



Transcript of Remarks by

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Introduction

Mr. Brian Lee Crowley (AIMS President):

We are pleased to have with us, as a senior fellow on educational policy this year at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS), Angus McBeath. Angus, who is seated here in front of me, is the superintendent of schools in Edmonton. Angus leads the effort in Edmonton to improve student achievement. The district is in the middle of a focus on supporting teaching and learning in which every school adopts an instructional focus that applies to every student in every classroom. And as part of that initiative, the district has enhanced opportunities for collaboration among staff, facilitating research and best practices in the classroom, and it involves stakeholders and supporting the crucial work of teaching and learning.

Angus has been an educator for 32 years. He started his career in Prince Edward Island. He is one of your finest exports aside from some great potatoes. Angus is someone who graduated, by the way, from this university. He insisted that I let you know that. And he spent a month in the gallery of the Legislature here to protest the amalgamation of the colleges that became the University of Prince Edward Island.

He is in demand across North America as a dynamic speaker with a truly remarkable story to tell about how public schools can reinvent themselves to meet the needs of a modern, diverse, and demanding society where educational achievement is the important part, where educational achievement is the key to success.

I would, as one final introductory comment, point out that not only has Angus (I didn't write a book) written a book about school performance and student achievement — which, as I understand, is what this group is here to think about with respect to Prince Edward Island — but a book has been written about him. This book, *Making Schools Work*, by William Ouchi, Professor of Management at UCLA, just came out this year. And I'll quote from the dust jacket: "Ouchi's study examines innovative school systems in Edmonton, Seattle, and Houston and compares them with school systems throughout North America." Ouchi's view is that the Edmonton school system, run by an expatriate Maritimer and Prince Edward Islander, is one of the top school districts in North

America. We flew Angus in at our own expense so he can tell you how he has done that. Angus.

Mr. Angus McBeath:

Thank you, Brian. I am going to take my jacket off, if you don't mind, but I have a problem. I only ironed the front. [laughter]

Now, I would like to tell you a couple of stories, if I might. But first, if I say anything tonight you don't like, attribute it to a psychotic episode, because I am not an expert on education. The trouble with hearing all the time that your school system is good is that it makes it all the easier for us to rest on our laurels with a view that we have no more work to do. Despite some excellent work being done in Edmonton we have some results in Edmonton that are disappointing, so I am not posing as being an expert who knows everything. I have not discovered any easy way to improve student achievement that does not involve hard work, absolute driving consistency, and step-by-step, brick-by-brick focus on the important work of teaching, improving teaching and leading skills and knowledge and district level capacity to support the work of the schools.

I am not going to talk tonight about all the societal factors that affect student achievement because there is growing evidence to show that we can improve the achievement results for our most needy students through teaching them successfully in a climate of very high expectations. Of course, being poor affects students, but public education has accepted for too long that such a factor in a child's life plays too great a role in determining the outcomes of schooling.

Our staff, when they got around to being posed the question, "Is it possible to be better?" used to say, "We would do better if we had better students." The answer to that was, I think the parents send us all they have and they don't keep the good ones at home, and it could be a long time before we regulate who gives birth. The people who give birth send their kids to school and it's our job to teach them successfully.

So we decided as a culture over a period of about eight years to encourage people not to talk about "this is how our students do based on who they are and what homes they come from," because we don't know the potential within all children. There are things in students I haven't seen. There are even things in my own son that I didn't know he had — perhaps not genetic, but other things. Students can do more than we think they can, and our children can surprise us. And we can surprise ourselves sometimes when called upon to find resources within us that we didn't know we had.

Support your teachers

In my view, teaching is the most important paid work in society. Teaching is also undervalued in our society. Teaching is so hard, complex, tough, and demanding that I

take my hat off to anybody who does it, because the job is no less than that of transforming the lives of children.

If you are lucky enough and the roulette wheel goes the right way, and you get the ideal family — not mine, but somebody else's — and you have all sorts of support at home, chances are you will do pretty well in school.

