

“Inspiring Education” -The Undermining of Parental Choice

Policy paper by *Parents for Choice in Education*

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Parents for Choice in Education

By

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About Parents for Choice in Education

Parents for Choice in Education (PCE) is an Alberta-based, non-profit, non-partisan advocacy organization that supports excellence in education through maximum parental choice.

PCE strongly supports a high-quality public education system in Alberta. We also believe that parents should have the ability to pursue alternative methods of education for their children if their local public school does not meet their needs or desires. These alternatives can include Catholic schools, private schools, virtual schools, publicly funded alternative programs such as charter schools, fully independent traditional home schooling, and fully independent alternative schools, which do not follow the Alberta Program of Studies. Sometimes parents just want the freedom to enroll their child at a public school outside of their local neighborhood. We believe that parents are the experts in their own children, and that they should be free to choose the method of schooling that best meets the needs of their families.

Children don't come one-size-fits-all. Education shouldn't either.

PCE believes that the authority over the education of a child rightly belongs to the parent(s) (or legal guardians) of that child. We affirm the importance of Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states that "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." Parents may, and often do, delegate the delivery of education to government entities, but the nature and degree of that delegation is *theirs* to determine.

PCE believes that most parents make choices about their children's education based on serious thought and sound analysis of the pros and cons of the options that are available. Parents are generally better positioned to understand their child's best interest than politicians, bureaucrats, or special interest groups.

PCE believes that school choice gives unique opportunities to students who can, at the appropriate age and with the permission and support of their parents, make education decisions based on their planned career path, values, and preferences.

PCE believes that parents are drivers of quality in education. Because of the natural and permanent tie that parents have with their own children, parents have a greater interest in ensuring the quality of their children's education than anyone else (save for the children themselves). Parent involvement and parent choice will continue to ensure excellence and quality in education.

PCE believes that choice itself is a driver of quality, because people with choice will choose the options they perceive to be better. That competition to be 'chosen' will drive improvements in quality.

PCE believes that good quality programming is typically available within traditional public schools in Alberta, and that enhanced choice within the public system as well as between the traditional public system and other education systems will improve quality, across the educational landscape.

Executive Summary

Parents for Choice in Education (PCE) opposes the underlying philosophy of Alberta Education's curriculum redesign known as *Inspiring Education*. In particular, PCE opposes the imposition of *Inspiring Education* on every school in Alberta, without respect for the needs of students and the choice of parents who do not want this curriculum redesign imposed on their children. We stand with all students, parents, educators and schools who fall into educational settings that **must follow the Alberta Program of Studies**.

PCE calls on the Alberta government to recognize and respect the difference between curriculum (knowledge and skills) and pedagogy (teaching methods).

Methods of instruction (pedagogy) should be determined by the professional teacher in the classroom, based on the needs of individual students, and not imposed by the government on every classroom in Alberta. Parents must be permitted to choose the pedagogical style that is best suited for the education of their children.

Parents for Choice in Education proposes:

1. Curriculum must be a statement that describes the content (“what”) knowledge and skills students are required to learn at each grade level. Curriculum must not impose a method of instruction (“how”), which is the choice of the teacher and/or program. Teachers must also be free to enrich the curriculum as needed, to ensure parents have real choice.
2. Curriculum design must start with grade 12 exit outcomes, established through meaningful consultation with post-secondary departments, trades and employers. From there, the K-12 curriculum can be designed. This ensures good articulation to further study or work on the part of the student.
3. Provincial educational standards and quality control must be sustained and evaluated by standardized, summative assessments in core subjects at least in grades 6, 9 and 12, for all Alberta curricula aligned students. Alternative accommodations exist for students in exceptional circumstances within this structure.
4. Reporting of student achievement must be clear, understandable and quantified, enabling the parent to be fully aware of the student's achievement.
5. Specific professional development programs should be developed to assist both pre-service and in-service teachers to build a strong knowledge base in the subject areas teachers are required to teach.

