

Curriculum criticism doesn't add up: Preparing students for a modern economy requires the basics plus much more.

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Recently, much has been made of the government's efforts to ensure that Alberta's curriculum is more responsive to the many different ways in which students learn.

I feel parents deserve to hear directly from me about my ministry's efforts to ensure the provincial curriculum enables Alberta's students to successfully compete in a dynamic, highly competitive world.

Along with being the minister, I'm also a father of three children in the education system, and I too have experienced some of the frustrations expressed by parents in recent weeks. This is why I believe it is important for me to set the record straight about the anticipated reforms.

I understand why some parents would be concerned with the allegation that mastery of the "basics" –skills such as arithmetic and reading – will play a less important role in the new curriculum than it did before. If this were the case, I would be concerned as well. But fortunately, nothing could be further from the truth.

I wish to assure parents that these basic skills will serve as the foundation and starting point of every change made to the curriculum. What they won't be is the end point. Through inquiry-based learning, we'll build upon these basic, foundational skills while developing additional skills that the business community and parents tell us are so critical.

The conventional method of teaching fundamentals, whereby students rely heavily on memorization, versus a more engaged, inquiry-based method are not mutually exclusive approaches to education. In fact, I believe it is crucial that we develop a curriculum that uses the best of both methods.

However, surviving on mere memorization alone is a thing of the past. The modern economy demands creativity and problem solving, the application of critical thinking and an ability to collaborate and communicate. These skills lie at the heart of Alberta's curriculum redesign process.

Top performing education jurisdictions, like Alberta, have increased their focus on these 21st century skills. We can't ignore that without strong abilities in these areas, our kids will be left behind.

But we also can't ignore the concerns of parents.

This is why we are responding in a thoughtful and collaborative manner. The redesign process is being led by parents, employers, teachers, students and school authorities, all of whom will be working together over the next two years to develop a curriculum that successfully weaves new competencies in with core skills like numeracy and literacy. Doing so will help reinforce literacy and numeracy across all subjects and better focus a curriculum that has ballooned to approximately 1400 outcomes.

Despite recent criticism, parents should know and take comfort in the fact that according to the most recent international tests our K-12 students remain at the top of international

rankings. Alberta's overall results are tremendously positive. Out of the 74 jurisdictions from around the world that took part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey, Alberta ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in math, 5<sup>th</sup> in reading, and 4<sup>th</sup> in science. Notably, Alberta's 15 year olds are actually outperforming Alberta's adults in these OECD rankings.

Our strength and performance internationally is due in part to Alberta's willingness to continually adapt. This year is a great example.

In response to years of consultation and research, we recently launched some groundbreaking initiatives under Premier Redford. The new Dual Crediting Program, for instance, better integrates K-12, post-secondary and industry credentialing. The High School Flexibility Program empowers teachers to customize learning to better address individual student need. Eliminating Provincial Achievement Tests and implementing a more robust standardized assessment at the start of the school year will provide parents and teachers with better information on how to tailor each child's education going forward and help them measure improvement throughout the year.

Curriculum needs to evolve as well. The days of a small group of educators taking 10 years to review curriculum one subject at a time are long over. We need to be more nimble and create curriculum that is more in tune with the local community and economy. Our curriculum must allow for creativity and excellence in teaching to shine through. We must embrace the individuality of the learner and ensure subject experts are teaching our kids. In short, our curriculum must become more relevant.

We've been asked to listen and that's exactly what we're doing. But the truth is that Alberta is at the top because we have not been afraid to take action. I won't apologize for putting the success of our children first but I also commit to continue listening in order to get it right.

At the end of the day we must ask ourselves, are we preparing our children for their future or for our past?

*Jeff Johnson is Alberta's Minister of Education*