

# Put Real Learning First It's Time to Hold Accountability to Account

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“Accountability is unfortunately what policy makers look for when trust has been removed from the education system.”  
– *Andy Hargreaves (2008)*<sup>1</sup>

Systems of accountability attempt to demonstrate a relationship between human actions and their outcomes. Yet, all too often, accountability regimes remind us of the limitations of humans and their faith in objective data. The recent global economic meltdown serves as a powerful reminder that our simplistic fascination with scorecards and spreadsheets distracts us from what truly matters in complex human relationships – significance and purposes that give meaning to our lives.

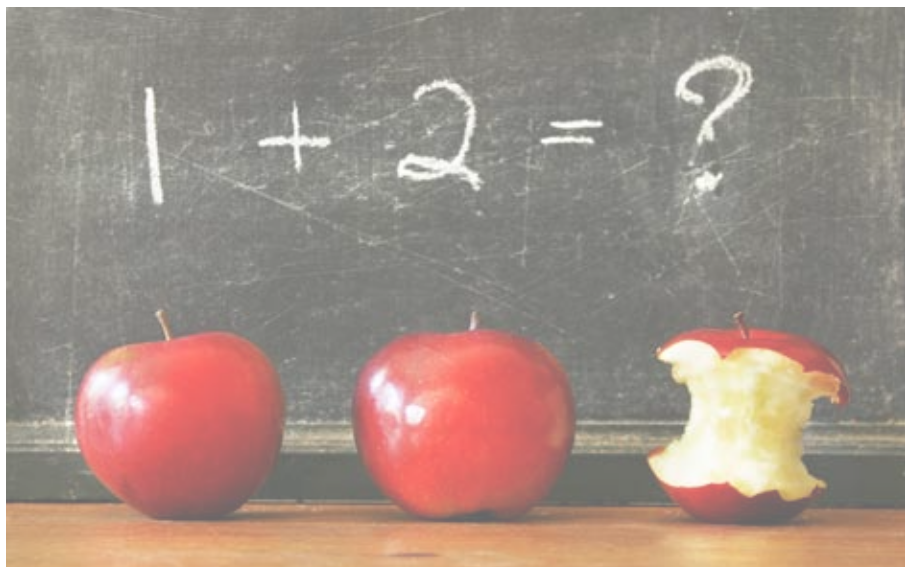
Collecting data is not new nor is it unique to western society. In the 1980s, Chinese government incentives to local public safety officials to reduce the rate of accidental drownings point to the inherent limitations of any command-and-control policies directed at determining human behaviour. Suspicion surrounding a dramatic decline in drownings reported in some communities was confirmed when government bureaucrats discovered that local officials had begun reporting drownings under a new category: respiratory failure. The miscreant local officials were summarily dismissed and lost their bonuses.

In *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*, authors Sharon Nichols and David Berliner describe how *all* rigid, externally imposed systems of accountability become corrupted over time.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on Campbell's Law<sup>3</sup>, the authors illustrate how the reliance on narrowly defined indicators or so-called “objective” measures of performance inevitably fails to address educators' lived experiences. All accountability systems become corrupted when they are driven by the basic human instinct to interpret and manipulate data to avoid punishment or attain rewards. The authors' use of the military metaphor “collateral damage” evocatively describes how bureaucratic mechanisms of surveillance and control aimed at improving student outcomes instead deprofessionalize the teaching profession and undermine confidence in public education. The authors' conclusions hit home when Berliner

applied a critique to the Alberta provincial government's Grade Level of Achievement initiative – a massive data-collection program that provides little new information to students and parents, and which has become a vehicle for comparing and ranking schools.<sup>4</sup>

## Collateral damage to Alberta's assessment practices

Alberta's annual reporting processes for school jurisdiction performance, shaped by the government's Accountability Pillar, is a simplistic story (empirical narrative) about human intentions and consequences cobbled together with numbers reported on government templates. School jurisdiction report cards, as they are commonly referred to in the media, attempt to illustrate a relationship between the data collected each year by school districts (for example, annual survey results, student performance on government examinations) and the success achieved in meeting students' learning needs. Yet, these reports simultaneously include and exclude particular ways of seeing life in Alberta schools. Never mind that, as the pre-eminent educational scholar Linda McNeill has pointed out, “measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning.”<sup>5</sup>



Collateral damage has been a powerful historical undercurrent in expressing the limitations of our cultural obsession with numbers and the hard science of social engineering. Sixty-five years ago, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Bill Mauldin captured the tension between body counts and spreadsheets.



