

Real Learning First

The Teaching Profession's View of Student Assessment,
Evaluation and Accountability

Issues in Education, Number 6



“If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry



**The Alberta
Teachers' Association**

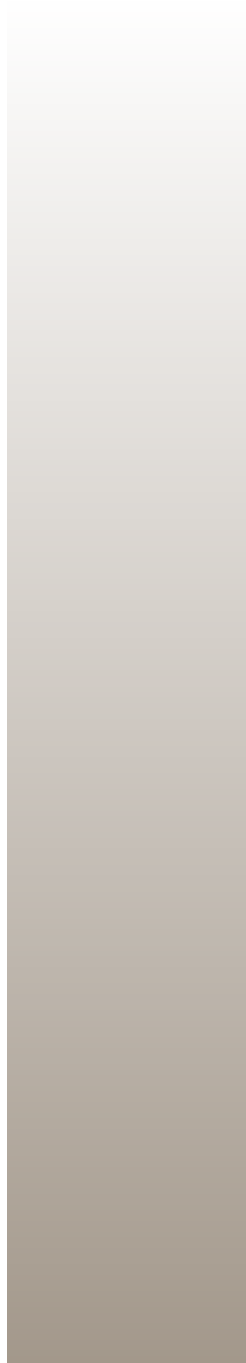
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*“Not everything
that counts can
be counted, and
not everything
that can be
counted counts.”*

—Albert Einstein



Introduction

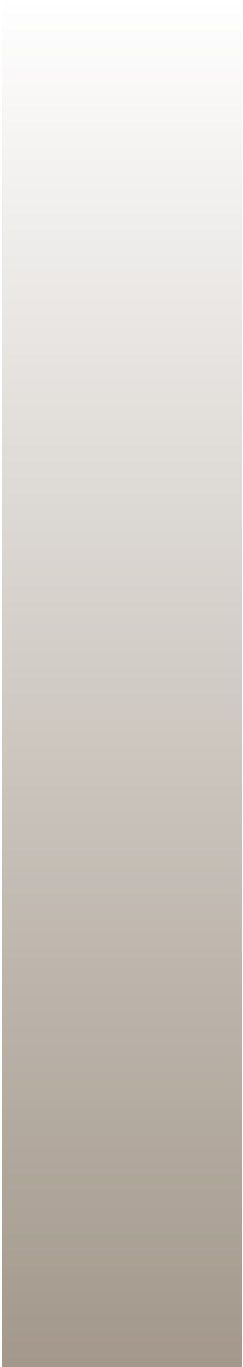
Alberta's teachers are committed professionals who view educational accountability as an important opportunity to improve learning for students. Teachers use multiple sources of information in the ongoing assessment, evaluation and reporting of student progress. The purpose of this publication is to engage teachers in a conversation about the wide range of policies and principles that Alberta's teaching profession has developed to ensure that Alberta's students are well served by the public education system.

As you review this document, consider a few questions that will help you reflect on your own practice, as well as stimulate conversation with professional colleagues and your school community:

- To what degree have student assessment, evaluation and reporting practices in your school improved your instructional practice?
- Do the current school, jurisdiction and/or provincial policies reflect the profession's principles regarding student assessment, student evaluation and educational accountability?
- After considering the information and perspectives in this publication, what actions might teachers in your school or jurisdiction take to support sound assessment, evaluation and accountability? What actions might your Association and the provincial government be encouraged to take?



***Engaging
teachers in
conversation***



The purpose of student evaluation

**Students
need
constructive
feedback**

To support student learning

The primary purpose of student assessment and evaluation is to support student learning.

Student evaluation is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Students need timely, constructive feedback that supports their learning. It is helpful to consider the two types of evaluation that teachers do: formative and summative. In a formative evaluation (assessment *for* learning), teachers use information about student achievement to monitor progress and plan further instruction. In a summative evaluation (assessment *of* learning), teachers make judgments about student achievement at the completion of the learning process. Teachers use the results of summative evaluation to determine final grades.

Curriculum development and student evaluation are closely linked. The design of curriculum has changed many times over the years. The current curriculum is written using outcome statements that describe what the student should know and be able to do as a result of instruction and learning activities. The result has been an increased emphasis on measurement and accountability. Teachers recognize that many learning outcomes, such as the application of critical problem solving in science or an appreciation for music, cannot be measured using traditional pencil-and-paper techniques. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) is opposed to a provincial testing program that emphasizes easy-to-evaluate knowledge at the expense of more-difficult-to-evaluate learning.

ATA Policy

1.A.27 The Alberta Teachers' Association opposes results-based curriculum that

1. gives evaluation a higher priority than instruction,
2. limits its focus to achievement that can be observed and measured,
3. leads to the assessment of teaching practice based largely on student achievement scores to the neglect of other considerations and
4. leads to a focus only on outcomes rather than educational processes.

[1993/96/98/2008]

1.A.31 Assessment and evaluation of student learning have, as their primary function, facilitating the teaching/learning process.

[1979/88/98/2008]

1.B.24 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association work with the Department of Education to ensure that all curriculum committees have appropriate Association representation.

[2007]

Student-appropriate evaluations

Fair and appropriate assessment practices

Student assessment and evaluation practices must be fair and appropriate to the learning needs of the student.

Teachers use a variety of evaluation practices to determine student achievement, including performance assessments, projects, written work, demonstrations, portfolios, observations and examinations. Teachers use data from multiple assessments over a period of time to make judgments about student growth, development and learning.

Good evaluation practices are appropriate for the student, match curriculum content and are consistent with the *Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada* (Joint Advisory Committee, Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation, University of Alberta 1993), developed by a national working group and endorsed by a number of professional organizations, including the Canadian Teachers' Federation and the Canadian Association of School Administrators. This document can be viewed at www.education.ualberta.ca/educ/psych/crame/files/eng_prin.pdf. For a principled national perspective on accountability, consult the Canadian Teachers' Federation website (www.ctf-fce.ca).

