



Public School Boards'
Association of Alberta

Keeping it Close to Home

A Preliminary Analysis of The Report of Alberta's Commission on Learning

November 2003

Summary

The Report of the Learning Commission represents a major contribution to the ongoing challenge of improving public school education in Alberta, and an endorsement of *keeping it close to home*. On the whole, the recommendations are what the Commission said they would be: evidence based. Where evidence is lacking the Report is weak, as when it deals with:

- Removing principals from the bargaining unit; and,
- Moving to provincial bargaining with a single agent for school boards.

On more than one occasion the Report advocates better and more timely information, more widespread and sincere consultation, mutual agreement rather than prescription. This outlook is hopeful, notwithstanding the occasional slip, by the Commission, into old and unworkable ways of dealing with issues. For example, Recommendation #13: "*Require every school to operate as a professional learning community. . .*" The reality is that a truly excellent system of public school education cannot be micro-managed, or led for excellence, from the top down.

Public school boards, and the communities they represent, are committed to the continued improvement of the public school system in the province.

We are committed to consultation with everyone on all sides of us. During consultation and thereafter we will be looking for a commitment, from the provincial government, that adequate resources will be available to do what is agreed.

We will be looking for a commitment, from both the provincial government and the community, that any enlargement of the mandate of public school boards will be based on an informed agreement, and not simply imposed.

We will be looking for an agreement that local conditions will be acknowledged as being of foremost importance in making decisions.

We will be looking for an acknowledgement that the best decisions are those made closest to the situation they will impact; made by the people who will be the first to live with the consequences.

The future is wide open for public school education in Alberta.

Introduction

1. The Commission was appointed by the Provincial Government. Its mandate came from the Provincial Government. The recommendations are for the attention of the Provincial Government. None of the recommendations is directed to school boards, teachers, the A.T.A., students, parents, or others.

“Specifically, the Commission’s mandate was to ‘provide recommendations and advice to the Minister of Learning on ensuring a sustainable basic learning (Kindergarten to Grade 12) system that supports the lifelong learning needs of students and the societal and economic well-being of the province.’” (p. 20)

The Commission’s recommendations, and the Government’s response, will not necessarily improve conditions in any school, or improve the educational outcomes for any student, or improve the quality of life in any community, unless local people are clear about what they need and want locally. They must also insist on the freedom to modify recommendations intended for the provincial government to meet local circumstances.

2. The Commission did more and accomplished more than many people and organizations, including this one, expected, given time and resource constraints. The evidence is that the Commission acted independently.

3. The Commission was wise to limit itself to the “big picture”, including important benchmarks and new initiatives and priorities, without developing the detail.

4. The Commission wisely said that a major investment of new money is required NOW. It said the implementation of all other recommendations should be delayed until the details are worked out. It emphasized the importance of the government working out the details in consultation with the major actors, that is the parties involved, in actually making things happen.

5. Mr. Al O’Brien, who costed out the implementation of all recommendations, was for many years the Deputy Provincial Treasurer, Budget. Mr. O’Brien’s reputation provides credibility for the numbers.

6. “The Commission’s vision begins with five very important starting points.

- *“Alberta has an outstanding education system. . . That doesn’t mean, however, that we can be complacent and accept what we have as “good enough”. It simply means we have a higher platform to spring from.*
- *“Education is the most important investment we can make as a society. Our education system not only shapes individual students’ lives, it shapes the very nature of our society. A strong and vibrant public education system – a system that values each and every individual, instills positive values, and builds tolerance and respect – is critical to develop social cohesion and the kind of civil society Albertans want for the future.*

- *“It is critical to look beyond the pressing issues of today and prepare for the future, whatever the future might hold. The best approach is to ensure that the education system remains flexible, resilient and able to anticipate and adapt to what will undoubtedly be a climate of perpetual change.*
- *Education will become even more critical to individual “Albertans, to their communities, and to our province as a whole, especially with the growing importance of skills, knowledge and ideas to the future of our society and Alberta’s role in a global economy. Albertans are strong supporters of their public school system. However, it will only remain one of the best systems in the world if we take deliberate actions to keep it that way.*
- *“The most important point is that everything in the education system must start and end with children and youth. Schools are not there for teachers, for administrators or trustees. They’re not there for parents, for business, or for governments. They’re there for students. And the first and only criterion for judging the success of schools and the education system should be how well every child learns.” (page 4)*

A tight focus on students should not exclude the legitimate needs of the community. Public school education exists for the continued well-being of the community as well as for the growth of students.

