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We don't need another hero!

Why Hollywood should not be the inspiration for education reform in Atlantic Canada

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To Sir With Love, Dead Poets Society, Stand and Deliver, Lean on Me, Freedom Writers. Since Sidney Poitier's 1967 performance as "Sir," inspirational teacher movies have developed into a successful Hollywood genre. By now, moviegoers have become familiar with the essential elements: a charismatic teacher, a challenging group of students, and a magical connection between them. Pedagogical moulds are broken, administrative hurdles are knocked over, and lives are changed. Viewers are advised to keep a supply of tissues handy.

Many teacher movies become box office hits because they pit a courageous protagonist against forces that would prevent progress, namely the educational bureaucracy. They're sentimentally potent because they present the teacher hero or heroine as a lone crusader championing a cause that others have dismissed as lost.

Such positioning makes for great drama, and it plays to the common perception that remarkable teachers must be radicals who somehow manage to stand up to "the system."

Atlantic Canadians can relate particularly well to that perspective, since many aspects of our provincial educational systems, such as the absence of measurable accountability, encourage mediocrity and passivity, not creativity. As a result, we look to heroic individuals, not administrators and bureaucrats, to save the day.

However, effective education doesn't have to follow a Lone Ranger script. Elsewhere in the world, including other Canadian provinces,

educational policy makers are making systemic changes that stimulate creative, effective teaching. They're finding innovative ways to empower local schools and make educators accountable for results. At the same time, they're strengthening the authority of those educators as well as drawing on the energy of community engagement.

We don't have to look as far as Hollywood for examples of how to achieve these goals. Edmonton Public Schools (official name of the school board) offers a model of educational innovation that has become world-renowned. If we do look further away, we don't need to look for glamorous, high-budget initiatives. Some of the most compelling stories come from inner city schools, ethnic communities, and the developing world.

Empowering local schools

In Edmonton, visionary leadership from school board superintendents has engineered a radical, widely acclaimed restructuring of the local educational system. By transferring decision-making power from the school board's central office to individual schools, Edmonton has become the poster district for "site-based" or "school-based" management. UCLA management professor William Ouchi calls the Edmonton success story a "revolution." He should know—eight years ago, he conducted a study of 223 schools in six North American cities and discovered that the key to strong school performance is weak centralized control.

In his book *Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need*, Ouchi identifies seven keys to educational success, the first of which is that every principal should be an entrepreneur. In Edmonton, principals, like business owners, directly manage more than 90 percent of the funding the school board receives from the provincial government.

In practical terms, that means that principals oversee nearly every spending decision in their schools. They decide how much chalk they need in their classrooms, which janitorial service to use, and how many new band instruments to order. They even determine the type of support services, such as leadership consulting, to buy from the central school board office. First-year principals must purchase a full year of consulting services, but after that they budget for as much advice as they think they need. Principals also make staffing decisions and "buy" teachers from the school board at a fixed fee. (Teachers are paid varying salaries by the board, but the price control policy prevents schools trying to cut costs by hiring large numbers of inexperienced teachers.)

Budgetary authority transforms the principal role from figurehead to genuine leader. As one entrepreneurial principal told *School Administrator Magazine*, "Being a principal in Edmonton Public Schools means something." It means, for instance, that a principal can increase operating funds by selling off surplus equipment. When Bob Maskell served as principal for Victoria School, a K-12 arts-based school in downtown Edmonton, he did just that and raised close to $500,000. During his tenure as Victoria's principal, Maskell became known as the "Let's Make a Deal" guy. Thanks to his creative fundraising, negotiating, and bartering, he and his staff turned a run-down inner-city school into a world-class school for the fine arts.

Maskell and his team were able to accomplish this feat because in Edmonton being a principal also means being able to shape school programming in unconventional ways. While some neighbourhood schools offer the standard provincial curriculum, more than 80 percent of Edmonton students participate in specialty programs that appeal to a particular type of student, emphasize particular subjects, or use an unusual teaching style. Parents can choose from a diverse catalogue of options, including programs for girls, for aboriginal students, for gifted students, for various religious groups, for hockey players, and even for homeschoolers. Besides French Immersion, there are bilingual programs in six other languages.