ATA Policy

1.A.29 Procedures used to evaluate student achievement must be designed so that they

1. are fair, just and equitable;
2. motivate students;
3. instill confidence in students' abilities to learn and to succeed;
4. test a variety of knowledge, skills and attitudes;
5. provide the teacher with information to make informed instructional decisions; and
6. are consistent with the *Principles of Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada*.

[1979/88/98/2008]



“Standardization is making school systems less like rich, biologically diverse rain forests of cross-fertilization influence that can achieve sustainable improvement over time than like regimented coniferous plantations whose hyperefficient ugliness is exceeded only by their lack of contribution to a wider environmental sustainability.”

—Andy Hargreaves

Fairness to students

Providing learning opportunities

Students must be evaluated on the curriculum they have been taught. For most students, that curriculum is the regular program of studies; however, some students are taught a different curriculum more suited to their individual needs. Students with special needs have an individual program plan (IPP) that outlines their cognitive, social and functional learning outcomes based on the program of studies. But some students, such as English as a second language students (sometimes referred to as English language learners) and students with special needs, are on a modified regular curriculum because they require more time for learning and, therefore, may not complete the program of studies at the same rate as other students.

Classroom teachers design student evaluation based on the curriculum that students have been taught. It is unfair and unethical for teachers to evaluate students on material they have not had the opportunity to learn. Students on IPPs based on a different grade level in modified programs should not be evaluated on the regular program of studies, nor should they be required to write the provincial achievement tests based on material they have not had the opportunity to learn.

ATA Policy

1.A.32 Procedures used to assess and evaluate student learning must be based on the objectives and implementation of the curriculum.

[1967/72/79/88/98/2008]

1.A.41 Students must have the opportunity to learn the curriculum on which they will be tested.

[2001/08]

1.B.32 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to ensure that provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations include only curriculum for which required materials were available eight months prior to the commencement of the school year in which the tests are to be taken.

[1991/94/97/2000/03/06]

“It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it.”

—Jacob Bronowski

***Students
must have the
opportunity
to learn***

Student achievement

Many factors influence student achievement. Information about the learning context provides a comprehensive way to understand the results of student achievement and must be taken into account in any interpretation of evaluation results. Factors that can influence student achievement include individual learning needs, resources available to support teaching and learning, and the socioeconomic characteristics of the community.

ATA Policy

1.A.34 Assessment and evaluation of student learning and educational programs must take into account the individual characteristics of students and schools.
[1976/88/98/2008]

Evaluation and assessment

Student evaluation and assessment practices must suit the purposes for which they are intended.

Teachers use standardized diagnostic and intelligence tests to identify a student's special learning needs. These tests must be administered and interpreted by a qualified professional, and the results should not be amalgamated with curriculum assessment data.

ATA Policy

1.A.30 The use of standardized diagnostic and intelligence tests should be restricted to a research and guidance function.
[1967/70/72/77/82/88/98/2001/08]

Fair provincial testing

Provincial testing programs must be free of gender bias and other forms of discrimination.

Large-scale provincial assessments must be free of gender and cultural bias to ensure fairness to all students in the province. A common criticism of standardized tests is that because they do not reflect the multicultural nature of society, some students are at a disadvantage. Eliminating gender and cultural bias is one of the principles in *Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada* (Joint Advisory Committee, Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation, University of Alberta 1993).

ATA Policy

1.A.44 The Department of Education is responsible for analyzing provincial assessment program results to determine if gender and/or cultural bias is evident and, if so, to take action to eliminate it.
[1991/94/98/2001/08]

The role of teachers

Teacher responsibility

Teachers are responsible for the design, implementation and interpretation of student evaluation.

Ongoing student evaluation is an essential part of the teaching and learning process. Teachers need resources and adequate time to develop and conduct student evaluation activities. Classroom teachers are in the best position to develop evaluation strategies that align with the curriculum and address individual learning needs. Evaluation instruments developed by those external to the classroom are seldom appropriate and must be adapted to suit the context of instruction.

ATA Policy

1.A.28 Regular and continuous assessment by classroom teachers is the most appropriate means of determining student progress.

[1979/88/98/2001/08]

1.A.33 Assessment and evaluation of student learning are primarily the responsibility of those teachers providing the instruction.

[1976/88/98/2001/08]

1.A.35 Adequate time and resources are required for teachers to conduct effective assessment and evaluations of student learning.

[1979/88/98/2008]

***Teachers
should
evaluate
student
learning***



Fair, just and equitable evaluations

Student evaluation

Provincial achievement test results should not be used for student evaluation.

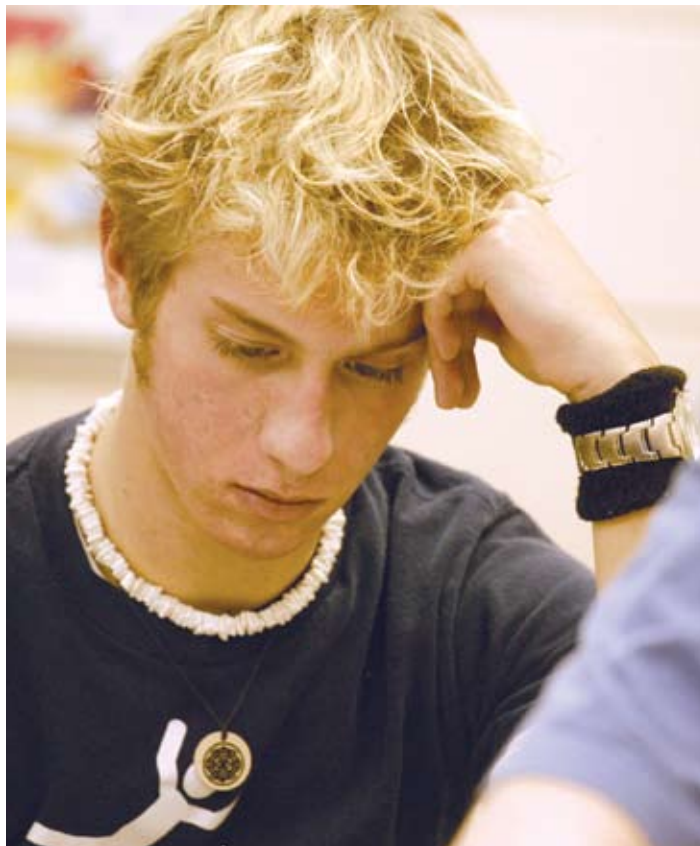
When teachers use the results of provincial achievement tests in student evaluation, teachers signal support for and endorsement of the achievement testing program.

