

# ideas matter

WINTER 2004

## Real education reform:

**AIMS sets the agenda**

**Standardized exams:**  
the test of a good school

**Angus McBeath**  
on choice, accountability  
and performance in  
our schools

**Independent voices**  
endorse AIMS report card

**Report card:**  
how we're making a  
good tool even better

**Angus McBeath**  
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**AIMS**  
Market Studies

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Angus McBeath and AIMS board member George Cooper discuss the success of Edmonton's innovative and accountable public school system.

## LEADING THE EFFORT TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Students in Atlantic Canada lag behind the rest of the country in academic achievement. This trend, if not reversed, will reinforce Atlantic Canada's perennial position as a "have-not" region. It is this simple truth that permeates all of AIMS' work in the education field and keeps us coming back to the topic despite often heated reaction on the part of the education establishment.

One of our earliest conferences, Choosing Better Schools, highlighted the successes that have been achieved by experimenting with the traditional design of public education and shifting the power relationship within the system to promote innovation and personal responsibility—on the part of students, teachers, parents, and administrators.

Further AIMS research, like our paper "Testing & Accountability," demonstrated that clear, measurable goals and independent assessment tools were critical in developing accountability and promoting a fair system where achievement is recognized and rewarded and expectations are clearly defined—again, for everyone.

And AIMS has not waited for the system to change itself. Our High School Report Card has raised the bar on public accountability in education and increased immeasurably the pressure for more public reporting of what school success looks like and how we can get there.

Angus McBeath, who graces the cover of this issue of *Ideas Matter*, is the superintendent of schools in Edmonton, a public school system that has embraced the model of education AIMS has been promoting for almost 10 years. Every school in that city is now an education enterprise led by a strong principal with the power to implement change and the power to acquire the services and resources students need, when they need them.

Throughout North America, Edmonton is being held up as the example of what the public schools can and should be. AIMS' next question is, if there, why not here? ■

# The Challenge and the Opportunity

## Highlights from AIMS' 1997 conference, Choosing Better Schools

**In 1997 AIMS hosted its second annual conference with the bold goal of sending the participants home with a "whole new vision of how our educational system might be made better for students, parents, taxpayers and citizens." More complete material from that conference is available on the AIMS website, but two excerpts serve to set both the challenge and the opportunity before us.**

### **The Challenges Facing Canada's Public Schools:**

**A Diagnosis** by Mark Holmes, professor emeritus, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

"Canada has very few really bad schools, like those that could easily be found in any American big city or in the slums of most English industrial centres—we don't have those countries' divisions by social class or by money; the academic achievement of our schools is reasonable in terms of international comparison, we do as well as or better than the countries most like us—the United States and Britain; a relatively high proportion of young people continues to postsecondary education. Canada is seen by many multinational firms as a good place to situate themselves because of the educational level of the workforce—for example, Canadian-made vehicles have generally had the reputation of fewer defects than American or Mexican cars made by the same manufacturer; Northern Telecom first builds its most complex parts in Canada, outsourcing the simpler parts, and later the more complicated parts as well after

"In education, as in all human activities, the question of economics is ever present since economics is concerned with the allocation of scarce resources in order to realize desired values. These resources can be measured in kind—the classic land, labour, and capital—or in dollars. If greater value can be realized by a different allocation of resources, then, from the economist's perspective, a reallocation of resources should take place. It is all very scientific, at least on first appearances.

"If economics has a bias, it is that it assumes that values—wants, needs, and preferences—are known in advance and that individuals are the central agents in making choices. In education, this perspective would imply that if we could sum the satisfaction that individuals acquire through their own or their children's educational experience—call this sum  $S(E)$ —then our objective should be to maximize  $S(E)$  within existing fiscal constraints. If individuals are not able to assess their satisfaction with education very well, or able to weigh satisfaction gained from education relative to the satisfaction acquired from other pursuits, then economists have a problem. Economists also are stymied if a good or service is consumed collectively with either everyone or no one receiving it.

"...Enhancing choice in education will lead, as it does in competitive free markets, to greater satisfaction by ensuring the preferences of diverse individuals are met. A common, light regulatory system that focused on key outcome areas, with regular meaningful assessments, would be adequate to provide feedback to parents and students and to ensure that the public interest is served.

## Canada has very few excellent schools and very few really excellent students, at a time when industrial countries depend increasingly on their very brightest young people

Canadian factories have got rid of the bugs. By the age of 25, 85% of young Canadians have reached the level of high school graduation.

"Unfortunately, I can also make an equally accurate set of statements that paints a less rosy picture. Canada has very few excellent schools and very few really excellent students, at a time when industrial countries depend increasingly on their very brightest young people. Canada gets less bang for the buck in terms of achievement than almost any other developed country, and we are not among the most academically successful countries: Switzerland, Japan, Singapore and France. Even in England and the US, the very best students outperform ours. Too many of our schools are mediocre—not very good at anything, whether it be academics, regular attendance and strong discipline, a friendly civil atmosphere, music and the arts, or physical fitness."

### **The Economics of Choice: Assessing the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Alternative Approaches to**

**Choice in Education** by Stephen B. Lawton, professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Reduction in the number and type of regulations that prevent competition among suppliers of educational services, be they teachers or institutions, would enhance internal efficiency, so that choice could be extended at no additional cost.

"There would be losers in such a choice-oriented reform. Some teachers might be paid less; some teachers and administrators might lose their jobs; some institutions might close. But more important are the winners: the students and parents. Our youth would be receiving a more satisfying education, and many new teachers and administrators, who are now trapped outside the system, would be able to practice. In the language of economist J. A. Schumpeter, this is the 'creative destruction' that necessarily takes place in any dynamic economic system.

"...What is important to recognize is that loss of one ideal, that of a common school system that was home to all, is being replaced by a more powerful one, that of a public system with a core curriculum that is offered by many different providers in order to ensure efficiency, effectiveness, and higher overall satisfaction with schooling." ■

# What Happened, When

## 1999

**March** – AIMS publishes *Charter Schools in Atlantic Canada: An idea whose time has come*, by Joe Freedman, MD.

**May 4-5** – Signaling its continuing interest in education, AIMS holds a conference in Fredericton, NB, called Choosing Better Schools: Does school choice improve standards, performance and accountability?

## 2000

**May 10** – AIMS president Brian Lee Crowley's column, "Do school boards add value to education?" appears in Halifax's *The Chronicle-Herald*.

## 2001

**July 10** – Rodney A. Clifton's paper, "Reforming Public Education in Canada," is published by AIMS.

**Aug. 9** – *The Wall Street Journal* publishes a piece about the value of competition and school choice for the public education system. Writer Michael Taube cites Brian Lee Crowley's comments that the friendly competition between Canada's public and private schools can only help the education marketplace and create more efficient institutions.

## 2002

**Feb. 27** – "Standardized exams: the test of a good school," a column by Brian Lee Crowley, appears in Halifax's *The Chronicle-Herald*.

**Feb. 28** – AIMS releases research report *Testing & Accountability: The keys to educational excellence in Atlantic Canada*, by Charles Cirtwill, Rod Clifton and John D'Orsay.

**March 5** – Brian Lee Crowley's column, "Testy about testing? The NSTU debates AIMS on standardized testing in the schools," appears in Halifax's *The Chronicle-Herald*.