Introduction

“*Inspiring Education*” is an initiative of the Alberta Department of Education to implement and enforce a radical change in Alberta’s schools. It will be implemented in all schools that receive government support, including Public, Catholic, Charter, Private, on-line or distance education. It will also have direct impact on all aligned programs of study, because it will be accompanied by a complete redesign of curriculum and associated resources for teaching and means of assessing learning. The shift will see an end to “direct teaching” being replaced with “discovery learning” or “inquiry-based learning.”

Inspiring Education, in order to accommodate a constructivist model, plans to significantly reduce factual content. Alberta Education states that the curriculum will become “less prescriptive” <http://education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/curriculum/about/what-will-change.aspx> . Alberta Education has also stated that learner outcomes will be reduced to 10 outcomes per grade per year per subject (Alberta Education, *Curriculum Development Prototyping Guide*, August 2013, p. 1).

Inspiring Education, by Alberta Education’s own admission, plans to significantly reduce the knowledge content of curriculum. Already educational planners have eliminated handwriting, many aspects of English grammar, formal geometry, comprehensive geography, and many fundamental concepts in math and science from the curriculum. This is to provide the time for an inquiry-based or discovery-based process. In the end, the students will have less knowledge and skill, and will be less prepared for their post-secondary education and their careers.

Despite the overwhelming evidence in empirical research that *Inspiring Education* is predicated on methods proven to be ineffective, Alberta Education is determined to proceed with its plan to impose this model on all teachers and students in Alberta. Full implementation is scheduled to begin in the fall of 2016.

Direct Teaching versus the Inquiry-based Learning Process

Inspiring Education is based on a non-traditional view of education, similar to initiatives being implemented in many North American jurisdictions. These initiatives appear to be linked to the decline in North American educational standards, and are often associated with practices referred to as *Discovery Learning*, or its close counterpart *Inquiry-based Learning*, which the world’s leading experts in cognitive development label a failure (Supporting Article #14, #15, #7). The *Inspiring Education* model, also referred to as “21st Century Learning Model”, or “21st Century Skills”, puts the focus on the process of inquiry or discovery. In contrast, the traditional methodology focuses on explicit learning and understanding of the identified content, while allowing the teacher to address individual needs along with group instruction.

Direct teaching, for centuries the primary approach in schools, is oriented towards acquiring knowledge and skills as defined by the curriculum. The teaching practices it employs are teacher-directed. It emphasizes face-to-face instruction by teachers and aides, using carefully articulated lessons in which cognitive skills are broken down into small units, sequenced

deliberately, and taught explicitly. In quantified research this method is proven to be the most effective method for the vast majority of children. (Supporting Article #2, Kirschner 2006)

The inquiry based model is designed upon *constructivist* learning theory. This means that learning takes place in situations where a student is presented with a problem and then draws upon her or his own experience to devise a solution or discover a truth or relationship that will help the student understand a situation or fact. This method can work well in some settings, especially with advanced students who have already acquired firm foundations. But many well-known researchers have expressed grave concerns because *Inspiring Education's* pedagogy disregards what has become understood by cognitive scientists regarding how the human brain learns as it relates to long-term memory and working memory. Inquiry-learning tends to cause cognitive over-load in novice learners, reducing the effectiveness of this constructivist approach. Most empirical research is unfavourable to this approach. (Supporting Articles #16, #15, #14, Tenenbaum- 2011, Mayer 2004, Tuovinen 1999)

Inquiry-based learning appears to be a part of a trend in North America and in parts of the U.K. In the United States it is known as *Common Core* (Supporting Article #17). This should not be confused with the *Core Knowledge Program*, which is a polar opposite. The general public is unaware of how radical this change will be, and that it will further disadvantage students. Already Albertan students are experiencing increasing difficulty in competing with foreign-trained students in our universities. Professors will quickly admit it is a function of background training which is being gutted and replaced by inquiry-based or problem-based exploration in *Inspiring Education*, against well-documented scientific study and research papers that contradict the efficacy of such a learning structure for novice students.

