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School Reform in Canada and Florida: A Study of Contrast

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Alberta and Florida have instituted school reform initiatives over the past fifteen years in an effort to improve the quality of their schools. Alberta has focused on systemic improvement by engaging the community in educational needs assessment, raising the high standards of teacher preparation, and improving effective instructional practices through professional development. Florida's efforts have concentrated on holding students, teachers, schools, and districts accountable for high-stakes testing results by increasing the number and rigor of required assessments and increasing the negative consequences for low achievement scores. The 2012 PISA scores reveal that Alberta's students are maintaining their high rankings relative to the other countries that administer the PISA, showing relatively narrow differences in student scores for children of low socioeconomic status and those from a recent immigrant background. In contrast, Florida's student scores continue to show a lack of progress in country and regional rankings and wide differences in the achievement of students from different socioeconomic and immigrant backgrounds.

“Work, work, work is all we do in school in Ethiopia. We go home and study, study. Every day we work.” These are the words my taxi driver responded when I asked him about schools in Canada. “The kids in Canada,” he continued, “they work some, but not so much. School is not as hard, here. Even in the university; I go to university when I come here, it is not so hard. The children here go to school. They have time to play and do sports and schoolwork.”

So I asked, “Where do you think you learned more?” After a moment, he said: “I think here we learn more. There, we work all the time. We do every problem in the book. Here we do some, then work new problems. I learn how to use the work here.”

I went to Canada, with my teacher's perspective, looking for answers to why the students in typical Canadian schools outperform the students in Florida schools on international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The study tour, sponsored by the National Public Education Support Fund, included forty-six professional educators, among them state and district superintendents, school board members, and educational foundation leaders from across the United States. I was one of three classroom teachers included in the study tour. We visited several schools, where we spoke with teachers and administrators and spent some intense days in discussions with union leaders and officials from the provincial Ministry of Education. Michael Fullan, an author and thought leader in school reform, facilitated the discussions.

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Community Engagement in Reform

Alberta's most recent work on school reform began in 1999 as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement with a push to use educational research to improve instruction in the classroom.¹ As the teachers and administrators sought ways to improve classroom instruction, they realized they could serve twenty-first-century needs only by changing the way schools operate to meet the needs of diverse learners through diverse learning strategies. The reform process by which Alberta has undertaken change in their education system has been remarkable in the degree to which stakeholder input has been sought. In 2008, the Ministry of Education, led by Dave Hancock, began a formal and very public conversation about schools and Alberta's educational system through town hall presentations and face-to-face meetings at schools and community centers. Social networking and public blogs broadened the conversation by drawing in many people from outside the education community. These conversations led to an extensive plan for improving Alberta's education system developed through a highly collaborative process involving teachers, school boards, parents, communities, and business organizations. The plan and process, focusing on small experiments with schools, students, and their learning processes are outlined in the Alberta government document *Inspiring Action on Education*, published in June 2010. The vision of Alberta's education system, as stated in the document, is, "To inspire and enable students to achieve success and fulfillment as engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit within an inclusive education system."² The 2013 "Ministerial Order on Student Learning" reinforces Alberta's vision for education: "The fundamental goal of education in Alberta is to inspire all students to achieve success and fulfillment, and reach their full potential by developing the competencies of Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, who contribute to a strong and prosperous economy and society."³

The effort from the beginning to promote public discussion and feedback signals a genuine commitment to engaging the community in Canada's education system. The Alberta Teacher's Association (ATA) has been intimately involved in these conversations, as have business and community leaders. A move to redesign schools has arisen from within schools as teaching practices have strengthened. Teachers have demanded that the skills and methods they are teaching their students have relevance to our increasingly global and mobile society.

Florida's commitment to community engagement, compared with Canada's, is limited. Recently, citizens have been deeply engaged in discussions of the merits of using Common Core Standards, which were adopted in Florida in 2010. In spring 2013, three public hearings were held statewide with 115 speakers commenting on the standards. Over nineteen thousand comments from more than fifteen hundred people were collected from a website and an email address dedicated to public comment.⁴ Members of the public were deeply engaged in the topic to the point that they overwhelmed the halls where the meetings were held. The result of the hearings and subsequent executive action was to reject the Common Core Standards, renaming them the Florida Standards with a few changes and additions, such as standards for cursive writing and pre-calculus. Unfortunately, this level of response is the exception and most of the comments on the Florida standards have been reactionary, lacking any attempt to engage in the very complex and sometimes contentious work of conceptual redesign. Part of the difficulty may be the high turnover in the office of commissioner of education. Since 1998 there have been ten commissioners heading the Department of Education, as well as four interim commissioners in the past five years.⁵ Several initiatives for communication, including on-line parental access to testing resources, were abandoned without comment following staff changes. An electronic

newsletter titled *Just for Parents* began publication in 2012, but it has offered no consistent mechanism to encourage discussion or comments directly from parents.

A group of invited stakeholders convened at the Governor's Accountability Summit in summer 2013 to discuss education in the state. But Governor Rick Scott did not attend, and there is little evidence that many of the recommendations made during the three-day summit have been implemented.⁵ The leadership and members of Florida's teachers union have had little opportunity to contribute ideas. Another example of the limited scope of involvement is seen in the membership of the state's Race to the Top Implementation Committees.⁶ Eight stakeholder committees act as advisers to the committees. According to the Department of Education website, each committee member was selected from an applicant pool of over a thousand and asked to serve a four-year term. The make-up of the committees shows limited parent, business, and teacher involvement in all but the committees on student growth measures and teacher and leader preparation. Florida has broad public record (sunshine) laws requiring that all public meetings be advertised and materials made available to the public. The meetings of implementation committees and documents used in those meetings are posted on the Department of Education website as well as video and audio recordings of meetings, telephone conferences, and webinars. Information about the committees' meetings is documented on the Race to the Top website. Opportunities for public feedback were offered, particularly about implementation of the student growth model development, but little input was solicited from those outside of direct educational influence. Unless one is directly engaged in educational systems in Florida, one has little opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion.