**March 13** – Halifax's *The Chronicle-Herald* publishes a column by Brian Lee Crowley entitled "Of school tests and teacher union testiness."

## 2003

**March 5** – AIMS releases *Grading Our Future: Atlantic Canada's High Schools' Accountability and*

## What Happened, When (cont'd)

*Performance in Context*, by Rick Audas and Charles Cirtwill. *Progress* magazine simultaneously publishes the report card in its March 2003 edition.

**March 6** – Nova Scotia department of education issues a press release saying that it will provide school-by-school results next year. Newfoundland and Labrador commits to a school-level report for all schools in the province by the spring.

**March 7** – Moncton's *Times & Transcript* publishes an editorial entitled "School ratings a welcome tool."

**March 10** – *The Daily News* in Halifax publishes an editorial entitled "School ratings raise hackles."

**March 19** – AIMS directs an open letter to PEI Premier Pat Binns, inviting the premier to help ensure information on education is made public. That same day, PEI's department of education announces that it is initiating projects to improve accountability, including the development of performance and outcome indicators, a review of the staffing and funding model for the school system, and school-based improvement plans. It also plans to track the progress of PEI high school and university graduates. Newfoundland and Labrador's Speech from the Throne lays out a comprehensive provincial testing program and commits to continuing work on diagnostic assessments so that teachers can use test results to improve student achievement.

**April 2** – Canadian ministers of education announce that they will adopt a new Pan-Canadian Assessment Program to assess student performance in reading, mathematics and science. The program will replace the existing School Achievement Indicators Program, which has been in place for 10 years. The new assessment will begin in 2007.

**April 23** – NB Premier Bernard Lord announces a policy statement for provincial schools that includes new targets and objectives for the K-12 education system that will focus on ensuring greater accountability of the system to students and parents. It will share information in an annual report called Key Achievement Standards.

**Oct. 14-17** – Grade 6 students in Nova Scotia write the first elementary literacy assessment test, to measure reading and writing skills. For the first time, all parents will receive his or her child's results.

# Standardized Exams: the Test of a Good School

by Brian Lee Crowley



Even though most parents and many teachers support standardized testing, such tests have been much criticized. Critics usually argue, as one writer did

recently: "What does standardized testing show? Absolutely nothing more than how completely a teacher uses class time to teach to the exam and prepare the kids for the exam. These are not reliable assessments and evaluation methods."

But according to Prof. Rod Clifton, an expert on the sociology of education

score, no matter where the student writes the exam.

Contrary to what many people seem to believe, standardized tests are very fair to students—particularly to disadvantaged students—because they are created by committees of teachers and subject-area specialists, more fully cover the curriculum, and more accurately measure the varying performances of all students. These claims are not a matter of conjecture, according to Prof. Clifton, but have been thoroughly demonstrated in the research literature.

Do standardized tests lead to an epidemic of "teaching to the test," while "killing creativity" in teaching and learning?

**Standardized tests are very fair to students—particularly to disadvantaged students—because they are created by committees of teachers and subject-area specialists, more fully cover the curriculum, and more accurately measure the varying performances of all students**

at the University of Manitoba, this criticism doesn't hold water when exams are properly designed. When they are, they yield the same score for all students across the province whose performance is the same. Moreover, such tests evaluate the material that students are expected to cover in the curriculum at the level that a committee of distinguished teachers and specialists thought was adequate for the particular subject at that grade level.

The exams themselves are tested in advance on samples of students and rewritten to eliminate ambiguities so that the tests reflect the content of the curriculum. After they are written, the tests are then graded by committees of specially trained teachers to ensure that the same level of achievement from students receives the same

Come on. Proper tests are derived from the objectives of the curriculum. Teaching to the test is, in fact, teaching to the objectives that the department of education has established for our children. And as basic competency tests, they leave lots of scope for teachers and students to go beyond those objectives.

Of course, test results must be interpreted carefully. They can provide a valuable measure of both student achievement and instructional effectiveness, but they cannot be used as the sole measure of either. On the other hand, without such tests, the school system cannot be held properly accountable for the results that it is producing. And higher standards of accountability are something that public schools need.

Most great scientific achievements

have depended on standard measurements—weight, distance, mass, time, academic achievement, and so on—and such standards allow other scientists to test the validity of their colleagues' work. In other words, they enhance accountability.

Few people question the usefulness of standardized tests and procedures in most scientific and practical endeavours. Especially post-Enron, most people, for example, think we should improve standardized accounting procedures, not get rid of them. Ditto for the Breathalyzers and radar guns police use, or the regular elections, following standard procedures, we use to hold governments accountable. Nevertheless, some people oppose the use of standardized exams in education. But without such performance measures, how can we know where our schools are letting down our students and the community, or indeed where they are doing us proud?

The research literature reveals that well-designed achievement tests have much higher reliability and validity than other tests that have been developed to see how students are doing, such as socio-economic status and self-esteem. In fact, the social science literature is quite clear: of all the student assessment instruments, the best are standardized tests. Properly used, well-designed exams give teachers and parents feedback to determine whether students have learned what they were supposed to learn. Properly interpreted, the results of good tests can inform teachers, students, parents and other citizens about the effectiveness of the schools.

Standardized tests, however, do not predict the future. Passing a driver's test, a standard instrument that measures both knowledge and skill, doesn't guarantee that you will never speed, run a red light, or have a serious accident. Similarly, when students achieve the provincial standard on an English language test, no one can say that they will be good at reading and writing throughout their lives.

They can say, however, that when the exam is well-designed, the responses of students are assessed in an objective manner on items designed to measure the core objectives of a course in a way that is consistent and fair for all students in the province. That's good for parents, teachers, employers, post-secondary institutions, and, above all, students. Isn't that what schools are supposed to be about? ■

The Chronicle Herald, *Halifax*, Feb. 27, 2002

# Testing & Accountability

## The keys to educational excellence in Atlantic Canada

When basic language, math and science skills are assessed, students from Atlantic Canada consistently perform below the level of their national and international peers. In the lower grades this gap is small, but as skill levels advance, the lag between Atlantic Canada and the rest of the country becomes significantly more pronounced. Quite simply, the longer a student stays in an Atlantic Canadian school, the greater a competitive disadvantage they have to overcome when they enter the global marketplace looking for work.

It is very easy to say that this gap is the direct result of declining education spending in our region. In the furore over education expenditures, however, the achievement of students and schools has not been given the intense scrutiny that is required. There remains an insufficient level of consistent, reliable measurement of educational outcomes. Nevertheless, it is clear that taxpayers, and the students they help support, are clearly getting less for their investment in education than they deserve and certainly less than their counterparts in some other provinces.

Developing sound monitoring systems and using standardized examinations can be helpful in ensuring that effective teaching and administration of schools takes place. Governments cannot claim to be properly managing our educational resources, money and students, without using standardized tests for basic benchmarks. To be of value, however, these test results must be reported showing school, school board, and provincial achievement standards, so that teachers, parents, and taxpayers can determine how well students are functioning in comparison with other students.

