

7-9-1995

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Education Policy Analysis Archives

Volume 3 Number 12

July 9, 1995

ISSN 1068-2341

A peer-reviewed scholarly electronic journal.

Editor: Gene V Glass, Glass@ASU.EDU. College of Education,
Arizona State University, Tempe AZ 85287-2411

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Educational Change in Alberta, Canada: An Analysis of Recent Events

Charles F. Webber
The University of Calgary

cwebber@acs.ucalgary.ca

Abstract:

Alberta, Canada, is the site of large-scale educational change initiatives legislated by the provincial government. The mandates have sparked heated public debate over the appropriateness, wisdom, and utility of the reforms. This article summarizes the views of representatives of several educational interest groups and offers suggestions for making change more meaningful and successful.

Introduction

Schools in Alberta are being altered on an unprecedented scale. The provincial Conservative government is following an education "business" plan that includes the shifting of power from school boards both to the provincial department of education and to individual schools. This has led to a reduced role for school boards in educational finance, the selection of their own school superintendents, and school accountability measures. In fact, the number of school boards has been reduced from 141 to about 60 (Government of Alberta, 1994). As well, massive budget cuts resulting in reduced support for students and classroom teachers have caused teacher morale, already at reduced levels because of rising demands (Alberta Teachers' Association, 1993), to plummet even further. Indeed, words such as "fear, anger, disbelief, bewilderment, and frustration" (McConaghy, 1994, p. 500) have been used to describe the reactions of public school supporters to recent actions of the government of Alberta.

The provincial government presented the changes to education, which included the halving

of funds for kindergarten and major increases in the use of standardized testing, as primarily the result of debt reduction initiatives. However, this claim was refuted by Barlow and Robertson (1994, p. 219), who said that the changes were motivated more by ultraconservative "ideological and political" beliefs than by fiscal need. Barlow and Robertson added that there was no pedagogical basis to the educational reforms currently underway in Alberta. Interestingly, Hallinger, Murphy, and Hausman (1993) made a similar claim about the overall educational restructuring phenomenon in Canada, New Zealand, The United States, and Great Britain. They stated that reformers have paid attention to organizational and governance issues at the expense of curricular and instructional matters. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993, p. 226) agreed that the restructuring movement results from "narrow economic concerns, private interests, and strongly conservative values."

Purpose

One purpose of this article is to report the views on educational change held by representatives of a wide variety of groups of Albertans interested in education. An important component of this purpose was to include educators' views on school reform, a need identified by Hallinger, Murphy, and Hausman (1993) and Barth and Pansegrau (1994).

A second purpose was to add to the documentation of earlier reactions to changes to schooling in Alberta. Webber (1995) reported that educational stakeholders concurred with the Alberta government's decision to reduce expenditures and to adapt to societal changes. However, that report also identified widely held concerns about the negative impacts of government actions on students, educators, and parents. In particular, concerns were raised about the government's motivations, inappropriate use of accountability measures, and role changes.

Setting

In October 1994, 26 representatives from The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) visited Calgary, Alberta. The visitors included the members of ASCD's executive council and staff from ASCD's American headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. These educators were in Calgary to hold an executive council meeting, to visit schools in the Calgary area, to meet with members of the Alberta Affiliate of ASCD, and to confer with representatives from a wide variety of educational interest groups from the province of Alberta. Key portions of the visit included an afternoon meeting with 33 individuals representing teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, business people, university professors and the provincial department of education. These groups, plus parents, were represented at an evening mini-conference held for 140 participants. The event was sponsored by the Alberta Affiliate of ASCD and by the Centre for Leadership in Learning at The University of Calgary.

The discussions that occurred during the afternoon and evening meetings were documented by members of the executive of ASCD's Alberta Affiliate and by graduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Education at The University of Calgary. Examination of the notes taken during the meetings showed that the talks focused on three areas: educational differences and similarities between the United States and Canada, what Albertans highlighted about their own system of education, and what the future might be for education. This report highlights how Albertans described their system of education to their American visitors. The notes taken during the meetings were sorted into topic groups and the information summarized so that both the meaning and the tone of the conversations were presented as accurately as possible.