Vimy Ridge Academy embodies this eclectic array of options. Nicknamed the "tank and tutu" school, it offers three distinct programs: a dance program affiliated with the Edmonton School of Ballet, a sports-intensive program, and a program that emphasizes Canadian military history and incorporates cadet-style training. The unusual combination of course offerings testifies to the way that school-based management fosters innovation. Giving principals, rather than pencil-pushers, power unleashes the kind of imaginative change that happens only from the grassroots up. The genius of school-based management is that it galvanizes educator heroes into action by enabling them to stand and deliver within the public system.

The Edmonton "revolution" has worked so well that it has put most private schools in the city out of business. But it hasn't cost taxpayers any more than the previous, centrally controlled system. When the Edmonton school board began its restructuring, one of the stipulations from then Superintendent Mike Stembitsky was that the schools in the pilot program would get "not one dime more," and they didn't. Nor did schools get more money when the experiment went district wide just a few years later. On the list of possible educational reforms, accountability is a low-budget, high-impact item.

Making educators accountable

Movie-star teachers demonstrate their success in dramatic ways. A group of at-risk students shocks state math examiners by excelling on a standardized test, or former gang members turn into published authors. Without such tangible results, the story would crumple and lose its punch.

Off screen, schools increase their effectiveness when they're required to measure and report on their performance. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has consistently noted a correlation between schools' academic achievement and the publication of achievement data, such as literacy levels and scores on standardized tests. This trend was confirmed in the 2006 science test run by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). On that test, 15-year-olds from schools that published achievement data scored an average of 3.5 points higher than students from schools that didn't disclose such information.

So what do better standardized test scores translate into in practical terms? Samuel Casey Carter, author of *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-performing, High-poverty schools*, points to several schools whose experiences show what happens when principals and teachers take assessment and accountability seriously. At Portland Elementary School in rural Arkansas, for example, teachers conduct tests every seven to eight days to track skill development. Before the school made assessment a priority, half of the students in Grades 4 through 6 were scoring two years or more below grade level on state tests. Five years after regular assessment started, all of the students were scoring at grade level or above.

Healthy Start Academy in Durham, North Carolina has a similar turnaround story to tell, and assessment is at the heart of it. A charter school that serves children from under-privileged homes, Healthy Start looks to standardized testing for its teaching cues. One year, the Grade 1 class scored in the 48th percentile, so teachers stripped the curriculum back to basics to concentrate on math and reading. A year later, the same cohort scored in the 71st percentile. But Healthy Start doesn't wait for annual testing to show how its students are performing. Each year, parents receive five report cards and participate in five parent-teacher conferences. Along with ongoing assessment, continuous communication of results grounds the school's success.

In Edmonton, assessment and disclosure also go hand in hand. Nearly all the information schools collect is made public. On the Edmonton Public Schools website, parents can easily find school-by-school results of provincial testing. Report cards indicate the

exact grade level at which students are performing, regardless of the grade in which they're enrolled.

Matching accountability with real authority

Such openness derives from school-based management. Once principals gain authority over spending, hiring, and program development, then they and their staff must take greater responsibility for the results of their decisions on all fronts. Suddenly, accountability is no longer a remote concept vaguely connected with parent-teacher communication but a stern reality.

Speaking to a Halifax audience six years ago, former superintendent of Edmonton schools Angus McBeath put it this way: "People behave naturally. When you give people the authority and the money, they make different decisions than when everything looks as if it is free."

Under school-based management, principals, like business owners, must take responsibility for the decisions they make. If they spend the entire annual budget on professional development and have no money left over for textbooks, then, like entrepreneurs, they have to find a creative way to find more money or bootstrap their way to the next year. Ultimately, they're answerable to the clientele they serve.