Poverty

“A significant number of Alberta's children live in poverty. While the measures of poverty can vary, estimates are that just over 15 percent of children live in families with income below the poverty threshold (based on the Canadian Market Basket Measure).” This statement comes from a report by Alberta's Commission on Learning titled “Alberta's Children and Our Society Are Changing.”⁷ Though it is hard to compare rates of economic disadvantage among countries because of differences in the costs of living and differing standards of poverty, the OECD data does establish a baseline comparison that allows country-to-country comparisons using constant dollars. By this measure, Alberta has many fewer students in poverty than Canada in general, and many fewer than Florida, which has a poverty rate of 9.4 percent compared with Alberta's 3 percent rate. Another difference between Alberta and Florida is the extent to which immigration status relates to socioeconomic status. In Alberta, the correlation between immigrant status and low socioeconomic status is weak, while in Florida, immigrant status is strongly associated with low socioeconomic status and low academic achievement. (See Table 1.)

PISA participants	United States	Florida	Canada	Alberta	OECD mean
Immigrants					
Percentage of population	21	24	29	25	11
ESCS* index	-.40	-.12	.32	.41	-.33
Nonimmigrants					
Percentage of population	79	76	71	75	89
ESCS index	.34	.30	.45	.55	0.06
Low SES** students (ESCS index -1)					
Percentage of population	13	9	6	3	15
Disadvantaged students					
Percentage who are low achievers	6	6	3	3	5
Percentage who are resilient***	5	3	8	7	7

Table 1. Immigrant and Socioeconomic Status of Canadian and the U.S. Participants in PISA 2012

* ESCS = index of economic, social and cultural status normalized in 2012 to OECD mean.

**SES = socioeconomic status measured by ESCS.

***Resilient = disadvantaged students who score in the top 25 percent of their country on the PISA, that is, their assessment scores are much higher than would be predicted by their demographic classification.

Note: In most countries, immigrants have a lower ESCS and SES scores than nonimmigrants, signifying that immigrants are typically disadvantaged compared with nonimmigrants. In Canada, the reverse is true. Compared with nonimmigrants, immigrants are more likely to come from families with higher incomes and to have parents with higher educational attainments.

Source: OECD, *PISA 2012 Results*, vol. 2: *Excellence through Equity: Giving Every Student the Chance to Succeed* (Paris: Author, 2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201132-en>.

In the past ten years, Florida has seen a large increase in the number of students eligible for the National School Lunch Program, a common proxy for comparing childhood poverty in the United States. In the 2003–4 school year, 45 percent of Florida’s students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, while in 2012–13 the eligible percentage was 59, an increase that reflects the impact of the global economic downturn of the past ten years.⁸ In the school year 2012–13, more than half of the students in forty-seven of Florida’s sixty-seven counties qualified for free and reduced price lunch.

Student Inclusion

Comments from educators in Edmonton are telling. “It’s about grit,” a junior high teacher said during one of our Edmonton school visits. “We have so many immigrants. The people who choose to come here are actively looking for something better. They are more driven. They want something better than what they left.”

The school principal said: “Here we welcome our new students. We work to include all adults in the school community. Our parent newsletters are printed in every language possible for our students’ parents to read. Our last edition was printed in seventeen languages.” He then led us down a typical junior high school hallway to a class of twenty-seven students, all new immigrants, with a teacher and an aide. The principal went down the rows, asking the students where they came from. Those who did not understand the question were assisted by other students, who jumped up, crouched beside the desk of the student being questioned, and translated. We found twelve distinct cultures and languages represented in that one classroom. Descriptive language was carefully structured to talk about “newcomers” (parents and students) and how to make them feel welcome and involved in the work of school. Alberta’s PISA results reveal an exceptional amount of educational equity in the scores of students who are recent immigrants and those of students who come from low-income families. There are small differences between the scores of immigrants and those of students from low-income backgrounds and the scores of nonimmigrants and those of students from higher-income families.

One of the striking results of the PISA analysis is the small achievement gaps between immigrant and nonimmigrant students and among students of different socioeconomic backgrounds, as revealed in the PISA mathematics assessment, the focus of the 2013 PISA administration. (See Table 2.)

	United States	Florida	Canada	Alberta	OECD mean
All Students					
Mean	481	467	518	517	494
Percentage below level 2*	26	30	14	15	23
Percentage above level 4	9	6	16	17	13
Nonimmigrant mean	487	471	522	521	500
Immigrant mean	474	461	520	526	463
Difference	13	10	2	-5	37
Difference taking ESCS into account	-15	5	-2	10	23

Table 2. Breakdown of Math Scores for Canadian and the U.S. Participants in PISA 2012

*PISA scores range from below level 1 to 6, with level 6 the highest score. Scores at level 2 are considered a baseline performance; scores at levels 5 and 6 are considered top performers. Source: OECD, *PISA 2012 Results*, vol. 2.

Canada is among the top ten OECD countries for equity in immigrant performance in math, while the United States is in the bottom third. Florida performs better than the United States, with a smaller gap in math achievement between immigrants and nonimmigrants. In both the United States and Canada, the gap between immigrants and nonimmigrants is smaller than the OECD gap of 37 points. In Alberta, which, among all OECD regions, has one of the smallest gaps between the achievement of immigrants and that of students from low-income families, the mean math score is higher for immigrants than for nonimmigrants. The United States does not show the same pattern of equity. Students who are recent immigrants and students from low-income families have scores that are highly correlated to the level of family income and immigrant status. In the United States, this math performance gap is larger than the gap for all of Canada, though Florida has a smaller gap than either Connecticut or Massachusetts, the two other states participating in the regional benchmarking for 2012.⁹

The variance in student scores that can be predicted by socioeconomic status is 14.8 percent in the United States. This is slightly higher than the OECD average of 14.6 percent but considerably higher than Canada's 9.4 percent difference, the sixth smallest of all OECD countries. For purposes of comparison, PISA defines disadvantaged students as the lowest 25 percent of a country's student population. In the data, Alberta and Canada as a whole show higher student achievement and lower poverty than Florida and the United States. More important, Canadian scores show that there is less difference between the performance of immigrants and that of the general population and a small correlation between income and student test scores. Compared with Florida scores, Alberta scores also show more than twice as many resilient students, that is, those whose assessment scores are much higher than would be predicted by their demographic classification.

