

A Personal View on the State of Education in the Province of Alberta
Prepared for
The Alberta Commission On Learning
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Thank you for the opportunity to address Alberta's Commission On Learning. I am grateful that all have the chance to express their views regarding the state of education in the Province of Alberta, but I am concerned that only a few individuals not directly tied to the system will indeed do so. I believe that I represent a rather different opinion than that of the majority of presenters who will no doubt express a desire for the maintenance of the status quo albeit with more funding. I would like to believe that I do not represent those with a vested interest as much as those who question the efficacy of the present system.

Please allow me to introduce myself. I can best be described a restored casualty of the public education system of the sixties. I survived largely because I attended a small country school in which grades 1-8 were mostly taught by nuns who viewed the students as their children rather than chattel. I also had the misfortune of having been in the class of some of the most incompetent, most inept teachers to have disgraced a classroom. One man spoke many languages it was said, but he did not speak either of my two languages very well. Another was as poor an excuse for a teacher as could be considered. He initiated my dislike of school. In my elementary years, I was fortunate enough to have been alternated between the very good and the very bad. I would have a good year and start to like school and then I would be placed in a class where I could only wish the day would pass. Just when I would have lost all interest in school, I would be passed onto the next level and into the class of an excellent teacher. Funny how the good teachers told my parents that I was intelligent, and therefore able to do better and the bad ones would simply find me lazy, on occasion even suggesting that I lacked what it would take to succeed. Nobody knew I was dyslexic and that I had to overcome some big odds to learn to read, to write legibly and spell correctly, the latter two a difficulty to this day. I would have been the last or second last class of Alberta students to have written departmental exams in grade 9. High school was a farce. I knew that I could get by with the lowest level programming and fifty percent and that is exactly what I did. In grade eleven, I decided that I would like to go to university. I made an appointment with the guidance counselor, where rather than directing me on how this could be done, was told that I could never go to university due to my lacking what it would take to get in and to succeed; translated, I wasn't smart enough. In spite of my multitude of negative experiences during my years in school, I had a burning passion to learn. I was interested in all things natural, especially birds and became quite an amateur ornithologist, my efforts of which are a part of the Provincial Museum today. It was on the strength of my portfolio, certainly not the diploma or my marks, that I was accepted in NAIT in 1970 in the Biological Sciences Technology Program. This was probably when I decided to put in a serious effort and it was here that I learned how to study the institutional way. In 1973, I entered the University of Saskatchewan where through sheer hard work and determination, I earned a four year BSc with honors along with a BEd. I must admit that my public school guidance counselor was a great source of inspiration to me, as I kept hearing his words about my not being able to make university and I kept imagining that I would show him one day that perhaps it was he, rather than me, who lacked something. I have no idea of what prompted me to go into the field of education, other than perhaps that a lot of my biologist friends were doing so at the time due to the fact that there were few jobs in biology and those

that were available paid poorly. I intended to teach for a few years, after which I planned on reapplying to the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. In any case, my practicum certainly restored my old feeling of anxiety as I was once again in the dreaded school environment. I knew that it was only temporary and so I completed my requirements, discovered that my bilingualism was a real asset at the time and soon found myself teaching grades 7-12 French and high school biology. My anxiety turned to frustration. I didn't want to be there but I dedicated myself all the same to my students and parents, comforting myself with the thought that it would only be for a short time. Twenty-five years later, after having taught in Saskatchewan and Alberta; in the country and in the city; in private, separate and public schools; junior and senior high; in French and English; having been involved in a number of different extra-curricular activities; having substituted in almost every possible combination of courses and grades; having mentored over twenty student teachers; having marked diploma exams in both French and English; having gained extensive experience and knowledge in the world of home education, both intrinsically and extrinsically; having gained expertise in post secondary admission of home educated students; I have finally come to the place where I can quit going to school! Temporary can sometimes last a long time! I may have finally reached the end of my school days but my broad-based hands on experience has made me a passionate believer in the importance of a good education along with an even more profound disillusionment of the public education system's ability to deliver it. In those twenty-five years, I came to enjoy what I was doing, but I can tell you that my real successes started the day I quit playing school and concentrated all my efforts into making a difference in the lives of the students in my care. I saw myself as working for the parents rather than the system, of being involved in educating rather than schooling. I never had a dispute with a parent as I never took on the "I know best, I'm the professional here" attitude that I witnessed in some of my colleagues. I made the parents, rather than the administration, my directors and was always cognizant that I was directed by the same motivation as the parents, that of the best possible educational experience for the students. I have never called a student stupid, belittled them, willfully discouraged them from pursuing their dreams, or made them believe that they were not very important to me. I cannot claim a perfect record as even with the most sincere of best intentions, a few still fall through the cracks. Having mostly taught at the high school level, I can attest that some of these "failures" are students who have been so completely damaged by their negative school experiences that they have stopped learning and are just putting in the required time to get out of jail, having equated their school experience with learning and wanting nothing more to do with either. It is with the sincere concern for the many students, parents and teachers who are frustrated with the present learning system that I address Alberta's Commission on Learning.

