



## There is a better way

Your Association shares your professional commitment to educational accountability. Public education is made possible through public funding and the public has every right to expect accountability for public spending. In September, 2004, the Association initiated a province-wide consultation that focused on alternatives to the current *Accountability Pillar*. In February 2006, the symposium *Handle with Care: Futures Being Built* brought together a cross-section of 150 Albertans to examine accountability processes that would support teaching and learning and at the same time provide needed information to parents, communities and government.

Working with education partners, your Association has developed a better approach to education accountability outlined in its *Education Accountability* discussion paper. This paper, which has been shared with education partners, identifies the limitations of the current approach to accountability but more importantly, outlines principles for a better approach that focuses on:

- Reporting to parents and communities in meaningful and informative ways
- Building the capacity of schools to support teaching and learning in order to better meet the learning needs of all students
- Assess the full range of learning outcomes fundamental to creating engaged and productive citizens
- Recognizing the respective roles and responsibilities of the education partners (e.g. teachers, parents, school boards, government)

## You can help make a difference

You can make an important contribution as the Association continues its efforts to engage provincial education partners in discussions related to the *Accountability Pillar* and the government's current approach to educational accountability:

- Help take back Alberta's classrooms from the government's testing and data collection bureaucracy. Draw the public's attention to the millions of dollars wasted on misplaced priorities such as Grade Level of Achievement Reporting and Computer Adaptive Assessment that squander scarce resources and does little to help students.
- Provide parents with copies of *Getting to the Heart of Learning: A Parent Guide to Reporting Student Progress* – a brochure, available at no cost from the Association, outlining the profession's view of quality assessment and evaluation of student learning.
- Celebrate the multiple ways that school-based assessments demonstrate the power of teachers' professional judgment through student performances, meet the teacher-nights and innovative projects such as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement.
- Understand the limitations of provincial testing programs compared to teachers' ongoing classroom assessments of student learning.
- Continue to improve your student assessment and reporting practices by participating in ongoing professional development offered by the Association and other PD providers.
- Share with parent councils up-to-date policies and practices in assessment. The publication *Student Assessment and Evaluation: The Teaching Profession's View* is a good starting point.

For further information about assessment and testing, contact:



**The Alberta Teachers' Association**

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**TEACHERS AND EDUCATIONAL  
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## The government's education accountability system is flawed

The current reporting requirements for school authorities in the *Accountability Pillar*, represents a patch-work of incomplete measures and indicators of school and jurisdiction performance. Consider that:

- jurisdiction performance in terms of “Student Learning Achievement” relies entirely on provincial achievement tests and diploma examination results in a few core subjects, and
- teacher determined marks are not included in the current *Accountability Pillar* despite the legislated authority in the School Act recognizing teachers’ responsibility to assess and respond to the learning needs of students.
- the consequences of high-stakes testing have been devastating for students. Consider the average mark for first-time admission at the University of Alberta in 2004 was 83.2%, up from 65% 20 years ago. There is nothing standard about the standards for access to post-secondary education.

A major limitation with the government’s accountability system is the narrow focus on a few academic subjects. This results in the marginalization of many very capable students whose learning needs are not being addressed.<sup>1</sup>

- 25% of Alberta students entering grade 10 do not complete high school within five years, with only 43% of graduates heading to postsecondary institutions – the lowest among the Canadian provinces.

## Myths about Alberta's current approach to educational accountability

### MYTH 1

**All the time and money spent on standardized testing programs has paid off because Alberta students are near the top internationally.**

- While it is true that our students do well on international tests, when factors such as measurement and sampling error, family background, and school contexts are considered, Alberta’s ranking drops considerably. After examining the results of the Program for International Student Assessment for 15-year-olds, analysts found that Alberta’s performance was actually fifth rather than first in Canada.<sup>2</sup> This confirms what the research consistently shows: that 70% of the variation in student learning is not attributable to school factors but to student, family, and community characteristics.<sup>3</sup>
- The Alberta government’s current approach to educational accountability is the most centrally managed regime in Canada.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite the millions of dollars pumped into its data collection and management bureaucracy, there is no evidence that these efforts actually help students.

### MYTH 2

**The use of centrally administered provincial testing programs helps to improve the performance of students, schools and school jurisdictions.**

- Only portions of six of the 20 student learning outcomes stated in Alberta Education’s Guide to Education (Alberta Learning 1997) can be measured on a paper-and-pencil test. Provincial assessments cannot measure such areas as students’ ability to “speak clearly, accurately, and appropriately for the context,” “manage time and other resources to complete a task,” “demonstrate initiative, leadership, flexibility, and persistence” or “have the desire and realize the need for lifelong learning.”



- Only one-third of the student learning outcomes can be assessed on provincial tests, yet these continue to be the central focus of government’s accountability measures of student learning.

### MYTH 3

**The current approach to accountability builds the capacity of schools to respond to the learning needs of students.**

- In Alberta’s cash-strapped schools, teachers work hard to help students in today’s increasingly complex and diverse classrooms. However, in 2006, 38.8% of teachers reported that support for special needs students worsened, while only 13.8% said there had been some improvement.
- The current approach to accountability, focusing on narrow accountability measures, drives teaching and learning in the wrong direction. Amid growing demands to provide more information to government, teachers report spending less time focused on instructional requirements. In 2006, 44.5% of teachers had a dramatic increase in clerical and other non-instructional assignments.

1 Alan King, an education policy analyst at Queen’s University, cited in Schmidt, S. 2005. “Quest for Excellence Leaves Some Students Out.” National Post, February 3.

2 Wilms, D. J. 2004. “Variation in Literacy Skills among Canadian Provinces: Findings from the OECD PISA.” Statistics Canada. www.statcan.ca.

3 Ungerleider, C. 2006. “Reflections on the use of large-scale student assessment for improving student success.” Canadian Journal of Education 29: 873-883.

4 Lessard, C. and Brassard, A. 2005. “Educational Governance in Canada: Trends and Significance.” American Educational Research Association, Montreal.

