



FESTIVE FILM FINESSE CONTEST

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Embrace diversity during holiday season and beyond

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ATA NEWS

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Season's Greetings

Colleagues,

The ATA News team wishes you a joyful and restful holiday season. We hope you're able to experience a meaningful break and engage in pursuits that are enjoyable for you. Your dedication and professionalism makes us proud to be associated with the teaching profession. See you in 2024.

Jonathan Teghtmeyer
ATA News Editor-in Chief

ISTOCK



Big challenges ahead

We need to organize to manage the issues that will come in the new year.

[See Editorial on page 2.](#)

New funding does not address class sizes

ATA president says school boards remain underfunded and unable to hire enough staff.

[See story on page 5.](#)



Off Script

Our struggles are not unique.

[See page 7.](#)



Success Stories

Teacher takes subbing to the opera stage.

[See story on page 7.](#)



Rocky View teachers authorize strike vote

Members feeling disrespected and devalued by their employer.

[See story on page 4.](#)

Organizing needed to meet upcoming challenges



EDITORIAL

Jonathan Teghtmeyer
ATA News Editor-in-Chief

There are no doubts about the number of significant challenges facing public education and teachers in Alberta.

We, at the ATA, have remarked regularly about the dismal state of funding and its impacts on classrooms. There is no need to tell teachers about how large class sizes have become and how complex the needs and demands of those classrooms are. Teachers know this first-hand.

To put it plainly, we have the lowest funded public education system and the largest and most complex classrooms in the country.

At the same time as these critical issues go unaddressed, schools are increasingly under attack as part of an agenda to undermine confidence in public education by spreading misinformation and stoking fear.

Recently, a group dominated by home schoolers and private school interests has found a lot of success in organizing around these issues. Take Back Alberta recently completed a takeover of the UCP board of directors and swept through a rash of policy positions at the UCP AGM.

Now that group has its sights set on taking over school boards in the 2025 elections.

Despite these concerns, I want you to know that there is some hope.

The ATA, as reported in the Oct. 31 issue of the *ATA News*, conducted public opinion research that shows the general public is on our side.

Albertans view class size, curriculum and funding as top issues in education. They believe (68 per cent of poll respondents) that Alberta is not spending enough on public education. They believe (72 per cent) that class sizes are too big, and they are five times more likely to say that teachers are paid too little compared to saying that teachers are paid too much.

We have significant challenges in the not-so-distant future. We must address

class size and class complexity. We must tackle the teacher recruitment and retention issues that are increasingly becoming a crisis. We will enter into central table bargaining shortly, and the school board elections are quickly approaching.

So, what needs to happen for us to be prepared to face these challenges? We need teachers to be engaged, well informed and ready to take a stand for public education. In order to get there, the ATA — through its various leaders at all levels — needs to get out and talk with teachers.

This work is what we refer to as organizing. Organizing is a way of working to bring people together to achieve common goals. It involves bringing people together in sufficient numbers and with enough coherence to have the power to make things happen. And it starts with face-to-face conversations.

Starting in the new year, ATA locals will begin holding face-to-face meetings in schools across the province to talk about issues important

to us. In some cases, the conversation will focus on the bargaining process and talking about why collective bargaining is important and what the role of individual teachers is in supporting the work of bargaining. In other cases, the conversation will focus on key issues like education funding and class size and complexity.

As these conversations proceed, we hope to progress from a state of member understanding to a state of member engagement and mobilization, a state where members turn out in strong numbers to vote on contracts and take the actions necessary to win on issues.

Keep your eye out for more information from your ATA local on these upcoming meetings and do your best to attend when they come to your school.

Success with these efforts is not just important, it is essential. And success is possible when our members are engaged and mobilized. ■

I welcome your comments. Contact me at jonathan.teghtmeyer@ata.ab.ca

Cashing out requires careful consideration



Q & A

Dennis Theobald
ATA Executive Secretary

Question: I think I'm about five or 10 years away from retiring, but I've decided to quit teaching. Would it make sense for me to pull my pension funds out now?

Answer: It is a hard time to be a teacher, and I understand and respect the decision of some to leave the profession earlier than they might have expected. One aspect of the decision involves how to manage one's accumulated pension. If you haven't turned 55 yet, you may be eligible to withdraw the commuted value of your pension as benefit if you terminate your employment contract. Whether this is a smart idea is a different question.

I cannot stress enough the importance of getting good, personalized advice from a knowledgeable, qualified source before making what might well be an irrevocable decision. You should start by speaking to a staff officer with the Association's Teacher Employment Services and a pension advisor with the Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund. These folks have no personal financial interest in whatever decision you eventually make — their job is to

ensure that you are equipped to make an informed decision and are fully aware of its consequences.

You may also want to consult with a financial advisor. Selecting one can be a bit challenging as the title is largely unregulated and there is no shortage of individuals offering their services on YouTube, through flyers and online ads or by word of mouth. I suggest that you look to engage a "for-fee" advisor, someone you pay up front to analyse your entire financial situation, help clarify your objectives, and set out some options and strategies for you. They do not stand to gain commissions from selling you financial products or fees for managing your money going forward, and so they are more likely to offer unbiased advice.

As you consider your options, there are some questions you and your advisors will have to consider.

Are you certain you are leaving teaching permanently?

If you are looking to take a break and come back or are not entirely certain what your future may be, leaving your pension in place and deferring a decision would likely be the better option. If you pick up another line of work, you may have the option of transferring your pension accrual to a new plan.

How are you planning to support yourself as you age?

Your teachers' pension will pay you

benefits for the entirety of your life and, even after your death, to your pension partner. If you do not have a pension partner, you can choose to have payments made to your named beneficiaries should you die before a specified guarantee period has ended. This is particularly important as the life span of people currently alive who will be receiving pension benefits is likely to extend well into the 90s.

How able are you to manage market fluctuations and risk?

The teachers' pension plan is a "defined benefit" plan backed by the plan itself and the Government of Alberta, meaning that the payments made are not subject to the ups and downs of the investment market in an uncertain world. Furthermore, benefits are protected from inflation, with a 70 per cent cost-of-living adjustment for all post 1992 service earned. So if inflation in a year was 10 per cent, your benefit would be automatically increased by seven per cent. The adjustment for all service up to and including 1992 is 60 per cent. Such solid guarantees are virtually impossible for a casual independent investor to obtain for themselves at a reasonable cost.

What are the tax implications of cashing out your pension?