In the United States, an even stronger correlation exists between the socioeconomic status of a school and an individual student's score than between a student's socioeconomic group and his or her score, and very little correlation between the presence of qualified teachers and the socioeconomic status of the school.¹⁰ The fact that a school's socioeconomic status has a greater impact on student achievement than a student's individual socioeconomic status should help Florida identify strategies to address student achievement. Florida is currently addressing this issue by increasing resources in low-performing and disadvantaged schools through Title 1 programs and Supplemental Academic Instruction and Reading Instruction Allocation. In the past two years, the legislature has required the lowest one hundred schools in Florida to add an hour of reading instruction to the school day and has seen positive results in many of these schools. In 2014 the Florida legislature modified this program by requiring an extended day for the bottom three hundred schools in the state. Unfortunately, this requirement has become an expensive unfunded mandate, since very limited additional dollars were appropriated to provide the extra hour for the additional two hundred schools. The 2014 state budget in this area increased by less than \$2.8 million dollars, which must be divided among all sixty-seven counties and the two hundred additional schools.¹¹ In Escambia County, Florida, according to its superintendent, Malcolm Thomas, extending the school day by one hour has cost an additional \$400,000 per school in the six schools where it has been implemented.¹²

Resilience

One measure of educational equity is resilience, the proportion of disadvantaged students who score in the top 25 percent of that country on the PISA. Again, Alberta outperforms Florida by a

significant amount. Canadian students are more likely to show resiliency than the average U.S. student, and in Florida, student resilience is less than half that of Alberta students. Another interesting comparison comes from volume 2 of the multivolume PISA report, which shows the percentage of students who speak the language of the assessment at home. In this measure, 17 percent of all Canadian students do not speak the language of the assessment at home. In the United States, 14 percent of all students (immigrant and nonimmigrant) speak a different language at home. This type of language diversity is considerably higher in the United States and Canada than across the OECD, where the average is 10 percent of all students speaking a different language at home than that used on the assessment.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

The president of the ATA is quick to credit Alberta's academic performance on the strict requirement that teachers earn a full teaching certificate before stepping into a classroom as the teacher of record. The PISA data confirms that assertion, showing only one teacher out of all teachers involved in the Alberta PISA assessments who was not fully qualified to teach. Teachers and school principals in Alberta may not be licensed unless they have completed all certification courses, including 48 credits (semester hours) in pedagogy and at least 24 credits in a particular subject specialty, and at minimum a full, supervised ten-week (250-hour) internship. Unlike many states in the United States, including Florida, Alberta offers no alternative routes to a teaching certificate. Two levels of certificate are granted to Albertan teachers: the Interim Professional Certification, a three-year certificate granted to new teachers while they earn two years of successful experience teaching, and the Permanent Professional Certificate.¹³

A construction technology teacher we spoke with told us that his principal had asked him to go back to school to learn how to teach carpentry. "I was a PE teacher," he said, "but my family is involved in the construction industry. I was paid to spend a year in college learning the trade and how to teach it. When I completed my training, I returned to this school to teach."

At many of the schools we visited, principals clearly valued and encouraged a distributive leadership style. In conference rooms, teachers spoke with pride about their contributions to the school programs, which included scheduling, curriculum design, and strategies to assist their students. They described professional development focused on curriculum and pedagogy. The teachers said they participate in collaborative discussions of student progress with time built into the schedule for these discussions. They also spoke of the high mobility of teachers around the city, which is based on the view that progress into the administrative ranks requires such movement to spread innovation and learn from other settings. We saw that teachers were maintaining knowledge of current research and trying different strategies with their students. One of the English-as-a-second-language support teachers we met, for example, said that he uses both push-in and pull-out strategies to meet the needs of his students. We also witnessed collaborative conversations and problem-solving discussions among teachers and learned that programs for professional development are offered through many routes, including face-to-face and on-line conferences. The school district provides some training, and individual schools offer other workshops. Faculty of related schools may share a facilitator at a single site, and the ATA offers workshops and training opportunities throughout the year to meet the needs of all teachers in the school system.

Evidence from the PISA surveys of teachers and administrators provides a statistical window into the work of the teacher. In Canada, during the school year, the average teacher spends between 750 and 800 hours in front of students, actively teaching. The rest of the school

day is used for planning and conferences. In the United States, teachers spend over 1,000 hours teaching students during a year. The United States ranks second for the amount of time an individual teacher spends instructing students during the school year. The average class size in Canada and the United States is similar to class sizes in the other OECD countries.¹⁴

A teacher shortage in Florida beginning in the 1970s opened the door to emergency certification of applicants with in-field bachelor's degrees but no teacher preparation. New hires were allowed three years to complete teacher preparation course work for full licensure, while teaching students full-time with varying degrees of supervision and oversight. The term for this type of certification has changed from "emergency" to "alternative" certification, making this form of on-the-job training more acceptable as an entry path into the teaching profession. Legislative initiatives requiring each district to offer a District Alternative Certification Program have encouraged this route into teaching, particularly in high needs areas such as secondary science and math. For the past several years, the number of untrained first-year teachers hired each year has been close to 50 percent in secondary subjects. Weakening initial certification requirements and making it easier to obtain a probationary contract has led to an increase in the number of certified teachers with no formal education coursework. In the school year 2009–10, 8,786 teachers completed one of three teacher preparation programs. Of these, 5,778 (66 percent) were traditionally trained as teachers; the other 34 percent came from an alternative certification program that many teachers completed while they were the teacher of record in the classroom. The next year, only 55 percent of the traditionally prepared teachers returned to a Florida classroom, while 68 percent of the alternatively certified teachers returned, increasing the proportion of nontraditionally trained teachers.¹⁵ It is important to remember that it can take as long as three years for a teacher to complete a district alternative certification program. These teachers hold a temporary certificate and are not reflected in the statistics for program completers until a year or more after their initial hire dates if they continue teaching. It is difficult to ascertain just how many temporary certificate holders do not complete their first year of teaching, but judging from the experience in my county, the number is significant.