Readers should note that this report summarizes the views that were expressed by all meeting participants. Any one person who took part in the talks may not agree with all or even many of the opinions included here. As well, this report may not reflect the official views of the

participants' employers. Moreover, this document is based on discussions that were interpreted by recorders and by the author; the information may have been interpreted differently by others. Finally, the data presented here are of a type particularly subject to alteration as conditions evolve.

Changing the Rules

Reducing government spending is the stated goal of the government of the province of Alberta. It is also the platform upon which the government was elected in 1992. Because the costs of health, education, and social services comprise such a large proportion of government spending, it was inevitable that they would bear the brunt of many cost-cutting initiatives. Even so, some government decisions, like the decree to school boards instructing them to amalgamate their districts with others nearby, were viewed widely as moves toward increased efficiency. Other decisions, such as the ruling to reduce funding to kindergarten programs by 50%, were thought to be based on fiscal and not pedagogical reasons. Nevertheless, the Alberta government continues to enjoy strong support among its electorate, which is committed to deficit reduction.

The support for budget cuts among the majority of Albertans was accompanied by the accusation from still sizeable portions of the populace that the education system was being changed drastically under the guise of balancing the provincial budget. Groups of teachers, school board members, school administrators, and parents raised the possibility that the government was shaping schools to conform to an extremely conservative political philosophy. Further, there was concern that the conservative nature of the government caused its members to listen carefully to the concerns of business and its rural supporters, for example, and to denigrate the views of teachers, nurses, professors, social workers, and medical doctors. Those who shared this perception cited dismissals of their concerns about the negative effects of budget cuts as the whining of "special interest groups." In fact, some believed that the government had a strong proclivity to be anti-intellectual and coercive in its approach to fiscal restraint. This perception was strengthened by statements from a senior government employee to the effect that the government was exercising a "power thrust" in its efforts to "move forward" on reform in the public sector.

Ambivalence toward recent government actions in Alberta was evident in other perceptions shared by those who took part in the meetings with ASCD representatives. For example, the government was praised for creating opportunities for parents and community members to share in the decision making within local school communities via membership in school councils. Expansions to student achievement testing programs were perceived by some to be important steps toward increasing student and teacher accountability, while others were afraid that assessment was going to drive instruction. The opinion was expressed that education is "very bureaucratic and administration-bound," but so was the belief that the government was attempting to centralize control by declaring that it would approve the hiring by school boards of all school superintendents. Similarly, statements that parents must accept their responsibility to send their children to school "ready to learn" were argued to be desirable but unrealistic within the context of a highly diverse population.

Despite the dissenting opinions expressed during the meetings, there was agreement that the Canadian business community was playing an active role in shaping education in Alberta. One example of business influence cited was the Employability Skills Profile developed by the Conference Board of Canada, an organization supported by major Canadian businesses and "dedicated to enhancing the performance of Canadian organizations within the global economy" (McLaughlin, 1992, p. 2). The document was widely circulated among educators, politicians at the provincial and national levels, and business people. It was developed in response to a "growing concern that many young people do not see the direct relevance of what they are

learning in school to their needs in later life" (McLaughlin, 1992, p. 2), plus the perception that graduates of public schools lack important employability skills when they enter the work force. Those at the meeting who disagreed with this perception expressed reservations about linking schooling closely to the success of Canadian businesses competing within a global market economy.

Meeting participants agreed that teaching professionals have less control within their field than in the past. Some stated that professionals are being "deprived of the control they have had" or that "teachers are being left out of the process." Others viewed reduced teacher autonomy as a requirement for increased input from parents. Whether viewed positively or negatively, it was clear that society expects teachers to make fewer decisions without input from parents and the community at large. Furthermore, a majority of Albertans was prepared to support legislation requiring teachers to forfeit real control over financial, instructional, and staffing issues to parents and students. It was noted that a devaluing of the control of professionals was not a strictly Alberta phenomenon but, rather, a global trend evident in countries like Great Britain, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

