



2000 Barrington Street
Suite 1006, Cogswell Tower
Halifax, NS B3J 3K1
902-429-1143 – office
902-425-1393 – fax
www.AIMS.ca - website

March 25, 2005

Gary MacDougall
Managing Editor
The Guardian
165 Prince St.
P.O. Box 760
Charlottetown, PEI C1A 7L8

Dear Sir:

Premier Pat Binns has properly expressed concern about the performance of PEI's education system. His alarm over PEI's poor performance on national and international test scores like PISA (the Program of International Student Assessment) has led to a welcome promise of better performance from the Island's schools.

But, the Premier has his work cut out for him. This is especially so if the defensive and ill-informed remarks reported in the Monday, March 21st edition of your paper in the article headlined "Report Card not reliable, says school board official" are representative of the attitude of the educational establishment to genuine accountability for the performance of the Island's schools.

The fact that Alex (Sandy) MacDonald, the superintendent of education for the Eastern School District would comment on my institute's report card on the region's high schools, a piece of complex research, without apparently having read it or even being properly briefed first is a serious concern to us and has resulted in misleading information being supplied to the people of PEI.

Ironically, Mr. MacDonald's own examples unintentionally highlight the real issues for Islanders trying to find out what goes on in their schools. First, he suggests that AIMS should be reporting performance in individual subject areas to allow readers to focus on what interests them most about a school. Surely he knows that we do just that for the schools in New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nova Scotia, and can't do it for Prince Edward Island only because the education establishment on the Island has been unable to provide that data to us even though we first asked for it over three years ago.

He then argues that we fail to take into account the economic environment of Souris Regional High when assessing the number of students who go on to post secondary studies

– which entirely misses the point of our analysis. We in fact give Souris Regional High credit in our analysis for their efforts in a challenging context. This is part of the value that our report card brings to the discussion — we adjust our findings for each school’s context, so that they are not penalized for factors they do not control, like the socio-economic status of the community or the pupil teacher ratio. Mr. MacDonald’s attempts to criticize our report card say more about his reading comprehension skills than about our research.

Contrary to what Mr. MacDonald would have you believe, the report card is not just simple at-a-glance provincial rankings. The report card provides specific detail on more than 20 factors collected to calculate the grade for each school. The report is about grades, not rankings. And Mr. MacDonald seems also to have forgotten that our approach was given a clean bill of health by the outside expert brought in by the region’s four ministers of education to analyse it.

In fact, that expert spent most of his time castigating the provinces for poor reporting, and the range of available information is considerably narrower on Prince Edward Island than anywhere else. That is thus a key issue that the Premier, as well as all Island parents and students should be taking up with Mr. MacDonald and his associates in the education establishment. As we have proven in the rest of the region, if Mr. MacDonald and his colleagues provide useful data, we will use it.

Useful, readily available and easily comparable public information on the performance of our schools was simply non-existent in Prince Edward Island before our annual report card was first published. If, in fact, the department, or Mr. MacDonald’s school district, now have that data on individual school performance that we have been asking for for years (and that other provinces provide as a matter of course), we look forward to receiving it to give Islanders an even more faithful portrait of their schools.

The Report Card is a tool to be used to improve the education system for our children so they are prepared to compete and succeed in the global economy of their future. If we want to make our schools better, we have to know what their individual strengths and weaknesses are, based on real verifiable data; we have to know how they perform compared to each other, so that we can see who is to be emulated and who needs help. We make no apologies for putting the interests of parents and students and individual teachers ahead of those of an educational establishment that finds accountability for results an uncomfortable notion.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian Lee Crowley". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned to the left of a vertical red line.

Brian Lee Crowley
President – Atlantic Institute for Market Studies