forced to forgo other coursework that might better meet their interests and long-term career goals. Similarly, the recommendations to narrow curricular focus to more literacy and numeracy outcomes (recommendations 21, 22) and to create standardized assessments for such (recommendation 17.2) require further consideration, including input from the Mathematics Specialist Council and English Language Arts Specialist Council.
- **It is of concern that there is a belief that "curriculum can be delivered in many ways beyond the classroom context" (recommendations 9, 9.2)** Students already partake in "volunteer activities" and "learn in the context of real-world experience" in schools across Alberta, when it is the student's choice to do so. Making this mandatory and relinquishing the teaching of curriculum to noncertificated individuals would have wide-reaching ramifications. The Advisory Panel is also rather naïve in assuming that this recommendation could be easily implemented. Supporting off-campus learning requires considerable planning and resources to ensure that students' experiences have educational value, to vet the qualifications and suitability of noncertificated persons not in the employ of the board, to provide supervision and instruction, to protect against potential exploitation of students, and to ensure the safety and security of minor students in the workplace environment. The logistics of transporting students and providing appropriate liaison with the school are additional challenges.

- **The Association agrees that Alberta’s education system should “ensure curriculum reflects the diversity of Alberta’s students” (recommendation 13), but notes that francophone perspectives are absent from the recommendations, even though they were considered by all curriculum working groups.** Francophone communities and histories play an important role in our province and country and in the lives of our students. It is important that they be incorporated into the provincial curriculum.

Assessment

- **The Association believes that assessment and evaluation must be consistent with the curriculum.** Evaluation and assessment are, first and foremost, the responsibility of the classroom teacher. They are an integral part of teaching and must directly reflect and reinforce student learning. It is important that assessment and evaluation engage a broad range of learning processes and skills in addition to testing content knowledge. Standardized testing, in particular, should be limited and focused on providing information that can inform teaching practice.

- **The assessment recommendations in the Advisory Panel report are generally regressive and not based on current best practices in the learning sciences.** The specific recommendations appear to be driven by a desire to deliver on a partisan agenda and undo the work of the previous Progressive Conservative and NDP governments that reflects extensive consultations with teachers and Albertans; for example:

- Differentiated weighting of diploma exams (recommendation 17.4)
- Moving away from formative assessment practices (recommendation 17.6)
- New emphasis on (mandatory) SLAs in Grades 1–5 (recommendation 17.2)

It is curious that the Panel, which so values preparing students for the world of work, should emphasize the expanded use of standardized tests when, by their very nature, these tests are unlike anything to be experienced outside a school setting. Modern business tends to value collaboration, cooperation, communication, inclusion, measured risk-taking and iterative improvement—approaches that are not measured by, and are indeed antithetical to, conventional standardized testing.

- **The designing of standardized “reports of student progress and achievement” (recommendation 17.6) is ambiguous in description and needs clarification.** Is this recommendation signalling a wholesale shift to provincial standardized report cards? Quite apart from undermining school board autonomy, the imposition of one-size-fits-all reporting may diminish the meaningfulness and effectiveness of reporting. Furthermore, the approaches to reporting that are often superficially attractive and simple often serve to obscure important context and issues relating to student progress and achievement.
- **Consistent with the Association’s interest in professional growth and development, enhancing teacher assessment skills across the system (recommendation 17.7) is an important area for resources and supports.** It is important that the goal of classroom-based assessment undertaken by teachers is not to replicate the results of standardized tests. Instead, such assessment provides an opportunity to measure student progress with respect to outcomes that do not lend themselves to typical standardized testing methodologies; to focus on specific outcomes with the goal of adjusting instructional approaches, content and pacing; to respond to the learning needs of individual students in real time; and to inform teachers’ professional practice.

Draft Kindergarten to Grade 4 (K–4) Curriculum

- As noted in the Minister’s press conference of 2020-01-29, the Curriculum Advisory Panel believed that existing draft K–4 curriculum had a “good foundation” and the frame is “strong.” The findings of the Panel debunk previous claims that the draft K–4 curriculum was shot through with ideological bias and fit only for the shredder. Furthermore, they validate the approach used by previous governments, which engaged the Association in a cooperative effort to recruit hundreds of classroom teachers to undertake drafting and validation of curriculum structure and content. It is hoped that with the completion of this phase of the Panel’s work the provincial government will proceed, with time being of the essence, to release the draft K–4 curriculum to Alberta teachers for validation and field testing.
- In terms of curricular content, there is strong emphasis on narrowing the K–4 outcomes to focus on core knowledge, streamlining and specificity that would go “back to the basics” in literacy, numeracy and history (recommendations 14, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24). Prioritizing foundational learning and integration of literacy and numeracy is an important component of the existing draft curriculum, as is the relevant coverage of historical narrative. Further narrowing curriculum objectives would do a disservice to students, as such direction risks undermining the mission of public education to develop the whole child through the study and practice of the fine arts and physical education.
- The introduction of a focus on the importance of Alberta’s “resource rich economic base in relation to the impact on the economy, families, services, and government” (recommendation 25) appears to be orienting the draft curriculum for children toward a particular direction or perspective. This should not be at the expense of a full consideration of legitimate and multiple perspectives. Teachers already adhere to the current Guide to Education, which outlines the protocol for addressing controversial issues in the classroom.
- “Examining the efficacy of cursive writing for student learning” is an area of interest to the focused development of fine motor skills and may require further investigation. Ongoing research on the effects of accelerated technological change within society identifies three distinct bottlenecks to automation: (1) fine motor manipulation and perception, (2) creative intelligence and (3) social intelligence. Whether it is fine motor skills through cursive writing or by other means within the curriculum, we should pay attention to how our new Alberta curriculum will be responsive to the future for our children and youth.
- The Curriculum Advisory Panel is to be commended for its understanding of the need to keep curriculum and pedagogical practices separate (recommendation 20) even if the example the Panel provides, “discovery math,” is irrelevant as the draft curriculum makes no mention of the approach, let alone mandating it. Honouring teachers’ professional judgment in matters of instructional design and process is essential, particularly if the teacher is to be empowered to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of individual students. Fundamentally, curriculum should be about what is to be taught, not about how a particular curriculum outcome should be taught.