A portion of the commuted value must be transferred directly to a

locked in retirement account (LIRA) as per the *Alberta Employment Pension Plans Act*, and the remaining portion must be paid in cash and is fully taxable in the year it is paid out. This will be a substantial hit that would otherwise be avoided if you were to remain in the plan and receive benefit payments.

Are you facing pressure from debt?

Apart from adding to your problems the tax hit already mentioned, there are better ways to manage debt than by cashing out your pension. The funds in your pension plan are protected in any bankruptcy proceeding; however, once they are paid out, they can be seized by your creditors. There are services, some not-for-profit, to help you identify how best to manage your debts and those coming after you for payment.

While there are some unusual circumstances where cashing out a pension makes sense, in most cases this is something that teachers should undertake very reluctantly and with eyes wide open. Again, if you are considering this option, call us first for advice and support. ■

Questions for consideration in this column are welcome. Please address them to Dennis Theobald at dennis.theobald@ata.ab.ca.



Embrace diversity during holiday season and beyond



VIEWPOINTS

Youssra Badr
Special to the ATA News

The December holiday season is a time of joy and celebration. As teachers, it's crucial to approach this period with sensitivity and inclusivity, recognizing that students bring a rich tapestry of cultural and religious backgrounds, each with its unique traditions and celebrations. Teachers play a pivotal role in cultivating an environment that respects and embraces this diversity, ensuring that every student feels included, regardless of their personal holiday practices.

Creating a diverse and inclusive learning environment is not a seasonal endeavour; it's a year-round commitment that lays the foundation for understanding, empathy and respect. Here are some tips for teachers to keep in mind.

Foster a culture of respect

Teach students the importance of respecting each other's beliefs and traditions. Discuss the value of diversity and inclusion, emphasizing that differences should be celebrated.

Diversify your lessons

Integrate diverse perspectives into your lessons throughout the academic year. Incorporate literature, historical events and cultural studies that represent a wide array of traditions and celebrations. This approach not only broadens students' understanding but also reinforces the idea that every culture is valued.

Acknowledge and celebrate diversity

Start by acknowledging the diverse backgrounds and traditions present in your classroom all year round. Encourage students to share their cultural practices, traditions and celebrations. Use this as an opportunity to teach students about the rich cultures that exist in their classroom.

Incorporate a variety of traditions

Rather than focusing solely on one set of holiday traditions, incorporate a variety of celebrations from different cultures and religions. Explore the customs associated with a wide variety of festivals celebrated around the world. This approach not only broadens students' cultural awareness but also demonstrates that no single celebration is more important than another.

Create inclusive decorations and activities

When decorating the classroom, prioritize diverse symbols and imagery to represent a range of traditions, avoiding a focus on one cultural or religious theme.

While the presence of holiday decorations, like a Christmas tree, don't inherently exclude students, it's crucial to address the absence of representation for other cultural celebrations. Strive for a genuinely inclusive atmosphere by incorporating diverse holiday traditions.

Representation matters

Equity in holiday celebrations is vital. If effort is invested in decorating for one holiday, extend the same consideration to others throughout the year. Maintain consistency to avoid prioritizing one over another. Consider creating a "holiday corner" with decorations representing various celebrations.

Inclusive language

Refrain from only using terms that exclusively link celebrations to one cultural or religious context. Employ language that encompasses the diverse festivities observed by students throughout the year. While it's perfectly fine to wish students a Merry Christmas, broaden your approach by acknowledging and inquiring about other holiday greetings in December and throughout the year. Encourage students to learn varied greetings.

Be sensitive to student differences

Recognize that not all students celebrate holidays, and some may not observe any festivities during December. Create an inclusive atmosphere by acknowledging and respecting these differences.

Encourage open communication and let students know that their beliefs, or lack thereof, are valid and respected in the classroom.

Recognize and address holiday challenges

Acknowledge that the holiday season can be challenging for some students. While many look forward to festivities, others may find this time emotionally difficult for various reasons. Be attuned to signs of distress and provide support as needed.

Incorporate discussions about empathy and understanding, reminding students to be mindful of their peers who may be facing challenges during the holidays. Encourage a compassionate classroom community that extends kindness and support.

Encourage empathy

Promote empathy by discussing the various ways people celebrate or choose not to celebrate during the holiday season. Foster an environment where students can ask questions, share their experiences and learn from one another.