Having completely reviewed the Commission's workbook, I intend to answer all the questions you have provided as well as issues you may not have taken into consideration while constructing it. I apologize for the negative approach that I am using but I felt that it would have the greatest impact on the Commission, assuming that it is indeed interested in the true feelings of those who would take the time to respond. I also admit that some of the evidence that I am using is anecdotal, but that a lot of it is from research I have conducted or read. The time and effort required to complete this presentation is indicative of my commitment and the sincerity of my concerns regarding education in this province. Thank you for taking the time to read this rather long submission, and I sincerely hope that it helps you in your unenviable task.

General Overview

While reviewing the workbook, I could not help but notice that your “snapshot of Alberta’s learning system” started with the title “Schools, students, teachers”. I suspect that the order in which things are presented in this subtitle is indicative of the priority of the “learning system”, and if that be the case, then this is probably the main reason the system is in trouble. The placement of schools first indicates that this is the most important element of the system, when in fact it is the least important. It is also instructive to note that the ATA in their ATA News have the same three in a different order, placing teachers first then school and lastly students. The ATA’s order indicates that it represents teachers needing schools full of students to continue its existence. For many years I have been telling my student teachers that it is all about kids becoming students, needing good teachers in a good school. That means the order should be students, teachers, school. When school is placed first, the objective is no longer to see students educated with the help of teachers within a school of some sort, but the establishment of the school agenda to be delivered to students by teachers. Any organization that intends to advance an agenda knows that it is easy to do so if the populace is generally in favor, but when the agenda is not popular or not well understood, or if there is indeed reason to keep it obscured from the people, then it can only be advanced by cloaking it within something that is important to the majority. Having done so, the agenda can then be fulfilled by taking advantage of the ignorance and apathy of the masses. There is no doubt that the majority of the people would agree that the educational welfare of the children is of paramount importance and so any agenda, regardless of its ultimate intentions, can indeed be advanced if it is wrapped in this noble cause. Is it just a coincidence that the workbook order is schools, students, teachers, while the ATA’s order is teachers, schools, students; or are the orders indicative of agendas? If so, what are they?

The fourth bullet of the first page indicates that all students between 6-16 are required to attend school. I believe that this should have rather said that they are required to be a part of an education program since some students, home schooled students in particular, are not physically in school even if they are considered an extension of it.

A general comment is that I find a lot of the questions to be somewhat leading. This may not have been the intent, but that is the end result all the same. It definitely lends credence to the old adage that “he who asks the questions directs the answers”. It may also be an indicator of how we have become hopelessly mired in our thinking and doing, preferring to tinker with the present way of doing things rather than to be seeking genuine reforms. I really hope that the appearance of predestined responses is indeed just an appearance.

Question 1 *What is working well in today’s education system? What are the major strengths that must be maintained?.*

My first response would be to say that not much is working well but that is perhaps my personal frustration coming through. No system is without its problems and few are all bad. If indeed the objective of the learning system is the educational health and welfare of each individual student, then that need not change, even if the method of delivery should be changed. I

believe the greatest strength of Alberta's learning system is the choice of delivery made available to parents. Private education should be encouraged and assisted or simply left to conduct their affairs as they see fit. To allow them to exist and then to insist that they be no different from any other school produces only the semblance of independence while maintaining a firm control directed towards making all students the same. This negates the very objective of independent private schools. Leaving them independent benefits the main stream education system by providing services that the public school cannot and helps society by celebrating differences rather than conformity.

Question 2: *What aspect are not working as well? What are the major weaknesses?*

The biggest weakness of the education system is its "one size fits all" approach to learning. The idea that all kids of a certain age are homogeneous in physical and mental attributes, health, aptitude, level, interest, skills and talents is ludicrous. It is all but impossible for teachers to be all things to all men, yet we are encouraged to believe not only that this is possible but that the system can deliver it and is here to cure all that ails society. Small wonder that teachers are frustrated and burnt out.

The system is large, bureaucratic, socialist, anti-Christian, and self-serving, all major weaknesses that prevent it from embracing change. The only thing that usually motivates such an institution is more power and control. Page 4 of the workbook listed all the players, stakeholders, most of whom have a vested interest in more of the same thing and most of whom would be greatly challenged, aggravated or threatened by alternatives to their hegemony. Funny that the actual recipients of this "service" are the most powerless to institute change. The students do not know enough and the parents are either oblivious to the problems or relegated to sell hot dogs at sporting events. Parents who do decide to do something about what they perceive as the deplorable state of public education by enrolling their students in private school or home school are discouraged from doing so and are penalized by reducing the funding available to do the job. To attempt to change a system is trying, but to change a mind set is impossible.

Question 3: *What is your vision for the classroom of the future?*

This is one of those leading questions referred to earlier. It does not ask for our vision of education but of the classroom, precluding that the classroom will continue to be a part of the educational landscape of the future. The main problem with education is that we have normalized the classroom when it may be one of the most dysfunctional human institutions ever invented. Only in school do we find a room full of people all the same age, all different in their needs and abilities, all expected to do the same thing at the same time, ready or not, willing or not, interested or not, and interrupted by the bell. Never again is one to experience this unrealistic environment. The inclusive classroom that answers all the educational needs of all students is a myth. In every classroom there will be winners and losers. If teachers are faced with the impossibility of the classroom and then threatened by the failure of their students, their survival dictates that they reduce expectations to the lowest common denominator. Augmented by the fact that it is no longer acceptable to fail students in many districts, the standards are washed away with the mistaken notion that students' self-esteem will be damaged. The further up in the system children go, the more dysfunctional the classroom becomes under the present system.