None of the testing programs put in place in the Atlantic provinces provide an indicator of effectiveness. There is no published analysis that considers the impact of the differences in students' initial preparation, family advantages, or opportunities for learning outside the schools in establishing a school's score. ■

*Excerpted from Testing & Accountability: The keys to educational excellence in Atlantic Canada, by Charles Cirtwill, Rod Clifton and John D'Orsay. Published by AIMS in February of 2002.*

# Reforming Public Education in Canada

To recruit and retain good educators, reformers argue that it's necessary to turn greater authority and more money over to principals and teachers; then it's fair to hold them accountable for the academic performances of their students

by **Rodney A. Clifton**

Canadians generally agree that getting and keeping good teachers and principals is extremely important for improving education. How to do this, however, is a matter of serious debate. We have many good educators, but we don't have enough of them, and we certainly don't have enough of them in inner-city schools and in rural and northern communities.

In obtaining and keeping good educators, two approaches have been used, largely unsuccessfully, and a new approach has been proposed. The regulatory approach centralizes the control of education in the offices of ministers of education and superintendents, and its supporters argue that senior administrators must enforce countless regulations on the training of teachers, the curricula that is used in schools, the maximum number of students in classrooms, and a host of other things. Socialist governments worldwide think that regulating education is the best way of improving students' learning.

The spending approach is often called "investing in education," so that it sounds like "motherhood." Its supporters argue that to improve education more money must be spent, especially on reducing student-teacher ratios and increasing teachers' salaries. Not surprisingly, most teachers' unions hold this view.

Finally, a few people are advocating a reformist approach that proposes to turn the authority of running schools over to principals and teachers and then to hold them accountable for the performances of their students. In this approach, schools would be deregulated and principals would be empowered so that they could make crucial decisions about teachers, students and curricula.

The regulatory approach is unrealistic. Regulating teacher certification, the time they spend on core subjects, and the curricula in schools is no guarantee of good teaching or effective learning. Micromanaging schools by ministers of education and superintendents is, in fact, a classic example of what Max Gammon, a physician who studied the British socialized medical system, called "the theory of bureaucratic displacement." In using this

approach, senior administrators in education have driven many fine teachers and many excellent principals away from public schools and into private schools and other occupations.

The spending approach is also unrealistic. Spending money for education is, of course, necessary, but it is only part of the solution. Canada already spends more than any other OECD country on education—more than 7% of GNP—and the performances of Canadian students on international tests are, at best, mediocre. Moreover, recent trends suggest that there is a shift in the allocation of resources by provincial governments from the education



envelope into the health care envelope. As the Canadian population ages, the cost of health care will undoubtedly increase, and additional money will be transferred from education to health care. Consequently, no additional money will be available for education.

By contrast, the reformist approach is realistic. Supporters of this approach argue that to recruit and retain good educators, it is necessary to turn greater authority and more money over to principals and teachers and then to hold them accountable for the academic performances of their students. Specifically, principals would have the authority to reward good teachers with differential salaries, a responsibility that is currently denied to them. In turn, principals

themselves would be rewarded for having students reach or surpass established educational standards.

Across the United States, the reformist approach is, slowly but surely, gaining momentum. Many states and school divisions are giving greater authority to principals and teachers, increasing competition between schools and school divisions, and establishing higher standards for students' performances. Many educators, parents and students now realize that the "one best model" of education is not effective for all students. Instead, people are beginning to understand that schools need principals who can make important educational decisions about curricula, teachers, support staff, and students. Increasingly, parents want to select schools with teachers who can effectively teach their children.

Some people call the reformist approach "neo-conservative," but in the United States, it is embraced by people on both the right (Milton Friedman, for example) and the left (Robert Reich, for example). Moreover, a number of states, with governments from across the political spectrum, have implemented vouchers and/or established charter schools as ways of reforming education and improving the performances of students.

In Canada, however, only two provinces, Alberta and Ontario, both with conservative governments, are beginning to tentatively experiment with reformist principles. Alberta has 10 charter schools and Ontario has recently enacted legislation that will give tax-breaks to parents who send their children to independent schools. It is now time for all provincial governments to turn away from attempting to reform education by increasing bureaucratic control over schools or by promising that more money will be pumped into the system. It is time for all governments to implement reformist principles so that, in the future, good teachers and principals will be recruited and retained by public schools. ■

*Dr. Rodney A. Clifton is professor of sociology of education at St. John's College, University of Manitoba. He teaches in the faculty of education. This paper was published by AIMS on July 10, 2001.*



# Choice, Accountability and Performance in the Public Schools

Superintendent of schools Angus McBeath talks about how Edmonton does it, and why it works

**W**e at AIMS believe the Edmonton public school system is a model of what a public education system can be. They have a really remarkable story to tell about how public education can deliver high-quality results, choice to parents and students, value for money, and satisfaction for teachers.

That's a winning combination. Edmonton's school system proves that it's not just possible

*in theory. Something is being done on the ground in a Canadian public system in a city where a quarter of the school population falls under the poverty line, and there are 6,000 Aboriginal students.*

*These are significant educational challenges in any public education system. Edmonton has them and Edmonton has been able to meet those challenges. While superintendent*

*of public schools Angus McBeath will say that he's never satisfied, they have achieved some remarkable results.*

There are only two kinds of employees in Edmonton public schools. There are those who do the most important work in the system, which takes place in the classroom. Anyone else who works in Edmonton public provides support for that work. So you're either doing the most crucial work, which is the work that goes on in classrooms, or you're providing support for that work.

Two years ago, we put billboards throughout our city that said, "Teachers transform lives."



Angus McBeath, addressing the audience, with AIMS' Brian Lee Crowley looking on.

## Every spring in Edmonton, every kid gets a passport. Their parents and the children go shopping for a school and schools compete and demonstrate what they're willing to do. They put their achievement results out publicly and they demonstrate how well kids learn

We had pictures of teachers and kids on those billboards and some people said, "But money is short, why are you wasting money on billboards?" "Because," we said, "we don't think the public gets it. We need to remind the public that only teachers transform lives." How many of you remember the first dentist you ever went to? I can't remember my first dentist. I can't remember my first doctor. I remember my parents, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, the people who helped shape me as a human being. The other people I remember from day one are teachers and I think we need to remember how important teachers are. As a society, we don't give them the recognition they deserve.

**Shopping for a school** Every spring in Edmonton, every kid gets a passport. Their parents and the children go shopping for a school and schools compete and demonstrate what they're willing to do. They put their achievement results out publicly and they demonstrate how well kids learn. Parents and children actually make the choices. This innovation doesn't cost a nickel.

People said initially that parents would be too stupid to make good decisions about which school their children should attend. It would be much harder organizing bussing routes. It would be much harder organizing the planning for building if we didn't know how many kids were going to be in every school in any given year. We've been doing

that for 32 years and we haven't shut down yet.

But once you let that word out, be prepared for parents to raise their expectations about the kind of service they will receive from the system. Because once people believe there's even a faint hope of choice, that will change things.

The other criticism was that if people were allowed to choose schools, they might not go to the bad schools. God forbid! ... In Edmonton schools are funded on the number of kids they get. So the amount of money your school has is directly correlated to the number of children you have. Schools compete for kids. Schools that don't perform well lose kids. Schools that don't perform well over time lose their school. We shut them down.

But we also had an absolute renaissance of schools that hadn't been performing well. One of our large inner-city high schools shrank to 300 kids. It held 2,200. We made it an alternative program of a performing-type school. It is full today. It has 2,200 children.

