

"Creating a useful crisis"

Alberta Education releases Provincial Achievement Test results

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Provincial government tactics to undermine people's confidence in the public sector are described in Naomi Klein's highly acclaimed new book, *The Shock Doctrine—The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*.

On Tuesday, October 2, a packed Edmonton audience learned more about Klein's view that a key driver in the emergence of the right in North America has been its ability to exploit both natural and human disasters (for example, Hurricane Katrina and Iraq) as opportunities to provide "shock therapy" that involves privatization and downsizing of the public sector. By creating a climate of fear that leaves public opinion "unmoored" and people "malleable and uprooted," the right has experienced renewed success in advancing its traditional message: the public sector is inefficient and wasteful and should be dismantled in favour of open markets, school vouchers and performance pay.

Klein writes that "statistical malpractice" has been a recurring theme in the radical right's agenda to undermine confidence in public institutions and services such as education. In particular, she pointed to the strategy deployed by John Snobelen, Ontario's minister of education in the mid-1990s, when he announced in a closed-door meeting of civil servants that "a climate of panic" would be necessary to mobilize public support for cuts to education. The strategy, which included artificially inflating debt projections while pointing to declining student test scores, was described by Snobelen as "creating a useful crisis." All of this mischief was the harbinger of brutal cuts to Ontario classrooms and attacks on the professional standing of teachers.

Here in Alberta, the government's September 25 analysis accompanying the annual Education Results Report, which included trends in provincial achievement and diploma examinations, bears an uncanny resemblance to the tactics described in Klein's "shock doctrine."

While pointing to improvements in areas such as school completion and diploma examination performance, the government website¹ makes a mystifying claim that fewer students achieve an acceptable level of performance in provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations and calls for "an examination of ways to address these results."

In reality, the 1 per cent decline in acceptable performance over 10 years is statistically insignificant. Further, the government's number crunching does not consider profound changes in Alberta's student population as well as family and community circumstances over the past 10 years. Seventy per cent of the variation in student learning is attributable not to school factors but to student, family and community characteristics.² Given this, the government's attempt to sound the alarm bell is puzzling at best. To complicate matters further and to shed more doubt on the government's contradictory claim, we must remember that one-third of student outcomes in courses can be assessed on these tests. Consider Grade 9 Science where only 63 (32 per cent) of

the 200 learner outcomes can be assessed or Grade 9 Social Studies where 22 (33 per cent) of the 67 learner outcomes can be measured. ATA President Frank Bruseker noted: "Nowhere does the government's website mention that teacher-awarded marks are not considered in determining this five- to ten-year analysis."

Ironically, Premier Stelmach promises to govern with "openness and transparency" while some education officials undermine public confidence in the K–12 education system through statistical alchemy. None of this serves the needs of Alberta students. The auditor general's recent disclosures that the province failed to collect \$1 billion annually in royalties because of a lack of "leadership"³ is particularly amusing, given the government's continual call for greater accountability in education. Currently, Alberta has the largest testing and reporting bureaucracy in Canada,⁴ and it continues to sprout one new so-called "accountability" initiative after another with questionable value for our students. In addition to numerous problems associated with the government's data collection scheme known as Grade Level of Achievement Reporting, teachers will be required (as of June 2008) to report to parents the multiple choice sections of the Grade 6 and 9 provincial achievement tests.

The government will release the results of its testing programs to the public in the coming weeks. Teachers are therefore reminded that they can counter the tactic of creating a "useful crisis" through a solid understanding of the limitations of the current provincial testing programs and by supporting Association efforts to find alternatives to the current narrow approaches to educational accountability.

For background information, consult recent Association publications, *Real Learning First* and *Time for Change. Time for Action—Teachers and Educational Accountability*, both available on the Association website (www.teachers.ab.ca).

1 www.education.gov.ab.ca/news/2007/September/nr-provresult.asp

2 Ungerleider, C. 2006. "Reflections on the use of large-scale student assessment for improving student success." *Canadian Journal of Education* 29: 873–883.

3 "Billions in royalties missed, audit finds." *Edmonton Journal*. October 2, 2007, p. 1.

4 Lessard, C. and A. Brassard. 2005. "Educational Governance in Canada: Trends and Significance." American Educational Research Association, Montreal