Teachers have a professional responsibility to evaluate student achievement using procedures that are fair, just and equitable. The provincial achievement tests are not an appropriate evaluation procedure for many students. As well, teachers should not abdicate their professional responsibility by using a standardized test developed by a third party.

ATA Policy

1.B.3 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge its members to refrain from using the provincial achievement test marks as part of their evaluation of students.

[2002/05/08]



Policies and student evaluation

School and jurisdiction policies for student evaluation and assessment must not detract from the professional rights and responsibilities of teachers to evaluate students.

Teachers are responsible for determining curriculum emphases, designing instructional and learning activities, and developing and administering evaluations. Policies regarding student evaluation influence the instructional process and, for this reason, teachers must be involved in policy development. Policy that is determined without input from teachers undermines the integrity of both teaching and learning.

Where school board policies mandate the inclusion of a final examination, teachers should design a test that fairly measures the range of curriculum taught. Provincial achievement tests cover only those elements of the program that can be assessed through large-scale pencil-and-paper tests. Teachers are the final authority in determining whether to use achievement test results as part of their assessment of student learning.

ATA Policy

1.A.36 Teachers must be consulted prior to any decision to alter their evaluation of a student's achievement and, if a teacher's evaluation is altered, the altered mark shall be reported along with a notation indicating on whose authority the mark was changed. [1979/84/88/98/2008]

1.A.37 School jurisdiction and school policy on student assessment and evaluation, appeals procedures and standards of achievement shall be developed jointly with teachers and support the professional rights and responsibilities of teachers to assess and evaluate student learning. [1979/84/88/98/2008]

1.A.40 The Alberta Teachers' Association opposes the inclusion by school boards of the results of the Department of Education Achievement Testing Program in the final evaluation of individual student achievement. [1977/82/83/86/88/98/2008]

“Across the education landscape, the movement toward standards is a movement away from teacher responsibility and agency. As curricula, teaching strategies, outcomes, and evaluation techniques are standardized, teachers’ opportunities to make decisions based on their professional judgment are systematically reduced. The implementation of standards-based programs signals to students, parents and society at large that teachers are not to be trusted or respected and that technical/managerial control is what is needed to fix problems that teachers helped create.”

—J A Hatch

Teacher involvement in decision making is essential

Teachers may not accept rewards for student achievement

Reward for student achievement

Teachers must not accept rewards for student achievement on provincial tests.

Provincial achievement test results are now mistakenly used as a measure of school accountability. Positive school results are sometimes used as a marketing and promotional tool for the school. Teachers are opposed to using the achievement test results in this manner, because such use undermines public confidence in other schools and provides a distorted view of accountability. Teachers reject any activity that singles out students or teachers based solely on provincial test results.

ATA Policy

1.A.66 Teachers may not accept rewards for school or district performance on achievement tests or diploma examinations.

[2001/08]



Provincial achievement testing

Continuous assessment by teachers

Opposition to testing

Teachers are opposed to standardized testing, including achievement testing, when the test is not appropriate to the educational needs of the student and when the results are misused.

Standardized tests are developed by people or organizations outside the classroom and administered to a large number of students under standardized conditions. Standardized tests generally stand alone and are administered as single assessments. Examples of standardized tests are the provincial achievement tests and commercial tests such as the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (CTBS).

The use of standardized tests should be limited to the purposes for which the tests have been designed. Typically, standardized test results should not be combined with results from curriculum assessments, because they are designed to measure different aspects of student achievement. As well, the results from a single standardized test should not be used to determine a student's final grade or program placement. Standardized tests become high-stakes tests when the results are used to evaluate students, teachers and schools, or to determine educational funding. When the results of standardized and achievement tests are used in these ways, valuable classroom instructional time may be spent teaching to the test and training students to read multiple-choice tests and complete computer answer sheets. These activities intrude on the instructional process.

ATA Policy

1.A.28 Regular and continuous assessment by classroom teachers is the most appropriate means of determining student progress.
[1979/88/98/2001/08]

1.A.39 The results of provincially administered achievement tests should be

1. made available only to the school attended by the participating student and
2. limited to determining the cognitive aspects of collective student achievement and effectiveness of the provincial curriculum.

[1977/82/86/88/98/2008]

1.A.43 Any use of test results for accountability must be consistent with the test purpose, design and the unit of analysis, be it classroom, school, system or province.
[1993/98/2008]

Student exemption from testing

Classroom teachers should have the right to exempt a student from the provincial achievement test.

Teachers should have authority to exempt students from testing

Although current Alberta Education policy suggests that teachers may recommend that students be excused from writing, in practice the exemption process is flawed and cumbersome. Current Alberta Education achievement test administration policy stipulates that the superintendent may excuse a student from writing an achievement test for either of the following reasons: (1) the student is unable to respond to the test instrument or (2) writing the test would be harmful to the student. Teachers believe that these criteria are too limited because they do not recognize students on modified curricula. Achievement test results are meaningless if students have not been taught the material on which the test is based. Because classroom teachers are in the best position to determine if the achievement test is appropriate for each student, teachers should have the authority to exempt students when necessary.

ATA Policy

1.B.38 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to recognize the right of a teacher to exempt a student from a provincial achievement test when the teacher deems it inappropriate to the needs of the student. [1992/95/98/2001/04/07]



“High test scores, whatever they might predict, are unable to predict teamwork abilities, perseverance, risk taking, creativity or old-fashioned reliability, not to mention any of the other hard skills that aren’t being measured. So these qualities, which are essential in real life, become undervalued.”

**— Deborah Meier,
In Schools We Trust**

Opposition to current provincial testing

Teachers are opposed to the current provincial achievement testing program.

