

## Alberta should respect choice in education

If the government of Alberta believes in excellence in education, it should lean in favour of local autonomy and parent choice in education, and stick to fair funding and quality control through standardized skills-based testing.

Curriculum overreach by a distant, centralized government leads all too often to a decrease in student outcomes, as shown in a recent C.D. Howe report by Anna Stokke. Her report summarizes succinctly how government-mandated discovery math has resulted in Alberta — once a leader in student math excellence — having suffered one of the steepest drops in math outcomes in Canada.

A decade of Alberta students have been left with insufficient math skills, not only because of an ill-conceived curriculum, but primarily as a result of government enforcement of this curriculum. Rather than leaving autonomy in the hands of educators in the classroom — many of whom swiftly recognized that discovery math was failing students — the government removed flexibility and choice, and students suffered the consequences.

As is usually the case with government intervention, authorities did not adapt swiftly to discovery math's utter failure. In fact, the failure was hidden behind provincial achievement exams that tested to the curriculum. The results looked acceptable.

It wasn't until students began to show gaps in knowledge in higher level math studies or competed in international standardized testing of actual math skills proficiency, that the failure of this curriculum became

evident.

Government being slow to respond, even these results have not been enough impetus for corrective action, and discovery math is still widely used by schools. Parents like Dr. Nhung Tran-Davies and professionals in education and math instruction continue to fight for back-to-basics, common-sense reform. Not only is there no end in sight, it appears it is full steam ahead for Inspiring Education, which would see the failed teaching method used in discovery math implemented in all remaining core subjects by 2016.

While, in recent days, the NDP stated that it is holding the line on funding for private and alternative school students — allowing for more parent choice as it relates to school setting — if the curriculum is mandated by government, then the choice itself is usurped from the inside out. It is not enough to provide fair funding and school choice; the government must also trust local authorities, and allow the educators in unique classrooms across the province to choose the curriculum and teaching methods that best suit their students.

This leads to recent news that home-schooling continues to grow in Alberta, with a 29 per cent increase across Canada since 2007, while enrolment in public schools has declined 2.5 per cent. As stated by a Fraser Institute study, "Research in both Canada and the United States has consistently found that students educated at home score in the higher percentiles — compared to students who attend public schools — on standardized tests in reading, writing and mathematics."

While fully aligned home schoolers — who use 100 per cent of the Alberta curriculum — receive \$1,600 in support (compared to public school student funding of \$13,500 per student), funding for curriculum is cut if parents choose to use an alternative, often higher quality, curriculum.

Home school parents who educate their children with curriculum that does not align with Alberta curriculum are labelled "traditional" and considered to be unaligned. They have their meagre \$1,600 support cut to as little as \$825 a year.

In recent years, many "traditional" home schoolers have begun to fear that the government may cut all funding to any home school student who does not comply 100 per cent with the Alberta curriculum.

If the Alberta government truly believes in quality, parent-choice driven education, then they need to stop the centralized overreach of classrooms through the mandating of curriculum. This needs to stop in all settings: public, private, charter, alternative and home schools.

Government should limit its engagement to offering equitable funding to all students and to the production of a concise list of grade appropriate scholastic skills, and testing to ensure these are met.

Leave the choice of curriculum in the hands of educators and parents. This is genuine choice! And this is the only way Alberta can ensure it provides superior education to each unique student, preparing them well to compete on the world stage.

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