### Schools decide how to spend money

Schools submit their budgets annually, and they have to defend those budgets to the trustees and then the budgets are passed. The schools are responsible for spending that money. People were really worried at first that schools might make bad decisions. They might buy something that people wouldn't think was proper. We had a famous case this year that got into the newspaper.

A high school took their whole staff to Jasper Park Lodge, and had a two-day retreat in order to galvanize the staff into increasing the results on high school achievement tests (which they did, by the way). The whole thing cost \$22,000. That was made public, and the *Edmonton Journal*, our daily newspaper, put that in the newspaper and said, "See, isn't it wrong when you allow schools to make decisions about resources?" This was before the Privacy Commissioner's lunch bills became public: \$22K would be a couple of meals for him.

We said, "One hundred people got two nights of accommodation and five meals, and this school has been galvanized into making their plan work." They had a professional development plan. Their January results were up significantly on the Fraser Institute rankings of the schools. They went from 155th in Alberta to 85th in terms of their results. I think the \$22,000 was well spent. Of course people are going to make some questionable decisions. I'd rather educators made decisions than central office bureaucrats who are good at numbers.

Schools decide how many teachers, how many custodians, how many support staff, how many paraprofessionals, what kind of services, supplies and equipment to buy. That really gave a sense of empowerment to schools when they had this money and this authority and what we said was this: "We will monitor you for results, not for process."

## Mandatory areas

- Teach the Alberta curriculum.
- Children must write the district and provincial achievement tests.
- Have targets for improving results in each of the measured areas; measure things like behaviour and some other important things.

### A sample of programs

- Academic-intensive
- Sports
- Performing and visual arts
- Christian education
- Military academy
- Mature learners
- French immersion
- School for the deaf

Those who have the money and the authority should be held accountable for results. The results of how well kids achieve on achievement tests, how well children behave, the satisfaction of staff, students and parents in each school community, are all published publicly.

**Improving student achievement: targets, tests and tracking** There was a huge cry of horror when we established a mandatory

district reading and writing test for all kids. This would damage kids, they said. You can't have this. We said, "Not only will we do that, we'll make sure the results are public for each of the schools in the district. And there will be achievement results and targets for improving those results annually for each of our schools." Years later, the system hasn't gone out of business. Damaged children? I haven't had any presented to me yet. I think the damaged children are the ones who don't learn to read, not the ones who are subjected to a reading test.

Our results are public. Horror of horrors, parents make decisions on which schools their children attend based on the results. Our schools are ranked by a foundation on the basis of achieved results. That brings a ton of bricks down from the Edmonton education establishment. It hates the fact that our high schools, our elementaries and our junior highs are ranked.

The argument when we first released our results publicly was that parents were too stupid to be allowed to have the information about the school's achievement test results. We said, "We don't think they're as stupid as you think they are and we're going to release them."

"Oh, but they'll misuse them," people said. "They might change schools based on how well the school is performing." Yes, they might. They might actually put a school out of business. In fact, we have a high school going out of business right now because of incompetence, but we've changed the leader and we think it will grow again. But yes, thank you for putting it out of business, kids. Our customers put our schools out of business and quite rightly so, if we didn't have the courage to do it.

**International test scores** Our students do very well internationally. In fact, Albertan

## Edmonton Sets the Standard in North America

In *Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need*, UCLA management professor William Ouchi calls Edmonton one of the most decentralized and effectively managed public school systems in North America. Professor Ouchi praises Edmonton's educators for leading what he calls "a revolution."

After studying 223 schools in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Edmonton, Seattle, and Houston, Prof. Ouchi found that Edmonton has the highest percentage of school board money going directly to the classroom (65%), and that principals in Edmonton directly control the highest percentage of per-school money (92%).

"Mr. Ouchi argues that Edmonton's system best meets what he outlines as the 'seven keys to success,'" wrote Julie Smyth in the Sept. 12, 2003 edition of the *National Post*. "Entrepreneurial principals, school-controlled budgets, accountability, decentralization, a strong focus on student achievement, school choice and a community approach, meaning there is a consistent set of beliefs among school staff about how to meet students' needs and use available resources."

Angus McBeath, who graces the cover of this edition of *Ideas Matter*, is the superintendent of schools in Edmonton. Every school in that city is now an education enterprise led by a strong principal with the power to implement change and the power to acquire the services and resources students need, when they need them. Throughout North America, Edmonton is being held up as the example of what the public schools can and should be. As superintendent, Angus McBeath leads the ongoing effort to improve student achievement.



students perform at the top of the world. Now is that because Alberta kids are smarter? No. Our kids are no more talented. Our parents are no more talented than anybody. Our kids perform at the top of the world because we measure achievement. We have a curriculum, which is quite specific, which is mandatory. Teachers don't decide what they're going to teach in Alberta. The government decides what people are going to teach.

We measure what kids are obliged to learn and our parents know what it is kids are supposed to be learning and they know

the standards. They expect to see the test results every year. We also have a requirement that we tell the truth in education, which goes like this: if your child is in Grade 9 and reading at a Grade 5 level of achievement, we must certify that on the report card. We must certify what the actual level of achievement is, based on our standardized achievement test.

That was another bone of contention. We couldn't possibly tell the truth about where kids were really performing. Parents would never stand for it. Not true. We did it and people survived. In fact, parents said to us, "Thank

you for telling us the truth. Everybody always said our child was doing really well in school for his ability." When people got the actual grade level of achievement that their children were performing at, that was quite illuminating for people who had different notions of how their kids were performing.

**Schools make their own information public** Virtually all information that we collect about our schools is public.

I don't publish it; the schools publish it themselves. It's on the Internet, it's in the libraries, and the parents must have a copy of all information. So the parents must know, for example, what percentage of students are below grade level in reading at each grade level in their school.

At first, people said our parents are too stupid to receive information about school performance. Our parents have been receiving regular updates on school performance for a number of years now and that hasn't seemed to create a problem for parents. I think our teachers, while initially fearful that information on school performance would be made public, are used to it now. People do use school performance results as a way to decide whether they want to go to that school, including our staff. ■

*Excerpted from a presentation on July 11, 2003, at The Halifax Club, in Halifax, NS.*

## The Edmonton Model Works Worldwide

When New Zealand had to fix its massive fiscal problems, one thing it did was to dramatically restructure governance of its 2,600 schools. Local district boards were abolished and governing powers transferred to each school. By removing this layer of bureaucracy, the government saved millions of dollars. Elected councils at each school assumed responsibility for budget, staffing and program delivery decisions. Their decisions were made based on the specific needs of their school and their students. Importantly, school effectiveness was monitored by an Education Review Office, ensuring accountability for results.

An eight-year study (1990-97) by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research analyzed the impact of these dramatic changes. Contrary to dire predictions, the sky did not fall. Four major surveys of parents, teachers, principals and school council members showed that the experiment in decentralization was successful. Today, few surveyed would return to the old system. – **Brian Lee Crowley**

# Why Grade the Graders

## AIMS takes a firm stand on school performance and accountability

by **Brian Lee Crowley**

In the spring of 2002, I debated Brian Forbes, the president of the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union, in the pages of a local newspaper about the value of testing and accountability in the public school system. Many calls and e-mails arrived in the wake of his published reply as, to the horror of many, he seemed in his article to be quarrelling with the notion of the usefulness of school testing.