Florida has increased its dependence on alternatively certified teacher providers through support for Teach for America (TFA) provider contracts and statutory changes that make it easier for TFA members to obtain teaching credentials.¹⁶ Additional teacher preparation programs include thirty Educator Preparation Institutes administered through the state colleges and universities. In 2010, about 35 percent of Florida's teacher preparation program completers came from an alternative certification program.¹⁷ Legislation passed in 2014 also opens up teacher education programs to private entities within and outside the state who seek to have their preparation programs recognized by the state.¹⁸

This cycle of decreasing requirements for initial teaching certification and enabling alternative certification has also caused a decrease in the number of education degree seekers, particularly at the secondary level, and has done nothing to improve the quality of teaching in Florida's classrooms. Florida now fills nearly 35 percent of the state's teaching vacancies with untrained or minimally trained individuals. With about nine thousand teachers leaving the profession each year, the number of poorly qualified individuals filling teacher vacancies in Florida is shocking.¹⁹ Florida statute 1012.56 requires "a minimum period of initial preparation before assuming duties as the teacher of record," but in the haste to fill a teacher vacancy, this training may consist of a set of written exercises completed sometime before the end of the first year of teaching. As in other states, teacher retention is also a persistent problem in Florida. Only 51 per cent of newly hired teachers from 2001-2 are still teaching in the state 10 years later

and 59 per cent of the 2007-8 new hires remained long enough to complete five years of teaching.²⁰

Teacher shortages and high rates of teacher turnover have escalated since the 1980s, with the average teacher salaries in Florida consistently near the bottom of state rankings. One of the biggest obstacles to attracting qualified teachers is the earning potential. The OECD found “on average, a primary school teacher in the United States can expect to earn only 66 percent of the salary of the average tertiary-educated worker in another field (the OECD average is 82 percent); a lower secondary school teacher can expect to earn 67 percent of the salary of his or her tertiary-educated peer (the OECD average is 85 percent); and an upper secondary school teacher can expect to earn 70 percent of what a tertiary-educated peer earns (the OECD average is 89 percent). These relatively low wages may make it difficult to attract the best candidates to the teaching profession.”²¹ Since 2000 the average teacher’s salary in the United States has increased 3 percent over 2000 levels, while the average OECD country has had salary increases between 15 and 20 percent.

Teacher salaries in Canada are comparable to salaries of other professionals with similar training requirements, with the average teacher salary 104 percent of a similarly trained professional in another occupation.²² In the United States teacher salaries are only 68 percent of the salary of a similarly trained professional outside of education.²³ Florida’s salaries for teachers are even lower than this, with the average Florida teacher making \$46,583, approximately 85 percent of the average U.S. teacher’s salary.²⁴ The relatively low wages in Florida and the United States contribute to the current teacher shortage, particularly in STEM fields, where only 55 percent of all teachers hired in math and the sciences are trained in math and pedagogy before beginning their teaching assignment.²⁵ The turnover in our teaching profession, in which over half of our new hires leave within the first five to ten years, continues and is expected to increase as our economic outlook improves and the demand for STEM career training tempts more and more math and science teachers into more lucrative and less stressful occupations.

Accountability

The *Accountability Pillar* is an Alberta school report card containing status measures for seven categories: safe and caring schools; student learning opportunities; student learning achievement (K–9 and 10–12); preparation for life-long learning, employment, and citizenship; involvement; and continuous improvement. Most of the indicators focus on descriptive data, such as how parents feel about the safety of the schools, the quality of the educators, and the citizenship traits of their students. The data is color-coded in the report card and based on parent, student, and teacher questionnaires and indicate changes over previous years. The reporting categories include terms such as “excellent,” “issue,” and “concern” and show achievement levels for students at the school as well as comparative status changes that are based on prior performance on the same exams.²⁶

Part of the accountability pillar is an analysis of the results of the Provincial Achievement Tests. The 2014–15 school year begins a transition to the Student Learning Assessments (SLAs), which will be field tested in fall 2014 with the third grade. Sixth grade will be added in fall 2015 and ninth grade in fall 2016. Full implementation is expected in 2017 for all three grades. The assessments are being developed to help teachers and parents understand and address students’ strengths and weaknesses and to help schools meet the educational demands of a global society. The assessments cover reading comprehension and mathematical knowledge and problem solving and can be scored digitally and, for performance tasks, by hand.

The accountability report also includes participation and pass rates for the diploma exams in high school and qualitative data drawn from parent and student surveys. Teachers are granted leave time or compensation to grade the written exams. Passing grades on these assessments are required for admission into university and college. An A is defined as an 80 to 100 percent, a B is 65 to 79, and a C is 50 to 64.

Time to Teach

During my visit to Edmonton, I was surprised by what I did not see on the walls of the schools. Though motivational posters, student work, and themed decorations are common in Florida classrooms, I did not see a single classroom in Edmonton with a word wall, a rubric, or a list of benchmarks, standards, or essential questions. Nonetheless, when we asked students in a social studies flex period class what they were studying, they immediately explained the importance and history of school integration; and in the science classroom students described the difference in the function of an indicator in determining whether a material is acidic or basic. When I walked into the teacher's lounge, I found a comfortable place to sit with coffee and tea and a refrigerator and microwave oven. What I did not see was student data. In many Florida schools, the teacher's lounges have been repurposed as data rooms with charts of student assessment data and interim assessment results covering the walls.

