

Why Provincial Testing is so Important

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Everyone understands economic inflation: items cost more than they once did. For example, sixty years ago a liter of gas cost 10 cents but today the cost is more than 100 cents.

Not readily understood is how educational inflation occurs and how this insidious phenomenon can be checked. Simply put, inflation in education happens when a student is marked using low standards. A student is given an “A” grade for work that is actually at the “B” or “C+” level.

Understandably, almost everyone is happy when grade inflation occurs. Students are relieved, parents believe their child is doing great, educators get credit for successful teaching, school boards and government take credit, and society believes that we are well-prepared for the future.

Not so happy are the employers and university staff who feel shortchanged because graduates’ talent does not match expectations. Taxpayers feel cheated when they discover the facts usually buried deep in some government website.

Alberta has a rich history in its provincial testing program, especially diploma exams. These are the most trusted measure of student achievement across North America because they are developed with the assistance of classroom teachers, field tested in classrooms for reliability and validity, and marked by teachers who receive intensive training every day to maintain high standards and ensure that a student remains anonymous during the marking.

Research demonstrates that grade inflation occurs when classroom teachers assesses their students’ work and allow biases – e.g. compliant behavior, neatness, attendance, etc.- to interfere with accurate assessments. Universally the tendency is to inflate rather than deflate marks.

For example, across all diploma exams in 2016, more students received a Standard of Excellence from their teacher than was earned on the diploma exam, and not by just a little bit. In January, 69% more females and 50% more males earned “Excellent” from their teacher than earned on diplomas. In June 70% more females and 48% more males earned “Excellent” from their teacher than earned on diplomas. At the other end, approximately five times as many students “failed” the diploma examinations but were gifted with a passing mark by their teacher.

It is in government’s best interests to hide these results, and they do. Expressing concern about these substantial levels of grade inflation would anger the teachers’ union. After all, it was the union which pushed government to downgrade diploma examinations from 50% to 30% of the final mark.

Last year's graduates enjoyed the highest final marks ever thanks to government's manipulation, thereby making almost everyone happy. Some countries are so concerned about classroom grade inflation that their diploma exams count 100%.

Jim Dueck Ed D. was a teacher and principal in Calgary for 15 years, Superintendent in Abbotsford and Nanaimo, BC, and Assistant Deputy Minister in Alberta for 12 years, in charge of Accountability and Student Assessment for both Alberta and Canada. He was also selected as the U.S. Department of Education International Expert where he worked on several projects related to accountability. He is the author of four books related to education:

- Being Fair With Kids: Shows a different school calendar that reduces failure by 60% as well as approximately 7% of the education budget.

- Education's Flashpoints: Identifies key political issues in education.

- Common Sense About Common Core: Why countries need to articulate a common core/standards (not curriculum).

- How Political Correctness Weakens Schools: Solutions for accountability, transparency and improvement.