The children who interest me are the ones who weren't born with a silver spoon, or weren't born with everybody supporting them, or were born in a family that doesn't value or participate in education or hasn't got all that it takes to lift their children out of poverty. Those are the students we find the hardest to teach, and they're the ones who need education the most — the children who don't necessarily get a fair deal in life, and there are lots of them.

I said to some graduates from one of our high schools at the end of June, "I know you people think you're hot stuff, but I'll cheer you up. You're graduating high school and I salute you for staying in school long enough to complete it. But you need to know there are tens of millions of students from India and China who have just graduated from high school, too, and most of those students have a huge work ethic and are at minimum, bilingual. They're ready to work anywhere for less than you will and they have a great attitude and there's more competition than you realize, and you must continue to learn until the day you die."

The act of teaching is hard work

When I graduated from university, it took me a long time to figure out that universities do a great job but they cannot, in fact, truly prepare teachers for what they face in the classroom. I think an awful lot of the learning occurs only when you get into a classroom. And if any of you ever taught children, you realize that the act of teaching is to get children to do willingly that which they would rather not do. There's the odd kid who's just dying to learn but the rest aren't. Got to fool them every inch, got to convince them to learn, got to hold them accountable, and that's the trick that teachers do that you don't even recognize. When you walk down a hallway in a school and you see everybody working, you don't realize how much work it took to get everybody to work because you just see the effect — you don't see the process of getting each student to learn.

When I started teaching — and I thought this was a phenomenon just here, but it was the same in Edmonton — I did not know how to teach reading and writing effectively. I'm not blaming anybody, but I had a couple of students in my room who did not know how to read much, and they didn't know how to read much better than that at the end of the year. I used to worry about that, but nobody told, nobody noticed, nobody complained. I never told anybody.

When I moved to Edmonton, I took a Masters degree in Administration. I also completed eight reading courses and I still didn't know much about how to teach students to read

and write. I knew a lot about reading and the theory of reading but I didn't know how to do the actual work of teaching reading. Again, I got re-certified, my principal never noticed, he never asked, and it didn't seem to matter.

This might never happen in Prince Edward Island, but in Edmonton sometimes members of the public say, "You have some teachers who aren't very good. How come you don't do something about them?" We have other people who just don't like teachers. I was asked the other day by somebody important, "Well, how many teachers did you get rid of out of your 3,800 last year?" And I said, "I don't know, how many key bank employees did you get rid of? We don't publish their names in the newspaper. Do you publish your bank employees' names in the newspaper? What is this attitude that some people have about teachers that's so negative?" This may never have happened to you, but it surely happens where I live.

I think one of the challenges with teaching is that all principals I have worked for have been fine human beings, but they never focused on me as a teacher. They focused exclusively on discipline, parents, getting the system to work, getting the school to work, doing all of the organizing, the scheduling, perhaps some of the ordering. They did the evaluations in order to certify us and then abandoned us, but not because they wanted to.

Improving the practice of teaching

I wondered if principals should learn more about the work of teachers, so I did something in Edmonton that got me nearly in hot water, at least for awhile. I realized that most teachers don't change their teaching practice profoundly after they become teachers and have been teaching for a few years. Their teaching practice tends to be static, and we only do what we know how to do. If we don't teach teachers how to improve their teaching, then how are they supposed to get better at it? I mean, you can't watch yourself teach — you are too busy focusing on the students and all the work that there is to do. Is there a body of knowledge — well researched, tried and true, best practices — that we know is effective and that is teachable to teachers?

The thing that startled the principals so much when I became superintendent was that I said, "I need you to spend 50 percent of the instructional day in classrooms." I could have said, "I need you to tread water every day for eight hours a day" and it would have been received with equal incredulity. Now, there was some panic, some pushback, but I want to give you a theory.

We know what it is students are expected to learn. In our province, this is referred to as learner expectations. Society has said that students need to have certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes if they're to grow up and contribute to the community, to be economically self-sufficient, and to compete with others. Now, these are the things that teachers are obliged to teach. Do we even know that teachers teach them? And does that matter? Does it matter if teachers teach reading? And so to ensure that more and more of our students could be successful in life our district started a fair while ago

measuring student learning, which was a radical thing to do at one point in our history and quite unpleasant at first, because people said, “You cannot measure what are students are learning because you can’t measure that kind of thing, you can’t capture student learning.”