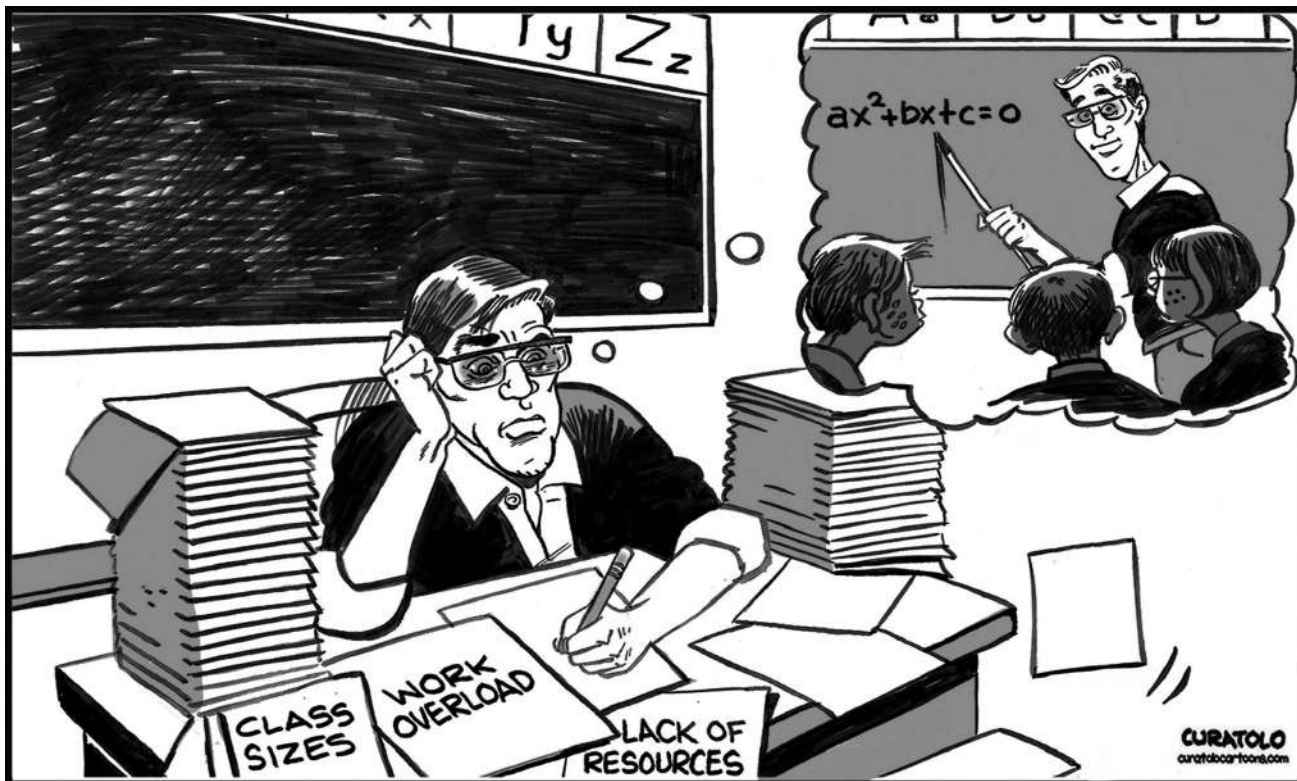
Year-round commitment

While the December holiday season may highlight the importance of fostering diversity and inclusion, these principles should be incorporated into the classroom culture throughout the entire year. Integrate diverse perspectives into the curriculum, celebrate various cultural events and consistently reinforce the value of inclusivity.

Creating a diverse and inclusive classroom during the holiday season involves actively acknowledging, respecting and celebrating the varied traditions and beliefs of students. By fostering a year-round environment that values diversity, educators contribute to a culture of understanding, acceptance and empathy extending beyond the holidays.

This holistic perspective makes inclusivity a core educational value, transcending cultural boundaries and fostering unity among students. ■

A former member of the ATA's Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Committee, Youssra Badr currently serves on the Teacher Education and Certification Committee.



YOUR VIEWS

ON X

Ms. Lutzmann @MsLutzmann

I know this is crazy but what if we funded schools at the start of the year, not in the middle of it? Piecemeal supports mid-year do little to make up for underfunded opening months.

Alberta Teacher @Abunderhiseye

It is becoming the norm to see job postings in Alberta for classroom supervisors. My rural school has a list of 17 subs available. Five years ago we had three pages full of sub contacts.

The Pulse YYC @Thepulseyycc

There is currently an anti-LGBTQ2IS+ group in and around #Airdrie called "Grandparents on Guard" trying to get our school board to ban books from school libraries and to stop "teaching gender ideology." This is Alberta in 2023.

Alberta Parents' Union @ABParentsUnion

We were pleased to have an opportunity to discuss with Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides a potential policy on name and pronoun changes in schools and a fresh opportunity we see to expand choice in education.

Letters to the editor: We welcome letters to the editor. Please limit your submission to 300 words. Only letters bearing a first and last name, address and daytime telephone number will be considered for publication. Teachers are also asked to indicate where and what they teach. All letters are subject to editing for length, clarity, punctuation, spelling and grammar. Email managing editor Cory Hare: cory.hare@ata.ab.ca.

FOR THE RECORD

“ Alberta’s government will always make thorough and evidence-based decisions to keep moving Alberta forward. ”

– Tweet by Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides in response to NDP criticism about the defeat of Bill 202, which called for the return of tracking class size data.

Opinions expressed on this page represent the views of the individual writers and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

Rocky View teachers authorize strike vote

ATA News Staff

Teachers employed by the Rocky View School Division have voted 99.6 per cent in favour of authorizing the Alberta Teachers' Association to request a government-supervised strike vote.

This action followed the rejection of a proposal by a third-party mediator to settle local negotiations in Rocky View. Teachers who gathered at the meeting held Nov. 26 voted 98 per cent in opposition to the mediator's recommendations.

"Teachers at Sunday's meeting voted to send a clear message: this settlement package is completely unacceptable and Rocky View trustees must return to the table with an intent to bargain and to improve the settlement offer," said Amrit Rai Nannan, president of Rocky View Local No. 35.

School board negotiators have previously told the ATA that the



trustees were done negotiating and that they would not be returning to the table if the mediator's terms were turned down. Teachers at the meeting were upset by the board's take-it-or-leave-it ultimatum.

Rai Nannan said teachers are feeling disrespected and devalued by their employer. Outstanding issues include working conditions for online teachers, compensation for school administrators and recognition for long service.

If bargaining does not resume, the mediator will "write out" of the dispute, kicking off a two-week cooling off period. After the cooling off period, the ATA would be able to hold a strike

vote with teachers in Rocky View School Division.

"Teachers are being left with no options," Nannan said. "We are feeling extremely disrespected, and we are not prepared to take an inferior offer just because the board refuses to listen to teacher concerns. The board is telling us to settle for an inadequate agreement or go on strike, but we refuse to be coerced."

The Rocky View School Division employs approximately 1,700 contracted and substitute teachers in public schools in Airdrie, Chestermere, Cochrane, Crossfield, Springbank and surrounding areas. ■

The bargaining process

Collective bargaining for teachers in Alberta is a two-phase process where matters of significant cost and broad impact are negotiated at a central table. This central bargaining is followed by local negotiations on other more locally specific matters. These negotiations take place between individual school divisions and ATA bargaining units.

Forty-six of 61 school divisions have already concluded local bargaining for this round, whereas teachers in Rocky View have been working without a finalised collective agreement since September of 2020.

BARGAINING NOTES

Strikes continue in Quebec

ATA News Staff

In Quebec, public sector unions representing education and health-care workers will hold another strike in December after walking off the job for three days in November.

Contract talks have stalled, leading to the widespread strike affecting around 600,000 public sector employees. The Front Commun, comprising 420,000 workers, held a three-day strike impacting elementary and high school teachers, school support staff and health-care workers.

Simultaneously, the Fédération Autonome de l'Enseignement (FAE), representing a different contingent of 65,000 teachers, launched an indefinite strike at the end of November.

The strikes are in response to Quebec's latest contract offer, viewed by unions as insufficient to address critical issues in schools and hospitals.

Unions representing Quebec teachers have highlighted the urgent need for the provincial government to address severe staff shortages. A recent report

revealed up to 5,000 teaching positions were vacant ahead of the school year, prompting a joint plea from labour leaders for better support for school employees.