There are a number of reasons teachers are opposed to the program in its current form. Teachers believe that it is both counterproductive and immoral to require students to write a test on material they have not been taught. In addition, the achievement test results are often misused. The provincial testing program undermines the professional role of the teacher and consumes vast sums of public funds that could be spent on curriculum development, implementation and classroom instruction.

In 2001 the ATA surveyed teachers about the provincial achievement testing program. Only 6 per cent of teachers believed that Grade 3 achievement testing should continue as is, 33 per cent wanted the tests replaced with diagnostic tests and 44 per cent believed that the tests should be abandoned. Only 15 per cent of teachers believed that Grade 6 achievement testing should continue as is, 35 per cent wanted the tests replaced with diagnostic tests, 21 per cent believed that the tests should be administered to a sample of students and 16 per cent believed that the tests should be abandoned. At the Grade 9 level, 33 per cent believed that testing should continue as is, and approximately 50 per cent were divided among the following options: replacing the tests with diagnostic tests, administering the tests to a sample and abandoning the testing program (ATA 2001).

Alberta Education maintains that provincial achievement tests inform government and the public about whether the standards of the curriculum are being met. Statistically, this data can be gathered through a sampling procedure, which would be less expensive and less disruptive to the educational process.

ATA Policy

1.B.16 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to discontinue the Achievement Testing Program in its current form at the Grade 3 level.

[1990/93/96/99/2000/03/06]

1.B.17 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to discontinue the Achievement Testing Program in its current form at the Grade 6 level.

[1990/93/94/97/2000/03/06]

1.B.18 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to discontinue the Achievement Testing Program in its current form at the Grade 9 level.

[1990/93/94/97/2000/03/06]

1.B.27 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to implement a policy whereby provincial achievement tests are administered to a population sample of Grade 6 and Grade 9 students in each subject area and that no student is required to write provincial achievement tests in more than one subject area in a given year.

[2000/03/06]

**Changes
needed
to current
testing**

**Support
for early
assessment
and diagnosis
is vital**

Support for assessments that help students

Teachers' professional judgment should play the central role in assessing student learning outcomes.

While the government responded in 2005 with a decision to consult with education partners on an alternative to the proposed Grade 4 provincial achievement test (based on British Columbia's Grade 4 Foundation Skills Assessment), after three years of waiting, no meaningful alternatives to high-stakes, large-scale assessments had been put forward by the government. Education partners look forward with anticipation to the follow-up to the recommendation of the *K-3 Numeracy/Literacy Report* (Alberta Education 2006), which emphasizes the primacy of building capacity for school-based assessments. Given the growing complexity and diversity of Alberta's classrooms, teachers continue to call for support for diagnostic assessments for students, particularly in the early years of learning.

Given the use and abuse of high-stakes tests, teachers should participate in the marking of provincial achievement tests only if directed to do so in writing by the superintendent. Until concerns about achievement tests have been properly addressed, it is not advisable to participate in activities that imply support, such as marking.

ATA Policy

1.B.10 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge its members to refrain from marking provincial achievement tests unless they receive a lawful order of the board to do so.

[2002/05/08]

***"Measurable outcomes may
be the least significant
results of learning."***

—Linda McNeil, Rice University



Diploma examination programs

Working together to resolve policy shortcomings

Maintaining integrity

The ongoing participation of the teaching profession is essential to maintaining the integrity of diploma examination programs.

Teachers are frustrated by the increasing erosion of classroom instructional time created by the expansion and restructuring of the provincial diploma examination program, and by the negative impact on students requiring accommodations for writing. Further, the increasing marginalization of the profession, including removal of ATA representatives from technical review committees and the securing of the examinations, has further undermined the credibility of diploma examinations.

Restricting teachers' access to test items after diploma examinations have been administered diminishes teachers' role in monitoring the validity of these tests and marginalizes their professional voice and involvement.

Alberta Education needs to resolve the administrative and policy shortcomings related to the current diploma examination program. For example, in 2002 the government began work on implementing achievement-over-time studies that led to the securing of diploma examinations, notwithstanding the objections of all stakeholders. This single-minded focus on exam security has diminished teachers' roles in interpreting curriculum standards, reflecting on their practice and meeting student learning needs. Alberta's students are being seriously affected by ill-considered decisions, and the ATA should play a lead role in helping to address these issues. The current haphazard approach to consultation with the profession not only diminishes the central role of the teacher in assessment and evaluation decisions but also impedes student learning.

“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.”

—Colin Jackson, President, EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts, Calgary

**Changes
to diploma
exams**

ATA Policy

1.B.1 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to make public all diploma examinations.

[2003/06]

1.B.14 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Government of Alberta to work with the profession to bring about the following changes to the diploma examinations program to

1. allow teachers to make more effective use of the examinations in the instruction, assessment and evaluation of students;
2. reduce the inordinate amount of time lost to classroom instruction to accommodate the examinations schedule;
3. reduce the negative impact on students with special needs;
4. schedule the marking of examinations to minimize the time teachers are away from the school;
5. minimize the negative impacts on all students and school programs; and
6. recognize the voluntary nature of the marking of and the developing of diploma examinations by professional teachers.

[2004/07]

1.B.29 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to engage in systematic and structured consultation with the Association prior to announcing changes in provincial examination format, timing and scheduling.

[2003/06]

1.B.42 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to stop the practice of securing diploma examinations.

[2005/08]



Evaluating real learning

Teachers recognize that pencil-and-paper tests do not evaluate higher-order thinking skills.

A student's final mark in Grade 12 is a critical measurement. While the diploma examinations represent 50 per cent of this final mark, they do not accurately reflect the depth and scope of the curriculum. Relying on a single 2.5- to 3-hour examination is unfair to students. This is most evident in the current English and mathematics curricula, which require students to develop skills for open-ended problem solving, application of technology, creative presentation and effective communication. Increasing the classroom assessment weighting to 80 per cent would ensure that the student's evaluation is based on a comprehensive set of assessments that address the full range of learning outcomes.