The parent's right to choose

Alberta's education system has provided, and still provides, more choice for parents than any other Canadian province. Until now, Alberta's education laws and policies have therefore come close to conforming with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which recognizes that *parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.*

Alberta parents can choose to send their children to a diverse range of schools: public, Catholic, private, alternative, charter, and homeschooling. Before the imposition of *Inspiring Education*, curriculum could be taught through a broad range of different pedagogical practices, according to the philosophy of the school or the teacher responding to parents. But *Inspiring Education* imposes certain teaching methods on every school in Alberta, which is a gross pedagogical overreach.

Mandating one single process of learning on every school removes the autonomy of schools, educators, trustees, and parents, rendering meaningful choice to meet local needs impossible.

A violation of Alberta's *Education Act*

In his Ministerial Order of May 6, 2013, Alberta's Education Minister (then Hon. Jeffrey Johnson) instructed his staff that in the process of curriculum redesign, they were to focus **“...on competency than on content; on inquiry, discovery and the application of knowledge than on dissemination of information...”**.

This statement is contradictory at the outset, because *competency depends on content* as a foundation. In the same way, inquiry and discovery are fruitless without a baseline of knowledge upon which to argue a thesis or build new ideas. The Ministerial Order is ripe with illogic, defies common sense and contradicts the *Education Act* (Section 19), which permits choice regarding pedagogy (teaching methods). The Ministerial Order also contradicts some of the world's leading experts on cognitive research/activity (Supporting Articles #1, #2, #3, #4, #5). The Ministerial Order is so vague that it leaves parents and society with little idea as to what foundational knowledge and skills a student will acquire. *Inspiring Education* is being implemented without quantified or empirical evidence in support of its rationale.

The negative consequences of Inspiring Education

PCE submits that if Alberta Education proceeds with further imposing *Inspiring Education* on Alberta schools, this will produce numerous negative results:

1. *Inspiring Education* redefines the very meaning of curriculum, and forces all Alberta teachers to practice a singular pedagogy. This removes from parents the opportunity for meaningful choice in their children's education, which is assured in the *Education Act* (Section 32).
2. *Inspiring Education* mandates an inquiry-based approach, despite strong evidence showing that direct teaching produces better achievement for all ranges of student needs (Supporting Articles #1, #2, #4, #5, #14, #15, #16). International research and experts in cognitive science are in agreement on this (ibid), yet Alberta Education ignores this reality as it presses forward with this *inquiry/discovery model*. Poorer student achievement can thus be scientifically predicted.
3. Due to the reduction of outcomes (fewer knowledge objectives) and the minimally guided approach offered by *Inspiring Education*, students will be faced with a curriculum requiring less knowledge acquisition. The effect can be predicted through previous research on this *discovery* pedagogy (previously attempted under various names such as problem-based, inquiry, experiential, and now “inspiring” learning): cognitive overload and reduced foundational understanding, and therefore a diminished capacity for thinking and problem-solving skills, and compromised student capacity in the areas of analysis, argument and logic (Supporting Articles, #5, #6, #9, #13).
4. Due to the elimination of large scale, summative assessments, there will be a weakening of standards and loss of consistency in schools across Alberta, and hence a loss of real

accountability. The abolition of Provincial Achievement Tests, for example, removes the only comprehensive tool for measuring student achievement in empirical terms across the province. The replacement, Student Learning Assessments (SLAs), due to their nature and their timing (September), cannot be used to monitor school performance or meaningfully measure student achievement at the close of the school year.