Increased school choice was also a condition with which educators must come to terms, according to the opinions expressed to ASCD representatives visiting Calgary. In fact, Albertans live in an era characterized by educational consumerism and a belief that parents and students are the "customers" of schools. Therefore, the educational landscape includes the piloting of charter schools, mandated parent councils for every school, the privatization of some school services, and a de facto voucher system. This allows for schools to "attract like-minded parents" and to "match teachers' styles with [the appropriate] parents and children." Supporters of school choice also may include "people who want more emphasis on the basics." The possible benefits of school choice were thought to be "pride, fund raising [for schools], and commitment" while the possible negative consequences included a "wider gap between the haves" who can afford higher quality schools, and the "have-nots" who are restricted by the costs of extra school fees or transportation to schools beyond walking distance from students' homes.

School choice "engenders competition" among schools for students, according to one ASCD visitor. Consequently, educators in Alberta must understand "a whole new paradigm" and "think competitively." Furthermore, personnel in competitive schools will actively "solicit money to equalize [economic] gaps" among students. However, some Albertans could not reconcile themselves to a competition among schools that would result in "winners and losers." These Albertans, and at least one ASCD visitor, also were concerned that support for competition among schools was driven by the oxymoronic "expectation that the majority of students will be at the top end of the scale." In addition, very few supporters of competition among schools expect that they or their children are likely to frequent schools populated by students who achieve at levels below average, despite the fact that virtually one half of all schools must be below average. The same proponents of competition also often do not acknowledge the strong possibility that teachers and administrators in schools perceived to be successful may attempt, overtly and covertly, to exclude students who may tarnish the school's reputation, especially if school funding is tied to student achievement levels and/or graduation rates.

Privatization of school services was a trend with credibility in Alberta where custodial services already were contracted to private companies in some school districts. As well, experimentation with work-site schools will soon become a reality in Calgary. This is in addition to the relatively high levels of provincial government funding already accorded to private schools in Alberta. The degree to which school privatization might go in Alberta was uncertain, but ASCD guests provided a description of privatization practices in the United States. For example, contractual agreements with some support and instructional staff have been waived and services subsequently contracted on a "fee-for-service basis." In some instances, the administrative, teaching, and support staffs of entire schools were dismissed and the services these personnel

formerly provided turned over to private companies. The stated rationale for these moves was that this approach to education was cheaper and that the deployment of staff was easier than in traditional school structures.

The emerging context for education in Alberta is one that comes closer to a market model of delivery. As one Albertan stated, "Things have changed - the rules, [even] the description of public schools." Some Albertans and their American guests believed that we simply must recognize "and understand the new rules and get on with them." In their opinion, this meant not worrying about change and, instead, "focusing on the new product or service as an improvement." However, their colleagues were concerned that, even though some of the new thrusts were "very good," there were too many initiatives scattered over too many directions in too short a time period for people to react positively to the changes. Indeed, we should ask, "Where are they going with the public education system?" because Albertans may be "caught by surprise, in many cases, as to what the final consequences will be."

The New Context of Teaching

Members of ASCD executive council and staff were told by Alberta educators that the new rules and expectations for education in the province were, in their opinion, affecting the context of most schools. For example, issues of equity were emerging as more significant than ever before. Efforts to heighten student and teacher accountability occasionally were being reduced to teaching to provincial achievement tests. Mandated site-based management required teachers, administrators, and parents to learn and use new skills. Competition among schools was leading school staff to plan very focused public relations campaigns. Finally, legislation requiring teachers to work more closely with parents and community members, plus the ongoing influence of business people, caused debates over whether the result would be true collaboration or mere compliance.

Equity

The topic of equity was not widely debated by Albertans until recently. However, changes in demographics, economic conditions, and legislation prompted intense discussions of equal access to adequate school programs. In these discussions it was difficult to separate clearly the influences of immigration patterns and other demographic variables. Nevertheless, differences between rural and urban schools, access to early childhood services, and socioeconomic variables emerged as significant issues in the current equity dialogue.