In Alberta the money follows the child to the type of education the parents choose: public, Catholic, private or home. For public and catholic schools, provincial money is distributed to the board based on enrolment. Edmonton Public goes one step further, and the money follows the children directly to the school where they are enrolled. If a school's customers (parents/students) become dissatisfied and transfer to another school, then the money goes to the new school. So principals must improve the service they offer or watch their revenues (provincial funding) shrink.

And Edmonton Public Schools makes it easy for parents to take their business elsewhere. Since the 1970s, the school board has had an "open boundaries" policy, which means that children are not compelled to attend their neighbourhood school. While every child has a "designated school," he or she may enroll at any school in the city. And, given the range of choices available, who wouldn't? Presently, more than half of Edmonton children, including many low-income children, attend schools to which they have not been assigned.

Competition for students gives principal-entrepreneurs incentive to document academic achievement. A school with weak test results risks losing students and therefore revenue. To maintain its market share, a school needs to keep up its reputation, which, for many parents, depends to some extent on standardized measures of academic performance.

As one might expect, then, Edmonton Public Schools, which describes itself as "an advocate of choice," performs well year after year on Alberta's annual tests. Despite the city's high poverty rate, it consistently performs at or above the provincial average on math, literacy and science tests (see Figure 1 & 2 on the opposite page for just one example). Performing at the same level or better than Alberta as a whole is no mean feat. Alberta, after all, is a world leader in academic achievement. Alberta students routinely perform at the top of the class on international tests, and Edmonton students routinely score well compared to other Albertans.

Testing, it's true, is not free. In 2001, Stanford University economist Caroline Hoxby estimated that it cost about $5 (USD) per student to administer and mark a standardized test. At that price, she decided, "Testing is undoubtedly the school reform with the highest ratio of benefits to costs."

Offering even better value, parental engagement can help reform an educational system without costing the system a penny, never mind a dime, more.