His critics were overly hasty. Upon review, his piece—stripped of its anti-testing rhetoric—said first, that testing has its place in the public schools; and second, that the tests have to be interpreted in the context of the individual school. I couldn't agree more; in fact, these two points formed the foundation for AIMS to create the AIMS Report Card for Atlantic Canadian High Schools.

The authorities who run the public schools must set appropriate standards for public education and ensure those standards are met. To do so requires accountability within the school system. How can we, as taxpayers and parents, know if the school system is doing its job in the absence of rigorous testing that reveals where the curriculum is being effectively taught; whether students are learning what they should; and where the schools are letting down students, parents and taxpayers?

At the same time, teachers and administrators can't function effectively within an accountability framework unless they have a reasonable expectation that they will be judged based on their performance, not on the effects of outside factors over which they have no control. Accountability without context is demoralizing and destructive.

No one likes to be held accountable, but it's an unavoidable fact of life. Most of us are accountable to someone: employees to employers, managers to shareholders, governments to voters. That accountability is most effective when it's based on a clear set of measures, which are outlined in advance, on what good performance looks like in the particular situation under review.

Teachers want accountability when their future is at stake. Recently Claude Lamoureux, the head of the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, was decrying what he believed is the inadequate accountability of companies and accountants. Lamoureux says he wants tougher reporting

standards so that his pension fund—one of the biggest institutional investors in Canada—can more effectively judge the managers on whose performance the retirement income of Ontario teachers depends.

Many companies would dearly love for investors to judge them solely on the information that managers and owners feel like supplying them. That's why generally accepted accounting standards, with all of their flaws,



have been developed: so there would be a common standard of information available to everyone, and companies could be held accountable when their performance lagged behind that of their peers.

No doubt having these tough tests of performance takes some of the joy out of management, especially when managers are weak. But demanding performance guidelines protect shareholders while giving guidance to good managers about the definition of excellence. Few things give people as much joy as successfully reaching a tough standard of performance.

Schools aren't companies, but the principle is similar. If standards and accountability are vital to the future of teachers' pensions, think how much more important they are to the future of our children. However much we need information above and beyond test results, such results—from properly designed and administered tests—are the bedrock on which proper school accountability must rest.

This leads me to the third point of agreement with Forbes, who notes that places such as Ontario do test, but students don't perform particularly well on those tests. He's right. But he concludes that, as a result, testing has little value. What it really means is that testing alone isn't enough.

Accountability isn't just measuring performance, it's also holding people responsible for that performance. When

school systems move beyond the gathering of performance information to things such as totally open enrollment so parents can choose their child's school on the basis of its effective teaching methods, then testing will be playing its role. Nor should such a system imply abandoning poorly performing schools, but in the absence of hard objective information about where schools are doing badly, how can public authorities know where or how to help?

Public schools exist to educate our children to standards set by the curriculum. When it's possible to test whether that knowledge has been successfully imparted, we have a duty as a society to do so—and a duty to act on the results. Successful schools should be rewarded, and poorly performing schools should be helped. Because when schools fail, it's the children who pay the price. ■

*First published in Progress magazine, March 2003.*

# AIMS Releases Its Report Card on Atlantic High Schools

On March 6, 2003, AIMS released the broadest set of public information ever presented on Atlantic Canadian secondary schools. The much-anticipated report card paints a rich, complex picture of the unique nature and performance of each high school in the region.

Schools in Atlantic Canada lag behind the rest of the country in academic achievement. The objective of this study is to begin to examine why this trend exists and what can be done to fix it, by analyzing the performance of the education system school by school.

“This report card is just one small step along the road towards improving the reporting of school performance in Atlantic Canada,” says AIMS director of operations Charles Cirtwill. “Fundamental improvements in data collection and reporting are needed if we are to ensure that each and every child in the region is provided the opportunity to do the best they can.”

Even before its official release, AIMS’ Report Card on Atlantic Canadian High Schools was being met with strong reaction from the Teachers’ Union of Nova Scotia and the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers’ Association.

Prior to its launch, AIMS president

Brian Lee Crowley said, “This report is the beginning of a long process to provide more accountability in our public education system. Many parents, students, taxpayers, and individual teachers have told us what a powerful tool this will be in understanding what is really going on in our schools. On the other hand, some people clearly will not be happy with this report card. These people are generally the ones who may feel it will be used to assess their own performance. For the sake of our children, such unjustified fears cannot be allowed to prevent these major improvements in accountability.”

This report ranks schools relative to what can be reasonably expected of them given their unique challenges and opportunities. On each measure, a school is given a “B” or better for exceeding expectations and a “C+” or worse for falling below expectations. Individual scores are then averaged to arrive at the final overall grade and rank for each school in each province. The only exception is Prince Edward Island, where no information is publicly available about high school performance, and the government declined an invitation to work with AIMS to identify suitable measures.

Dr. Rick Audas, assistant professor in the faculty of administration at the University of New Brunswick, is the principal researcher for the report. “We all want our schools to be successful. To be successful it is essential we have the tools and measures to manage that success. At this point, we don’t even know what success looks like. Our report card is intended to open the debate on what we want to see in our schools.”

Few schools in this report card do badly across all expectations and few schools actually exceed them all. There is a little good news/bad news here for just about everyone. This is why it’s critical to look not only at the overall ranking, but to consider the relative performance on each outcome measure as well.

School report cards are used in many jurisdictions to improve accountability and school performance, including in Canada, the United States and Britain. Links to many of these report cards can be found on the AIMS website at <http://www.aims.ca/School/links.htm>. ■

*The full text of Grading our Future: Atlantic Canada’s High Schools’ Accountability and Performance in Context is also available on the AIMS website at <http://www.aims.ca/Publications/Grading/grading.pdf>.*

## NEWFOUNDLAND

### Report takes aim at high schools

**The study, like or lump it, is an extensive and expensive effort, and the think-tank should be congratulated for its initiative**

If you teach at Swift Current Academy, you’re probably pretty happy with the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) and its analysis of high schools in this province.

If you teach at the Holy Cross school complex, you’re probably pretty annoyed.

That’s because the two schools are at the opposite ends of the study’s spectrum

—one with an A, the other with an F.

If you’re the provincial department of education, you’d be circling the wagons pretty quickly. And it’s not hard to hear the wagon wheels hard at work.

A news release from the education department included unanimously damning comments on the study, not only from Education Minister Gerry Reid, but also from Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers’ Association president Winston Carter, Denise Pike of the Newfoundland and Labrador School Councils Federation and a host of other education professionals.

Their concerns are primarily about something the AIMS study admits upfront; that the methodology used in the analysis of high schools in this province is weakened because it is based, in part, on predicting Grade 12 results based on test results from Grade 10.

That is a legitimate concern.

Other concerns about the study question the way its authors use socioeconomic factors to weigh the performance of schools in varying urban and rural settings.

But while there are questions about the work, there’s also value in it. One of the most

interesting parts of the study has nothing to do with the ranking of high schools, and it's a part that no one has questioned—its introduction. The researchers point out that Atlantic Canadian schools perform very badly in particular standardized tests, often near the bottom of Canadian rankings, and Newfoundland and Labrador performs near the bottom of even the Atlantic levels of the same test. Granted, the test results are not new, but the concern is valid.

That's perhaps how we should be looking at the entire AIMS report—the study, like or lump it, is an extensive and expensive effort, and the think-tank should be congratulated for its initiative.