Florida's Approach to School Reform

As in Canada, Florida's current approach to reform began at the end of the 1990s. The impetus in Florida was the election of a new governor, Jeb Bush, and an awareness and concern over the standing of Florida's students as measured by national and international assessments. In the 1998–99 school year, Florida instituted a school grade policy that assigned A–F grades for all schools in the state based primarily on student achievement scores on the high-stakes state testing initially in grades four, five, eight, and eleven. The policy was later modified to include assessments at every grade, three through ten and student growth measures based on grade-level expectations. Additional credit may be earned for improving the scores of the lowest-performing students and for increasing the number of students earning career certifications and college level credit through dual enrollment, advanced placement, and international baccalaureate exams.²⁷ The combination of new legislation and rich grant incentives that accompanied the implementation of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top promoted a philosophy of business capital that mirrors the will of Florida's past few governors and legislators. No Child Left Behind provided the justification for "raising the bar" and Race to the Top provided funding that has been used to increase the complexity and detail of statistical score analysis, which in turn has led to promoting value added modeling as a mechanism for determining school and individual teacher effectiveness.

The focus on school accountability and business principals is evident in the state Board of Education mission statement, which appears on the Department of Education website: "Increase the proficiency of all students within one seamless, efficient system, by providing them with the opportunity to expand their knowledge and skills through learning opportunities and research valued by students, parents, and communities, and to maintain an accountability system that measures student progress toward the following goals: Highest student achievement; Seamless articulation and maximum access; Skilled workforce and economic development; Quality efficient services."

Florida's Race to the Top application highlights some of the various strategies Florida has tried in an effort to increase student test scores. Initially, the application was rejected, in part because the Florida Education Association (FEA), Florida's professional teacher's union, objecting to its lack of involvement in the planning and development of the application, did not sign on. The FEA president, Andy Ford, however, announced in a press release that he "looked forward to working with the state Department of Education to overcome this hurdle."²⁸

After Governor Charlie Crist, responding to the criticism, assembled a working group to provide collaboration among a broader stakeholder pool that included school superintendents, parent groups, school boards, principals, and teachers, sixty-five districts (out of sixty-seven) and fifty-four local union presidents signed the "Memorandum of Understanding" that accompanied Florida's second application. When that application was accepted and Florida became a recipient of a Race to the Top grant, Ford announced, "We must continue to bolster our efforts to involve teachers, school professionals, administrators and parents as we work to implement and evaluate the reforms in this Race to the Top grant. It would be a mistake to not fully involve everyone who has a stake in the education of Florida's children."²⁹

Sadly, that optimism has not continued, and the state's reform efforts have been driven in large part by hostile legislative initiatives that have proceeded as mandates rather than thoughtful, collaborative efforts by the Department of Education and the communities of stakeholders. The divergent opinions and political ideology about the best ways to improve Florida's school system remain as obstacles to be overcome before Florida schools can meet the aspirations of its many stakeholders.

Union Involvement

One of the biggest differences between Alberta and Florida is the role various professional unions in Alberta play in decision making on educational issues at the provincial and community levels. Teachers and administrators all belong to the ATA, which was founded in 1936 under the Teaching Profession Act.³⁰ Superintendents and chief financial officers also have their own professional unions, and parent and community involvement is formalized through representative organizations and strengthened through community discussions and workshops held in face-to-face and digital platforms.

ATA membership is mandatory for all school-based educational personnel. The association is responsible for monitoring teaching practices, addressing professional issues and training, negotiating employment rules and contracts, and when necessary, holding tribunals to determine whether discipline is needed. The association also offers an evaluation service of college transcripts to determine eligibility for certification and placement on the salary schedule.³¹ Teaching assignments are based on certification and experience. We learned from our interviews with teachers in the Edmonton schools that before moving into leadership positions in the district, teachers expect to change schools and teaching assignments. Also, they are strongly encouraged to obtain two or more certifications to allow flexibility in teaching assignments and a stronger understanding of subject area content and the interrelationships among different disciplines.

A significant effect of a 2010 report to the minister of education titled *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans* is the passage of Bill 26 in August 2013. This bill is the result of extensive negotiations with the ATA over salary and working conditions, such as teacher workloads and the many noninstructional tasks assigned to teachers that do not directly affect their students in the classroom. Teachers worldwide complain about these extra duties and

tasks, such as repetitive professional development, administrative reporting, and parent conferences. In return for an agreement to freeze salaries for three years and negotiate a 2 percent raise plus a lump sum benefit in 2015, the bill directs schools to reduce the maximum number of teaching hours down to 907 through a 4 percent reduction each year.³² This reduction in classroom instructional responsibilities gives teachers more time to meet together for planning and professional development. The OECD average, which varies by grade level, is about 790 hours. In Florida, a teacher is expected to teach for an average of 1,080 hours, a difference of nearly five weeks of full-time work, time that could be used for collaboration and planning.³³

Alberta has not by-passed the controversies of U.S. school reform entirely, as a recent news article criticizing the progress of the program outlined in *Inspiring Action on Education* makes clear.³⁴ With an increase in the number of students with PISA scores in the lowest bracket and growing concern over the wisdom of inquiry-based learning and the latest curriculum initiative, Discovery Math, Alberta Education is experiencing the same sort of backlash over change we are seeing in the United States over Common Core Standards. And though Alberta maintains a strong top ten position, critics point to the drop from second place in the 2003 PISA rankings. Ministry officials have stated that they expect a small drop as Alberta transitions to the new curriculum focus on the individual child.

This past spring, Jeff Johnson, minister of education, expanded the reform efforts through eight initiatives, including formation of the Task Force for Teaching Excellence. The task force report includes twenty-five recommendations for discussion, grouped into four theme areas: Practice Standards, Enabling Teaching Excellence, the Role of Leaders in Enabling Teaching Excellence, and Assuring Teaching Excellence.³⁵ Under the new evaluation system proposed by the report, teachers would have to prove they are competent at their jobs in order to renew their certification and the responsibility for that review would be taken away from the ATA under the proposed changes.³⁶ The ATA has expressed dismay over the circumstances surrounding the development and public release of the report and disappointment that teachers were not included on the task force. One of the greatest points of pride for the ATA is that it can effectively serve as both a professional organization and an advocate and agent of employment and contractual design. The ATA views the recommendations of the task force as a direct attack on the purpose and work of the association and its members.³⁷ Mark Ramsanker, president of the ATA, called the report itself “a direct assault on teachers in the province and on the profession itself.”³⁸

Other reform efforts arising from the recently released report by the Task Force for Teaching Excellence, which excluded significant teacher input, include a recommendation to separate the professional responsibilities of the ATA from the employment functions, and a weakening of the requirements for teacher training before full licensure for a teaching certificate for trades, fine arts, and career and technical positions. The same criticism of the ministry processes have occurred in Florida; that effective teacher representatives are being deliberately left out of the conversation about what can be done to improve teaching success.