Many Albertans from both rural and urban environments perceived their political control to be problematic. Rural residents traditionally have perceived their influence to be outweighed by that of citizens in the more densely populated cities. On the other hand, the current government was elected largely on the basis of rural votes gained just after constituency boundaries were redesigned so that urban centres were represented by proportionately fewer Members of the Legislative Assembly than rural districts. A legal challenge to the current electoral boundaries was in progress when ASCD representatives were in Alberta and the subsequent court decision was that the existing framework was undemocratic. Until a recently struck committee redesigns the constituency boundaries to more closely apply the concept of representation by population and another election is held within two to three years, rural politicians will continue to wield power that is disproportionate to the population they represent. Not surprisingly, the present government was criticized as "anti-urban." Dissenters claimed that rural schools have suffered for too long because of a relatively small tax base. The government stripped school boards of the power to collect property taxes, arguing that funding arrangements to shift monies from some urban school boards to rural school districts were necessary to ensure

that "no matter where youngsters are in the province they are learning to their potential. This was countered by claims that the "government doesn't understand where costs and needs are different in cities compared to those in rural areas." The whole situation was exacerbated by a successful legal challenge by Catholic school boards which resulted in their retaining their right to levy and collect school taxes.

Socioeconomic differences and reduced educational budgets may combine to form a "two-class system" in Alberta. For example, provincial government grants to school boards for kindergarten were cut by 50% in 1994. Some school boards drew from their total budget to pay for a full kindergarten program of 400 hours of instruction, while others charged parents up to \$450 per school year to cover the difference between a 200 and 400 hour kindergarten program. Many teachers were concerned that children from less affluent families would not have access to full kindergarten. This is significant when early intervention is critical for students with any kind of special needs. Parents who have sufficient resources will "kick in additional money, further exacerbating the problem" of socioeconomic differences in Alberta's society. A large proportion of both the Americans and Canadians urged each other to "never abandon the role of equity" and to declare publicly that "we care about these kids." Further, they cautioned policy makers to remember when they are deciding how to downsize that "public schools are the only public organizations that have the role of servicing all students."

Testing as Accountability

A belief that "schools aren't accountable" led the provincial government to renew and expand its emphasis on standardized testing. Personnel from the department of education reported that they were "going toward a results-based focus" in their province-wide evaluation of students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 12. The search for "good outcome measures" includes plans to publish "school-by-school test comparisons" and "high school grants attached to credit modules completed."

These proposals elicited many concerns among ASCD personnel and those individuals meeting with them. The concerns included the appropriateness of standardized tests for inner-city and immigrant students. It was pointed out that much of what is done in schools cannot be measured by standardized achievement tests and that standardized "testing is also very costly."

Advocates of testing were asked to consider alternative evaluation methodologies such as portfolio, performance, and authentic assessments. However, some present at the October meetings were not optimistic that teachers would be able to implement newer evaluation strategies successfully. Instead, teachers may have to live, at least in the short term, with traditional models of student evaluation, particularly when the claim is made by government spokespersons that "accountability for results [should be] decentralized." While the term "decentralized accountability" remained undefined, its use increased the concern that standardized test results will be used to compare schools, students, and teachers with insufficient regard for demographic differences among students and communities.

Site-Based Management

Participants in the October meetings in Calgary recognized that the term "site-based management," sometimes referred to as "school-based decision management," has become central to the discussion about North American schools. Although the term is used generally to refer to the devolution of educational decision making to the school level from school district and government offices, site-based management (SBM) means different things to different people. To some, it means that school principals have control over virtually all aspects of their schools' programs, while others believe it refers to a "balance between decision making in schools and in

district offices." The lack of clarity surrounding SBM caused several meeting participants to raise concerns about "how far site-based management should go" and about replacing "management at only the government level with management at the principal and/or parent levels only."

It was noted during the meetings that researchers have failed to find a correlation between SBM and student achievement. However, the American ASCD members who had experience with the implementation of SBM reported that it led parents, educators, and community members to be more satisfied with their levels of involvement in school affairs. One Albertan who represented a teachers' association stated that SBM in its best form can cause a "movement from appointment leadership to leadership through democracy." Other Albertans agreed, saying that "collaboration is better than competition to solve problems" and that "reform occurs best when all of us are working toward common goals."