There is great value in talking about what makes schools good or bad, and looking at ways that various schools can learn about their comparative strengths and weaknesses, and, as part of that, how they can improve.

This report will certainly stimulate discussion; it has already. Some of its harshest critics tell people not to even read the report, because it will only unduly concern parents about the prospects for their children—that is a most ostrich-like approach for someone to take, especially if they are working in the field of education.

All that being said, this type of study certainly beats the heck out of the usual AIMS fare. That is, putting the boots to

the Atlantic provinces for their dependence on federal subsidies, while—at the same time—taking the moral high ground of effectively receiving federally subsidized donations.

AIMS is, of course, a charitable foundation under Canadian tax laws, and is able to issue tax receipts for donations to those who support its particular policy directions.

Look at this study. Consider the source, the material, and the methods.

And then start the discussion. ■

*This piece appeared in the Fri., March 7, 2003, edition of The Telegram in St. John's. It is produced with permission.*

## We say: N.B. should adopt and encourage the approach to evaluating the education system that the Atlantic Institute of Market Studies has initiated

### School ratings a welcome tool

**It isn't good enough when the bureaucracy is essentially accountable to only itself**

**W**e say: N.B. should adopt and encourage the approach to evaluating the education system that the Atlantic Institute of Market Studies has initiated.

The Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) think tank based in Halifax yesterday released its first report card of individual schools across the Atlantic region (except PEI, where officials refused to co-operate) and the result is enlightening. So too is the defensive reaction from education officials.

Indeed the reaction is most notable for its defensiveness, something which ironically illustrates how badly we need a regular, consistent evaluation, or educational audit, of schools in the province.

There is no reason for the province to refuse co-operation or participation. Indeed, no excuse. To do so would indicate a fear among the politicians and bureaucrats that the results might indicate they are not doing

very well at all. But it is an unfounded fear. It is also to look at the effort from a cynical point of view.

The purpose of the AIMS exercise is to set some standard benchmarks for a reasonable level of achievement by the schools (yes, benchmarks can be arbitrary, but without setting them and being consistent in maintaining them, there is no way to measure how any school is doing from year to year or in comparison with others). This is quite unlike the often vague and confusing approach the provincial department of education has taken through the years, with a constant shifting of standards, more than once leading officials to caution that the results from year to year cannot be compared meaningfully. That is precisely the problem. There is no accountability.

And this is very much accountability: an audit of performance that the public can look at and understand; a tool to help them understand what the real picture is, where the system is weak and strong, and perhaps a reliable pointer on what directions are

needed to correct problems. For example, a cluster of some of the highest ranked high schools in New Brunswick are all from one district. AIMS suggests it would be worth finding out why and what is being done there that the other districts aren't doing.

And in fact, in this year's rankings, 53.5%, or 38 of the 71 schools involved, emerged as performing above expectations by AIMS standards. The rest fell below, but even some of those had bright spots. It is not an entirely bleak report, although it is clear there is considerable room for improvement.

It isn't good enough when the bureaucracy is essentially accountable to only itself. A standard independent audit is a valuable tool to help the public hold the government and system to account. It is long overdue! ■

*This opinion piece appeared in the Fri., March 7, 2003, edition of The Times & Transcript in Moncton. It is reproduced with permission.*

# Teaching Valuable Lessons

## Radio talk show host says he's looking forward to the second report card

by Rick Howe

**Back-water** (*bac-waw-ter*) *n.* **1.** a stretch of stagnant water joining a stream. **2.** a place unaffected by progress or new ideas.

I think the second definition aptly describes the state of Nova Scotia's education system these days, as I look at the reaction from those in the profession to the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies' recent report card on the province's high schools.

The AIMS report ranked the schools from one to 75 based on criteria that included test scores and graduation rates. Cole Harbour's Auburn Drive High was rated the No. 1 high school in the province, and Oxford Regional High came in 75th.

Parents have long clamoured for a ratings system, eager to see how their child's school might stack up against others from Yarmouth to Sydney. Politicians, as recently as Jane Purves, have promised to release such an analysis, but until the AIMS study, those promises went the way of many others before them—nothing more than words from those who will say anything in the hope it will get them a vote or quiet a critic. So the wishes of parents were denied, mostly because those within the education system had no desire for public accountability.

With the recent disclosures that standardized-test results rank our students among the least-educated in the land, I guess their attitude is hardly surprising. The AIMS report, however, has blown the doors of accountability wide open and those within the system are howling in protest. Tough.

Brian Crowley of AIMS agrees. "What accounts for this anger and angst? For the very first time, our educational establishment is being called to account for its own performance, and it doesn't like it."

And what a pathetic display it was to see the circling of the wagons by those involved in the education system, from the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union right on up to Education Minister Angus (Blando) MacIsaac. The union's president Brian Forbes called the report a publicity stunt. Forbes and his union publicly profess a concern for education, but they continue to take a defensive posture on any progressive step that calls for more

teacher accountability.

As other jurisdictions move toward teacher-pay increases based on merit or regular teacher reviews, the NSTU reacts by condemning those who dare to suggest something similar in Nova Scotia. Forbes says, "AIMS is not doing anything to contribute to school improvement, student achievement or accountability."

I beg to differ.

Such a report should be a wake-up call. Parents and students should start demanding their school improve its ranking. But that is



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exactly what the NSTU fears, for it can share the blame for a system that has lowered, rather than raised the bar. I call it dumbing down. And as for our education minister, someone in the department woke up the former teacher long enough for him to say it is not his department's purpose to rank schools, instead

"it's our purpose to provide an evaluation to schools that would allow them to improve their own performance."

It's the minister's way of telling parents they have no business knowing how a high school in their community stacks up against schools elsewhere. Parents, however, want to know. AIMS says it had more than 100,000 hits on its website in the days after the report's release. So despite a public keen to have access to such information, current government policy prohibits the public ranking of schools. Not only should high schools be ranked yearly, but junior high and elementary schools should be included in the mix as well. The yearly *Maclean's* magazine ranking of universities in Canada was first met with the same outrage from educators, but it has become a valuable tool as students search for the right place to continue their education. And getting a good *Maclean's* ranking is something most universities now consider an honour.

The principal of Oxford Regional High went to the media with some tough words of criticism directed at the AIMS report. Oxford, remember, is ranked 75th. David McClelland called the study flawed and outrageous in the extreme and proceeded to pick apart what he saw as the report's shortcomings. A more worthy reaction might have been to pick up the phone and find out what schools like Auburn and Parrsboro Regional, ranked fifth and in a neighbouring community, are doing different from his school's programs. Use the report for what it was meant, a tool to begin improvements that will one day benefit all of his students, indeed all students everywhere.

Let us stop acting like a backwater province and start thinking outside the box. Other areas in Canada, the US, in fact in many other countries, provide school rankings. I hope AIMS stands firm in the face of the self-serving critics of its foray into the field of education and I look forward to seeing its second annual report in a year's time. ■

*Rick Howe is the host of the radio talk show Hotline, weekdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on AM 920CJCH. This column first appeared in The Daily News, Halifax, on March 14, 2003. It is reprinted with permission.*

# Shooting the Messenger

## Atlantic Canadian educators lay the blame on the AIMS high school report card

by Jim Meek

Just before the Gulf War began in March, the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) released a report that “shocked and awed” the region’s educational establishment. Or maybe that should be “stunned and stupefied.”