My first inclination would be to advocate the dissolution of the classroom entirely. This, however, represents a departure of what all major stake holders in education hold sacred and

so not likely to incite a lot of favorable reviews. If the classroom must continue as an integral part of the education system, we must ascertain that the students are indeed truly homogeneous, not necessarily in age but in ability and interest. I believe teachers would be happy just to have a group of students that are all on the same page at the same time, regardless of the level or age. This may be more important than the class size we hear so much about. As long as teachers are asked to teach a classroom made up of every possible combination of students, they will rightfully demand smaller classrooms. Even so, the regular classroom is the best last choice.

It is hard to see the future classroom without a great deal of technology being involved. This is both exciting and frightening. The excitement comes from the educational opportunities that this technology brings. The fear is rooted in the frustration of having witnessed the increased level of indoctrination into the state sanctioned ideology and desire to create the ideal citizen and the computer's ability to deliver it more effectively. There is much that is taught from a single perspective, denying students of their right to hear all sides of an issue and to be respected if they view the world differently than the teacher and the system. I would dearly love to imagine the future classroom as a friendly place that stimulates higher level critical thinking and encourages all to learn simply for the joy of learning.

It should also be pointed out that use of technology is not to be confused with education. No convincing study exist to my knowledge that has shown that computers can teach. Schools advancing their technology as pedagogical are being dishonest. Technology may facilitate instruction but it is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Question 4: *What are your expectations for the future?What can and should we reasonably expect from our schools? What should the top five priorities be?*

Once again a leading question. The workbook offers suggested expectations such as "preparation for post secondary training or the work force"; "...to prepare young people to be good citizens" (without defining what a good citizen is); "...to reinforce good behavior and respect for others and ...to get along in a group". Any hope of getting original, objective responses of expectations for our schools or the listing of five top priorities is compromised after offering five suggestions of your own. It is no wonder some say the whole Commission is a white wash and that the conclusions have already been made!

The top priority of any system wanting to advance the educational health and welfare of students has to be the proper installation of basic skills. Students should not be advanced without meeting acceptable standards in reading, writing, and math skills. It is indeed an indictment against the public education system when a high school makes reading its major instructional focus. Students are testing from almost zero to post secondary level reading skills, all in the same high school class. There is no way this should be happening. All students should be given every opportunity to learn to read by phonics regardless of sacrosanct pedagogical theories. We must be accountable and objective enough to admit when something does not work and to stop doing it. Sight reading should have been discontinued along with the open classroom of the sixties.

The second priority should be objective programming that takes into consideration all plausible answers and explanation to problems, even if they conflict with our own beliefs. As already alluded to, while pleading neutrality, we usually offer students a single side to an issue. While telling them they have a right to choose, we present them only with the choices we would have them make. While claiming to be non-religious, we offer unsubstantiated, unscien-

tific, misinformation with a religious fervor unmatched by organized religions. Our failing to disclose all does not create a strong democracy of critical thinkers, but more of a “demockary” of clones who can only repeat what they have been told without the benefit of knowing why they believe what they do. True critical thinkers must be given all the known information and encouraged to make informed decisions about what they believe. Walter Lepp was right when he stated that “when all men think alike, no one thinks very much”.

A third priority should include proper school behavior, a good work ethic and time management. If taught and encouraged at every level, students would be equipped to become productive members of society regardless of careers pathway.

Financial education must become more prevalent in our learning system. It is absolutely shameful how little our citizens know about money, economics, investments, enterprise, etc. One would think that the curriculum was created by those who benefit the most by keeping people ignorant of money matters.

The fifth expectation has to be the raising of the bar. Although verbal homage is given about higher expectations in the classrooms today, old teachers such as I know that this is just not so. The level of expectation has been falling for decades. Hilda Neatby wrote a book in the 1930’s about this loss of high standards in the schools, and some of us post secondary graduates have attempted the grade 8 test of the nineteenth century only to discover that it was a big challenge. When the school took on the responsibility of being all things to all man, academics began to be replaced with new social structures, and later, with the politically correct. It should be obvious that the modern inclusive classroom will be unable to meet the needs of all the students, and the ability of the teacher to meet them, if we set the standards too high. Once again, we create a situation where the best solution is to aim for the lowest common denominator.

The final expectation really should not be an expectation. The school should not be responsible for the instilling of values that conflict with those being taught by the family. If morality is a matter of ones personal preferences as we are often reminded and if “parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children” (workbook pg. 4), then it should be up to the parents to see that morals and values are taught and that they are reinforced by the school community. To claim neutrality in religious matters is dishonest. All people are religious, advancing what they believe or support as reason for not allowing what they don’t believe or support. A pleural society is not so if we disenfranchise one group under the pretense of not wanting to offend another. As an example, December 25 was Christmas long before anybody decided that it should become Winter Festival under the guise of not wanting to offend anybody. Winterfest means nothing to no none while denying the Christians of one of their most important celebrations. Should we not also ban Ramadan, Halloween, tarot cards, tea leaf reading, earth day, native festivals, etc. under the same rules? The main reason that home schooling parents cite for having taken their children out of school is their perception of a strong anti-Christian bias within the system. Most of the private schools are religious in nature, evidence that religious groups feel that the public schools are either not teaching what they would like to have their children taught, or more likely because what is being taught is diametrically opposed to what they hold as true. Honest, knowledgeable people would admit that the schools are very religious in their advancement of secular humanistic ideology along with all its adherent philosophies. This has no place in public education.