The FAE, representing 34 Quebec teachers' unions, emphasized the unmanageable conditions in classrooms, attributing the challenges to decades of neglect by successive governments. Teachers argue that negotiations should prioritize classroom conditions to retain and recruit educators.

Education Minister Bernard Drainville said he aims to have one adult in each classroom, while acknowledging the challenge of finding enough qualified teachers.

Steven Le Sueur, president of the Quebec Professional Association of Teachers, expressed concern over this approach, emphasizing the need for improved working conditions to address the root cause of staff shortages. He highlighted the lack of support for special needs and at-risk students, contributing to a crisis in the education sector and diminishing the attractiveness of the teaching profession. ■

Newfoundland teachers reach tentative agreement

ATA News Staff

The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association has reached a tentative agreement with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Newfoundland and Labrador School Boards Association on a new collective agreement for teachers.

"The retention and recruitment of qualified teachers and the overall integrity of the public K-12 school system relies heavily on a collective agreement that supports NLTA members and is responsive to conditions impacting working and learning conditions in our schools," said Trent Langdon, president of the

Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association.

"Over the next several weeks, teachers in the public K-12 education system in this province will consider the details of our tentative agreement. We look forward to the possible ratification of an agreement which will allow us to continue to concentrate on providing outstanding education to the students of this province."

Details of the tentative agreement will be presented to teachers in the coming weeks. No other information will be released until teachers have been fully briefed on the contents of the tentative collective agreement. A vote on the tentative collective agreement is scheduled to take place from December 5 to 7. ■

Sask teachers navigate impasse

STF fighting to address class size and composition

Kim Clement
ATA News Staff

The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) is hoping the conciliation process can resolve its current deadlock with the provincial government around contract negotiations.

"We are united, we are prepared, and we are ready to fight for our colleagues, our students, and the families who are struggling in underfunded and under-resourced public schools across Saskatchewan," said STF president Samantha Becotte to CTV News in November.

In October, more than 95 per cent of Saskatchewan teachers voted in favour of potential job actions up to and including a strike. The outcome empowers the STF executive to consider sanctions if deemed necessary between now and June 30, 2024.

The STF had declared an impasse in negotiations, pointing to the government's rejection of nine out of 10 teacher proposals, specifically regarding classroom size and composition.

As the impasse in contract negotiations persists, the STF and the provincial government have entered the conciliation process, aiming to bridge the gap in their ongoing negotiations.

"We do not want to be in this position, but government's disrespect toward teachers, their bad faith bargaining tactics and their intransigence — not just through the bargaining process, but their continued refusal to make students and public education a priority — has forced us into our current path," Becotte said.

The STF has been adamant about including issues of class size and class complexity in a new collective agreement. However, the province contends that school divisions are best suited to manage these aspects, citing feedback from the 27 school divisions. Education Minister Jeremy Cockrill reiterated this stance in October,

emphasizing that it's not a term they are seeking in a bargaining agreement.

With the conciliation process in motion, Becotte reiterated the STF's willingness to return to the negotiating table for meaningful discussions. The key condition is the government's commitment to address the pressing issues of class size and complexity.

Becotte highlighted the success of four "mini rallies" held outside the constituency offices of certain cabinet members, attributing the remarkable turnout to public awareness of the vital role of public education and acknowledgment of the challenges stemming from years of underfunding in Saskatchewan. ■

HER WORDS

Samantha Becotte, President of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation:

"We have had nine days at the table. We've had hours of presentations, hundreds of pages of research, and countless testimonials from teachers about their experiences in schools, but through all of this, the government has not moved from its original position."

— CBC.ca

"We're hopeful that the conciliation process will be successful. But the results of this vote send a very clear message. We are united, we are prepared and we are ready to fight for our colleagues, our students, and the families who are struggling in underfunded and under-resourced public schools across Saskatchewan."

"Teachers want to negotiate a fair deal at the bargaining table. I want our government to finally listen to what teachers are telling them with this vote: Enough is enough."

— CTV.ca

New funding does not solve large class size problem

ATA president says school boards remain underfunded and unable to hire enough staff

ATA News Staff

A funding boost recently announced by the government is welcome but is not nearly enough to address Alberta's class size crisis, says ATA president Jason Schilling.

"By adding students without funding school boards to hire enough teachers and other support staff, it is guaranteed that class sizes and classroom conditions will just continue to worsen," he said. "While any injection of funding to schools is appreciated, today's announcement falls well short of what's required to improve conditions in schools. In fact, this announcement does not even stop the situation from getting worse."

School boards will receive \$1,500 per student for actual enrolment growth between zero and 100 students and \$2,000 per student for growth exceeding 100 students.

The funding will be allocated in December through the supplemental enrolment growth grant. For 2023-24, the grant has been changed so all school boards experiencing growth will receive student funding. Previously, only school boards with enrolment growth of more than two per cent were eligible for the grant. Funding will be allocated based on the previous school year or the revised formula, whichever option offers more funding.

"Alberta continues to attract people from across Canada and around the world. We've seen many newcomers to Alberta in recent months, meaning more kids registering in our schools," said Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides. "We know schools are facing enrolment pressures, so we are providing school authorities with more funding to better support schools and students."

Schilling agrees this year's growth in student enrolment is unprecedented. Estimates from school boards suggest enrolment will be up by at least

20,000 students over last year. Yet school boards are short about \$135 million this year because the province will not fully fund these students, Schilling said.

He pointed out that the Alberta government had an \$11.6 billion surplus last year and is projecting a \$5.5 billion surplus this year.

"The government has the money; it just needs the political will," Schilling said.

He suggested that Albertans want to spend more on public education, as public opinion polling shows 68 per cent of Albertans believe the province is not spending enough on public education, and 72 per cent of Albertans feel class sizes are too large.

"Why are we choosing to continue to cut the level of per-pupil funding when we already have the lowest funded public education system in Canada?" Schilling said. "This funding is obviously welcome, but it is nowhere near enough. Alberta's students deserve better." ■

Bill calling for return of class size reporting defeated

ATA News Staff

Don't expect to see reporting of Alberta's class size data returning anytime soon.

The Alberta legislature recently defeated a private member's bill that would have resumed the practice of publicly reporting class size data. The Government of Alberta ended this practice nearly five years ago, in 2019, when data was showing years of unprecedented growth in Alberta class sizes.

Bill 202, the *Education (Class Size and Composition) Amendment Act*, called for the annual reporting of class size and composition data; the establishment of provincial standards for class size and composition; and the establishment of a commission on learning excellence to look at class size, composition and other educational issues.