AIMS had the nerve to rank the region’s schools in three areas: academic excellence; the proportion of graduates to dropouts; and the post-graduate “success” of students. Then the think-tank did the unthinkable. It graded the schools, from A to F. Not only that—it ranked schools from first to worst.

The reaction to this report was—in a word—reactionary. In all four provinces, it was rants all around from teachers, politicians and unions. In one lengthy jeremiad published in a Halifax newspaper, a principal from a rural Nova Scotian school suggested that the survey might hurt the feelings of students in the last-place school—his. On Prince Edward Island, Education Minister Chester Gillan—who is an old pedagogue himself—sniffed that the study did a “serious disservice to students.”

In New Brunswick, the Teachers’ Association dismissed the AIMS research as “misleading.” And in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Teachers’ Association distinguished itself by launching several rockets at AIMS before the report card on the region’s schools had been released.

I was all set to join this holy crusade myself, but I figured I should see the whites of the enemy’s eyes before firing a bullet between them. So I read the report first. And here’s what I found. The authors start by making a modest proposal: given that “one of the most important functions of Canadian provincial governments” is educating its citizens, maybe we should figure out how well our high schools are doing the job. This is important. Good students generally turn into adults who earn their way, give society back more than they get, and make a pretty good go at life.

It turns out that Atlantic Canada is doing badly—flunking, if you like—at educating its kids. In comparison with other Canadian regions, our four provinces appear to be locked in a race for last place. Rankings of 15-year-olds in Atlantic Canada showed that students from our four fair provinces finished 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th in reading; 7th, 8th,

**After reading the dreary results comparing the Atlantic region to other Canadian provinces, I was left wondering if our pedagogues and their minders didn’t descend on the methodology of the AIMS report to divert attention from the educational establishment’s unmitigated failure to deliver the goods**

9th, and 10th in mathematics; and 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th in science. That’s 10th out of 10 provinces, by the way. (We do earn an A+, however, for consistency.)

In fairness, I should add that other rankings reveal some bright spots in our educational system: 16-year-old francophone students in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia excel at mathematics, for instance. So do 16-year-old Prince Edward Island science students.

Overall, though, the findings shouldn’t cause anyone to pop champagne corks—although they might drive you to drink. After reading the dreary results, I was left wondering if our pedagogues and minders didn’t descend on the methodology of the AIMS report to divert attention from the educational establishment’s unmitigated failure to deliver the goods.

But back to the report. What AIMS set out to do was complete an “important first step” in ranking our schools. (The authors concede that the methodology is flawed, in part because the Atlantic provinces have failed to provide consistent data on school performance.) The real point of the AIMS report was not to point fingers. It was to rank schools so we could collectively figure out what works—and what doesn’t work—in education. Once that was done, this region could start to create a model of educational excellence for schools in the region to emulate. The Canadian experience shows that educational systems tend to thrive after school rankings are implemented. In Alberta, for instance, students have

increasingly excelled at standardized math tests since school rankings were introduced in 1994-’95.

Instead of carping at their critics, then, our teachers and politicians should develop a more comprehensive method of ranking our schools—and making them better. Like it or not, education is a competitive business, whether the goal is creating a generation of entrepreneurs or a generation of well-rounded human beings or both. As for the reaction to the AIMS report itself, all it really proves is that the education of our children is too important a mission to be left to the educators. ■

*Jim Meek is a consultant and writer based in Halifax. This column first appeared in Progress magazine, June 2003. It is reprinted with permission.*

# Academics Line Up to Endorse AIMS' Report Card

## AIMS methodology called "exceptional," "fair," "illuminating," "objective"

**Dr. Jacquelyn Thayer Scott**  
*Recognized as one of Canada's leading educators, Dr. Thayer Scott is a former president and vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Breton, a member of the Prime Minister's Advisory Council on Science & Technology, and a tireless champion of lifelong learning. She serves on more than a dozen boards and recently chaired the Government of Canada Expert Panel on Skills.*

"Of all the so-called reports and rankings of educational institutions in this country, the AIMS methodology is, by far, the fairest and most illuminating. It is firmly grounded in the known research—that is, variables that are not known to make any difference are not included in the multiple regression model.

"Importantly, however, the model was built on the fundamental assumption that those schools with a greater number of advantages should be expected to do better than those that face a more difficult operating environment. Thus, the performance measurement model accounts for: differences in previous academic achievements by students in middle or junior high schools; the different economic and social climate and indicators in the primary catchment area of the school; the student-to-staff ratio (reflecting different distribution formulae within and between school boards); and the size of the school (to reduce false comparisons between larger and smaller entities, which offer different strengths).

"What could be fairer? No model is perfect (and I'm certain AIMS will continue to refine this one), but the model used in this study is vastly more sophisticated and superior to any of the other, more simplistic and flawed, measurement models used regularly by governments or periodicals in this country."

### **Dr. David Zitner**

*Dr. Zitner, MD, is director of medical informatics at Dalhousie Medical School and a specialist in accountability measures for complex public services.*

"The AIMS education report is an

exceptional contribution to education because it will promote citizen participation and engagement in the important issue of the quality of public education. It was refreshing to see an objective evaluation

**"Three prominent Atlantic region academics have provided ringing endorsements of our methodology. They have supported their position with thoughtful, specific comments on the AIMS approach. Similar complete commentary has been totally lacking from government critics." –Dr. Rick Audas**

that recognizes the purpose of education and reviews worthwhile outcomes, including performance on standard achievement tests, high school completion and proportion of students going on to post-secondary education. It was a bonus that the report considered socio-economic status, and previous school performance to develop performance expectations for each school. The report is a contribution to our understanding of school performance and to the evaluation literature.

"Your thoughtful reflections on the causes of decreased entry to post-secondary education, including the disadvantages of being poor and the recognition that inadequate education 'tends to increase the divisions between rich and poor in our society,' presents important reasons to dedicate energy to improving the education we provide our young people.

"I hope your report succeeds by leading to improved school performance and therefore to improved economic, social and cultural opportunities for children."

### **Dr. Robert Richards**

*Dr. Richards is the chair in Youth-focused Technological Entrepreneurship at Memorial University; in September of 1999, he received a PhD from Brigham Young University with a specialty in education of the gifted and talented.*

"Having read your study, and your subsequent commentary upon the release of the report, I want to lend a supporting voice. The response of the education establishment is predictably defensive. John Milton, if he were around, would still lament the lack of education reform . . . 'for the want whereof this nation perishes.'

"I have been a teacher, a principal and an education consultant. I have lived the system from the classroom to the Ministry. As a researcher I have reviewed and characterized the literature of criticism

and reform over the last 50 years. Education's collective response to reform imperatives has been that 'it ain't so.'

"While there is some tolerance for friendly internal critics, assertive nonpartisan attempts to hold the system accountable are often characterized as unfounded, based on poor research or otherwise the invalid ramblings of outsiders who really don't understand. Education is not a great mystery. Educational processes can have clearly defined outcomes. Sound curriculum is rooted in learning objectives. There are results to be delivered, and progress that can be measured.