One ASCD representative, who was also a senior central office administrator in a large urban environment in the United States, cautioned that SBM in his school district was successful when it was implemented on a voluntary basis. He reported that the concept worked less well when "the politicians became involved and things became mandated." An Alberta teacher responded by noting that SBM is anything but voluntary in Alberta and another voiced the hope that SBM in the province's schools would result in "significant changes about decision making and not just window dressing."

Principals and teachers need new decision-making conditions when SBM is implemented in their schools. Even though most teachers "want input into decisions and want to know how decisions are made," some will "need to learn how to work within a democratic environment." Importantly, they "need time to negotiate and compromise." Principals, especially, are put into difficult positions if their staff members fail to realize that, even under optimal conditions for SBM, principals still are responsible for articulating the ideas and decisions of their school boards. As well, principals must avoid jeopardizing teacher commitment to SBM by behaving too often in an undemocratic fashion. Both teachers and principals must learn how to identify their decision-making priorities and to gather the kinds of data that will aid decision making. Similarly, school personnel must know which areas constitute their decision-making domain and which are under the control of central office staff and their school board.

Proponents of SBM must consider that, while it is a concept with great potential, SBM also contains several pitfalls. For instance, Americans familiar with the implementation of SBM stated that costs to school districts can rise when SBM involves school-based budgeting because "with SBM you lose economy of scale." In addition, decision making in one school "affects feeder school instruction and grouping" and school personnel "must consider decisions that impact other schools." In the same vein, staffing can be a contentious issue with school boards and school staffs debating their respective rights to deploy teachers. Teachers and parents can become alarmed about the number of committees of which they are members and the corresponding time commitment required of them. Advocates of SBM also should recognize that its implementation can result in inequities and unhealthy competition among schools. Finally, SBM supporters should ask themselves how much latitude members of school communities really have when curricula, large-scale testing, and the appointment of superintendents are controlled by the provincial government. Is there a danger that the future of SBM in Alberta is jeopardized when teachers are faced by a time consuming and difficult task accompanied by little or no control over major educational issues?

Public Relations

ASCD personnel and the majority of those with whom they met during their time in Calgary concurred that calls for increased accountability for students and teachers arose from a lack of public understanding of what transpires in schools. Therefore, the educational community

must act more vigorously on its obligation to inform parents and the general public about school programs. This should be done because students are the dependents of the taxpayers who fund schools and because satisfied members of the public are schools' strongest allies. Educators should note that the good will generated by a satisfied public "lasts a long time" and is an essential component of successful school reform. In fact, governments are unlikely to listen to requests from school personnel who are not supported by their communities; as one educator from Alberta said, "We need a parent movement to have an impact on the government."

How is community support generated in an Alberta context in which teachers in "individual schools think they are doing a good job, ... parent surveys come back positive," but a large segment "of the population has no one in schools." One American participant in the Calgary discussions responded by stating that accountability contains an affective component and that "building and rebuilding [school] communities is more emotional than intellectual." To elaborate, she asked, "Do parents love your school? Do people who do NOT have children in school? ... Do the tax-base people love your school?" These are critical questions, she said, because "if you like people you do not judge them as harshly in rough times."

The Albertans involved in the discussions agreed that effective communication was a critical part of strong school-community relations, especially when school councils were mandated in recent changes to the provincial school act. Both the Alberta and American teachers insisted that the marketing strategies employed by schools must support good educational practice. They also recognized that long term, effective public relations are as important to schools in the 1990s as they are to business endeavors like real estate agencies, hamburger chains, and motion picture companies.

Those who feared that a heightened focus on public relations was a precursor to a parental take-over of schools were reminded that most parents do not want to govern daily life in individual schools. Rather, most parents desire no more than what parents in well recognized schools have always received; that is, parents want information about what their children are doing, a hospitable environment when they go to their children's schools, and involvement in critical decisions that affect their individual children. Therefore, it is incumbent upon school staffs to ensure that the entire parent body has the opportunity to provide input into issues that generate a high level of concern. However, both teachers and community members should recognize the diversity of opinion that is predictable when large numbers of people are involved, accept the fact that compromise is a necessary part of collaborative decision-making processes, and understand that not all decisions will be regarded highly by all.