The bill was sponsored by Amanda Chapman, the NDP MLA for Calgary-Beddington.

"Alberta is growing, and that growth needs to be accommodated in our schools," Chapman said during debate in the legislature.

While class size funding is no longer reported, tracking of employment levels shows that the hiring of teachers in recent years has failed to keep up with rapid student population growth. Over the past five years (2018 to the last school year), enrolment rose by 25,000 students. Another 20,000 students are expected to be in schools this year. A return of provincewide class size data reporting would provide a clearer picture of the effect increased enrolment is having on Alberta schools, teachers and students.

"This government needs to let the sun shine in," Chapman said, "and let Albertans see what is really happening in Alberta classrooms."

Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides stated that the bill would just create red tape for school divisions, when the focus needs to be on providing school divisions with the resources and supports

required to deal with increasingly complex classrooms.

At the second reading on Nov. 27, the bill was defeated, on division by a 44-19 vote with all UCP members present voting against the bill and all NDP members present voting for it.

Reflecting on the bill's defeat, ATA president Jason Schilling said that the bill was just calling for information and transparency.

"Alberta's students are currently learning in the largest and most complex classrooms we have ever seen," Schilling said. "Albertans deserve to know the facts about the current state of classrooms."

He added that he would like to see the minister of education bring back class size reporting, even without the mandate proposed by Bill 202.

"Adequate support for public education should not be a partisan or political issue," Schilling said, "Regardless of political stripe, Albertans across the board want to see well-funded classrooms." ■

Highlights from the legislature

Government and opposition debate education issues

Kim Clement

ATA News Staff

Alberta's 31st legislature began on Oct. 30 with a speech from the throne. The sitting is scheduled to run until Dec. 7. Here is a summary of the education-related discussions that took place in question period from Oct. 30 to Nov. 24.

Education funding & class sizes

Oct. 31 — **Rakhi Pancholi** (NDP—Edmonton-Whitemud) raised concerns about overcrowding in Alberta schools due to a lack of funding and insufficient school infrastructure. She cited examples of overcrowded classrooms and urged Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides to take responsibility for the situation.

In response, Nicolaides defended the government's efforts to revitalize Alberta's economy and attract people to the province. He acknowledged the need for more schools and teachers and promised further initiatives in that direction.

Pancholi continued to highlight the challenges posed by growing class sizes and the complexity of classrooms. She criticized the government for allocating resources to campaigns and pensions while underfunding education, leading to overcrowding and a lack of resources for students.

Nicolaides refuted these claims, emphasizing the government's commitment to funding classroom complexity, English language learners and other student needs. He reiterated that the government is dedicated to improving the education system.

Nov. 5 — **Amanda Chapman** (NDP—Calgary-Beddington) expressed concern about increased class sizes in Alberta under the UCP government's watch. She questioned Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides about the growth in class sizes since the UCP took office. In response, the minister discussed the challenges posed by the success of the Alberta is Calling campaign and emphasized the government's efforts to address them through school projects.

Chapman pressed further, criticizing the government's decision to stop public reporting of class sizes and urging the restoration of such reporting. The minister defended the government's focus on making Alberta a destination of choice and outlined plans to build more schools and hire additional educational support staff.

Chapman raised the issue of low funding for Alberta students, overcrowded classes and announced her intention to introduce a bill for class size and complexity reporting. She challenged the minister to engage with Albertans on her proposed legislation. The minister defended the government's commitment to education, citing significant investments and school projects to address growing demands.

Nov. 23 — **Peggy Wright** (NDP—Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview) asked the minister of education about the challenges faced by educational support workers, citing overcrowded classrooms, lack of support for students with complex needs and exhausted staff due to inadequate numbers. She questioned when the 20,000 school support worker positions lost in 2020 would be fully funded.

In response, Nicolaides highlighted a recent increase in education funding by more than five per cent, including \$820 million in new funding to address



FILE

enrollment pressures. He emphasized the creation of a new classroom complexity grant, providing \$126 million over the next few years to hire educational assistants, speech-language pathologists and other professionals.

Wright continued by referencing government statistics indicating a decrease in educational assistants compared to the previous year. She questioned the government's plans to show appreciation for the workers, emphasizing their dedication despite low wages.

Nicolaides assured that the government values education staff, citing successful efforts in hiring additional staff, including 1,200 new teachers and 450 educational assistants in metro school divisions.

Wright raised concerns about the low wages of school support staff, urging the minister to make necessary investments to prevent education support workers from living in poverty. Nicolaides affirmed the government's commitment, mentioning the \$126 million in new funding specifically allocated for

LEGISLATURE HIGHLIGHTS
continued on page 6



The ATA News is seeking entries for Teacher’s Pet, which profiles teachers’ furry, feathered or even scaled friends.

If you have a cuddly companion that you’d like to share with your colleagues, please send us a picture, along with the following required information:

- Your name, grade, school and the subject(s) you teach
- Your pet’s name and breed

Also, please answer these two questions:

- 1) What makes your pet special?
- 2) How does your pet help you in your profession?

A selection of entries will be published in an upcoming issue of the ATA News.

Please email your submissions to cory.hare@ata.ab.ca.

DEADLINE: DEC. 12

SEEKING FURRY SUBMISSIONS!



Apply now



The Alberta Teachers' Association

for an Alberta Teachers’ Association Fellowship or Scholarship

Applications are now being accepted for the following:

ATA Doctoral Fellowships in Education

- Two awards of \$15,000
- For members entering or in first year of a doctoral program in education

Nadene M Thomas Graduate Research Bursary

- One award of \$5,000
- For a member enrolled in a graduate program in education
- A research focus on teacher health issues and/or teachers’ working conditions

John Mazurek Memorial—Morgex Insurance Scholarship

- One award of \$2,500
- For members who pursue relevant professional development

Deadline: February 28, 2024

To be considered, applications must be received at Barnett House by 5:00 PM on February 28, 2024.

Contact

Tracee McFeeters
Administrative Officer
Scholarship Subcommittee
Alberta Teachers’ Association

Phone 780-447-9470 or 1-800-232-7208
E-mail tracee.mcfeeters@ata.ab.ca
Online www.teachers.ab.ca/professional-development/grants-awards-and-scholarships

www.teachers.ab.ca

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LEGISLATURE HIGHLIGHTS

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educational assistants and other support staff. He reiterated the government’s dedication to providing support and resources for school divisions to manage their staffing needs.