Question 5: *Alberta's school system provides choice for students and parents in many parts of the province while, in other areas, it is difficult to provide the same level of choice. **Does this diversity add or detract from the central purpose of the public education system?***

If there were an award for leading questions with attached agendas, this question would be sure to win. The question is suspect in a number of ways. First it is misleading people by presenting an unrealistic picture of educational opportunity in the province in that it directs the reader to believe that a lot of Albertans have limited choice in education. The choices referred to include; "public, separate, charter, private, alternative programs, home schooling, blended or virtual programming"(workbook pg. 2). The choice between public and separate is constitutional and so needs not be discussed. Private schooling is available wherever any group of people want it and are willing to do what is necessary to establish it. Charter schools are not as popular as it was initially assumed they would be and so are not numerous, but can still be established wherever there is the will. I believe alternate programs are offered within the public school system and so again only require the will to provide it. Virtual, blended and home schooling are all available to anyone, anywhere in the province. I am, therefore, baffled by the statement about the same level of choice being available in all areas of the province! Perhaps the statement is meant to direct the answers. Perhaps the Commission has been instructed to create a situation that will force all into a single monopoly, public education mold. Listening to the radio on November 26, I heard of Dr. Oberg's comments on a Statistics Canada Study's findings on the results of Alberta students' reading skills (We should always be careful of statistical reporting as it is well known that these studies can be orchestrated to say whatever is desired). I was perplexed by his comment about private schools not doing as well as public schools. When I accessed the study, I found no reference whatsoever to the type of schools involved in the study, so I question how the Minister arrived at this conclusion! If it is the Minister's intention to reduce or do away with choice in education, the easiest way to do so would be to pole the people. Since only a small minority of parents take advantage of choice in education in the province, a majority would vote against continuing to offer the choice. Considering the fact that industry players, teachers in particular, are making multiple submissions under a diversity of names and interests, the results are even more likely to be skewed against private alternatives. Under the pretense of democracy, the Minister could then curtail choice within the system, by saying that most Albertans are not interested. What perhaps should be done is to see whether or not there is any correlation between Alberta's excellent students' results in reading and the fact that Alberta offers more choice than any other province.

My second concern is that the question is written from a socialistic egalitarian perspective which presumes that if anybody does not have access to something then nobody should have access to it or if one has it, all should have it. This is the flawed logic that resists change by claiming that it would create multiple-tiered programming, and that the only way to achieve fairness is by making everyone equal. Even grade school kids know that life is not fair and to try to create such an environment is in direct conflict with the realities of life, certainly not a preparation for it. This type of thinking, by its very nature, tends to direct any service to basal levels. The abolition of choice and its replacement with bureaucratically planned systems subjects virtually everyone to the orders and directives of the governmental agency. There is a special name for this ideology. It is called communism. One should take notice that the former USSR, Russia, China, or any other communist country for that matter, are never cited when giving examples of successful education systems. That's because monopolistic, egalitarian systems do not work, that without competition, the system has nothing to keep it from devolving into chaos. Yet, even within these systems, the best are still selected and put into special (alternative) pro-

grams in order to direct their talents towards the “collective” good. Using another example, the best thing that ever happened to the North American car industry was the importation of European and Asian cars. The domestic industry had to improve their products or face loss of business. Similarly, studies show that the more choice one has, the greater the need for informed decisions by the customer and the more accountable must become the deliverers of the goods and services. Freedom is best defined as having three essential elements, equality, fairness and justice. The elevation of one is always at the expense of the others and so to emphasize equality is to undermine fairness and justice. The most fundamental and important element in our learning system is that of choice. It allows for the differences in children, parents and families to be accommodated. To deny choice in education is to determine to reduce it to its lowest common denominator or a decision to make all students the same. The availability of alternate forms of delivery should be augmented for the sake of keeping Alberta “competitive” in the global arena. The Alberta advantage is that there are unlimited opportunities, or choices. Unlimited educational choice is definitely in keeping with the Alberta advantage.

Another interesting “magic trick” is how the learning system suddenly becomes the “public education system” in this question. You would think that the question was composed by the ATA, who constantly remind Albertans that “Public Education Works”, with jingoistic fervor, without ever telling anyone how it works or for that matter who it works for! The question does not just ask whether the choice adds or deters from public education but from the “central purpose” of public education. What is the central purpose of public education? Perhaps if the ministry described this “central purpose” we would all have a better idea of what is going on and how to fix the problems. I believe the statement was a classic Freudian slip and inadvertently exposed that there really is a central purpose, an agenda that meets with the objectives of big government wanting more power and control of its’ citizens.

Educational choice is anathema to the ATA since only public school teachers can be members. Even though they are the Alberta Teachers Association, they have become the defenders of public education more than the supporters of teachers. The reason for this is very simple. For every 20 or so students not found within the public education system, there is one less teacher paying his/her ATA dues. Privatization would greatly threaten the ATA which will do anything to protect its interests.