I would agree that there are a number of things that are hard to capture including everything that students should and have learned but it is possible to gather some pretty reliable evidence of some of what they should and have learned. We do have standardized assessments at the district level, grades 1 to 9 for students in writing and 1 to 9 for students in reading. And then we have provincial examinations at grades 3, 6, 9, and 12. At the grade 12 level, the final mark is a blend between the teacher’s mark and the provincial achievement examination mark. The grades 1 to 9 writing tests are marked by teachers and most principals mark these tests as well. At the district level we audit about 5000 of those writing examinations a year, and around 94 percent of the teachers have been judged to have marked them correctly according to the standards.

Anyway, let’s get to the point. I believe that over time in our system most teachers didn’t, in fact, have the right support in Edmonton in terms of learning to grow and change and develop as teachers because that isn’t where we traditionally spent our money. Although there’s lots of PD and workshops and other things for teachers, traditionally, teachers in our district said, “Yes, I went to that workshop,” but nothing different happened on Monday morning. So maybe we needed to study what kind of professional development teachers needed that would actually change teaching practice. I’ll give you an example of it.

It turned out that a lot of teachers believed that they had not been well prepared in university to teach reading and in many cases insufficient preparation was provided to give them a high level of confidence as a reading teacher. And no matter how we measured it, our results were low. We also had some disappointing high school completion rates.

So we designed several reading programs that would take one to three years of training for teachers. Basically, the teacher would study, go for training, practice, have a professional coach provide them with feedback, go back to training, learn something, practice it, have a professional coaching experience, and at the end of the one to three years they were much better at teaching reading.

We did a study and found out that these teachers got more and better results. But here’s the irony. A lot of people didn’t want to take the training because it was hard, it was time consuming, it was a lot of work, and it was an intrusion on their comfort zone because most of us find it hard to learn something new that requires us to change practice. The irony is that, after the teachers took the reading training, they felt more confident and more competent in their work. Because most teachers often feel guilt-ridden some of the time about their work — it’s a guilt-ridden kind of profession. There’s always more that you can do and somebody is always not learning and there are always

students for whom you feel sorry. I think the profession very much blames itself for whatever shortcomings there are in public education.

Classroom visits crucial

At first principals said to me, “But I have all this work to do, and I can’t go into classrooms. Why do you want us to go in the classroom anyway?” I said, “I want you to go into classrooms because your job is to monitor, coach, support, nurture and ensure that teachers are the very best they can be.” They said, “Yes, but we don’t know how to do that work.” I said, “I know, I don’t know how to do it either as your superintendent. So here’s what we will do. I will walk classrooms with you when I come to your school. I will sit with you in your office for two hours and we’ll go over all the data about how your school is performing, and then we’re going to practice walking classrooms together.”

And I’ve been in 7000 classrooms in the last four years and I don’t pretend to know everything about instruction, but I go out and I do the visits and I go over the results. We don’t look at one year’s results — you’ve got to look at timelines: how did the students perform in this school over time?

What does the research say about what happens to students who don’t complete school? They tend to be unemployed and live in poverty. They also tend to have bottom-level jobs. Minimum wage will not put a roof over your head and it will not keep you out of poverty. I cannot work for \$6.50 an hour at my age and have a home and raise a family. It just won’t work. On minimum wage, I can’t transfer or move and I won’t get a promotion and I won’t have any advancement opportunities. Chances are even my health will be poor because there’s a lack of efficacy and a lack of empowerment when you do not have a high school education. I don’t know what it is. It eats people like cancer. Education is more than just book learning. Education is all the other things you acquire by going to school, including the development of character.

But when I go to a school now, I say to the principal, “Pick 10 rooms that we should visit this morning.” And when we get into the hallway, I say to the principal, “Tell me what I’m going to see in this room.” Then we spend three, four, or five minutes, and I ask the principal, “What did we just see? What feedback would you give the teacher based on what we just saw in this room?”