5. A weaker, scaled back curriculum will reduce the ability of Alberta school graduates to compete in a global economy, against better trained foreign students who have had the benefit of a content-rich curriculum taught in a mode of direct instruction.
6. A decline in the range of professional judgment exercised by teachers, as their instructional methods will be restricted to those defined by the *Discovery (Inquiry) Learning* approaches mandated by *Inspiring Education*. This is an imposed reduction in professionalism.
7. *Inspiring Education* will see increasing funding applied to technology as a learning tool in the classroom, largely to the detriment of student learning and student health. There is currently no empirical research that draws a strong link between technology and improved student results. Yet there is a growing body of medical evidence that excessive “screen time” can have decidedly negative impacts on student health. This has been reported by the Mayo Clinic, the American Academy of Pediatricians and the University of California (see research section).

Inspiring Education is predicated upon misguided educational theories, implemented without quantified studies, and built upon a series of false assumptions about what should be learned and how it should be learned. These are the fantasies at work in the design of Alberta Education’s “*Inspiring Education*”. Building a curricular redesign on unproven theories is unsound at best, and irresponsible at worst. Forcing such pedagogy on all the school settings that align with Alberta Education is counter to Alberta’s education laws and policies.

A better way for students, parents and teachers

Parents for Choice in Education proposes:

1. Curriculum should be the “What” of education: the knowledge and skills a student needs to learn in the course of the K-12 education. Curriculum is not a pedagogy (teaching method), but rather a mandated minimum that all students in the province need to learn. This core can be enriched with additional content that builds on student or parent interests. The creation and development of curriculum should be kept separate from teaching methodology, such that one curriculum can be taught in different ways, so as to respond to the differing needs of students, and to the differing instructional requirements in alternative programs. For example, academic programs (International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement etc.), Charter and Private schools will want different teaching methods, as permitted in the School Act.
2. Curriculum design must start with the establishment of the “exit knowledge” and skill levels that a student should have upon school completion. This knowledge and these skills should be established through *meaningful* consultation with subject area departments of post-secondary institutions, and with employers who are offering direct entry positions. Currently Alberta Education does not fully utilize such a process to establish endpoint knowledge and skills for graduating students. Alberta Education is failing to design the K-12 curriculum from the standpoint of knowing the ultimate goals. Alberta Education should directly involve post-secondary departments and industry representatives in developing the details of required learner outcomes.
3. Provincial standards and quality control of the education process must be sustained through a comprehensive program of standardized, summative assessments in core subject areas, at least at grades 12, 9 and 6, based on content-driven outcomes. This is the only fair method for determining scholarship awards and post-secondary acceptance. Thus Provincial Achievement Tests at grades 3, 6 and 9 should be restored as summative measures of student and school performance. Similarly, the suggestion to reduce the grade 12 Diploma Exams to only 20% of the student mark should be rejected.
4. Reporting of student achievement must be clear, understandable and quantified, enabling the parent to be fully aware of the student’s achievement.
5. Specific professional development programs to assist teachers to become more knowledgeable in their subject area discipline need to be developed to assist pre-service teachers and in-service teachers to develop a greater knowledge base in the subject area disciplines they are required to teach.

About the Authors

Stuart Wachowicz is an educator with 44 years experience. He graduated in 1971 from the University of Alberta with a B.ED, and in 1975 a B.Sc. (Geographic Information Systems –Cartography). In 1991 he received an M.Ed from the University of Calgary. He taught for 25 years in rural Alberta, primarily in the Prairieland School Division, where he taught mathematics and as a school administrator. In 1997 he was hired by Edmonton Public Schools where he became Director of Curriculum, Research and Resource Development. It was during this period that the Curriculum Department became one of the largest curriculum contractors in western Canada. Upon retirement from EPSB in 2009, Mr. Wachowicz became Director of the Confucius Institute in Edmonton, of which he is presently Chairman of the Board of Directors and Advisory Board.

Mr. Wachowicz has been invited to present on second language education and credentialing nationally and internationally including the Public Service Commission of Canada, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, Ministry of Education of Spain (University of Seville, University of Valencia, Department of Education, Asturias), University of Cambridge (International Language Testers of Europe), Ministry of Education of China, Beijing and Kunming.