Expanding Partnerships

School partnerships with other community organizations, both public and private, always have existed in urban centres throughout North America. Recent budget cuts and conservative educational policies simply have been a catalyst for educators to look even further afield for partners. As well, the success of school-business collaborations have prompted school districts to consider forming consortia with a wider variety of members. For example, one ASCD member reported on a school-university-business collaboration in North Carolina that provided several benefits, including a more powerful voice for education, reduced isolation for teachers, higher trust among interest groups, and greater diversity of people and perspectives.

Other educators who had positive partnership experiences stated that they learned from the practices of successful businesses. However, they cautioned that much "depends on the mental attitude of those who come to the table." All members should be committed to making the partnership work well. Further, every effort should be made to establish a pattern of open communication. In addition, members should focus on benefits for children rather than salaries or working conditions for staff members. Instead, partner support for schools can take the form of

personnel, space, and supply exchanges. Finally, consortia members should strive to focus continually on their collective vision for schools and use that vision to guide their activities.

Some Cautions

Concerns about the apparent directions that educational policies may be heading also surfaced during the meetings between ASCD representatives and educational interest groups in Alberta. A major apprehension was the apparent lack of direction for changes to the province's educational system. Participants described the feeling of uncertainty in a series of questions: "Whose plan is this?" "When is the end coming?" "What does this look like when we are finished?" "Are these real changes or a series of fads?"

A second contentious topic was school choice. The individuals involved in the Calgary meetings worried that school choice could contribute to community fragmentation, competition among schools that exacerbates socioeconomic inequities, and institutional neglect of students from disadvantaged circumstances. Furthermore, school choice could lead to school communities wanting to offer the best in facilities and equipment to become dependent upon corporate sponsors without asking themselves why businesses are willing to provide support to schools; some motives will be altruistic but others more self-serving.

Even site-based management was identified as a possible topic of controversy. For example, some school administrators could fail to involve their staffs in decisions. School boards, central office administrators, and school staffs might be unsuccessful in their attempts to clarify their respective areas of responsibility. Indeed, the combination of budget cuts and a corresponding reduced ability of schools to offer instruction in optional areas like kindergarten, the fine arts, and life skills limits the scope of decisions that school- and district-level personnel can make. Similarly, the sheer fact that the implementation of SBM in Alberta was mandatory and large-scale could jeopardize its achievement, especially when adequate resources for staff development were not forthcoming.

Teacher morale was identified in the discussions as a significant barrier to successful educational change. Stress levels were high among Alberta's teachers as they struggled with a series of mixed messages which included the perceptions of their students' parents that schools are generally successful, the exclusion of teachers' voices in critical decision making, and government mandates for massive educational change. The messages caused some teacher representatives to the meetings to declare that the provincial government was "not elected to change the social fabric of our province." The teachers also worried that members of the Alberta government cared more about budgets than they did about children.

The rapid pace of change to Alberta's education system was cited as contributing to low teacher morale. Teachers said they were beginning to ask if what they do is important or even useful to policy makers. As well, they wondered when the general public would understand the potentially negative consequences of the educational changes under way in the province.

One individual stated his opinion that "teachers would rather blame someone else than change" and the "only person who likes change is a wet baby." However, others noted that teachers did not oppose all the changes initiated in Alberta. For example, teachers and their association supported the consolidation of smaller school districts and recognized that change is likely to elicit fear and uncertainty on the part of those affected. Also, it was pointed out that policy makers should understand that demoralized teachers are unlikely to embrace mandated changes. Furthermore, government change agents were advised to recognize the importance of working collaboratively with a strong teachers' association with approximately 26,000 members.

Some Suggestions

Important observations were emphasized as a result of the discussions among ASCD members and their Canadian hosts. The insights were not new but their importance was accentuated by the sense of urgency that accompanied their expression.