"However, the inhibitors to change from within public school systems are rooted in powerful emotional, structural, philosophical and political factors. These are serious impediments to objectivity and to genuine systemic improvement. If reform occurs it may only be in response to voices from beyond the schoolyard gates." ■

# Provincial Reviewer Sides With AIMS

When AIMS released its report card in March of 2003, provincial departments of education and teachers' unions issued terse responses saying the study was "flawed" and that rating schools "served no useful purpose." The Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, representing all four Atlantic provinces, then commissioned an independent review of the AIMS report card to examine the methodology and data sources, the rankings and responses. AIMS was not surprised by the resulting report, but it is likely the provinces were.

The governments of the Atlantic provinces faced pointed criticism from their own study. The author of the report, Dr. Robert Crocker, a former associate deputy minister of education in Newfoundland, wrote that "...the AIMS report has served to draw attention to the limitations of existing accountability mechanisms and of current publicly available data." He went on to write in the report released in July of 2003, "It is useful to draw a parallel between rating schools and grading students. It would certainly seem ironic to some that school system personnel would object so vociferously to judging schools on achievement criteria when exactly the same criteria are routinely used to judge students... It is virtually impossible to refute the argument that what goes for students should equally be applicable to schools."

Ten of Dr. Crocker's 13 conclusions dealt with what the provinces can do better. Of particular significance is what AIMS has consistently argued: that better data must be made available. Dr. Crocker agreed. "Provinces need to introduce a more comprehensive program of indicator development...post-secondary participation, student and parent satisfaction, fitness, performance at the end of Grade 12...It is better for departments of education to co-operate in providing data and assisting external

agencies in formulating their reports."

Crocker is, however, no fan of ranking schools by performance criteria, and he had some critical things to say on some "technical issues" regarding the way AIMS designed its report card. But the objections chiefly arose from his discomfort with the whole ranking exercise, which is at the heart of what AIMS has done. AIMS is still firmly of the view that, if rankings are valuable and should be done, then they have used the best methodology available to treat the data and that view is shared by Dr. Mark Holmes, one of Canada's leading authorities in education accountability.

In an assessment of the AIMS report card commissioned by the Institute, Dr.

particularly in their failure to establish proper assessment tools and to gather the information to allow outside observers to form a clear picture of what is going on in individual schools. "The failure to carry out valid provincial assessments is clearly a failure of the provincial governments." Dr. Crocker was even more blunt. "There is no need to repeat the situation of the past few months, in which the debate was as much about access to data as about the value of the report."

As for the argument that there is no way to rank schools, because different students and different communities have unique qualities, Dr. Holmes concluded

**It would certainly seem ironic to some that school system personnel would object so vociferously to judging schools on achievement criteria when exactly the same criteria are routinely used to judge students**

Holmes wrote, "Overall, the methodology is to be highly commended. Virtually all valid criticism of the methodological use of data relates to problems in the supply [which is the responsibility of the various departments of education and other responsible school authorities] rather than its treatment [which is the responsibility of AIMS in this study]."

A former elementary, junior high, and senior high school principal in New Brunswick and a retired full professor from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto, Dr. Holmes says, "The project makes the best use possible of the available data."

Dr. Holmes was unequivocal in his criticism of the departments of education,

that "a similar comment could be made about the assessment of almost any human product and activity: automobiles, movies, musical performance, medical care, economic status. The fact is that most hospitals, automobile manufacturers, and musicians do assess their success in terms of progress and in comparison with others. Beyond that, many of us try to find a surgeon with a record of success, an effective lawyer, and a reliable car. Because education is largely a public monopoly, because provinces have goals for all schools, and, yes, because parents are unique and sometimes have different priorities, overall assessment of schools according to important criteria is essential." ■

# Making a Good Tool Better



## Improvements for Report Card Two

The AIMS research team describes collecting measures of school success in Atlantic Canada as making the best of a bad situation. The lack of clear and comparable information and the blasé attitude of education officials towards the deficiency are two of the most striking findings arising out of our first two report cards on high schools in Atlantic Canada.

Who knew in 2002 that when Newfoundland and Labrador eliminated all Grade 12 testing they left themselves with the results of a Grade 10 test as the only measure of academic achievement in secondary school? Who knew that school boards in Nova Scotia would be incapable of reporting their average junior high achievement over the past three years? Who knew that the PEI department of education collected almost no information, and regarded what they did collect as a state secret? Only in New Brunswick, where testing was well-established, could consistent comparable test results be found, but even there it takes considerable effort to compile all the information into a comprehensible and comparable picture of individual schools.

All four Atlantic provinces have improved their data collection and reporting since the release of Report Card One, and for that, all deserve kudos. Every improvement requires the AIMS authors to review the data included in subsequent report cards and we have done so for Report Card Two, with the following results:

- Grade 12 achievement scores are now available in Newfoundland.
- Francophone New Brunswick is now treated, as it should have been in Report Card One, as a separate system.
- High school achievement measures have been expanded in each province where the data allows, to give a more complete picture of achievement in four broad areas: language arts, science, mathematics and humanities.
- AIMS has collected the GPAs of first-year students in universities and community colleges across the region, allowing for an assessment of how well high schools prepare their students for further learning.
- The “graduation rate” of incoming Grade 12 students has been replaced by a “hold” and a “retention” measure for Grade 10 students in all four provinces. This allows a more appropriate look at the success of schools in either graduating Grade 10 students (retention) or getting them into their third year of high school (hold).
- While standardized scores are necessary for fair comparison and to control for school context, there was a wide demand for access to the raw scores as well. As a result, raw, unadjusted scores will be provided for every measure—if your school got an 87% average on the provincial math exam, you’ll know it.
- The school districts in PEI have made available graduation rates and the provincial department recently released information about post-secondary participation among its graduates.
- In all provinces, where the data allows, three-year rolling averages have been implemented to smooth out spikes in year-over-year achievement and to focus more clearly the assessment on the schools and not individual class cohorts. ■

*For a more technical presentation of methodology, check out the AIMS website, at <http://www.aims.ca>.*

# Improvements Throughout the Provinces

In the weeks following the release of AIMS’ first high school report card, every province in the region announced improvements to their school level accountability mechanisms. The announcements continue in the lead-up to Report Card Two.



**Newfoundland:** Newfoundland’s Minister of Education Gary Reid says staff in his department have been working on a school-level report for all of the province’s schools in collaboration with school districts. They call it part of their commitment to accountability, and just released the report in February of 2004.



**Nova Scotia:** School improvement and accreditation is part of the Nova Scotia Learning for Life Strategy released in September of 2002. Eight pilot projects are underway in which school advisory councils, usually chaired by parents, are working with schools to help improve the quality of students’ learning. As well, the Nova Scotia School Boards Association launched a province-wide assessment of school success and learning indicators in 2003 and released the results Jan. 26, 2004.



**PEI:** The province has signed on to a new Pan-Canadian Assessment Program to assess student performance in reading, mathematics and science. “It is good educational research that enables us to assess how well our curriculum is preparing our students, and where we should be allocating resources in terms of new curriculum, teaching strategies and professional development,” minister of education Chester Gillan said in a release.



**New Brunswick:** Six weeks after the AIMS report, the New Brunswick government announced a comprehensive new education policy for the purpose of “raising academic achievement and excellence, improving quality teaching, and ensuring greater accountability of the school system.” New Brunswick launched its new qualitative assessment tool, a survey of parents, teachers and students about their personal assessment of school success, this year. Data from this should be available for incorporation in AIMS’ third school report card, in 2005. ■



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