Studies have shown that private schools, on average, do better than public school, and home schooling does better than private. It stands to reason that a loving parent, intimately aware of a child’s needs and abilities, can deliver a better, more individualized program than the teacher using a standard curriculum with a group of students. Parents pay to have their children attend private school because they believe that it will deliver a better product than the public school. Now the interesting thing in all this, is that it appears the less money that is spent on educating a student, the better the results! Choice, therefore, not only keeps the public education system competitive, but also saves the taxpayers money.

Question 6: ...*Do you think province-wide testing should be done?*

If testing is to ascertain proficiency and if advancement is determined by this, as opposed to age appropriateness, then students would not have need of province-wide testing. Since not all teachers are as competent (or honest) as they should be, some standardized testing is probably needed. The problem with province-wide testing using instruments created by the same agency that created the curriculum is that the “game” becomes to beat the test more than to learn the content and cheating can become a very real issue. A better, more objective

evaluation could be obtained if a neutral third party tested at different levels for age appropriate skills that could be conducted on all students regardless of the venue of education or the curriculum being used. This would result in a more generally applied standard that would address some of the issues being raised about the outcomes of the students not enrolled in regular public school.

Standardized testing is good when it is testing the level of the students' skills rather than the understanding of curricular content. Most people, if given enough incentive, can memorize and repeat information. Tests based on curriculum are more likely to test how well the system is doing with the student than how well the student is doing within the system. Skills-based testing, on the other hand, is general in nature and a better measurement of what a student can do. Skills-based testing can be given anywhere and anytime. Standardized test such as the Canadian Achievement Tests (CAT) or the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) can be used towards this purpose. These tests are used regularly in most private schools which are less likely to follow provincially mandated curriculum and resources. The American SAT's and ACT's are skills-based assessments that are used to assess students from any state, regardless of curricular pathways. American post secondary institutions place a lot of confidence in the results of these tests. Skills-based testing gives a much better evaluation of students' abilities and a better indication of strengths and weaknesses than does the curriculum-based testing presently employed. Skills-based testing can also be used to ascertain how good the school is at developing appropriate skills in students as well as providing an objective measure of teacher effectiveness. For this reason alone did some of my incompetent colleagues convince the administration in a school I taught in years ago to discontinue the use of these tests as "students did not do very well on them".

Question 7: *What measures should be put in place to assess the performance of the school system in addition to student achievement?*

Student achievement sounds wonderful but begs the question of what student achievement means. Is it life skills, academic skills, technical skills, the ability to regurgitate information on a test, staying in school, advancing to post secondary training, being happy, or what?

When a system evaluates itself it is usually dishonest, being primarily motivated by self-preservation. An outside private agency would be far more likely to give an objective evaluation of the system. It is said that money makes the world go round and nowhere is this more evident than in the learning system. The government makes the rules and regulations designed to most appropriately distribute the money and the schools and boards find ways to maximize their take of it. Good money makers include: maximizing the number of special needs students; superfluous CTS credits; enrolling all students in a program and then pretending to deliver it; registering home schoolers in blended education; keeping students on attendance rosters until October 1 and other resourceful techniques. Sure the government tries to plug the holes, but there is always a resourceful board or school that comes up with a new and innovative idea that others then follow. While the department is being bilked of millions of dollars, its bureaucrats spend time bullying tiny private schools that are hopelessly honest with their 60%. Blended education is neither blended nor education. Most blended education programs are a method of bilking the government of funds. Steps should be taken to ascertain that the programs being funded are indeed the programs that are being delivered. If we are wanting to assess the performance of the school system, it should start with a fair assessment of the system's use of money and the way that public school boards are accessing it. I would suggest we also evaluate the performance of the bureaucrats within the system to determine if

they have the best interests of the education system in mind and not just on some power trip to subvert all into submission.

Evaluations of schools, principals, teachers, and programming, are very often shams. Even when an entire community is wanting to rid themselves of teachers, principals, programs, or what-have-you, nothing usually happens outside of a few platitudes and empty promises. There are a number of reasons the system cannot eliminate the incompetent and inept and so a lot of changes would have to occur in order to be able to do this. Again, I believe that the best way to do this is to involve the services of a neutral third party that has no vested interest in the outcome.

The term accredited is often used implying that the provincial standards are high, well established and defensible. Although standards, goal, objectives and expectations are important they should be employed as benchmarks as opposed to hard and fast rules that assume all students to be the same.

Question 8&9 are completed in the workbook

Question 10: *What barriers or obstacles need to be overcome in order to achieve excellence in the classroom?*

Once again, the Commission precludes that all education must take place in the classroom. Many studies on home education have shown that excellence can also be achieved outside the classroom. What is excellence? Is it submission to authority, cooperation, sharing, academic proficiency or something else? Is fifty percent considered excellence? Since this is all that is needed to advance to the next level, one can rightly assume that fifty percent is at least sufficient if not excellent. Where in real life is half of any desirable thing excellent? A fifty percent minimum standard on a dumbed down curriculum is just not good enough. Our acceptance of this kind of effort is the single, most significant barrier to excellence within the entire system. In the home school environment the minimum accepted standard is usually 80% with most parents not allowing advancement until 100% of the objectives have been met. It is a small wonder that home schooled students are being sought out by Ivy League institutions in the USA who do so because they know that these students can read, write and think.