Teachers believe that the implementation of new curricula requires that diploma examinations be structured to evaluate students' knowledge of processes and skills. In order to test problem-solving, critical-thinking and writing skills, students must be tested using open-ended or performance items. Teachers believe that the open-ended component of the diploma examinations should constitute no less than 50 per cent of the examination.

ATA Policy

1.A.38 The Department of Education should ensure that written responses represent a significant portion of its provincial diploma examinations.
[1987/90/98/2008]

1.B.13 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to change the school-awarded percentage of the diploma examination course results from 50 per cent to 80 per cent of the student's final mark.
[1990/93/94/97/2000/03/06]

1.B.31 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association

1. affirm the importance of the written component of diploma examinations and of the need for qualified teachers as markers and
2. actively oppose any attempt to diminish or eliminate the written component of diploma examinations.

[2003/06]

“Every test, every grade affects the learner. Every dull test—no matter how technically sound—affects the learner’s future initiative and engagement. No, even saying it this way does not do justice to the consequences of our testing practices: Every test TEACHES the student.”

—Grant Wiggins

***Evaluate
knowledge
of processes
and skills***

**Ensure
that test
results are
not misused**

Public reporting of provincial test results

Addressing the collateral damage of the government's testing programs

Public reporting of test results must include information that prevents misinterpretation of the results.

An explanation of the purposes of the test, limitations of the test and guidelines for interpreting the results must accompany the release of standardized test results to the public. In *A Joint Position Statement by the Canadian Psychological Association and the Canadian Association of School Psychologists on the Canadian Press Coverage of the Province-Wide Achievement Test Results* (Canadian Psychological Association, Professional Affairs Committee Working Group on Test Misuse 2000), the sponsoring associations state that “publishing school results can generate considerable harm by placing unwarranted pressure on teachers, administrators, and ultimately students themselves to increase test scores or risk losing status within the community.”

Correctly, the authors note that “because students are not randomly assigned to schools and because schools have little or no control over the majority of factors, any attempt to place blame for poor test performance on the schools alone without giving proper consideration to each of these other factors is problematic at best and misleading at worst.” Ranking schools or jurisdictions based on test results negatively affects students and school communities. For this reason, the minister of education should continue to publicly condemn the practice.

Teachers believe that Alberta Education and school jurisdiction officials have a responsibility to ensure that test results are not misused. Common misuses of test results include ranking schools, evaluating teachers, comparing students, comparing schools and rewarding student achievement based solely on provincial achievement test scores.

“As we earnestly try to fix what’s broken, we are, in the process, turning an entire generation of children into a giant flock of canaries in the coal mine.”

—Bruce Kluger

ATA Policy

1.A.34 Assessment and evaluation of student learning and educational programs must take into account the individual characteristics of students and schools.

[1976/88/98/2008]

1.B.6 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to encourage media to adhere to the "Joint Position Statement by the Canadian Psychological Association and the Canadian Association of School Psychologists on the Canadian Press Coverage of the Province-Wide Achievement Test Results" in reporting and interpreting diploma examination results/school-awarded marks and achievement test results.

[1985/88/91/94/97/2000/03/06]

1.B.9 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to report on the standards reached only by those students who write achievement tests.

[1999/2002/05/08]

1.B.20 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association oppose the distribution to the public of school-specific achievement test, diploma examination, and national or international test results.

[1993/96/99/2002/05/08]

1.B.33 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Minister of Education to prevent the use of achievement test and diploma examination results to rank order schools.

[1996/99/2002/05/08]

The Association opposes the distribution to the public of school-specific test results



A lack of consultation with the profession continues to hamper effective policy development

Emerging issues and the role of Alberta Education

The marginalization of the profession's voice

Grade Level of Achievement (GLA), unilaterally imposed by Alberta Education, was initially intended to require teachers and school jurisdictions by 2007/08 to assign and report to parents a student's whole number grade in the four core subjects in Grades 1–9. Following numerous concerns expressed by the Association and other education partners and the failure of the 2005/06 pilots to demonstrate any real benefit of GLA reporting, the government backed off its initial implementation schedule.

The October 2006 revisions to the government's GLA scheme, which call for a staggered rollout of GLA reporting in language arts and mathematics from 2006 to 2008, do little to address the fundamental problems with this program. Concerns continue to be raised about the comparisons between GLA and provincial achievement test results, as well as the marginal benefit that students and parents will derive from this added layer of reporting.

Starting in 2005, \$1 million was committed by Alberta Education annually for three years to the generation of an online databank of multiple-choice test questions for classroom testing in four core subjects in selected grades from 3 to 12. This project is known as **Computer Adaptive Assessment (CAA)**.

Teachers and school jurisdictions were not consulted on this costly online testing project. Not only did CAA raise questions about the use of educational technology in schools, but over the next few years CAA would duplicate the efforts and expenditures dedicated to the current provincial achievement testing program.

As a result of these concerns, Alberta teachers, at the ATA's 2005 Annual Representative Assembly, unanimously called for an immediate halt to any activity related to the CAA project, recognizing that the millions of dollars being dumped into the online test bank would be better spent on other priorities.

Department officials claim that the goal of GLA and CAA is to enhance the assessment and reporting of student achievement. These claims ignore the fact that Alberta's teachers and school jurisdictions are already providing world-class assessment and reporting of student learning. Indeed, if there is a gap in the current accountability system in the province, it lies in the government's inability to put sufficient resources into classrooms to respond to the learning needs of students who have already been identified as requiring enhanced support. In October 2006 the Association called upon teachers to decline participation in CAA and reaffirmed this position at the 2007 Annual Representative Assembly.

ATA Policy

1.B.43 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to declare a moratorium on the implementation of the Grade Level of Achievement (GLA) initiative.
[2005/08]

1.B.44 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to immediately suspend all activity related to its Computer Adaptive Assessment project.
[2005/08]

1.B.45 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to create a provincial working group including representatives of the Alberta Teachers' Association to develop guidelines and protocols for the collection and reporting of student achievement information, including online reporting to parents.
[2006]

1.B.47 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association encourage members to appeal the requirements or directives to facilitate or report to parents any Grade Level of Achievement that is not determined by the teacher's own methods of evaluation of student achievement unless directed to do so by a lawful order of the board.
[2006]

1.B.50 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association call upon members to decline participation in any online testing programs associated with the Computer Adaptive Assessment project.
[2007]

1.B.52 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association seek a moratorium on Grade Level of Achievement Reporting and all new student assessment and reporting initiatives until the completion of the Alberta Student Assessment Study and a subsequent consultation process with education partners.
[2008]

Members are encouraged to decline participation in any online testing programs associated with Computer Adaptive Assessment



“There is a growing technology of testing that permits us now to do in nanoseconds things that we shouldn’t be doing at all.”