Funding Insufficiency

The state of Florida is currently defending itself against a lawsuit charging that Florida is not funding education at the level required by the state constitution. The suit was brought in 2009 by a group of parents, known as Citizens for Strong Schools, who are concerned that the state is not meeting its constitutional obligations under Article IX, Section 1, which reads:

The education of children is a fundamental value of the people of the State of Florida. It is, therefore, a paramount duty of the state to make adequate provision for the education of all children residing within its borders. Adequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education and for the establishment, maintenance, and operation of institutions of higher learning and other public education programs that the needs of the people may require.

Evidence that is expected to be used for this suit includes state revenue and spending statistics coupled with low student test scores and low graduation rates.³⁹ This is the second attempt to force the state to increase its spending on education. The first suit was brought in 1996 but dismissed for lack of a specific definition for “adequacy.” In 1998 the constitutional amendment quoted above was added to the state constitution and this spring, Florida’s Supreme Court refused to dismiss the 2009 lawsuit. A trial date was set for October 2014. A Google search reveals that this type of lawsuit is being attempted in at least ten states where frustrated groups of parents are attempting to help increase resources for struggling public schools in their states.

The data for Florida’s system suggest that the issue of funding needs to be addressed. The average teacher salaries in Florida are ranked forty-second in the country. Revenue and spending on governmental services per \$1,000 of income are both fiftieth in the country, and per capita school revenue ranks forty-eighth, nearly \$3,000 less than the U.S. average of \$11,946.⁴⁰ The magazine *Education Week* assigns grades to states in their annual Quality Counts report. Florida’s overall grade is a B-, above the national average of C+. And though the state received an A- in equity for its method of distributing tax dollars among the local school districts based on a cost of living factor for each county, it received a D+ in finance and an F (46.9 percent) in school funding.⁴¹

Florida’s School Ratings

Florida’s approach to school reform has followed the path of outcome-based sanctions through high-stakes testing, exit exams, school grades, and teacher evaluation. Soon after the introduction of Florida’s school grading system in 1998, I was introduced to the commissioner of education. It was in the spring at the state academic team competition. At that time I was coaching my county team, which would soon be heading to the finals of the state championship. When I said that I was from Escambia County, the commissioner immediately asked, “Aren’t you proud of your schools that have just come off the failing list?” I mumbled something about being really focused on my coaching responsibilities, but I really wanted to say, “I would be proud if I thought the school grades had something to do with how hard the teachers are working.”

Since then, districts have closed and consolidated schools all over the state, distributing students from impoverished communities throughout districts, diluting the impact of poverty on school grades, but with minimal effect on the overall achievement rates of Florida’s students. The 2012 PISA was the first time Florida participated in the regional testing process, so there are no state scores to use for comparison. But the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores show Florida test scores well below the national average for twelfth graders, a position that has not changed appreciably in the past ten years. Eighth graders also show no significant change in reading. In math 70 percent remain below the national average, mirroring

the small but significant gains made over the past ten years. Fourth graders' scores were above the national average, ranking fifth in reading, but have shown no significant gains since 2009. In math, Florida fourth grade students are near the national average and have shown no significant change since 2007. Two bright spots for Florida are the fourth grade reading scores, which are above the national average, and the narrowing gap between Hispanic students and white students' state scores. Florida shows progress in closing the gap between English language learners and native English speakers, as is seen in both historical NAEP results and the PISA data.⁴²

Florida's school report cards contain data about the annual standardized assessments, paper credentials of the staff, and other hard data. The Department of Education and media reports focus on ranks and comparisons. Every school in Florida receives a grade based on its Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scores as well as other indicators of student achievement. The Florida Department of Education home page provides a list of rankings by school grade-point totals for every public school in the state, lists of the lowest one hundred schools, and sanctions for those schools as part of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top.

Florida has pushed school districts and students to improve their academic performance through a series of reforms focused on high-stakes student assessments and rewards for schools that raise their state-determined grades. In the past fourteen years the school grades have become a complex metric because of changes in student score expectations, improvement and other measures of achievement (so-called raising the bar), and student academic acceleration, such as Advanced Placement participation and pass rates. Nineteen rule changes since 2002, including seven substantive amendments to the school grading system, make year-to-year comparisons difficult.⁴³ At the same time, measures such as alternative teacher certification routes have been promoted. Charter schools and vouchers for students with disabilities have broadened student access to nonstandard public and private school options but without the same kind of oversight and supervision that is required for regular public schools. These aggressive moves, based on the business philosophy of increasing competition, have been promoted as a model for student success and increasing educational quality.

With the introduction of grades for schools came increasing penalties, leading to school closing, removing and replacing large numbers of staff, or turning schools over to external management companies and charter schools. Lower-performing districts and schools are subjected to progressively restrictive curricular requirements and a state presence in the schools. The focus on FCAT scores in reading and math test scores has led to increasingly intrusive test preparation, more numerous interim assessments and reductions in time and resources for other subjects, narrowing the curriculum, and limiting the opportunity for building cross-curricular connections, a fundamental component of reading comprehension. Higher-performing schools and districts are allowed more flexibility over decisions ranging from the start date for school to staffing and scheduling, perhaps giving them additional advantages in the competitive school grade environment promoted in the state.