It is indeed a rare event to find someone who really believes that the public education system is not in need of a major overhaul. Yet public indifference and misplaced trust gives life to a bureaucracy which may have exchanged pedagogical leadership for raw power. Compounded by the profound dislike of private alternatives to public services, systemic bureaucracy, unions and other key industry stakeholders can become a big barrier to change, often using all means possible to convince the populace that the industry is solvent and delivering a great service without need for change, just more money.

Another obstacle or barrier is the innate resistance to change. We recognize that the world is changing yet we resist change within the system, often waiting to implement the change until it is either late or no longer relevant. In the world of computers, internet and telecommunications we must not think that modernizing an antiquated system is the same as creating a modern system. All change should be motivated by how it will affect the educational health and welfare of the student rather than how it can best be implemented to protect our self-interests.

Question 11 is completed in the workbook

Question 12: *What other things should be done in Alberta schools to address the diverse needs of students?*

In the modern day public school we have mistaken process and procedure for purpose and product. Schooling is not the same as educating. We are far more interested in normalizing and standardizing people than helping them grow with their individual needs, whatever they may be. The school can not address the diverse needs of students as it is an institution that demands conformity rather than diversity. The best way to address the diverse needs of students is to provide training that meets those needs. Since students have different needs they need different classes. To put them all in one class and to expect a teacher to meet all their needs is unrealistic and results in someone having to be left out, ignored or damaged. Give all students the opportunity to grow and learn within their potential by separating them into more homogeneous groups. It used to be called streaming and it worked better than the inclusive approach used today.

Question 13: *What should be done to address the needs of students who do not qualify for special needs funding but need more time and attention to address their needs?*

The question assumes that because a student has qualified for additional funding, that they are getting additional time and attention. True some indeed are receiving this extra service, but when the department requires only that individual program plans be made for these students, schools can access the funding without delivering the extra help. I have in my possession a memo that listed all the students who were identified as special needs within the school. It then asked teachers to submit the names of any student who they felt would “qualify for additional funding”. The memo did not ask if teachers knew of students who needed extra help, encouragement, or remediation, just those who were potentially worth more money to the school. I found this very offensive so I decided to privately interview the students I was teaching who were on the list, only to discover that three of the four were not aware that they were entitled to additional help and resources. One of the best students I ever had was on that list and she was not even aware of it! I have witnessed the trauma that some parents and students have suffered in schools that measure students by how much they are worth in extra funding. Some of these parents who, having decided to keep their children at home and teach them, have endured insults, belittlements, lies, even threats from the school that would be losing the funding. The reality is that a lot of these special needs students are not as much learning disabled as they are school disabled. My answer to any parent who is experiencing the grief with having a cash cow student is to get them out of the present system and to find alternatives, including home schooling as soon as possible. It is a very sick system that places a monetary value on the special needs of children, willing to even create special categories and to poison them with drugs to increase their value. Inclusive education may not be about helping those in need as much as helping the schools in need of cash.

Question 14 is completed in the workbook

Question 15: *What other things should be done to the curriculum to ensure that students in Alberta get the best education? What should be done to better prepare students for the impact of globalization and an increasingly inter-connected world?*

First, we have to recognize that a government mandated monopoly on curriculum is more effective at indoctrination than education. There are actually unlimited alternative resources available to get the job done. My experiences with home education have taught me that curriculum is a tool used to accomplish the goal of educating students. Just as there are many

shovels, some working better in some situations than others, so do the curricular needs of students differ. What works for one does not necessarily work for another but all get the job done. The fragmented, nonsequential, often confused and incomplete curriculum mandated by the department is not really a curriculum but a method of directing all educational programs in the province to complicity. Hardly a formula to equip students for the increasingly inter-connected world. Benchmarks are necessary but should not be mandatory. The method of ascertaining them must be flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of students. Once again the answer is freedom, as only this creates the competitive environment that keeps everybody looking for the best alternatives in reaching the common goal of a good education

Question 16 is completed in the workbook

Question 17: *What things need to be changed in the post secondary system to enhance smooth transitions?*

This happens to be my area of specialty, in which I have done a lot of research and a lot of networking with admission directors from all manner of institutions. I can answer this question simply by suggesting that the post secondary institutions be freed from the provincial system of evaluation. I know that some institutions are frustrated with using the provincial diploma and transcript as the sole method of evaluation for proficiency. Good marks are not necessarily indicative of critical thinking, academically proficient students as much as they show that the student is good at writing exams. More to the point, a diploma is no guarantee of appropriate levels of literacy or numeracy. It provides no indication of work ethic, attitude, thinking skills, interests, strengths, values or skills, only the fact that it took twelve or more years to complete. Transcripts only allow institutions to compare marks, not students. Furthermore, the issue is complicated by students from outside the jurisdiction and by students educated outside of the public education system who may not have earned the provincial high school diploma, not because of a lack of opportunity, ability or potential, but because they either chose not to make it their goal or they did not fit the standard mold of the public education system. I recommend to post secondary institutions that they employ alternate admission criteria for those that do not possess the provincial diploma or have one with marks that disqualify them from being accepted. Standardized, skills-based testing, a Canadian version of the American ACT's or SAT's, student portfolios, and interviews would free institutions to find the best candidates for their programs without the frustration of identifying differences among clones.

