



Transcript of Remarks by

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Before the PEI Task Force on Student Achievement
Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island
July 21st, 2005

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 30 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. 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 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 you are good is that all our staff now think they don't have any work to do. We have some results in Edmonton that are abysmal, 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 an area.

I am not going to tonight talk about all the societal factors except one. For many years our school district has had a huge aboriginal Canadian population. It is the poorest-off element of our city and one that we have nothing to be proud of in terms of educational achievement.

Our staff, when they got around to being the posed the question, "Is it possible to be better?" used to say, "We would do better if we had better kids." 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.

So we decided as a culture over a period of about eight years to encourage people not to talk about "this is how our kids do based on who they are," because we don't know the potential within all children. There are things in kids 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. Kids 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 that we didn't know we had.

Support your teachers

In my view, teaching is the most important paid work in society. Teaching is undervalued. 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 transforming the lives of many.

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 full deck, 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. Those are the kids we find 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 guys 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 50 million Chinese and Indian kids who just graduated from high school, too, and all of those kids have a huge work ethic. They're ready to work anywhere for less and they have 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 was to get everybody to work because you just see the effect — you don't see the process of getting each kid 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. Not blaming anybody, but I had a couple of kids in my room who did not know how to read, and they didn't know how to read 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 took eight reading courses and I still didn't know how to teach kids to read. I knew a lot about reading and the theory of reading but I didn't know how to do that. Again, I got re-certified, my principal never noticed, he never asked, and it didn't seem to matter.

There may be none like this in Prince Edward Island, but in Edmonton the public says, "You have some teachers who aren't very good. How come you don't do something

about them?” We have other people who don’t like teaching. 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 you have about teachers that’s so negative?” That may never happen 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 work as teachers, so I did something in Edmonton that got me nearly lynched. I realized that most teachers don’t change their teaching practice profoundly after they become teachers and they get into it. The 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 kids 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 class.” 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 interest. Now, there was some panic, some pushback, but I want to give you the theory.

We know what it is kids are expected to learn. In our province, it’s called knowledge, skills, and attitude. Society has said that kids need to have the knowledge, skills, and attitude 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 our district started measuring kids’ learning, which was a radical thing to do and quite unpleasant at first, because people said, “You cannot measure what kids are learning because you can’t measure that, you can’t capture that.”

I would agree that there are a number of things that are hard to capture. But we do have

standardized assessments at the district level, grades 1 to 9 for kids in writing and 1 to 9 for kids 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 marks and the provincial mark. The grades 1 to 9 writing tests are marked by teachers. We audit 5000 of those writing examinations a year, and 94 percent of the teachers mark them correctly to the standards, because there are various interpretations about what the curriculum means.

Anyway, let's get to the point. I believe that most teachers don't, in fact, have a lot of support in Edmonton in terms of learning to grow and change and develop as teachers because that isn't where we spend our money. Although there's lots of PD and workshops and other stuff, traditionally teachers in our district said, "Yeah, I went to that workshop," but nothing happened on Monday morning. So maybe we needed to study what kind of professional development teachers need that actually changes practice. I'll give you an example of it.

It turned out that hardly any teachers believed that they had been taught to teach reading in university to give them a high level of confidence as a reading teacher. And no matter how we measured it, our results were low. We had some terrible high school completion rates.

So we designed several reading programs that would take three years of training for teachers. Basically, the teacher would study, go for training, practice, have a professional coach, go back to training, learn something, practise it, have a professional coach, and at the end of the three years they were certified teachers of reading.

We did a study and found out that those 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 hard. The irony is that, after the teachers took the reading training, they felt more confident and more competent in their work. Because most teachers feel guilt-ridden all 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 kids you feel sorry for. I think the profession very much blames itself for whatever shortcomings there are.

Classroom visits crucial

Principals said to me, "But I have all this work to do, and I can't go into the classroom. Why do you want us to go in the classroom?" I said, "I want you to go into the classroom because your job is to monitor, coach, support, nurture, push, drag, pull, teachers to be the very best they can be." They said, "Yeah, 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 the deal. I will walk to 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 walk to classrooms together.”

And I've been in 7000 classrooms in the last four years and I don't pretend to know anything, 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 kids perform in this school over time?

What does the research say about what happens to kids who don't complete school? They tend to be unemployed and live in poverty. They 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 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 come up. 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 an 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?”

Principals said, “But I'm not good at going into rooms. I've never been in rooms. Teachers don't like it when I get in 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.

High school principals were the hardest to convince to walk into classrooms because high school teachers in Edmonton view their classes as their own domain: “we own it, we run it.” I think it's 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 and looking for evidence of practice. 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, they 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 kids, 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 practise 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, we sorted out the problems with collecting high school completion data, and our district thought we were really hot stuff. We were written up in articles and had international visitors.

And the rate of high school completers was 53 percent. Our Director of Communications said to me, “You can’t tell people our completion rate is 53 percent. People will be upset and leave, because there’s a Catholic District you can attend, there are publicly funded charter schools and publicly subsidized private schools. We’ll lose kids.”

I said, “We deserve to lose kids. With this completion rate, we ought to lose 10,000. The sad news is we aren’t going to lose kids 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, 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 it."

