

Calgary Varsity Education Panel

Nov. 19, 2013

Education act is a technical document and very high level; it includes statements like this one:

“The Minister may make regulations respecting the examination and evaluation of persons by the Minister, including appeals, fees, and the payment of remuneration.” (18.4)

That’s pretty open-ended. The rubber hits the road when it gets enacted in regulations or in things like this ministerial order which commits to the goals of the 3Es – Engaged Thinker, Ethical Citizen, with an Entrepreneurial Spirit. Those are drawn directly from this document “Inspiring Education.” I have to say it is inspiring. It’s an exciting vision of education. I think every parent in this room would say “Of course I want my child to be engaged with learning. Of course I want my child to be an ethical citizen.” And if not entrepreneurial, they certainly would want their child to be resourceful and resilient and all those other key elements that the document calls entrepreneurial. So what are parents’ concerns? Well I’m sure we’ll hear many of them this evening but I’m going to try to capture a few.

SUPPORTS: First, if we are truly aspiring to these 3Es, what supports are in place to make it happen? The curriculum redesign is an ambitious project. It aims to cut back the number of outcomes addressed in every grade and instead focus on big ideas. The goal is to then help teachers build meaningful learning opportunities and foster the 3Es rather than being constrained by detailed little outcomes. That has the potential to create much richer experiences for our children in schools. But how will we equip teachers for this new curriculum? When my children were at Varsity Acres, they used part of their AISI funding to hire consultants from the Galileo Network to support their inquiry based learning. As you know AISI was cut last spring and that was a significant loss to innovation in schools. There needs to be a substantial investment to support teacher professional development, technology support, and other resources. There is a vision but the means for achieving it is still a bit fuzzy.

ASSESSMENT: Inspiring Education is also asking us to rethink assessment. I personally am delighted by the elimination of PATs in grade 3, a practice that was simply not age appropriate for young children. I remember asking Jacques Ferguson a few years ago if high schools could incorporate more of the principles of inquiry based learning into their teaching and he admitted that the PATs constrain teachers. With the multitude of outcomes teachers must cover in every grade level in order to prepare students for the PATs and diploma exams, they often don’t feel they can do the kind of projects that might foster the 3Es – more authentic engagement, a commitment to fostering ethical ways of living, and building students’ capacity for risk taking. Assessment demonstrates what we value so I think if this document communicates what we as a province value, the assessments need to be adjusted accordingly. For those of us who have watched our children stress over these exams, we’d like to know how school testing practices will better reflect this vision.

VOICE: Finally, I think parents are concerned about decision making and the parent voice. One of the biggest concerns in this school right now and in high schools across Calgary is class size. Many classes are over 40 students. While I know Sharon has previously cited research that shows class size is not as critical as we might think, there comes a point when crowding and the resulting lack of teacher attention start to put an strain on everyone, certainly an emotional **strain** if not an **academic** one. In light of the budget cuts last spring, the school boards had some scrambling to do and elected to pass the burden primarily to high schools. The boards point fingers at the government for making the cuts and governments point fingers at boards for their budget decisions while parents are left feeling like significant decisions impacting their children are being made and they have little opportunity to have their views heard.