Question 18: *What steps should be taken to ensure that young children are ready for school when they enter grade one?*

You probably want to hear that we should start them earlier. I do not believe this is wise. The standard flawed assumption is that all students are ready at the same time. This is further exacerbated by insisting that all students at any particular level be of the same age. Students mature at different rates, at different times, in different ways. Let the parents make the decision as to when the child is ready but have something in place that prevents them from using the school as a publicly funded daycare facility. Providing helps to parents of young children to teach them the fundamentals would be a good start but certainly not fool proof. This assumes that all parents can teach their children and care to do so.

Question 19: *What should be done to ensure smooth transitions as students move from grade to grade? How should decisions be made about whether or not students move on the next*

grade - based on age, based on their knowledge and skills, or based on a combination of factors?

In the home school world this is not a concern as students advance only as they master concepts. They may be all over the map in terms of levels and courses being studied, however they are advancing in their skills and following their interests. I only wish the same could be said for the regular school system. The school cannot afford the luxury of individual programming even if it says that it can, neither can it provide seamless movement of all students from grade to grade. This is a hard thing to fix as the system itself cannot abide it. In any case, to promote a student to the next level before they have attained appropriate levels in the fundamental skills is to prepare them for disaster in the later years of their education. Students who cannot read well or perform simple mathematical tasks sustain far more damage to their self-esteem than when they are made to repeat things they never learned well in the first place. Self-esteem has never been something that is bestowed on anyone, but something that is earned through success. The absence of failure is not the same thing as success and is therefore not an esteem builder. Lower grade students should never be advanced until they have mastered the concepts being taught in the basic skills of language arts and math. All other subjects are really just the application of these skills.

Transitions are never smooth when a student goes from the class of a competent teacher into the class of an incompetent control-master who confuses intelligence with submission. The only way to fix this one is to have a mechanism in place to ascertain competence and to remove those who are not.

Question 20 is completed in the workbook.

Question 21: *What other aspect of the current way schools are governed and managed should be addressed and what options would you suggest. What should be the roles and responsibilities of the provincial government, Alberta Teachers' Association, school boards, principals, superintendents and teachers.*

A big question that can best be answered as what should not be done than what should be the roles and responsibilities. It is nobody's job to control people as slaves or automatons. Leadership is best exemplified by example not coercion. The problem with all these key players is that they see the others as either their subjects or masters. Allow me to address each role separately.

The primary role and responsibility of teachers should be service to parents and students. It is never a teacher's job to treat students as anything less than humans deserving of respect and dignity. Teachers should never be responsible for wounding students and if they inadvertently do so, need to make restitution as soon as possible. It is never a teacher's place to admonish parents. Parents are often open to suggestions when experiencing difficulty with their children but nobody appreciates condescension and ridicule from teachers who are under the illusion of being experts.

The principal's role and responsibility should be service to parents, students, and teachers. I have had the opportunity to work with many principals and the best saw themselves as being the primary facilitators for teachers and teaching. Unfortunately only two of the many principals that I have worked with understood this. Most behave as though the school belongs to them, sometimes even seeing teachers as workers, custodians and helpers as slaves and students as fuel to keep the whole thing going. I realize that this is a harsh description of principals, but it is true. The majority of the principals I have worked with would have been ineffective teachers. There is only three choices a person has if they find themselves with a BEd and

hating students and classrooms. They can do the honorable thing and enter another career; stay in the classroom and poison several thousand students over the course of thirty years, quit and get the pension; or aspire to administration. One of my greatest frustrations as a teacher has been the impersonal and incompetent leadership of the schools I have worked in. I discovered that I could indeed be a better teacher by ignoring the ridiculous directives of my principals, cutting back on the paperwork and concentrating on the educational health and welfare of my students.

Superintendents' primary role and responsibility should be service to parents, students, and teachers. My experience has been that most just want to make things look good so they can keep their jobs. They really should have the responsibility of making sure that the teachers and principals are competent in their service to parents and students. Their job is not empire building.

Parent councils should be given more than token power. They should be the directors of the principal in establishing a school that suits the needs of the community.

School boards should be comprised of parents with a vested interest in a good system, and not a paid political position. It's responsibilities should be more than just spending money and time on retreats from which they emerge with useless platitudes like "We believe, kids achieve" or "Excellence for everyone". They are the superintendent's boss. It is their role to make sure that the parents and students are receiving the best service possible by making sure the superintendent is helping principals and teachers to do so.

The ATA should get out of the business of telling everybody that public education works when it doesn't. They should stick to helping teachers rather than themselves. I sometimes think the ATA would not even recognize a student if they saw one! They are too busy creating the next slogan as they advance teachers, schools and students, in that order. Their roles and responsibility is not to attack everything that is not public education but should be to represent teachers, all teachers in all types of educational venues in order to facilitate the teacher's service to the students and parents.

Finally the government should do everything needed and possible to assure that all students and parents of the province have the opportunity to choose the venue, manner, curriculum and delivery of education. Governments should set benchmarks that teachers and parents can use to ascertain best results but not hard and fast standards that neglect to take into consideration that not all students are alike. Government and governmental agencies should be supporters of the intent of the law rather than bullies representing the letter of the law. The roles and responsibilities of government and bureaucrats should be to encourage all to do the best possible job in providing the best possible education to all students by providing freedom, choice and sound leadership.