Some principals said, “But I’m not good at going into rooms. I’ve never been in rooms. Teachers don’t like it when I go into their rooms.” I said, “Give it a chance. I’ll walk in the room first.” After a while, you just walk right in the room. If you walk into 7000 rooms, you lose your fear. We also train our principals, assistant principals high school department heads and many teachers on how to observe teaching and to give successful feedback.

High school principals were the hardest to convince to get them to walk into classrooms because high school teachers in Edmonton viewed their classrooms as their own domain: “we own it, we run it.” I think it was a defensive culture. Or perhaps a culture

where people were abandoned for a period of years and left on their own to sink or swim.

So principals needed to learn to go into the classroom, needed to learn best practices, needed to know the educational research — didn't have to find it, just had to know it — and needed to learn how to give feedback to teachers. Can I tell you that getting feedback in education is really hard? Because it's not something that people in Edmonton were used to doing.

Now let me tell you about a couple of outcomes that would surprise you. First of all, we had to train all our principals to walk into classrooms in other schools with a guide to look for evidence of best practices. Then they would come out into the hall and do feedback: "Here's what we saw." Not "here's what's wrong with this room."

Now they're gaining confidence. If you don't go into teachers' rooms now, teachers often say, "Why aren't we getting it, what's wrong?" — because teachers like it when you go into their room. Not at first, but after a while they said, "We feel more confident. I feel supported." Now principals come back to me and say, "We're working on that." The teachers feel that it's important their principals also know what they're struggling with — you know, special needs students, not enough resources.

Principals in classrooms are not out to get the teacher. All teachers in Edmonton are now also visiting other rooms in their own school and in other schools in order to practice giving each other feedback — using protocols; it's not "anything goes".

I wanted to share that with you just to give you a little glimpse of how we support teachers. I think the most important work you can do as a system is support teachers, because kids learn in classrooms from teachers. They learn at home, they learn in a community, but given the absence, sometimes, of community support, of the church playing a big role, and maybe they're not connected to team sports or other things, teachers almost become a life-and-death situation for a lot of kids in our society; we depend on them so much.

Measuring results

Results are very important in Edmonton. I want to give you an example. In 2001, for the first time, the province sorted out the problems with collecting high school completion data and produced for each of Alberta's school districts. Up until then I think we all thought that our district was doing quite a great job of educating students. We were written up in articles and we hosted hundreds and probably thousands of international visitors.

And the rate of high school completers was 64 percent for the 1999-00 school year. One of our directors said to me, "You can't tell people our completion rate is 64 percent. People will be upset and leave the system, because there's a Catholic District their

children can attend, there are publicly funded charter schools and publicly subsidized private schools. We'll lose students."

I said, "We deserve to lose students. With this completion rate, we ought to lose a lot of them. The sad news is we aren't going to lose students when people find out what our high school completion rate is. Nobody left when the results said we don't know how to teach reading as well as we should and nobody left when they said we don't teach writing well, and nobody left when they said we don't do a good job in high school mathematics or junior high math. So I'm not convinced we're going to lose a class of kids just because we tell the truth about our results." The public doesn't mind when we admit that we could improve our work. What leaves the public skeptical about public education is when we don't share our results and we don't have a realistic plan to improve our work. Blaming the results on our parents doesn't cut it either.

Some of our staff didn't like it when the province published our high school completion rate. The first response of some of the staff was to say that whoever calculated that number didn't know what they were doing — something is wrong with the statistician, let's kill the messenger.

So I said to our director of student information, a really respected former high school assistant principal whom everybody liked and admired, "go on over to the Alberta Education Department and study the methodology they used to calculate our completion rate, and then I want you to go to every high school in Edmonton and tell them whether the methodology is sensible." So he went over, studied the methodology, said it made sense and that it worked and was fair, and went to the high schools and they believed him. And our rate was 64 percent as indeed the province said it was.

Now, let me tell you, our staff wasn't happy, our staff was embarrassed. I published it in as many places as I could. In education if you do badly we tend to blame the students or their families, or say it's because there's not enough money, or there are too many special needs students, or we don't have the resources, or the parents don't do their work. So now achievement information on high school education is a tool to get us to focus on making improvements to the things we do control such as how we teach, lead and support teachers.