—Gerald W Bracey

On educational accountability

We must address ill-considered government initiatives

Evidence-based policy development that improves student learning

Alberta Education's structures for engaging the teaching profession and education partners in meaningful policy discussions no longer function effectively. The negative impact on student learning, given the ongoing pattern of ill-considered government initiatives, must be addressed.

ATA Policy

1.B.28 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Government of Alberta to reform the process for policy development and decision making related to student assessment, evaluation and accountability to include

1. systematic consultation with representatives selected by the Association on design, technical and administrative issues;
2. ongoing consultation, communication and decision making with the Association and other education partners on policy matters;
3. ongoing research focused on guiding and improving policy decisions; and
4. assurances that all exams are developed in Alberta by active members of the Alberta Teachers' Association reflecting the Alberta Program of Studies.

[2004/07]



Educational accountability

Educational accountability is one of the central issues facing the teaching profession today. The Association is committed to working with education partners to ensure that the following statement in principle can become widely shared among Albertans.

ATA Policy

21.A.1 The Alberta Teachers' Association believes that educational accountability

1. is the process through which the partners in the education system each take responsibility for their actions and report to those who are entitled to the information and
2. includes an obligation to improve the capacity and performance of all those responsible to achieve the broad goals of education.

[2006/08]

The ATA's seven accountability principles

Developed in consultation with members and informed by a wide body of research on effective accountability processes, these seven accountability principles form the keystone of the ATA's (2005) *Accountability in Education* discussion paper. These principles were unanimously endorsed by the 2006 Annual Representative Assembly.

ATA Policy

21.A.2 The Alberta Teachers' Association recognizes the following principles of an effective education accountability system:

1. Education partners have a shared understanding of and commitment to fairness, openness, respect for diversity and stewardship, which are key values underlying accountability in education.
2. The primary purpose of accountability in education is to support the broad goals of education and the diverse learning needs of children and youth.
3. Information for accountability purposes is gathered in a variety of ways from all relevant sources, and reported and used in ways that respect the limitations of the data.
4. Sound educational research and practice guide the design and implementation of an accountability system in education.
5. Accountability in education enhances the capacity of education partners to fulfill their respective roles and responsibilities and leads to sustained improvement of the system.
6. Each education partner is accountable for those areas of the system within its authority and expertise.
7. The system of accountability in education is evaluated on an ongoing basis.

[2006/08]

“Who bears more responsibility: the people who produce the high-stakes tests and scripted curricula, the people who demand they be inflicted on children, or the people who use them day in and day out?”

—Susan Ohanian

***Educational
accountability
in Alberta
schools must
involve all
education
partners***

**Using
research
to support
effective
accountability
processes**

Accountability in private schools

Despite the limitations of the government's current approach to accountability, it is important that a degree of consistency be applied to monitoring educational programs in publicly funded private schools. Ideally, when a more coherent approach to accountability is developed in the future, consistency in the application of reporting processes will be in place.

ATA Policy

8.B.16 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Government of Alberta to immediately apply all accountability measures required of public schools to private schools that receive public funds.

[1998/2001/04/07]

“The GLA reports, which are being sold to parents and the business community by Alberta Education for their informational value, will not, I think, yield very much useful information to either parents or the business community even were they valid. A crude single number that will capture the performance of most of the students in a class, say a single 4 for most of the fourth graders, will likely yield nothing of great informational value for use by parents or the business community. If my predictions are correct, the GLA will, over time, be seen as expensive and burdensome and duplicative of other information, and will become more and more invalid as time goes by.”

**—David Berliner, Regents Professor of Education,
Arizona State University**



Real Learning First

Now is the time for a genuine approach to educational accountability in Alberta

In 1994, in the context of cutbacks and managing expectations, the government intended to make schooling an affordable and manageable system with specific and easily recognizable goals. Since that time, the education ministry has repeatedly claimed that the time and effort committed to its standardized testing programs have led to Alberta's being an international leader in improving student achievement. While it is true that Alberta's students do well on international tests, when measurement and sampling error are considered alongside family background and socioeconomic variables, Alberta's students rank in the middle of the pack among other provinces. In fact, research has consistently demonstrated that 70 per cent of the variation in student achievement can be attributed to nonschool factors such as student, family and community characteristics (Ungerleider 2006).

In September 2004, the Alberta Teachers' Association created a committee to explore how the scope and impact of the current accountability framework used by Alberta Education might be improved.

The current reporting processes for the Accountability Pillar reduce school jurisdiction performance to what has been called by one superintendent "a colour-coded bingo sheet."

The reporting requirements for school authorities in the Accountability Pillar are a patchwork of incomplete measures and indicators of school and jurisdiction performance that narrow the focus to a few academic subjects. For example, educators and community leaders increasingly recognize how this narrowing of teaching and learning contributes to Alberta's low rates of high school completion (which are among the lowest rates in Canada).



"The main message is that schools in strong accountability cultures and market-driven education environments have been left stuck in the middle. Present cultures of accountability in the public sector damage trust rather than support it."