Mr. Wachowicz has been awarded, the Qilu Friendship Award from the Governor of Shandong Province, China for contributions to Shandong, and has been made an Honorary Lifetime Member of the Canadian Association of Second language Teachers, in addition to other international awards.

Donna Trimble is the Executive Director for Parents for Choice in Education. She is a passionate advocate for parental autonomy, and ensuring that parental choice in education is protected and expanded. As a stay-at-home mother, her knowledge and commitment have grown as she has guided her own children through their individual educational journeys in Catholic and public schools. All three of Donna’s children have also, at one time or another, homeschooled-traditionally, blended and online. Innovative Career and Technology options have been available to the elder two sons in their senior years, with the eldest graduating with his first year Pre-Apprenticeship Welder in 2014.

Donna has a deep understanding of the choices available to parents and children in Alberta, the curriculum used for schooled and home-schooled children – its benefits and pitfalls, and an understanding of the wonderfully wide variety of educational options available in Alberta: charter, private, alternative, public, and homeschool to name a few.

In recent years Donna has become deeply concerned with the heavy-handed Alberta government experimentation and control over core curriculum which has diminished the quality of education for students, and slowly eroded parental choice from the inside out. Parents are rising up across Alberta and calling out for the return of their autonomy, and a larger say in the curriculum used for their children. It is the Parents for Choice in Education mandate, and Donna Trimble’s intention, to stand alongside parents and help reverse this trend going forward.

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Supporting articles: Research, Expert Commentary and Parental Observation

<p>1</p>	<p>Centre for Teaching Mathematics, University of Plymouth: Educational Foundations, Montana State University. “THE CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTIVIST DISCOURSE”</p> <p>Research demonstrating the flaws in Constructivist or Discovery Learning, flaws which will be implemented in <i>Inspiring Education</i>.</p> <p>http://people.exeter.ac.uk/PErnest/pome14/rowlands.pdf</p>
<p>2</p>	<p>Educational Technology Expertise Center, Open University of the Netherlands and Research Centre Learning in Interaction, Utrecht University, The Netherlands (2006)</p> <p>“Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-Based, Experiential, and Inquiry-Based Teaching”</p> <p>http://www.cogtech.usc.edu/publications/kirschner_Sweller_Clark.pdf</p>
<p>3</p>	<p>Harvard Education Review: “Differentiated Instruction Re-examined” (May/June 2011)</p> <p>An article demonstrating the problems with parallel multiple levels of instruction in a classroom. Differentiated instruction is a central pillar of <i>Inspiring Education</i>.</p> <p>http://hepg.org/hel-home/issues/27_3/helarticle/differentiated-instruction-reexamined_499</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>Frontier Centre for Public Policy “Differentiated Instruction is an Unproven Fad” (Sept. 2013)</p> <p>Research demonstrating the weakness of multiple levels of instruction in a classroom</p> <p>https://www.fcpp.org/files/1/PS154_UnprovenFad_SP03F1.pdf</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>“Steven Pinker on Learning Math”</p> <p>Steven Pinker is Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, and formerly the director of the Centre of Cognitive Neuroscience at MIT.</p> <p>The article, a chapter from his book, <i>How the Mind Works</i>, is written to show the flaws in the application of discovery learning when applied to the instruction of mathematics.</p> <p>http://www.kitchentablemath.net/twiki/bin/view/Kitchen/StevenPinkerOnLearningMath?skin=plain</p>