Figure 1 – Alberta Leading the World – PISA Science Scores 2000-2006

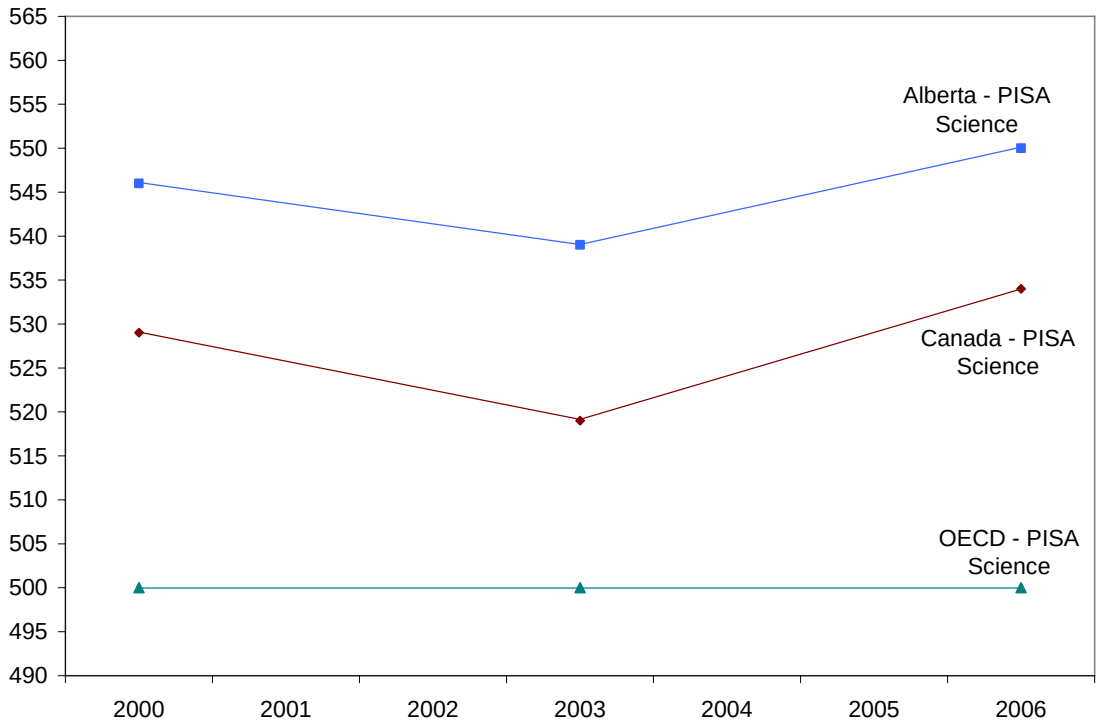
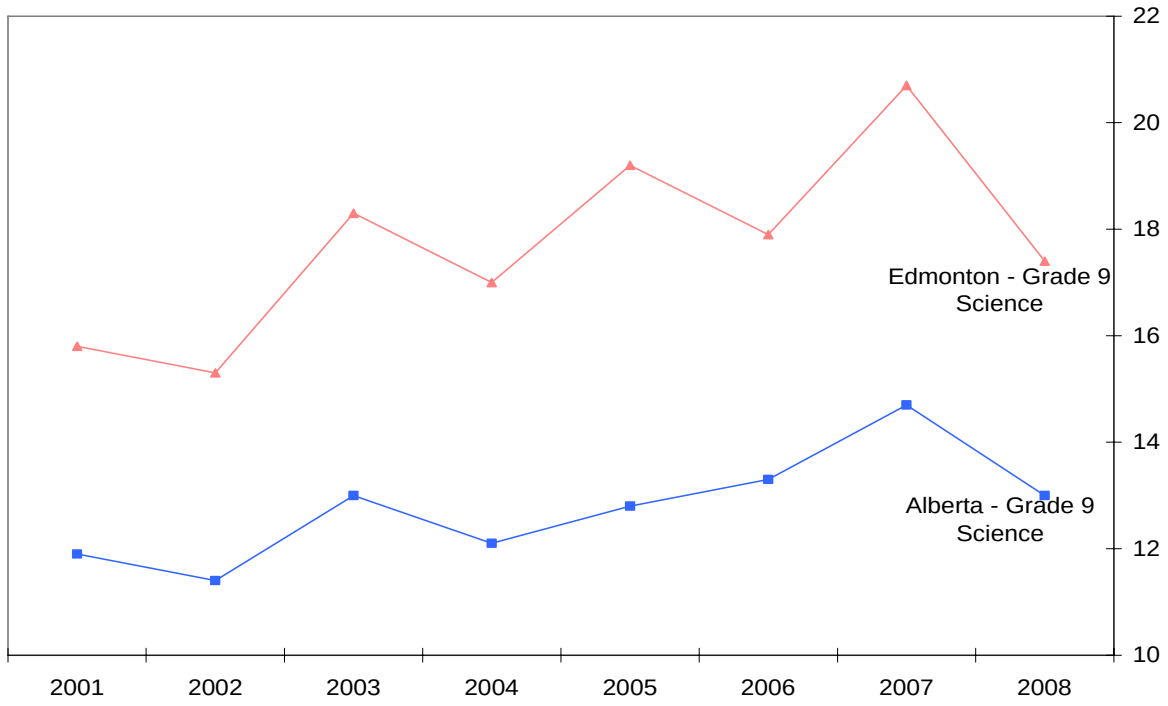


Figure 2 – Edmonton Leading Alberta – Grade 9 Science Achievement Tests 2001-2008



Engaging the community

While most schools offer limited ways that parents can become "involved," mere involvement is not enough to improve school performance. The key, says Debbie Pushor of the University of Saskatchewan, is parent "engagement." When parents engage with a school system, they become an integral part of it, in the way that working gears engage with each other to make a machine run. Rather than viewing themselves as visitors occasionally invited to enter the school, they view themselves working as active partners with teachers and educators.

And it's not just parents who can enter into this partnership. "Family engagement" may be a more appropriate and effective term to use. Schools that know how to engage families—stepparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and godmothers—tap into a powerful force for change. Research across various socio-economic and ethnic groups shows that family engagement correlates with improved school attendance, student behaviour, and enthusiasm for schoolwork.