Specific Comments

1. Re: An Immediate Infusion of new and recurring investment

The Commission concluded that there is a structural shortfall in provincial government funding for K – 12 education.

The Commission concluded that the shortfall is \$90.6 million. It also estimated that the additional annual cost of implementing the new funding framework would be \$46.6 million, recommending a total of \$136.6 million be put into the system immediately. Arguably, the additional money required to implement class size guidelines is also to address the structural shortfall, since class sizes have deteriorated in the last few years. The Commission referred to the implementation of class size guidelines as a new initiative.

Recommendation #87 was that the provincial government should “*Address the current shortfall in funds as soon as possible, but no later than the 2004 – ‘05 provincial budget.*”

Recommendation #88: “*Address the shortfall in operations and maintenance funding on an ongoing basis.*”

Recommendation #89: “*Implement the Renewed Funding Framework as part of the Budget for 2004 – 05.*”

Recommendation #90: “*Provide sustainable and predictable funding.*”

Recommendation #91: “*Implement a transparent, open, and understandable financial information system that provides accurate, timely and comparable information on funding for Alberta’s education system.*”

Recommendation #92: “*Establish a mechanism for school boards and teachers to provide ongoing and regular input to the provincial government on the overall costs of education and related issues.*”

2. Consultation is vital, before the province announces decisions

The Commission also advised that details surrounding the implementation of most recommendations should be worked out in consultation with all the affected parties.

From the letter of transmittal: “*We sincerely hope that our report will stimulate discussion and debate. More importantly, we hope it will act as a catalyst for concerted and deliberate action across the province...*”

“*...We now turn this report over to you (the Minister of Learning) and encourage you and all Albertans to take up the challenge, to work together.*”

“In the longer term, it is important for all of the key partners in education to sort out appropriate roles and responsibilities and work together in a positive and collaborative way to achieve the best outcomes for students.” (p. 15)

“....all Albertans – not just those who have a direct stake in the education system – need to play an active role in their schools and their educational system – asking questions, seeking answers, providing support and encouragement, and getting directly involved.” (p. 35)

“All partners in the learning system – teachers, parents, administrators, support staff, school boards, government, community and business members – should work together to ensure that children receive the best possible education.....” (p. 39)

3. The section on Governance is of great interest to all school boards

For about 100 years the success of public school education depended upon the maintenance of what was often referred to as “the respectful partnership” between the provincial community, represented by the provincial government, and the local community, represented by the public school board.

The Commission wrote that: *“In terms of advice from stakeholders and experts, the most common themes were that: . . . Roles, responsibilities, and accountability should be clear for all those involved in the education system.” (p. 22)*

The Report acknowledges that *“this balanced approach to governance has served the province well. It produces a kind of dynamic tension that allows the different partners to work together, push and prod, agree and disagree, and in the end, ensure the best results for Alberta’s students.” (p. 136)*

The Commission goes on to say: *“It’s important for this balance to be maintained and strengthened. There is a perception that the province is moving towards more centralized control of the education system. Concern has been expressed about the lack of consultation on major policy directions or reduced involvement in areas such as curriculum development. The current funding framework provides provincial funding in distinct envelopes and this limits school boards’ abilities to allocate funds as necessary to meet local priorities and needs. Some of these concerns may be more perceived than real.” (p. 136)*

The Commission neither finds the relationship healthy, nor unhealthy. It records a few concerns without recording any endorsements. But, since it makes no recommendations about strengthening the relationship, it gives comfort to those who say the relationship is fine.