Cartoon by Bill Mauldin

*"I feel like a fugitive from the law of averages."*<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, Mauldin's cartoon did not win him favour with his commanding officers, who demanded compliance and strict adherence to military objectives and predetermined targets – no matter what the cost.

According to Canadian education analysts, Alberta has the dubious honour of being one of the most robust examples of a command-and-control approach to educational accountability in Canada.<sup>7</sup> Further, one of the overriding limitations of the government's approach to accountability is that it is largely a story told to the public without the background provided by those responsible for actually providing instruction to students – teachers. The annual publication of school jurisdiction performance report cards, which include the all-too-familiar green/yellow/red colour-coded spreadsheets, confuse data with information, information with knowledge and knowledge with wisdom. As one school superintendent observed, "this stoplight metaphor would be harmless enough, except we are dealing with exceedingly complex human relationships – not directing motor vehicle traffic."<sup>8</sup>

Under Alberta's present accountability regime, the public is not being told that 70 per cent of the variation in student achievement is not attributable to school factors but to student, family and community characteristics.<sup>9</sup> Even if schools could assist students in overcoming the range of social and economic variables that influence students' readiness to learn, little effort is made to consider the influences of school and community in annual school jurisdiction reporting.

Also excluded from the storyline of jurisdiction performance is the reality that Canada is at the bottom of the 25 economically advanced countries with respect to children's readiness to learn by age six. The UNICEF report, *The Child Care Transition – A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, states that 28 per cent of Canadian children are unable to meet basic requirements to learn in the first years of schooling.<sup>10</sup> In stark contrast to the Alberta government's vast data storehouse on school performance testing programs, no Canadian province or jurisdiction (with the exception of Québec) has taken steps to track early child care and development from ages two to six.<sup>11</sup> Further, of UNICEF's 10 basic benchmarks to assess attributes of early childhood services that build readiness to learn (for example, quality daycare and parental leave), only three countries – Australia, Canada and Ireland – achieved fewer than three of these targets.

Grant Wiggins, an internationally recognized assessment expert, emphasizes that "context is inseparable from what it means to understand"; therefore, assessment must be humbled by the reality that "understanding is a usefully ambiguous term."<sup>12</sup> While the nuance and subtlety of teachers' professional judgement in assessing student progress are put front and centre by champions of the emerging assessment movement, complexity and attention to context are not what drive the Alberta government's educational accountability policies and processes.

Wiggins notes the irony that much of the vigour and intellectual legitimacy of the authentic assessment movement flows from the arts, specifically music, and its tradition of performance-based assessments.<sup>13</sup> As the wealth of the research on assessment illustrates, performance-based tasks require a pedagogical relationship between student and teacher that honours ways of knowing, open communication, and ongoing feedback and support. Unfortunately, little of what counts as indicators of real learning exists in the Alberta government's current accountability processes.

These limitations and the damage caused by the government's accountability requirements have been documented by independent research commissioned by the Alberta Teachers' Association<sup>14</sup> and are apparent in reporting practices that are familiar to Alberta educators:

- Jurisdiction performance, in terms of reporting student learning, almost exclusively relies on provincial achievement tests and diploma examination results that might assess, in snapshot manner, one-third of learner outcomes in a few selected core academic subjects. This narrow focus on a few subjects results in the marginalization of a large segment of our capable student population whose learning needs are not being addressed.<sup>15</sup>
- Teacher-determined marks are not included in the Accountability Pillar reports of school jurisdiction performance despite the legislated authority given in the *School Act* that recognizes teachers' responsibility to assess and respond to students' learning needs.
- The consequences of high-stakes testing continue to affect Alberta high school students, because 50 per cent of students' final marks in diploma courses is determined by the provincial examination. Consider the average mark for first-time admission at the University of Alberta in 2007 was 83 per cent, up from 65 per cent a decade ago. In this respect, there is nothing standard about the standards for access to postsecondary education in Alberta.

### Time to hold accountability to account

The unintended negative effects of the Alberta government's approach to school jurisdiction reporting does little to address the underlying social and community characteristics that limit student learning. In Alberta one out every ten children lives in poverty.<sup>16</sup> By failing to address the fundamental economic inequalities facing many of the province's children, we continue to allow school jurisdiction reporting of student progress to perpetuate systemic social and economic inequalities.