—Pasi Sahlberg

Exploring the scope and impact of the current accountability framework

**Exploring
the real
meaning of
accountability**

Highlights of the Association's leadership in advocating for change

- Sponsored Handle with Care: Futures Being Built, an invitational symposium on educational accountability, which took place in January 2006 in Edmonton. More than 150 people, representing a cross-section of Albertans, attended the symposium, which had the theme "Learning: It's Yours for Life."
 - Published *Educational Accountability in Alberta: Prospects and Possibilities for Renewal*, a discussion paper developed in consultation with education partners and intended to convince the government to rethink its approach to educational accountability.
 - Developed, for Provincial Executive Council's approval, a strategy map outlining a range of actions intended to foster in Alberta a system of educational accountability that puts real learning first.
 - In January 2008, invited the minister of education to work with the education partners to develop a more sophisticated approach to educational accountability in Alberta.
 - Initiated, in cooperation with two school jurisdictions, the Accountability Pillar Pilot Project in the fall of 2007 to develop a more authentic approach to accountability.
 - Organized Leadership in Educational Accountability: Sustaining Professional Learning and Innovation in Alberta Schools, a symposium that took place April 18 and 19, 2008. The purpose of the symposium was to explore the real meaning of educational accountability.
 - Developed an action plan that focuses on such emergent developments as GLA reporting and prior reporting of provincial achievement test results.
 - Published the following documents to inform the school community about the implications of the government's misplaced focus on high-stakes testing and the bureaucratic control of schools:
 - *Real Learning First: The Teaching Profession's View of Student Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*
 - *Time for Change. Time for Action: Teachers and Educational Accountability*
 - *Getting to the Heart of Learning: How Is Your Child Doing in School? A Parent Guide to Reporting Student Learning*
 - *Always More Than a Number: Grade Level of Achievement (GLA) Reporting—What It Means for Your Students*
- These documents are available at www.teachers.ab.ca/Issues+In+Education/Real+Learning+First/.
- Participated in focus groups in conjunction with the Alberta Student Assessment Study.
 - Approved in principle a pilot project designed to identify indicators at the school and jurisdiction levels for assessing the extent to which students have achieved an understanding of personal community values and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
 - Commissioned the internationally recognized assessment expert David Berliner to critique Alberta Education's GLA reporting initiative.
 - Undertook a research project to assess the educational value of enabling parents to track their child's progress online, using a secure website.

Time for action— The Real Learning First action plan

Examining current accountability initiatives

At its meeting of April 7 and 8, 2008, Provincial Executive Council approved in principle an action plan dedicated to protecting the integrity of public education by advancing an approach to accountability—including student assessment, evaluation and reporting—that puts real learning first. The goals of the plan are as follows:

- To encourage teachers, school communities and education partners to examine how the government’s current accountability initiatives tend to undermine attempts by teachers to provide high-quality assessments of student achievement and by schools and jurisdictions to develop meaningful measures of their performance
- To affirm the central role that teachers’ professional judgment plays in diagnosing, assessing and responding to the learning needs of students
- To urge the government to shift its accountability scheme from one that relies on large-scale external tests to one that (1) focuses on teacher-developed student assessments that conform to professional standards of practice and (2) fosters the conditions necessary for optimal teaching and learning
- To work with education partners to urge the government to adopt a system of educational accountability that supports student learning and that improves the capacity of teachers, schools and jurisdictions to respond to the growing complexity and diversity of classrooms

The action plan will communicate three key messages: (1) teachers are ultimately responsible, both legally and professionally, for evaluating and reporting student progress; (2) the current emphasis on standardized testing programs does little to address the individual needs of students and diverts precious resources away from the classroom; and (3) relying on standardized testing programs to determine school and school system performance misrepresents the work of teachers and schools.



“The current Alberta reliance on external testing in narrow subject areas ignores most of what schools actually do. A shift that emphasizes teacher- and school-focused accountability is necessary. To link accountability more directly to the task of school improvement, the new emphasis should reflect the unique mix of students, societal factors, and the school’s and community’s values.”

—Stephen Murgatroyd

School improvement requires trust and investment in leadership capacity at the school level

The plan, endorsed by the 2008 Annual Representative Assembly, is built on four major strategies: (1) making representation to the government, (2) educating and engaging members (including teachers, administrators and locals), (3) raising public awareness and (4) fostering partnerships with key education partners.

These efforts to build a renewed approach to educational accountability are especially timely, given the election of Premier Ed Stelmach and his commitment to “govern with integrity and transparency,” specifically to “improve the transparency and accountability of government agencies, boards and commissions” (see <http://premier.alberta.ca/news/news-2006-dec-13-Priorities.cfm>).

Not only is the current Accountability Pillar a barrier to fostering these values but, most important, it does not contribute to optimal student learning and school improvement.

Increased bureaucratic control over education systems by governments diminishes teacher professionalism and reflective practice. Researchers from a number of countries, including the United States (McNeil 2000), Australia (Groundwater-Smith 2005) and Canada (Leithwood 2006), have illustrated how command-and-control mechanisms such as large-scale testing programs lead to a narrowing of educational programs and reduce teaching to compliance behaviour focused on increasing test scores, rather than improving instructional practice that addresses the diversity and complexity of classrooms. In 2006/07, Alberta’s teachers reported record levels of work intensification—71 per cent of teachers indicated that their workload had increased compared to previous years; 51 per cent of teachers reported increased marking and student evaluation requirements; and 36 per cent reported that expectations to report student progress to parents had “significantly” or “somewhat worsened” (Alberta Teachers’ Association 2007). This trend continues today: 65 per cent of teachers report increased workload and 43.7 per cent cite increased requirements related to student reporting as a very significant concern (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2008).

Principles of sustainability

Andy Hargreaves (2007) describes the increasing bureaucratic controls on Canadian teachers as the “tyranny of the short”—a singular focus by provincial governments on quick fixes and short-term funding that fails to address the reality that school improvement requires trust and investment in leadership capacity at the school level. Hargreaves identifies five principles to foster the “sustainability of the long”:

- 1. Putting learning first**, before achievement and testing, rather than equating achievement with tested attainment in literacy and math, in which Canada already excels.
- 2. Distributing leadership widely and wisely** so that improvement becomes a shared professional responsibility rather than the object of top-down government control.
- 3. Ensuring that improvement lasts** beyond the tenure of one school leader or the temporary election agenda of the government of the day.
- 4. Encouraging schools to work together**, providing mutual aid instead of competing against each other in the quest to raise achievement standards.
- 5. Connecting future changes to past achievements** of which experienced educators can be proud, rather than rushing through short-term reforms that dismiss or demean the past so that governments can claim control of the future.