Recommendation #82: *“Maintain a balance between centralized and decentralized responsibilities for the provincial government and school boards.”*

Recommendation #82 is also the only recommendation that deals with *“roles, responsibilities, and accountability.”*

The explicit position of the provincial government is that locally elected trustees are agents of the provincial government, not agents of the local community. The community itself seems to have the directly contrary point of view. It would have been helpful to have had the Commission support one view or the other.

The Commission wrote positively about the benefit of a “balanced approach to government.” It had nothing to say about the role or the very existence of locally elected trustees. We interpret this to mean that the Commission endorses the continuation of a significant role for locally elected trustees. It would have been helpful to have heard from the Commission about what should be done to re-establish an appropriate balance.

The Commission had nothing to say about the right of local communities to determine their own size. The Commission said nothing about a Local Government Charter, or clear lines of accountability, or the clarification of the rights of school boards, parents, students, etc., or a clearly expressed mandate.

4. The Distribution of Financial Responsibility

The Commission was asked to make recommendations about some degree of financial independence for school boards, i.e. access to some funds the purpose of which would not be prescribed by the provincial government. The Commission was silent on the question of provincial funding without strings attached. The Commission did recommend that boards should be able to levy a local supplementary requisition up to 10% of the value of their annual budget.

Revenue sharing is probably a more productive avenue to explore. All taxation, regardless of form, is a measure of local effort, because the revenue is coming from taxpayers, not the provincial government. The issue is one of local government control vs. provincial government control. The provincial government tends to shift the burden to individuals, and away from corporations, while local government tends to favour having corporations bear a greater burden while individuals bear a smaller burden.

We support the idea that funding of every public school board’s mandate and work should come from all the provincial government departments that benefit, i.e. Health and Wellness. We consider public school boards to be general-purpose local government.

5. The Commission recommended better information systems.

Recommendations #91 and 92 speak directly to the value of, and the need for, good information (input) as the basis for decision-making.

The Report itself describes past decisions made by the provincial government which have had the effect of making it very difficult to compare education from one year to another, and this, in turn, makes it difficult to identify trends.

The Report also provides ample evidence that school boards, teachers and others have been giving the provincial government reliable information for the past decade. Improved information systems are only useful if there is a commitment to make effective use of the information.

2. Re: Students Ready to Learn / Teaching Conditions

The Commission concluded that the mix of students is far more diverse and complex today than in days gone by. It concluded that this is true not only in so-called magnet communities but almost everywhere, reflecting increased incidence of special needs, an increased number of recognizable special needs, better and earlier diagnosis of special needs, more frequent identification, and increased immigration. It also concluded that, at the same time, family and community supports are not all that they should be, and are not brought to bear as early as they should be.

It also concluded that parents, other advocates, and people within the public school system are less willing to be satisfied with “nominal inclusion”, that is, accepting of the presence of the child without actively and constantly engaging the child in the work of the school.

The Commission recommended that the mandate of the school system should be explicitly expanded.

Recommendation #1: *“Establish parenting centres in communities across the province with close links to elementary schools.”*

Recommendation #2: *“Establish new junior kindergarten programs on a phased-in basis.”*

Recommendation #3: *“Ensure better coordination of programs for children provided by the provincial government and at the community level.”*

We are prepared to recommend to our members that they consider an enlarged mandate for public school boards, eg. early kindergarten, additional subjects, etc. but:

- **there must be a firm commitment from the provincial government that additional resources, sufficient to support any enlarged mandate, will be available**
- **there must be prior consultation and agreement;**
- **school boards must have the option of opting out or delaying entry, depending upon local circumstances;**
- **there must be additional flexibility available to school boards, with a realistic prospect if long term sustainability and stability; and,**
- **the mandate must be explicitly enlarged so that everyone is aware of the new circumstances.**

In addition, there must be public discussion about accountability.

The proposed expansion of the mandate of the public school system is very significant, not only for the public school system itself but also for parents and the community as a whole. The social and financial implications are huge.

Such an expansion cannot be undertaken without careful consideration involving every member of the community with an interest. The public school system simply cannot consider such an expansion without a clear political, public policy, and financial commitment from the community as a whole as well as from the provincial government.