Linda Darling-Hammond reminds us that meeting American government-imposed requirements under the *No Child Left Behind Act* distracts from teachers' ability to address fundamental economic and community health issues. In her view, accountability systems that focus on extracting more and more from local school and community authorities, while failing to address endemic inequalities, sidestep the rhetorical policy question: "Will standards and tests built upon a foundation of continued inequality

simply certify student failure more visibly and reduce access to future education and employment?"<sup>17</sup> When most of the 80,000 children who live in poverty in Alberta live with parents who are classified as working poor, then it is obvious that school readiness has been ignored for too long in this province.

As the provincial government focuses on reporting school authorities' performance on test scores, Albertans cannot ignore the growing mental and physical health issues facing Alberta's youth. In 2007, one in seven Alberta children was diagnosed with a mental health issue; 22 per cent were diagnosed as overweight, of which 8 per cent were considered obese.<sup>18</sup> The average age of the onset of anxiety disorders is now 12 years, and for substance abuse it is 18. In 2007, 44,000 school-aged children in the

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province received doctors' care for mental health issues, with half the cases of depression beginning at 14 years of age. These are certainly not the exit outcomes anyone planned for in Alberta's K-12 education system.

If we are to improve assessment and reporting practices in Alberta schools, teachers' professional judgement must be complemented with a coherent approach to educational policy development. Even the most promising efforts to build teacher assessment practices, such as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS), have been hampered by a lack of policy coherence. David King, executive director of the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta and former education minister under the Peter Lougheed government (1979-86), sees AIS's capacity to improve schools encumbered by the centralized control exerted by the provincial government:

When I consider AIS, I conclude that it has fostered experimentation (try something new for a short period of time), but it has stifled innovation (draw new ideas and practices into the very fabric of the way we do things). The reason for the failure is simple; local school boards don't have the resources or encouragement or autonomy to embed AIS in day-to-day school activity. (p. 40)<sup>19</sup>

As the education minister responsible for reintroducing provincial testing programs in the early 1980s, King is now deeply concerned about the proliferation of the government's examinations and their inappropriate use in holding school boards accountable to the provincial government rather than the electors who elect school trustees. King's overriding concern is that, while initiatives such as AISI do foster pockets of innovation, the reality is that under the

emerging system of accountability that is conceptualized for the purpose of spending scarce resources ... I do not see a system of accountability that is conceptualized on the basis of investment, of moral responsibility to the community and to the individual, as represented by the child. (p. 40)<sup>20</sup>

### Real learning first

The current approach to accountability was introduced by the government about a decade ago during a time of restructuring, downsizing and funding cutbacks, and has yet to be reviewed for its continuing effectiveness and future viability. Today, Alberta is experiencing unprecedented growth and an increasingly diverse and complex student population. For these reasons, the Alberta Teachers' Association in the past few years has hosted public forums and undertaken initiatives highlighting the need for fresh approaches to identify the goals of public education, as well as assessing and reporting student progress in ways that put real learning first.<sup>21</sup>

The Association has worked with education partners to invite the government to review its approach to educational accountability to more effectively improve student learning. Specifically, the Association has circulated, in collaboration with education partners and a University of Alberta researcher, *Educational Accountability in Alberta: Prospects and Possibilities for Renewal*, a discussion paper aimed at persuading the government to reconsider its approach to educational accountability.<sup>22</sup>

As former education minister David King and others have observed, the challenges facing the government in achieving a less centralized approach to accountability are complex, given the government's funding models and ideological commitment, such as increasing funding to private schools and home-schooling<sup>23</sup>, which only serve to draw attention and resources away from children and youth most in need of support. Improving schools' ability to assess student learning will be sustained by developing a method of accountability that recognizes school-community circumstances by addressing the issues facing children and youth. The professional judgement of teachers must be

supported through high quality school-based assessments and developed through a moral commitment to improve outcomes for all students.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, the principles that guide authentic assessment should drive our current approach to schools reporting to the communities they serve. The ATA, for example, has embarked on a pilot study with two school jurisdictions to explore accountability that engages local school communities in identifying how they will meet the 20 goals of public education outlined in Alberta's *Guide to Education*.<sup>25</sup> As the pilot project proceeds, the Association looks forward to continued dialogue with the education ministry to achieve a review of the current approach to educational accountability in the province.