Greater family engagement might start with something as simple as a teacher inviting grandparents to share their life stories with a social studies class or starting an after-school homework club run by parent volunteers. It might also mean connecting high school students with mentors in the business community or asking family members to sit in on school staff meetings. Imagination, not dollars, is what funds such community support.

Family volunteers in the Southwestern United States, for instance, set up "salas comunitarias" (family living rooms) where students drop in to get help with homework, discuss personal problems, or grab a nutritious snack. Closer to home, a Winnipeg school with a large Aboriginal population created a collaborative writing project for parents and students. To underline the importance of family engagement, the project kicked off with a community supper and concluded with a celebratory book launch.

Such community-based initiatives explain the gains in school performance in Alaska. Alaska ICE (Initiative for Community Engagement), a statewide program of the Association of Alaska School Boards, has helped create webs of community support for local schools. To increase community engagement, educators have reached out not just to families but also to local businesses, charity groups, and associations. As a result, school dynamics have changed. Aboriginal parents who once felt alienated from the educational process now visit schools to participate in family reading time, play a board game during the lunch hour, knit after school in the library, or participate in a parenting discussion forum in their native dialect.

The Alaska model of community engagement has proven so successful that it's resulted in a book *Helping Kids Succeed—Alaskan Style*, now in its fifth edition. Through its Quality Schools/Quality Students (QS2) program, Alaska ICE has closely monitored assessment and tracked notable improvements. As an example, over the past five years, more than half of the districts in the ICE program have improved their language arts test scores by 10 percent or more, with two districts seeing gains of more than 20%.

Success "Alaskan style," like success Edmonton style, works from schools up rather than government down. It shows that engaging the community in education means, as Pushor says, "living out a new story of school." In the slums of India, an alternative "story of school" is also playing out, and the lesson it teaches is so startling that it's worthy of a Bollywood treatment.

A fable from Hyderabad

James Tooley, an educational researcher from Newcastle University, literally stumbled onto a new vision of education when he was strolling through the streets of Hyderabad, a

city of about seven million. After spending the day assessing an expensive private school, he turned down an alley to discover a group of slum schools, privately operated schools that are "unrecognized" by the state. In those schools, classrooms are dark, dirty, and open to noises and smells of the street. There are no posters or pieces of student artwork on the drab walls. But what can you expect for student fees of just a few rupees a day (about $1.50 USD a month)?

To his surprise, Tooley learned that one should actually expect much more from a private slum school than from a government-run school in the same district. To begin with, the facilities in the slum schools are superior to those in government schools. The "unrecognized" schools have more blackboards and better playgrounds, desks, and toilets than their government equivalents. In terms of instruction, the comparison clearly favours the privately run institutions. In India's government schools, Tooley found that teachers and principals were often absent. By his estimate, only 53 percent of the schools he visited were actively teaching students. In contrast, the slum schools are making the most of their pennies-a-day tuition, graduating students who go on to technical schools and universities.

On standardized tests, children in India's slum schools outperform children in government schools. In 2005, Tooley reported that the average math score for government schools was 38.4, whereas the average for the unrecognized schools was 60.8. The results in English were even more telling: just 22.4 for the government schools versus 53.6 for the unrecognized schools. Tooley, who has now studied similar private schools in Africa and other parts of Asia, has witnessed this discrepancy throughout the developing world.

Tooley points to accountability as the distinguishing factor. The meager tuition required to send a child to an Indian slum school costs the typical family about seven percent of its income. With that kind of investment on the line, parents presume they'll get impressive results. Unless they see those results, they won't continue to make the sacrifice to keep a child in school. As Tooley told *The National Post* last year, "The key is schools have got to be accountable to parents. Only that way can you ensure that teachers show up, that they teach and respond to the kids."
If the producers of *Slumdog Millionaire* are looking for a new project, then they might consider capturing the academic success stories of India's educational black market. That would be a film that Atlantic Canadian parents, educators, and educational policy makers shouldn't miss.

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