The formulae for determining school grades has become so complicated and cumbersome that it was revised and simplified in 2014 to focus more on student achievement, growth, and high school acceleration. Senate Bill 1642, signed by Governor Scott in May, reduces the elements used in determining school grades to simple achievement and learning gains, with points added for acceleration success for secondary schools and graduation rates added to the high school calculations and removes point bonuses and penalties.⁴⁴

In 1998, Florida added high-stakes FCAT tests in reading, writing, and math for grades four, five, eight, and ten, revising the old high school exit exam, the High School Competency Test. The FCAT tested writing using a performance score of a holistically graded essay in grades four, eight, and ten. In 2000 more tests were added so that all students in grades three through ten were tested in reading and math with performance items in reading, writing, and math assessed at grades four, five, eight, and ten. New assessments will be administered in spring 2015 for setting the baseline for student achievement and school grades; 2016 will be first year for consequences of school grades under new assessments and new formulae. New assessments will include English language arts in grades three through eleven and math in grades three through eight plus new end-of-course exams in Algebra I, Algebra II, and geometry, in addition to the biology, U.S. history, and civics exams.⁴⁵

Florida's current high-stakes testing environment includes third and tenth grade exit exams and a growing list of state-mandated tests. One of the more controversial policies of Florida's education system is the automatic retention of third graders when their FCAT scores are significantly below grade level in reading (Level 1). Though there are provisions for students to demonstrate their mastery of reading through portfolio evaluation and remedial summer classes, more than 15,600 third graders were retained in 2012–13. The average retention rates show approximate 5,000 students per grade per year for other elementary grade levels.⁴⁶ It may be significant to consider that a large number of potential fourth graders are not included in the NAEP because they are still in third grade when their cohort takes the fourth grade NAEP. The 2013 PISA surveys show that Florida retains many more students than other OECD countries. An astonishing 22 percent of all fifteen-year-olds in Florida reported that they had been retained at least once. This retention rate is a much higher than that for the United States at 13.3 percent and Canada at 8.0 percent and more than three times the rate in Alberta at 6.6 percent.⁴⁷

While Alberta has focused on increasing teacher quality through professional capacity building over the past decade and has maintained its status as a high-performing school district, Florida has taken a different approach and seen different results. Even before the Student Success Act (No Child Left Behind), Florida began implementing a series of reform efforts focused on student test results.

In Alberta secondary students who are working toward a standard diploma must earn one hundred credits (in core and elective courses) through course grades and provincial exams. State assessments are also required. These include twelve diploma exams in specific high school subjects, the Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) in grades 3, 6, and 9, which were replaced in spring 2014 with new assessments. As with the PATs, the new assessments are given at the beginning of the year to provide diagnostic information to teachers as students transition to a new level of school. According to Alberta Education, the new Student Learning Assessments (SLAs) “support student learning while effectively assessing literacy, numeracy and competencies such as critical thinking and problem solving.” Classroom teachers will help develop the SLAs, which eventually will be administered at the start of grades 3, 6, and 9. They are “essentially ‘readiness’ assessments that can be used to determine the programming needs for students for the school year.” They will also provide teachers with “information to support more personalized student learning throughout the school year.”⁴⁸

A design and accountability subcommittee developed the following guiding principles for the Accountability Pillar: “transparent process, emphasis on achievement, holistic approach to evaluation, on-going collaborative processes, [and] all jurisdictions can succeed.”⁴⁹

Evaluation

I was struck by the disproportionate effect of one student's performance on a teacher's evaluation when one of my colleagues came up to me as we were supervising students taking their state end-of-course exam. Indicating one of the students in our testing group, she whispered, "I'm glad he is not in my stability group, he just submitted his test. He took thirty-four minutes. Now he is taking a nap. I feel sorry for his teachers." For the student, the score counts 30 percent of the overall grade in the course. For the school, the pass rate of all students is used in school grade calculations. For the teachers of this student, as well as guidance counselors, media specialists, and all other teachers not assigned specific classes to teach, his achievement score will be included in their annual evaluation (whether or not they teach math). In addition, FCAT scores for this student will be plugged into the state-adopted value added model (VAM), which is used to determine half of a teacher's evaluation, the so-called student growth portion.

Florida's focus on accountability extends to the classroom level with the statutory requirement that all instructional personnel be assessed for their contributions to their students' growth. Race to the Top funding was used to develop a VAM for student growth on the state assessment, the FCAT, limited by specific statutory exclusions for factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, and race and ethnicity. Other factors, such as attendance and disability, are included as co-variants in the model, which also includes an adjustment for school effect. Teachers are assigned a VAM score based on the students they teach, or, if they do not teach a subject or grade that takes the state assessment, they are assigned a school or district score. Again, statutory changes have modified the implementation of these calculations, which may comprise 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation, and the fairness of the implementation of this evaluation system is currently the subject of yet another lawsuit.⁵⁰

The idea of using student test scores as such a large part of a teacher's evaluation shocked the Edmonton teachers I talked with in one of the schools we visited. They described an evaluation process as a conversation with their principal during which they discuss their teaching strategies, the principal's observations, and the correlation between their students' grades in their course and their scores on the state exams their students took. They were surprised to hear that evaluation reform was such a large part of Florida's debate about how to improve school performance. Since my visit, however, the Task Force for Teaching Excellence released its controversial report to the minister of education.⁵¹ Many of the report's recommendations for changes to teacher evaluations echo the changes we have seen in Florida. Under the new evaluation system proposed by the report, teachers would have to prove they are competent at their jobs in order to renew their certification, and the responsibility for that review would be taken away from the ATA under the proposed changes.

Pre-Primary Education

The importance of pre-primary education cannot be underestimated. Volume 2 of the PISA report, *Equity in Opportunities to Learn*, states: "Across OECD countries, students who reported that they had attended pre-primary school for more than one year score 53 points higher in mathematics—the equivalent of more than one year of schooling—than students who had not attended pre-primary education" (14).