Educational curriculum and school construction

Nov. 2—**Nolan Dyck** (UCP–Grande Prairie) asked Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaidis about the redrafting of the social studies curriculum, the addition of life skills and financial literacy training and the strategic plan for increasing the number of schools in communities with growing needs. Nicolaidis responded by emphasizing collaboration with various educational partners and the importance of teacher resources and training, while also discussing the growth of Alberta and the budget process related to school infrastructure.

Teacher recruitment and retention

Nov. 23—**Myles McDougall** (UCP–Calgary-Fish Creek) expressed concerns about teacher shortages, seeking information on approved funding for teachers and teaching assistants in Calgary schools. Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaidis responded by highlighting a recent increase in education funding, specifically in Budget 2023, with more than five per cent allocated for education. He emphasized that around \$2 billion goes to Calgary schools to help them hire necessary staff.

McDougall acknowledged the increased resources but inquired about government initiatives to attract qualified teachers and assistants for vacant positions. The minister reported that, as the new school year commenced, information from four metro school divisions indicated over 1,200 new teachers, 450 additional educational assistants and 94 other certified staff had been hired. He noted ongoing collaboration across the province.

McDougall addressed the global trend of individuals leaving the teaching profession and the rise in classroom complexity. He asked Nicolaidis to elaborate on factors contributing to this complexity, its impact on teacher departures and government measures to address it. Nicolaidis acknowledged the increasing complexity, citing a higher proportion of students requiring assistance, English as an additional language and complex learning needs. He outlined Budget ’23’s inclusion of \$126 million for a new classroom complexity grant specifically designed to hire professionals like educational assistants, speech-language pathologists and psychologists to address these challenges. ■

NOTICES AND EVENTS

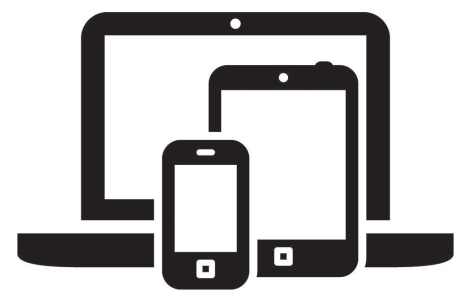
Research participants needed

A research study being conducted by a masters student at Cape Breton University is seeking grade 1 to grade 5 elementary teachers with experience supervising students during school lunch. The study aims to explore teachers’ perspectives and experiences regarding social emotional practices during lunchtime in Alberta schools.

The research question is: “What social

emotional learning experiences are elementary educators creating during school lunchtime?”

Interviews will be approximately 10–15 minutes and audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. All information will be treated confidentially and participant identities will not be shared. Interested parties can contact Mackenzie Lafleur at macklafleur@gmail.com.



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Off Script

with ATA President Jason Schilling



I welcome your comments. Contact me at jason.schilling@ata.ab.ca.

Our struggles are not unique

Teacher retention and recruitment, workload intensification, inclusion, classroom complexity and class size were all issues discussed with our colleagues from across Canada at the most recent Canadian Teachers' Federation meeting at the end of November.

The CTF-FCE represents more than 360,000 teachers across Canada, and the one thing I noticed from our recent meeting is the commonality of these concerns from coast to coast to coast. Alberta teachers are not facing these issues alone. This last meeting focused quite heavily on the teacher retention and recruitment issue and how we are seeing it impact public education. For example, Quebec has uncertified teachers currently teaching courses, and several other areas such as the

Northwest Territories cannot attract teachers to stay in the area.

We are also seeing the impact of retention and recruitment here in Alberta, from the use of classroom supervisors to cover classes, to continued substitute teacher shortages in some areas, and the fact that there are several schools in Alberta that are still unable to find teachers to fill vacant job postings. This is an issue that will only continue to grow.

Another common thread throughout all the issues we discussed at our last CTF-FCE meeting is funding. Several governments across Canada are not funding public education sufficiently as they fail to accommodate for growth and inflation. We see it daily in our classrooms as staff struggle to meet the needs of our students. The status

of our classrooms affects retention and recruitment issues, and those issues, in turn, affect classroom conditions. They are not siloed issues, they are interwoven and rooted in a lack of funding.

The CTF-FCE is embarking on a strategy to address the retention and recruitment issues, and I was heartened to see that educational leaders across Canada are working together through CTF-FCE and individually in their own province and territories to address and find solutions to the many challenges facing public education. It's easy to feel like you are alone or that our challenges are unique to just us. The sense of unity and comradery at CTF-FCE is a great reminder that we are not alone and that we have thousands of colleagues across the country who care about public education and students. ■

Teacher takes subbing to the opera stage

Last-minute opera role another unique assignment for substitute teacher Catherine Daniel

SUCCESS STORIES

Sandra Bit
ATA News Staff

What do you do when the artistic director of a major opera house calls you with four hours' notice and asks you to sing the iconic lead role in one of the most well-known operas in the world?

You say yes!

That was the scenario that unfolded one day in late October for Catherine Daniel, a substitute teacher with Edmonton Catholic Schools. During a 3:00 p.m. spare period, Daniel received a call from Joel Ivany of Edmonton Opera asking her to "jump in" to the role of Carmen that evening because the original casted soprano had become ill.

Daniel, a trained mezzo-soprano with many years of opera experience, has sung the role before, most recently with Opera Tampa in February 2020, and she speaks French, so the opera's language and music were quite familiar to her. But it was still a huge challenge to familiarize herself with the role on the fly, especially the spoken dialogue, which varies from one production to another.

"It was nerve-racking, but I love this music, I love that role, I love to sing and perform," Daniel said. "You don't want the show to fail or to be cancelled, so I didn't even think for a second that I would say no. Yes, of course I'll do it. That was the spirit behind what happened."

After getting the call, Daniel rushed from JH Picard School to the Jubilee Auditorium, whisked through a two-hour rehearsal, was quickly fitted for costumes, grabbed a quick bite and was on stage promptly at 7:30. She's never been asked to jump into an opera role like that before, and there were moments on stage when Daniel wondered if the experience was real or just a crazy dream.

"When you're a performer, there's something audacious about being on stage in a situation like this. You have to be courageous and accept the humour of it. It's a wild exercise



Catherine Daniel is a substitute teacher and opera singer with a passion for making music inclusive and fun for everyone.

in improvisation and immediate storytelling."