6	<p>The New York Times: “What’s Lost as Handwriting Fades” June 2, 2014</p> <p>An article demonstrating the cognitive losses that result from the abandoning of instruction in handwriting in schools, a practice now underway in Alberta and which will be entrenched under <i>Inspiring Education</i>.</p> <p>http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/science/whats-lost-as-handwriting-fades.html? r=1</p>
7	<p>“Five ways the Alberta government’s radical “Inspiring Education” plan for transforming our schools will hurt our children”</p> <p>Curriculum expert demonstrates the danger of Alberta’s Inspiring Education plan.</p> <p>http://blogs.edmontonjournal.com/2014/04/06/alberta-educations-planned-changes-to-schools-will-damage-economy-limit-our-childrens-future/</p>
8	<p>Have the Progressive Conservatives given up on the push for academic excellence in Alberta schools?</p> <p>June 4, 2015 An article by Dr. Nhung Tran-Davis, explaining why thousands of parents are concerned about the discomfoting trends in Alberta schools and the impending implementation of “Inspiring Education”</p> <p>http://blogs.edmontonjournal.com/2015/01/04/213073/</p>
9	<p>“Discovering Discovery Math - The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” One Parent’s Experience January 19, 2014</p> <p>A parent’s journey in gaining understanding about the shortcomings of the discovery learning process now used in many classrooms and which will be mandated in Alberta under <i>Inspiring Education</i>.</p> <p>http://parentchoice.ca/2015/01/discovering-discovery-math/</p>
10	<p>Defeat Common Core K-12 Data Mining - California Privacy Protection Opt Out Forum</p> <p>A video of a major public forum with expert presenters showing why parents need to oppose educational initiatives such as the “Common Core” in the US and by extension, “Inspiring Education” in Alberta.</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YA8jcfSeiXg&feature=youtu.be</p>
11	<p>What do we really know about the effects of screen time on mental health? The Guardian August 29, 2013</p> <p>http://www.theguardian.com/science/head-quarters/2013/aug/29/screen-time-mental-health-children</p>

12	<p>Kids And Screen Time: What Does The Research Say?</p> <p>NPR ED August 28, 2014 http://www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2014/08/28/343735856/kids-and-screen-time-what-does-the-research-say</p>
13	<p>Why is it your job to teach your kid math? Parents are being forced to hit the books and help tutor their kids through a confusing curriculum.</p> <p>Maclean's March 13, 2012 http://www.macleans.ca/society/life/have-you-finished-your-homework-mom/</p>
14	<p>Mayer, R. (2004). "Should there be a three-strikes rule against pure discovery learning? The case for guided methods of instruction". <i>American Psychologist</i> 59 (1): 14–19. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.59.1.14. PMID 14736316.</p>
15	<p>Tuovinen, J. E., & Sweller, J. (1999). "A comparison of cognitive load associated with discovery learning and worked examples". <i>Journal of Educational Psychology</i> 91 (2): 334–341. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.91.2.334.</p>
16	<p>Alfieri, L., Brooks, P. J., Aldrich, N. J., & Tenenbaum, H. R. (2011). Does discovery-based instruction enhance learning?. <i>Journal Of Educational Psychology</i>, 103(1), 1-18. doi:10.1037/a0021017</p>
17	<p>What is the Common Core? Vox.com http://www.vox.com/cards/commoncore/what-is-the-common-core</p>
18	<p>UK Education Minister Speaks in Favour of Traditional Education Daily Mail January 28, 2015 http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2836240/Minister-tells-schools-copy-China-ditch-trendy-teaching-chalk-talk-Teachers-speaking-class-effective-independent-learning.html</p>
19	<p>Counting the Cost of National Maths Failure The Australian Dec 6, 2014 http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/counting-the-cost-of-national-maths-failure/story-e6frg6z6-1227146451237?nk=44788475039f8a272c8f6a3d0edea98f</p>
20	<p>Test-Enhanced Learning: Taking Memory Tests Improves Long-Term Retention Henry L. Roediger, III, and Jeffrey D. Karpicke Washington University in St. Louis (Research showing the importance of curricula that specifically targets memory development) http://learninglab.psych.purdue.edu/downloads/2006_Roediger_Karpicke_PsychSci.pdf</p>

22	Education Week (Sept 2010) “When Pedagogic Fads Trump Priorities” http://mikeschmoker.com/pedagogic-fads.html
23	Education study finds in favour of traditional teaching styles The Guardian October 31, 2014 http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/oct/31/education-traditional-teaching-versus-progressive