Now, how do you make improvements? Well, first of all you have to ensure all staff understand precisely just how important it is that we educate all students successfully. The staff need to hear that repeatedly year after year. We also have to expose our staff to the achievement results so that they understand how they are doing. I also think it is crucial that staff understand the high moral purpose that is attached to the job of providing students with an education. We in education can't wait for the public to tell us about how important our work is. We have to believe and say that every day of the year.

Well, first of all, we had to involve our teachers in all this work, because teachers' associations all over North America tend to oppose standardized measurement of

achievement. What they say is — and I'm not putting them down — “If you measure it, you'll hurt students.”

I don't believe testing damages students. A low level of education can certainly harm adults. Testing is a fact of life. I think you can test in a way that is unethical, but all of our tests in Alberta are teacher developed and mostly teacher marked. Many of our teachers now believe that standardized assessments help them to design their programming for students. What happens in August in every school in Edmonton is that teachers will get out the test data and pull out every single question, draft them all out and put them into categories, and see where the results are weak and where the staff will need to put more emphasis. The results, over time, should give the staff a very good idea of where to spend their professional development funds.

The beef in the burger

Then I say to the schools, “You need to develop a target to show what how much you're going to improve by this year.” The schools have to set a public target, and they have to show the results publicly.

And you would think parents would take all the students from what might appear to be weak-performing schools and move them to other schools. They don't, although in Edmonton you're allowed to go to any school you want. I don't think most parent decisions about schools are based on just achievement data, but parents do think it's important that we tell the truth in education.

So the schools set targets to reach by yearend. And if the schools persistently don't improve over time, then I have to bring in another measure called “pressure and support.” Now, I learned this from Dr. Michael Fullan. My former superintendent in 1997 asked me to go visit Dr. Fullan in Toronto. I was a little intimidated to do that, and he said, “Oh, yes, I've heard of your system, it's quite famous, but there's no beef in your burger.” I didn't need to ask him what that meant. I knew what the beef was that we didn't have. We didn't have impressive achievement results.

We asked Dr. Fullan to visit Edmonton in September of this past year. He talked to about 800 staff and studied our system of training and professional development and monitoring, and he said that this kind of system appears to make sense.

So we set achievement targets, we measure, and we hold people accountable for the results. What I do is identify which are our weakest schools over time. We also know which are our highest needs schools in terms of family income. Last year, in one of our most high needs schools in Edmonton, 100 percent of the grade 6 students passed the language arts achievement test. In May, I visited one of our wealthiest schools and said to the principal, “I find it curious that only 87 percent of your students passed the grade 6 achievement test. Let me see the professional development plan and, more importantly, let me see your schedule.” The principal said, “What do you mean, my schedule?” I said, “I want to see how you schedule your week.” “Well, I don't have a

schedule.” I said, “Why don’t you have a schedule? I’ve got to wait for parents to drop in, I’ve got to settle disputes, deal with the students teachers send to the office and I have to be around to deal with the custodian.”

I’m not putting this principal down — But I did say, “How do you get into rooms if you don’t have a schedule?” “Well, if I have time left over at the end of the week I go into classrooms.” I said, “Did you not read *The Wealthy Barber*? The Wealthy Barber said pay yourselves first — take \$100 a month and put it into an investment. If you wait until the end of the month, all you’ve got left are days and no money.”

I think that most of our principals now schedule their day, and I don’t hold them accountable for whether they spend 50 percent of their day in classrooms. But I do hold them accountable for knowing their teachers, knowing what their strengths and weaknesses are, and for having a plan to show what they’re going to do over time to strengthen the teaching of the teachers in a way that is supportive and helpful to staff.

Very few teachers are so bad that they don’t belong in our profession. Some teachers are born gifted. My sister-in-law was a teacher in your system. I think she was a naturally gifted educator. I didn’t have that gift. I had to learn the hard way. I had very little help becoming a good teacher. It took me years to get good at what I needed to get good at a lot faster. I got better as fast as I knew how and as fast as the support was there to help me.