There is much reason to be hopeful with respect to sustaining real learning in Alberta schools. The renewal of cycle four of AISI, the focus on supporting school administrators as instructional leaders, and ministry of education commitments to build school-based methods of assessment among Alberta teachers of mathematics will contribute to this goal. However, until we hold educational accountability to account for the well-being of all Alberta students to achieve the broad goals of public education, we will not be able to make the improvements in assessment practice that we seek.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Hargreaves, A. Presentation at Symposium on “Leadership in Educational Accountability: Sustaining Professional Learning and Innovation in Alberta Schools”, Alberta Teachers’ Association, Edmonton, April 18, 2008.
- 2 Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2007). *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America’s Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- 3 A principle of Campbell’s Law, by American social scientist Donald Campbell, states that “achievement tests may well be valuable indicators of general school achievement under conditions of normal teaching aimed at general competence. But when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways.” [www.wikipedia.org]
- 4 Berliner, D. (2008). *Review of Grade Level of Achievement Reporting – Report Commissioned by Alberta Teachers’ Association*. Edmonton: Alberta Teachers’ Association.
- 5 McNeill, L. (1986). *Contradictions of Control: School Structure and Knowledge*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 18.
- 6 See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill\\_Mauldin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Mauldin)
- 7 Lessard, C., & Brassard, A. (2005). “Educational Governance in Canada: Trends and Significance.” American Educational Research Association, Montreal.
- 8 During fall 2006, ATA research staff interviewed 20 superintendents to ascertain their support for the government’s school jurisdiction reporting scorecard, commonly referred to as the “Accountability Pillar”. The research brief based on these interviews was circulated among education partners in 2007.
- 9 Ungerleider, C. (2006). “Reflections on the use of large-scale student assessment for improving student success.” *Canadian Journal of Education*, 29(3), pp. 873-83.
- 10 *The Child Care Transition – A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, UNICEF, 2008. [www.unicef-irc.org/article.php?id\\_article=103](http://www.unicef-irc.org/article.php?id_article=103)
- 11 Maxwell, J. (2008, Dec. 29). “Economic downturn increases urgency to invest in children.” *Globe and Mail*, p. B2.
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- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Murgatroyd, S. (2007). *Accountability Project Framework – Developing School Based Accountability*. Unpublished Report. Edmonton: The Innovation Expedition Inc.
- 15 King, A. (2005, Feb. 3). “Quest for excellence leaves some students out.” *National Post*.
- 16 Howard, C. (2008, Dec. 11). “Well, well, well: In poor health.” *Vue Weekly*, p. 9.
- 17 Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). “Standards, accountability and school reform.” In C. Sleeter (Ed.), *Facing Accountability in Education: Democracy and Equity at Risk* (pp. 178-226). New York: Teachers College Press.
- 18 *Changing Landscapes of the Next Alberta*. Alberta Teachers’ Association. Edmonton: ATA.
- 19 King, D. (2008). “Looking ahead.” *ATA Magazine*, 88(4), pp. 39-41.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 See ATA publication: *Changing Landscapes of the Next Alberta*. 2008. Edmonton: Barnett House; and *Real Learning First – The Teaching Profession’s View of Student Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*. 2008. Edmonton: Barnett House.
- 22 This paper is available upon request from ATA staff. Brenda Spencer, the paper’s lead author, is an expert on accountability. Her analysis of literacy reforms in Ontario found failures with the province’s neo-liberal accountability practices.
- 23 Provincial governments that are most amenable to funding private schools also tend to rely on externally imposed testing programs, according to C. Lessard and A. Brassard (2005), “Educational Governance in Canada: Trends and Significance”, American Educational Research Association, Montreal. This is more than a mere coincidence since there is a perceived need by these governments to monitor the performance of both public and private schools through mechanisms that are deemed to be cost-effective and relatively simple to implement (for example, standardized testing).
- 24 Sahlberg, P. (2008). “Real Learning First: Accountability in a Knowledge Society.” Paper presented at the Leadership in Educational Accountability Symposium, Edmonton, Alberta, April 18-19, 2008.
- 25 Further information on these two pilot studies is available from ATA staff. Currently, only 6 of the 20 *Goals of Education* can be assessed through provincial testing programs and government school jurisdiction reporting requirements. These projects will develop broader and more comprehensive measures that reflect the democratic values of local school-communities.

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**Note:** Albertans are engaged in a valuable discussion on standardized testing and educational accountability. To learn more about how to improve learning opportunities for students join the discussion at [www.reallearningfirst.ca](http://www.reallearningfirst.ca).