The home-crowd advantage contributed to the night's success. The audience was well aware that Daniel had jumped in at the last minute, and that she is a native Edmontonian, so there was a lot of excitement and energy from the crowd supporting her because of the unexpected nature of the experience.

Daniel also credits the success of the evening in large part to the teamwork of the opera's technical team and her fellow castmates, some of whom hid on the side of the stage mouthing the text to her. She also had the French dialogue written on cards glued to various handheld fans she used as props while singing. As a teacher, she gives herself an 87 per cent on her performance.

"Quite a few of the cast I had worked with before," Daniel said. "When people say that a cast is like a family, well opera is like that, opera in Canada is like that. We all know each other directly or know someone who knows someone, so I wasn't on stage with

a bunch of strangers. Everyone was super supportive."

Ongoing career

Daniel has been working with Edmonton Opera since 2014 and will be singing the role of Fricka in their production of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* in the spring of 2024.

She began her singing career at 15 with Schola Cantorum, a local children's chorus now known as Cantilon Choir. While initially afraid to sing, she was encouraged to take voice lessons by the conductor Ardelle Reis. After graduating from high school, she attended Faculté St. Jean, fully intending to become a classroom teacher.

Reis, however, convinced her to pursue a degree in music as well, and she graduated with a music and an education degree, but ironically not a performance designation. Another mentor she studied with, voice teacher and performer Tracy Dahl, convinced her to take up performing as well. So by 2011, Daniel was working as a teacher but also singing and performing.

While she is a music specialist, as a

substitute she has taught all subjects, which has given her a profound respect for generalists.

As a music teacher, however, she sums up her teaching philosophy this way: "I've always wanted to be a teacher who encourages everyone to sing and everyone to participate. I will never say to a child 'just mouth the words'... because it's very traumatizing to tell a six-year-old child that they can't be musical, experience music or be part of a performance."

Daniel wants musical performances to be inclusive and fun for every child as well as the families who come to see them perform at school concerts.

"In the same way that I experience ... this passion that I have for singing and storytelling and being on stage and feeling comfortable on stage, I want to pass that on to my students so that they have a positive experience, so they feel that they can participate, sing, perform, play an instrument and that it be a pleasant experience. I really want to be the kind of teacher who facilitates that type of learning." ■

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Lorne Schmidt, TIS Head of School



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Watch for weaponization of PISA 2022 results



EXECUTIVE REPORT

Philip McRae
ATA Associate Coordinator, Research

For years, the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) has been steadily infiltrating education systems worldwide. The GERM narrows the aims of education and calls for increased student testing at all grade levels; increased standardization; and a myopic focus on mathematics, technology and science at the expense of other curricular domains. Over the past two decades, the GERM has eroded the promotion of creativity, the arts, diverse talents, interpersonal communication and even the concept of play within K–12 learning environments.

The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has often acted as a key vector for the GERM. Results of the PISA 2022 test are scheduled for release on Dec. 5.

What is the PISA test?

PISA is a two-hour computer-based standardized test that attempts to assess the competencies of 15-year-olds in mathematics, science and reading across 81 different countries. The PISA test was first administered in the year 2000 by the OECD and is conducted every three years in Alberta, with PISA 2022 being the eighth international ranking Alberta has undertaken.

PISA 2022 focused on students' proficiency in mathematics and introduced an updated framework to reflect large-scale social changes with an emphasis on mathematical reasoning. PISA 2022 had mathematics as the major domain, science and reading as the minor domains, and creative thinking as the innovative domain. Financial literacy was an additional domain assessed in some countries and in some Canadian provinces. More than 81 countries participated in PISA 2022. As in previous cycles, Canada's participation included all 10 provinces.

The test is a mix of open-ended and multiple-choice questions grouped around real-life scenarios. In addition to taking various combinations of these tests, students and the school

principals complete questionnaires about their backgrounds, their school experiences and the broader educational context. The most recent round of the assessment was to be conducted in 2021; however, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed back the assessment to 2022.

Historically, PISA 2009 had a primary focus on reading abilities among 15-year-olds. In 2012, mathematics took center stage, and reading and science were secondary domains. PISA 2015 focused on science, reading and mathematics, with an emphasis on scientific literacy. The PISA 2022 results will focus on student performance in mathematics, as heavily impacted as they were by the pandemic. The latest results will also explore issues of disadvantaged students and of equity and well-being, as captured in 2022.

What are the key issues with PISA?

Given that the 2022 iteration of PISA was conducted online during the pandemic, the results must be carefully considered. Other key issues with PISA include the following:

- The ranking of countries through PISA has negative consequences for school systems. PISA has created an overreliance on standardized testing and a narrowing of learning to domains that can be easily measured. PISA's reductionist approach should be a particular concern in Alberta where we are in the process of a redesign and implementation of new curriculum. By emphasizing a narrow range of measurable aspects of education, PISA takes attention away from the less measurable or immeasurable educational objectives like physical, moral, civic and artistic development, thereby dangerously limiting our collective imagination regarding what education is and ought to be about for Albertans.
- The OECD, and therefore PISA, has been criticized for being biased in favour of economic interests in education systems. PISA 2022's

focus on mathematics and financial literacy will likely be weaponized by the United Conservative Party government, which may use the results as an opportunity to blame teachers for students' mathematics performance during a pandemic.

- Major technical flaws have been identified with the items that make up PISA testing.

Why should we care?

Historically, PISA test results have had far-reaching effects — prompting national debates and reforms in education systems — despite this being a short two-hour test for a selected group of 15-year-olds. In recent years, PISA has been used to declare education crises and justify knee-jerk reactions, including increased standardized testing and a narrower curriculum. Notably, the “math crisis” across Canada emerged shortly after the release of the 2012 PISA results.

If history is any indication, the PISA 2022 assessment results may generate renewed vigor for those wanting to re-energize a “math crisis” and bash teachers. Even if Alberta maintains its previous performance, there is a risk of calls for narrowing the curriculum and emphasizing financial literacy or vague global competencies.

The PISA ideology emphasizes economic imperatives — growth and competitiveness — as the primary goals of schooling, using math and science achievement as key indicators of a region or society's future economic well-being. It overlooks the broader role of education, including fostering social cohesion, preserving diverse cultural heritage, and promoting civic engagement and citizenship in rapidly changing, complex societies.

What can we do?