- Successful change to education systems should be based on a thorough and accurate understanding of existing conditions, the advantages and disadvantages of available alternatives, and positive experiences in similar learning contexts.
- Communities striving for high levels of public satisfaction with their schools should articulate a commonly accepted purpose for schools, complete with clear and reasonable expectations for all players plus a description of appropriate curriculum content.
- A strong education system should be sensitive to the needs of students, if for no other reason than the fact that "students are future taxpayers."
- Sustainable school change should be based on input from teachers, parents, students, and community members; no important interest group should be excluded from the change process.
- Significant educational change should be implemented over a period of time that most teachers feel is necessary.
- Members of all educational interest groups should feel morally obligated to respond to the diverse needs of students.
- Change agents should expect conflict to increase as innovations are introduced, especially when stakes are high and perceptions are polarized.
- Change initiatives should include resources for staff development for those responsible for implementing the reforms.

Conclusion

An earlier report (Webber, 1995) cast doubt on the likelihood that mandates for educational change in Alberta would be implemented smoothly or easily. Moreover, that account stated that systemic educational change in Alberta may not be a model for other provinces and that it was unclear how the changes would improve conditions for student learning. Those contentions are supported by the discussion summary presented in the present article. In fact, the tenor of the discussions between the ASCD visitors and Albertans leads to the conclusion that resistance and concern actually may have increased rather than dissipated. It should be noted that the willingness of meeting participants to speak openly and frankly was positive. However, the discussions were characterized by sufficient tension to suggest that an easing of widespread concern is in not yet in sight.

Acknowledgements

The contributions of two groups of educators who gathered information for this report are gratefully acknowledged. One group consisted of the following members of Alberta ASCD: Michael Dzwiniel, Judith Hart, Ross Jaques, Wendy Jensen, Jim Latimer, Nancy Lukey, Peter Prest, Irene Naested, Jim Tayler, and Nina Wasilenkoff. The second group was comprised of graduate students in the Faculty of Education at The University of Calgary: Kim Anderson, Karen Barry, Ken Campbell, Carol Clark, Robyn Cochrane, Carolyn Crang, Lee Cummins, Julie Kearns, Berny Sproule, Pat Sproule, and Gail Thauberger.

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| Alan Davis <i>adavis@castle.cudenver.edu</i> | Mark E. Fetler <i>mfetler@ctc.ca.gov</i> |
| Thomas F. Green <i>tfgreen@mailbox.syr.edu</i> | Alison I. Griffith <i>agriffith@edu.yorku.ca</i> |
| Arlen Gullickson <i>gullickson@gw.wmich.edu</i> | Ernest R. House <i>ernie.house@colorado.edu</i> |
| Aimee Howley <i>ess016@marshall.wvnet.edu</i> | Craig B. Howley <i>u56e3@wvnm.bitnet</i> |
| William Hunter <i>hunter@acs.ucalgary.ca</i> | Richard M. Jaeger <i>rmjaeger@iris.uncg.edu</i> |
| Benjamin Levin <i>levin@ccu.umanitoba.ca</i> | Thomas Mauhs-Pugh <i>thomas.mauhs-pugh@dartmouth.edu</i> |
| Dewayne Matthews <i>dm@wiche.edu</i> | Mary P. McKeown <i>iadmpp@asvm.inre.asu.edu</i> |
| Les McLean <i>lmclean@oise.on.ca</i> | Susan Bobbitt Nolen <i>sunolen@u.washington.edu</i> |
| Anne L. Pemberton <i>apembert@pen.k12.va.us</i> | Hugh G. Petrie <i>prohugh@ubvms.cc.buffalo.edu</i> |
| Richard C. Richardson <i>richard.richardson@asu.edu</i> | Anthony G. Rud Jr. <i>rud@purdue.edu</i> |
| Dennis Sayers <i>dmsayers@ucdavis.edu</i> | Jay Scribner <i>jayscrib@tenet.edu</i> |
| Robert Stonehill <i>rstonehi@inet.ed.gov</i> | Robert T. Stout <i>stout@asu.edu</i> |