Our staff didn't like it. The first response of the staff was to say that whoever calculated that number didn't know what they were doing — something wrong with the statistician, let's kill the messenger.

So I said to our director of student information, a really respected high school math teacher and principal whom everybody loved, "Mike, go on over to the Alberta Education Department and study the methodology, and then I want you to go to every high school in Edmonton and tell them whether the methodology is sensible." So Mike went over, studied the methodology, said it made sense, it worked, and went to the high schools and they believed him. And our rate was *63 percent*. ???????

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 in Edmonton, if you do badly you tend to blame the kids, or say it's because there's not enough money, or too many special needs kids, 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.

Now, how do you make improvements? Well, first of all you have to say it 900 times for anybody to get it. My wife had to say some things to me for 32-and-a-half years that I didn't get or I didn't want to get. There are things that she still was working on the day she died. I think that's human nature.

Well, first of all, we had to involve our teachers' association in all this work, because teachers' associations all over North America don't like measuring anything. What they say is — and I'm not putting them down — "If you measure it, you'll hurt kids." I said to the association, the union, "Fine. You bring in all the damaged kids that we're hurting by giving them a writing test. Bring them into my office one at a time and I'll meet them. I'm going to bring in a bunch of adults we damaged because they're illiterate. Then we'll match all the damaged kids with all the damaged adults." Guess what? They haven't brought me one yet.

So I don't know whether testing damages kids or not. 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, teacher marked. Many of our teachers now believe that the standardized assessment has helped them do their programs. 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 they're weak.

The beef in the burger

Then I say to the schools, “You need to develop a target to show what you’re going to improve by this year.” Nobody gets shot if they don’t get the target, but they have to set a public target, and they have to show the results publicly.

And you would think parents would take all the kids from 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 that it’s based on the data, but that the parents think it’s important that we tell the truth in education.

So the schools set the target to improve. And if they persistently don’t improve, then I have to bring in another measure called “pressure import.” Now, I learned this from Dr. Michael Fullan. My superintendent in 1997 told me to go visit Dr. Fullan in Toronto. I was a little intimidated to do that, and he said, “Oh, yeah, 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 any achievement results.

I brought Dr. Fullan to Edmonton in September of this 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 works: “There’s some beef now in your burger.” Thank you, sir.

So we set a target, we measure, and I hold people accountable. What I do is identify a list of our weakest schools over time. We rank our schools from 207 to zero in terms of well-to-do-ness of the kids. Somehow, I don’t know how we do that, but we do it.

Last year, in one of our very worst 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 PD plan and, more importantly, let me see your schedules.” The principal said, “What do you mean, my schedules?” 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 a dispute about the classrooms, teachers send me kids, I have to be around to deal with the custodian.”

I’m not putting this principal down — that’s substance of your day and then some. I said, “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."

The principals now schedule their day, and I don't hold them accountable for whether they reach 60 percent. 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.

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 gifted. I didn't have that gift. I had to learn the hard way. I had virtually no help. It took me years to get good at what I needed to get good at a lot faster. I got good as fast as I knew how.

Student by student

So, about three years ago, we got our reading results from our district tests, and I said to our principals, "If you take out the true special education kids, we have 2500 kids from grades 1 to 9 who are below grade level in reading. They do not have special education issues, but they're below grade level in reading. I want a list of each one of these kids sent to my office by November 1, and beside each kid's name a plan that will make a difference.

The most common reaction I heard was, "Don't you trust me?" I said, "Yes, I trust you. I trust my banker but I still get a bank statement. I trust my broker but I wouldn't mind getting an update occasionally."

I won't go through the whole process that we went through because educational change is like going through Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*. 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?" 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 to change. I think that's human nature.

Anyway, they submitted 2500 names. It turned out there were kids at risk in every school in Edmonton, including in really rich schools. Then I went to my school visit and said, "I have my list, let's look at your list. Let's talk about each of these people." 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 kid that is listed on that page. Where is this kid going to be in reading by the end of the year?”

At the end of the first year, 57 percent of those kids 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 I decided this year to make it more complex.

I told you at the beginning that our weakest performers are aboriginal kids for a whole bunch of reasons I won’t go into. They really don’t do well. So I said, “Now, every kid will have grade level in reading, every kid will have grade level in writing, every kid with DSL and every kid who is aboriginal we’re going to track this year.” Do you know how we test for them at the end of the year? The kid writes the reading test and the writing test and then our Department of Assessment calculates how the kids did and then they show the kids on the list. There wasn’t a single complaint this year because I think they had gotten used to the fact that we were going to monitor how well these kids 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 come 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 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 kids’ achievement — and we don’t pretend to measure it perfectly — is one piece of evidence. Theoretically, I think, teachers don’t know how to assess a lot of things and that’s a real challenge. 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 kids to learn and teachers to perform well. What I look for is whether kids are engaged in learning in the classroom. Who isn’t engaged?

And when are we going to have to stop this work of measuring, setting standards, setting targets? Where will that stop for district professional development? It will not stop. It cannot stop. There are always improvements to be made, and to stop measuring is to stop knowing where we are and where we have to go.