Following the release of the PISA 2022 results on Dec. 5, professionals in the education field should closely monitor the public discourse and local school community discussions surrounding PISA. It is crucial to understand the test's purpose, the increasing trend of international benchmarking in Alberta, and the concerns associated with PISA and its global testing regime.

The funding, support for and administration of international benchmarking tests, including the PISA test, are of significant concern for

Alberta's teaching profession. In fact, the Association has established policy opposing PISA:

22.2.5.1 *The Government of Alberta should give notice that Alberta will not participate in future iterations of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). [2016]*

Most importantly, teachers can engage in conversations about the purpose of K–12 schooling, bearing in mind that the PISA test results will undoubtedly shape this discourse for students' parents and the discussions surrounding education reforms in Alberta.

We should be vigilant about the GERM's influence and how neoliberal governments around the world will be weaponizing the results and, in the spirit of our populist times, demonizing teachers. ■

OPEN LETTER

In an open letter addressed to the head of the PISA program, more than 80 renowned academics have expressed profound concerns about the impact of PISA international benchmarking and have called for a halt to standardized testing.

To read the letter, visit <http://bit.ly/PISANOW>.

Who benefits from PISA testing?

To conduct PISA and generate a market for various follow-up services, the OECD has formed partnerships with global for-profit companies. These corporations have profited from the perceived shortcomings identified by PISA tests and international benchmarks.

Pearson Education, the world's largest for-profit education company, was responsible for developing the frameworks for the PISA 2022 international benchmarking test. These frameworks defined the overall approach, measurement criteria and reporting methods for PISA 2022. As outlined in a research report *Pearson 2025: Transforming Teaching and Privatising Education Data* by scholars Sam Sellar and Anna Hogan, “Pearson is a new type of edu-business that operates across multiple education sectors and industries with a more ambitious global corporate vision than many of its competitors.”

One aspect of PISA that merits attention is how the testing has coincided with the rise of private tutoring (a shadow education industry) worldwide. Also notable is that Pearson derives the majority of its global profits from online learning tools, virtual schools, digital textbooks, digital testing, student and teacher assessment programs and services, student information systems and instructional management systems.



PISA is a computer-based standardized test of 15-year-olds that takes place in 81 countries. The ATA opposes the test due to the belief that the ranking countries has a negative effect on school systems and contributes to a narrow definition of learning.

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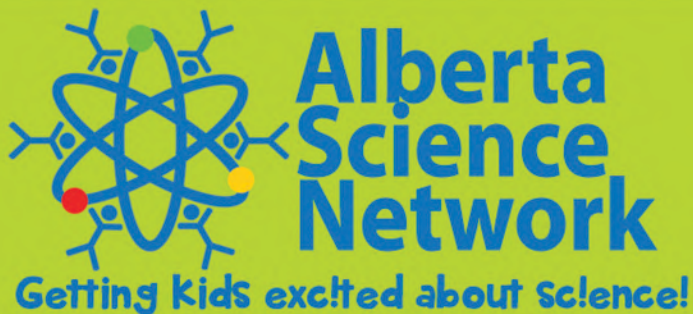
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TALENT

December 5, 2023 | Volume 58, Number 6

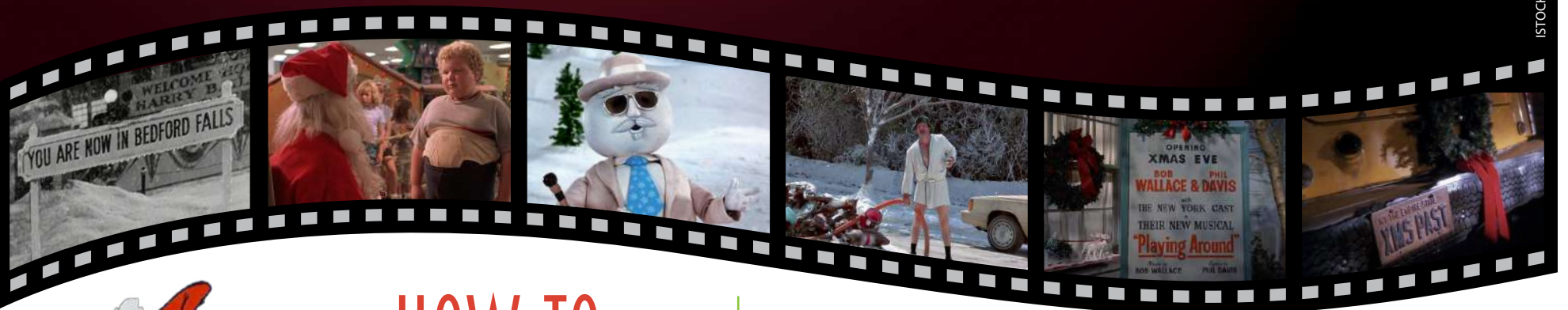
FESTIVE FILM FINESSE

Test your knowledge with our contest

With the holidays here, many of us will be tuning into our favourite festive films — the season just wouldn't be the same without them! In fact, you've probably seen some holiday movies so many times, you can boast that you know every single frame. Well, it's time to put your seasonal skills to the test.

We've isolated a single frame from a selection of holiday classics, from both the large and small screen, and we're challenging you to see if you can correctly identify them.

Be warned: while some are a piece of Christmas cake, others could have you spinning like a dreidel.



HOW TO PARTICIPATE

- Head to <https://surveys.teachers.ab.ca/s3/Holiday-Movie-Contest>.
- OR
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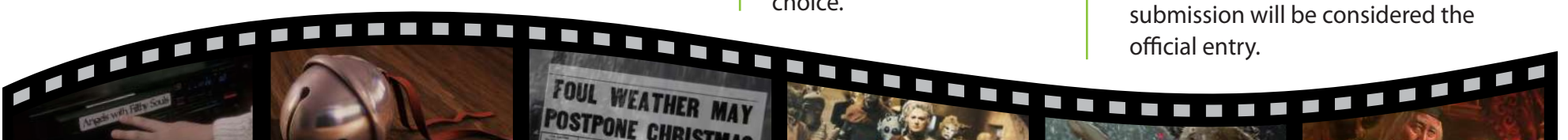
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We'll also donate \$100 to a local charity of your choice.

CONTEST RULES

- The contest is restricted to Alberta Teachers' Association members.
- You can enter individually or as a team.
- In the event of a team win, one gift card and one donation will be issued to the group.
- If multiple entries are received from the same email address, the first submission will be considered the official entry.



DEADLINE: MIDNIGHT, DEC. 31, 2023