The Association continues to work with education partners to advance a genuine approach to educational accountability. The seven principles identified in the ATA's (2005) *Accountability in Education* discussion paper will inform much of this important work—in particular, exploring an alternative to the government's current Accountability Pillar.

**Enhance
student
learning
opportunities**

The profession's leadership role in policy development

The ATA represents 36,500 teachers in the province. The policies of the ATA are developed by representatives of ATA locals at the Annual Representative Assembly (ARA). As the voice of Alberta's teaching profession, the ATA adopts, amends or repeals its policies during the ARA. Among other important purposes, ATA policies

- express the collective voice of teachers with respect to professional principles, beliefs or other matters of significance;
- identify specific goals that individual teachers, school staffs, specialist councils, local associations and the provincial organization want to achieve;
- support the development and provision of ATA programs and services for members; and
- guide the ATA's collaborative work with other organizations and education partners.

Although ATA policies are intended to be discrete statements, they should be understood in the context of the complete set of policies, which are updated and published annually in the *Members' Handbook*.



“We need to remind ourselves that the function of schools is broader and deeper [than high test scores] and that what really counts is what people do with their lives when they can choose to do what they want to do. In fact, I would argue that the major aim of schooling is to enable students to become the architects of their own education so that they can invent themselves during the course of their lives.”

–Elliot Eisner

What you can do to support Real Learning First

In light of the ongoing focus on high-stakes testing underscored by Alberta's Commission on Learning, more than ever Alberta's teaching profession must advocate for an approach to accountability that will enhance student learning opportunities. A key focus of Alberta's K-12 system in the coming years will be the development of professional learning communities. Research demonstrates that the growth of learning communities in Alberta's schools will come about only if teachers' professional judgment plays the central role in diagnosing student learning needs and assessing student learning. Alberta's teaching profession sees real potential in professional learning communities, provided they focus on individual student learning needs within Alberta's diverse school communities and respect the professional role of teachers and school administrators.

In Alberta, the balance has shifted toward a high-stakes testing environment where students' learning is being pushed aside by a narrow focus on standardization, ranking and sorting of students and schools. You can help shift the balance toward promoting assessment for learning that provides meaningful feedback to students and parents by

- reviewing and promoting ATA policy related to student assessment and evaluation that optimizes student learning, such as distributing Association materials and resources;
- attending ATA workshops, conventions and specialist council conferences, which provide numerous professional development opportunities related to student assessment and evaluation; and
- advocating for accountability policies and practices that honour the complexity of teaching and support student learning.

To make suggestions for policy change or new policy, talk to your school representative, local president or district representative. Provincial ATA staff are also available to review specific issues related to student assessment, evaluation and reporting.

***"A time comes when
silence is betrayal."
—Martin Luther King Jr***



Resources and references

**Increasing
student
confidence as
learners**

Websites

Alberta Teachers' Association

www.teachers.ab.ca

Numerous background materials related to student assessment, evaluation and reporting, as well as educational accountability, are available.

Canadian Teachers' Federation

www.ctf-fce.ca

This website provides comprehensive resources that will engage the teaching profession, education partners and the wider public in a discussion about genuine educational accountability that puts teaching and learning first.

National Center for Fair and Open Testing

www.fairtest.org

The US-based National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) works to end the misuses and flaws of standardized testing and to ensure that the evaluation of student learning is fair, open, valid and educationally beneficial.

Alfie Kohn

www.alfiekohn.org

Alfie Kohn's website provides a wide range of helpful resources for teachers, parents and members of the public concerned with the growing focus on high-stakes testing.

Alberta Assessment Consortium

www.aac.ab.ca

This partnership of primarily Alberta educational organizations is dedicated to enhancing student learning through classroom assessment that increases students' confidence as learners and enables students to reveal what they know and demonstrate what they can do. Many print and online resources and professional development opportunities are available through the consortium.

Association brochures

The following brochures are available at www.teachers.ab.ca/Issues+In+Education/Real+Learning+First/.

- *Time for Change. Time for Action: Teachers and Educational Accountability*
- *Getting to the Heart of Learning: How Is Your Child Doing in School? A Parent Guide to Reporting Student Learning*
- *Always More Than a Number: Grade Level of Achievement (GLA) Reporting—What It Means for Your Students*

Association workshops

Using Assessment as Effective Instruction

In this workshop participants will explore the differences between assessment *for* learning (formative) and assessment *of* learning (summative). Participants will consider how assessment for learning can become instruction, and how student involvement in the assessment process can contribute to improved student achievement.

Length: Half day or full day **Language of instruction:** English

Student Portfolio Assessment

Designed for K–12 teachers, this hands-on workshop illustrates how portfolios can be used to assess and evaluate students. This workshop is suitable for school staffs or for groups of teachers from different schools taking part in a systemwide professional development day. It also fits well into a long-range program of enhancing student assessment and evaluation.

Length: Half day or full day **Language of instruction:** English

Educational Accountability for the Next Alberta

This session outlines the rationale for Association policy related to various aspects of student assessment, reporting and accountability. Particular focus is given to proven approaches to educational accountability that foster innovation and school improvement focused on enhancing students' engagement with their learning.

Length: 60–90 minutes **Language of instruction:** English

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"The standardized testing agenda is deeply entrenched in our system and it seems to be escalating every year. But if we have to choose one part of it to rebel against first, we should choose this endless testing of young children. Let your school trustees and MLAs know that comprehensive standardized testing at this level serves no useful purpose to the system, costs money that is needed for learning resources and is abusive to young children. These tests should be scrapped!"

—Marita Moll, *Passing the Test: The False Promises of Standardized Testing*

Answering the call for Real Learning First . . .



*“Standardized testing is to learning what
Rain is to parade
Monkey wrench is to gear
Cellulite is to thigh
Pigeon is to window.”*

—Alfie Kohn’s answering machine message

For more information

For information, contact the Alberta Teachers’ Association at
780 447-9400 (Edmonton area) or 1-800-232-7208, or visit www.teachers.ab.ca.



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