

Achievement Testing Program

On two occasions during September, I attended meetings in which Alberta Education presented the Achievement Testing Program to teachers. In each instance, I recognized two distinct but mutually exclusive views. I am certain that Alberta Education was saying that an Achievement Testing Program would be implemented. Teachers were saying that the program was educationally ill-advised, that the results were poorly used and that the cost/educational benefit ratio of the program was questionable.

The document *Proposed Enhancements to the Achievement Testing Program*, distributed by Alberta Education at the September meeting of the MCATA executive, states:

In order to address the weaknesses in the current program, it is proposed that the Achievement Testing Program shift in emphasis from that of collecting information for monitoring and program evaluation purposes to collecting information that can be used to serve the needs of students more directly.

Certainly, this is a goal that The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and Alberta Education must support. Both must be concerned with providing the best educational experience for students. Despite this admirable goal, an attitude of confrontation prevailed.

What, then, may be the cause of concern of interested teachers? The two major concerns appear to be

1. the educational justification of an external testing program, and
2. the misuse of results of such testing programs in rating teachers.

The use of standardized or actual authority tests is difficult to justify. In principle, such tests must be invalid. There is no recognition that classrooms are fundamentally unique. No one test has validity across the normal level of diversity. Consider the effect of mainstreaming on the test results attained in certain classrooms. Such tests shift the curriculum implementation away from the needs of the students to teaching for students to do well on the tests. I suggest that centralized tests measure objectives that are easily tested while most worthwhile educational objectives are not easily tested. I suggest that Alberta Education is still trying to determine how to test the problem solving process, an essential ingredient of all mathematics curriculum. I doubt if Alberta Education has even begun to think of testing the desirable objective of teaching students to think critically. Finally, student performance on tests is measured under strict timelines. Compare results of the students' performance on test items when adequate time is given for the students to show their mastery of concepts to those when a time limit is imposed.

I am confident that this brief case against centralized testing is well known to Alberta Education officials. However, teachers must recognize that Alberta Education not only has the right but the responsibility to monitor educational achievement in the province. Also recognize that the teacher who "teaches to the test" is abrogating professional standards and responsibility to the student. Such action is unprofessional as is the misuse of test results.

The misuse of results of centralized testing programs is of primary concern to teachers and apparently of little concern to Alberta Education. At the meetings I attended, the following statements were made:

1. An assistant superintendent of schools, in discussing his school authority's results on a provincial test, stated that his objective was to have every student achieve beyond the provincial average.

2. The test results were listed by school and in comparison to provincial averages.
3. Principals have reassigned teachers to teach at grade levels other than those grade levels subjected to the provincial testing program. The reason? You know it!

Other statements could be made to add to the political misuse of test results. Unfortunately, such misuse does not enhance the teacher's value and demeans the profession.

The unfortunate irony of the situation is that the administrators (described above), at whatever position in the hierarchy they occupy, deem themselves as professionals. Their actions belie the claim. Eventually they must realize that their peers view such statements as more political self-aggrandizement than professional.

Concerns are easily identified. The remediation process is harder to specify. The ATA should be able to discipline its members if it becomes aware of a grievance. Alberta Education must become involved at the political level with school authorities and administrators. If the Achievement Testing Program is to proceed (I suggest that it is more a reality for the future than a proposal), Alberta Education may be well advised to judiciously distribute the tests to districts that do not misuse the results.

Alberta Education and the ATA must analyze the cost/benefit ratio if the needs of students are to be served. Alternate methods of monitoring achievement could be designed. Test item banks could be developed allowing teachers to choose from the items at their discretion. The money now budgeted could be better utilized in effective inservice programs for teachers who have recognized a need for improving instruction. The goal "to serve the needs of the student more effectively" may then be achieved. It must be a cooperative effort of Alberta Education and the ATA.

Teachers must become more proactive in identifying the misuse of test results. The place to start is internal to the profession. Those responsible for the education of our children must cease compounding each other's mistakes and work toward cooperative resolution of the confrontational attitude to achieve the goal of serving students.

John B. Percevault