Now you may wonder why I see the roles and responsibilities of all these players as service to students and parents. That is because I have come to the conclusion that the last priority of the Minister of Education, the board of education, superintendent of education, principal of the educational institution, deliverers of education and the ATA is often education. Bureaucracies quickly lose sight of the original mandate and take on lives of their own, becoming the master rather than the servant, making students and teachers nothing more than the fuel that keeps the engine going. I do not have a solution as I have found this to be the case in all human institutions.

Questions 22 & 23 are completed in the workbook.

Question 24: *What other ideas do you have for funding education and making sure that it is sustainable in the future?*

This not my forté. I do know that whenever there is an opportunity to make extra money, schools and districts are quick to capitalize. I also know that the amount of money spent in education is not correlated to results. I further know that privatization is usually a good thing that usher in more competition and subsequent lower cost. A mix of public and private education is probably the best bet. In the case of private education, it will never work if it is never allowed to be anything more than a 60% slave of the system. If private schools are willing to provide a service to parents at a lower cost to the taxpayer and higher cost to parents, they should have the latitude to decide how they are going to do it. Another way to save money is to continue to provide the reduced funding to parents who would like to home school.

Some of the American jurisdictions have developed joint schools with private enterprises which has the dual function of producing skilled people and saving money.

Less bureaucracy is always a great way to save money, as it tends to lead to less paperwork, freeing people and resources for educating students.

I am not sure how a performance / merit system could work, especially with the ATA opposing anything but monopolistic egalitarianism, but maybe there is a way to do so without injuring the sensitivities of anyone. The real world offers rewards to those that merit it and we are supposed to be preparing students for the real world.

Question 25: *What steps should be taken to reduce current and future inequalities between rural and urban schools?*

Here we go again with our “everybody has to be equal” ideology. I am sure that most people will see this question as saying that rural schools have less than urban schools and this is indeed correct when one considers crime, bullying, laziness, violence and proper dress codes. If urban schools are better than rural ones, why is it that most employers readily hire young people who have come from the farm? My experience has taught me that the quality of rural education is often superior to that of urban kids. Rural kids are ecologically literate while urban kids are ecologically brainwashed. Rural kids tend to value family and faith while urban kids tend to value themselves. Rural kids know how to work while urban kids lack the opportunity to learn a good work ethic. Rural kids get to school on time while urban kids are still learning to tell time. Rural schools have a much higher percentage of parental involvement than urban schools and rural schools are much more a part of the community than the urban ones. Rural schools have also learned how to stretch a dollar a little further which is probably what the question was about. There is some disparity between rural and urban, but I am not convinced that it is a major issue as the computer will do much to reduce these inequalities.

Question 26: *What other issues or ideas should the Commission address as part of its review?*

Teacher training was not addressed. I personally learned nothing about teaching in university. I have heard from everyone of my student teachers that they have learned more from me in a few days or weeks than they have in years at university. You can not make a teacher of someone who lacks the innate ability to relate with people. Studies from the United States have shown that the colleges (faculties) of education are the easiest to be admitted into and that these colleges tend to award the highest marks. In Canada, a student wanting to be a veterinarian must get very high marks in a science or agriculture undergraduate degree, compete with students from many provinces and then train an additional four years to save the

lives of animals, yet nearly anybody can aspire to mold the minds of the future! I believe we should be more demanding as to who teaches our children. I fail to understand how people with graduate and doctorate degrees are barred from teaching until they have acquired a BEd. Provisions should be made to accommodate those whose lives have given them much insight. I would rather have my child in the class of a distinguished non-degreed grandparent than a twenty something know-it-all that has had no life experiences and may not even have children of their own. Create an internship program to facilitate the certification of people who would make good teachers but who have not acquired a BEd. BEd's do not make teachers, as we have all had the misfortune of experiencing.

In conclusion, it is far easier to find fault than to find solutions and I am afraid that I may have done some of that. The first step to solving a problem is to admit that a problem exists and I hope that I have exposed a few. My diverse experiences have shown me that the education system is in need of regeneration and not restoration. It is so hopelessly mired in bureaucracy and tradition and is so ingrained into the minds of its progeny as to be all but impossible to really change. I personally gave up trying to work the system to the benefit of my own children and took them home to educate them. I discovered that we could do a better job than the school was able to do for them by the simple fact that my wife and I knew them better than anyone else could. My teacher training and experience proved to be a detriment as I had to make the paradigm shift in thinking from that of schooling to that of educating my children. This experience has made me far more effective as a school teacher than all the other training and experience that I have gained combined. My children have all grown up to be happy, successful, properly "socialized" and properly educated to meet the challenges of this world without having a high school diploma. Now, my suggestion to parents frustrated with the system is to give serious consideration to home education. There is no doubt in my mind that this is the best alternative for educating children regardless of what the naysayers of the industry are saying. I also know that it cannot be the answer for all parents, but the more we try to emulate the successes of home education within the system, the better the results will be. The advent and employ of the computer will eventually favor alternative educational programs in the future, finally allowing the individual programming needed to address the diverse needs of all students that would give them all a fair chance at excellence.

I appreciated the opportunity to have been able to express some of the ideas, thoughts, observations and frustrations that I have acquired in my educational journey, and wish the Commission the best in finding solutions to the ubiquitous problems of the learning system.

Sincerely,

Léo Gaumont

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