Student by student

About three years ago when we got our reading and writing results from own district tests, we said the following to our principals, “If you take out the true special education students, we have 2500 students from grades 1 to 10 who are below grade level in reading. They do not have special education issues, but they’re below grade level. I need a list of each one of these students sent to my office by November 1, and beside each student’s name please list a strategy that will make a difference to that student’s achievement in reading. We did the same thing for writing.

The occasional reaction I heard was, “Don’t you trust me?” I said, “Yes, I trust you. I trust my banker but I still need to get a bank statement. I trust my broker but I wouldn’t mind getting an update occasionally.” It is a matter of trust but verify.

I won’t go through the whole process that we went through because educational change is like going through Elizabeth Kubler Ross’s stages of death, dying and grieving. The first response that most people have to change is, “I don’t want to do it.” My son used to come to me and say, “Dad, can I have a new computer or whatever?” He wanted an answer within a nanosecond. To preserve my own sanity, my first answer was “No.” I couldn’t be saying yes, yes, yes — I had to think, and I needed time and I had to talk to his mother. And I needed to make him do some thinking. And so I think all of us are resistant to change as a way of maintaining our stability and sanity. If teachers are hard

to change, it's because it's hard for any of us to change. I think that's human nature. Members of other professions also find it hard to change.

Anyway, they submitted 2500 names. It turned out there were students at risk in every school in Edmonton, including schools in really well to do neighbourhoods. Then I went to my school visits and said, "I have my list, let's look at your list. Let's talk about each of these students." The first person I went to didn't know where the list was. The second person also didn't know where their list was. When I went to the third person, the list was on the desk when I walked in the room. I said, "That's fine. Tell me about each student that is listed on that page. Where is this student going to be in reading and/or writing by the end of the year?"

At the end of the first year, 57 percent of those students who were at risk on the list went up two grade levels — in other words, if they were at grade 3 they tested out at grade 5. So we decided this year to make this process more sophisticated.

I told you at the beginning that our weakest performers are Aboriginal students for a whole range of reasons I won't go into. Many of them really don't do well as they need to do. So we said, "Now, every student should be at grade level in reading by yearend, every student should be at grade level in writing by yearend. We're also going to track the achievement of every ESL and Aboriginal student who is below grade level. Do you know how we test for them at the end of the year? The students write the reading test and the writing test and then our Department of Assessment calculates how the students did and then they show the schools how well each of their at-risk students did. There was hardly a single complaint this year because I think they our staff had gotten used to the fact that we were going to monitor how well these students were doing.

Now, why is it that people, when monitored, behave better or perform better than before? Well, I think it's a lot like this: if your brother or sister or nieces or nephews come into your house every day, you're not going to tidy up when one of them comes in. But if your grandmother comes from 10,000 miles away and she hasn't seen you for 10 years and you're in her will, you might tidy up your house in a way that you wouldn't if a regular visitor came. So I think it's what you expect and inspect that makes a difference.

What I would make the pitch for is the importance of supporting teachers through on-going, targeted professional development. Our teachers would not give that up for love or money, although they complain sometimes when they have to do it.

I honestly believe that measuring student achievement — and we don't pretend to measure it perfectly — is one crucial way of knowing what value you are getting from public education expenditures. Theoretically, I think, teachers haven't traditionally been well trained to assess how well students are performing and that's a real challenge for our profession. We already know from the research what good teaching looks like. Teachers feel better when they get better results. Teachers teach better when they know what they're doing. Principals want students to learn and teachers to perform well.

What I often look for in classrooms is whether students are engaged in learning and who isn't engaged.

And I am sometimes asked "when are we going to stop all this work of measuring achievement, setting standards, setting targets and strengthening our knowledge and skills? My response is that it can never stop. There are always improvements to be made in the way we educate students, and to stop measuring, reporting and learning is to stop knowing where we are and where we have to go. If we want the teaching profession to achieve the kind of respect it truly deserves, we, as educators, are required to set the very highest standards for own professional growth and development.

I wish you all well as you deliberate on behalf of the young people of this "Fair Island of the Sea."