Florida began offering a state-funded pre-kindergarten program in 2005, enrolling 47 percent of all four-year-olds in the first year. *The State of Preschool 2013*, a report published by

the National Institute for Early Education Research, ranks Florida second only to the District of Columbia for access, with 78 percent of all four-year-olds enrolled in a pre-K program.⁵² The mean PISA scores in math for those receiving at least one year of pre-primary education is 469, while the mean score for students not attending is 436. Students reporting less than one year of pre-primary education had a slight difference in mean score, 467, significantly different than those students reporting no pre-primary school.⁵³ When Head Start and pre-K special education students are added, the number of four-year-old students served in the 2012–13 school year approaches 89 percent. But Florida's program, provided primarily through private and faith-based organizations, meets only three of the ten quality standards identified in the report, placing the state next to last in quality, behind only Texas. Per pupil expenditures places Florida thirty-seventh in total funding out of the forty-one states offering a pre-K program. Florida spends an average of \$2,242 per pupil total funding for the pre-K program, less than half of the \$4,629 U.S. average per pupil spending and a decrease from the initial investment of \$2,691 in 2006.⁵⁴

In Alberta, enrollment of pre-primary education programs lags behind Florida, with less than 40 percent of the students who took the 2012 PISA reporting more than one year of pre-primary schooling. As for Florida, the PISA results for Alberta show the value of attending a pre-primary program. The mean on the PISA math assessment for students reporting over one year of pre-primary attendance is 544; for those attending less than a full year, the mean score is 508; and for those attending no pre-primary school, the mean score is 507, only slightly lower than the students attending less than a year of pre-primary school.⁵⁵

What Has All This Effort Yielded?

The individual parts of a given school system are complex and often act synergistically with other parts of the system to make predicting outcomes very difficult. But there are lessons to be learned and relearned from analyzing successful school system practices. Internationally successful educational systems have many similarities in practices and attitudes about education. Generally, the countries with the highest achievement have a highly professional, well-trained teaching cadre with strong cultural and social support for schools and education. Teachers are given the authority to exercise professional judgment and work in a highly collaborative environment. School leaders typically have more autonomy over curricular decisions and more planning time. They participate in a culture of shared decision-making within schools and school systems and seek involvement and engagement with education in the broader community. Educational systems that are highly successful also provide additional resources and supports for students in lower socioeconomic conditions and more focused support for immigrant students and their families. A source for advice on what really works in education is the OECD publication *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA 2012 for the United States*, which discusses at length the elements of high-performing school systems, including Canada's.

In many ways Alberta's school-age population is similar to Florida's but there are surprising differences as well. For example, Florida has a higher level of pre-K participation. Demographically, both Florida and Alberta have high numbers of immigrant, nonnative speakers in their schools. Childhood poverty rates are higher in Florida than in Alberta according to PISA and national census data. Both systems have undertaken major reform agendas in an effort to increase student achievement, but the approaches to educational improvement have been very different, as have the results. Teachers in Alberta are more formally trained and have more planning time during the school day. Unlike in the United States, the salary of Canadian teachers

is comparable to the salaries of other professions requiring similar training. Alberta teacher compensation is among the highest in Canada, while in Florida, teacher salaries and educational expenditures are near the bottom of all the states. Where Florida has focused on student assessments and ranking schools and teachers, Alberta has spent its time and money attending to improved classroom instruction through training and study. Alberta's community engagement efforts are evident, and the direct involvement of their teacher's union is a legislative mandate, whereas Florida's union involvement has been highly limited, as has been the participation of other stakeholders. The educational outcome for children of similar backgrounds in each system is vastly different. Where Canadian students remain near the top of the international assessments, the United States lingers near the middle of the rankings. Florida's students' academic performance lags far behind other regions assessed by the PISA, even when socioeconomic and immigrant status are taken into account. *Strong Performers* comments on the poor showing of the United States: "Based on annualized changes in performance, student performance in mathematics in the United States has shown no significant change since 2003, the first year from which mathematics trends can be measured. Similarly, there has been no significant change in reading performance since 2000 and none in science since 2006" (20).

What Comes Next?

Alberta seems to be maintaining its high level of student equity and achievement and moving toward a stronger emphasis on application and global competence. The controversies over changing curriculum and the role of the ATA signal a level of public engagement in the work of school reform. It will be interesting to see what political fallout, if any, results from some of the disruptive systemic reforms being proposed by the current Albertan government. I hope that the spirit of problem-solving and civility that I heard during my visit to Edmonton continues.

In Florida, political entanglement is inescapable in the clash among different philosophies of standards, accountability, and school financial strategies for staffing schools. The state Department of Education recently hosted a conference for leaders of educational stakeholders in the state to look at classroom teacher practices. If the single most important part of student achievement comes from the classroom teacher, perhaps Florida has finally reached the place where Alberta began, concentrating on ways to improve classroom practice. The vast collection of data in the 2012 PISA studies offers a wealth of ideas. A shift in Florida to a problem-solving approach with all stakeholders engaged in the conversation about school improvement would be a welcome change to many of us in the classroom. I would like to see a move away from an emphasis on high-stakes testing and punishment to what Michael Fullan calls professional capital. We should be focusing on systemic changes in all areas of education from high-quality pre-kindergarten instruction through teacher preparation and professional development. A focus on learning should be a community priority with better teaching at the heart of all improvement work. We are succeeding in many schools, but there are still many others that need help to reach and teach our students.

Notes

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⁵¹ Task Force for Teaching Excellence, *Report*.

⁵² W. Steven Barnett, Megan E. Carolan, James H. Squires, and Kirsty Clarke Brown, *The State of Preschool 2013: State Preschool Yearbook* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2013), <http://nieer.org/publications/state-preschool-2013>.

⁵³ OECD, *PISA 2012 Results*, vol. 2, table B2.II.24; OECD, *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA 2012 for the United States* (Paris: OECD, 2013), <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/PISA2012-US-CHAP2.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Barnett et al., *State of Preschool 2013*.

⁵⁵ Pierre Brochu, Marie-Anne Deussing, Koffi Houme, and Maria Chuy, *Measuring Up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA Study 2012; First Results for Canadians Aged 15* (Toronto: Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2013); OECD, *PISA 2012 Results*, 2:209, and table B2.II.24.