

June 16, 2006

Retirement must be a beautiful thing. Recently Dr. Ron Rubadeau joined the ranks of the retired as he left his position as Superintendent in Central Okanagan (Kelowna). Ron's passion for learning and his commitment to kids continues. Between offering sailing lessons to youngsters and the evening barbeque, Ron has been thinking about one of his favourite topics – standardized testing. Ron's background is in special education. He has written the following provocative article addressing the controversy surrounding FSA. Ron is the BC antithesis to Alfie Kohn who has expressed his "Americanized" views about testing and FSA widely in British Columbia. I asked Ron if I might share his perspective with leaders. I hope you enjoy this read and differing view as much as I did.

Market Hogs for Profit

A view on standardized testing – Dr. Ron Rubadeau

Even in Hogtown they know that you don't get a fatter pig by weighing it. If obedience to the scale was all that one needed, many of us would have achieved our weight loss goals long ago. Indeed, North Americans are as addicted to our bathroom scales as we are to our appetites. But, since there is a disconnect between the assessment and the action, the adage is unfortunately true: the more we weigh ourselves, the fatter we seem to be getting.

There is a lot of talk about the evils of assessment in both board and staff rooms these days. Some within our profession are of the belief that standardized assessment is evil and that if another Star Wars movie is made, Darth will annihilate the Confederation by forcing them to take a Foundation Skills Assessment.

The anti-assessment forces have their champion in Alfie Kohn, but even Alfie knows what it's all about and is careful to make his criticisms generic rather than specific. Some of his followers are not so well informed, however, and are anxious to toss away not only the FSA, but any form of standardized assessment.

But before we rush to action there are a few things to think about before we recycle the FSA protocol into Post-it notes.

1. Standardized testing does not hurt kids. While test anxiety is apparent in most individuals before they take a driver's, first aid, swimming, sailing, chapter unit, term or a Cosmopolitan relationship test, anxiety doesn't hurt anyone. I've personally interviewed hundreds of FSA test students and could not find a single example of a student harmed by taking a test, much less a standardized test.
2. Kids with disabilities take the most number of standardized tests. Have you ever seen the battery of assessments in a school psychologist's arsenal? Any child with a special need and every kid with an IEP has had more standardized assessments than any of the rest of us will have in a lifetime. Not only do these kids take more tests, but the more disabilities that they have, the more assessments they take. Most importantly, they enjoy taking them. Just ask the school psychologist and the speech pathologist. They will tell you that the kids enjoy coming to them and like taking the tests.
3. You need a standardized tool to assess the degree of your innovation. How will anyone know if a smaller class, more resource teacher time, or more library books make a difference unless we have a way of measuring the impact? Asking the public to fork over millions without a shred of accountability doesn't sell well in suburbia.
4. A standardized test is simply a sample of behaviour; nothing more and nothing less. Teachers are constantly sampling behaviour. The value placed on a standardized test versus report card marks, versus anecdotal reports are judgments made according to one's values. In my years in special education, I often advocated for a teacher (often with no success) to place less weight on the classroom assessments and more on the special needs student's work ethic.

5. Without a standardized test, how will anyone differentiate resources to schools that need it most? All schools are not created equal and all schools do not need the same resources. Before standardized testing, all schools got the same; they were treated equally. Since the advent of the FSA, resources in every district are divided unequally to support learning in challenging environments.

6. Standardized testing can tell us what kids can do and what they need to learn. Standardized testing such as the FSA are based on the curriculum. An item analysis really helps pinpoint what kids need to know as well as their areas of strength.

7. Standardized tests help us advance the intelligent conversation about educating kids. It is well established that a student's socioeconomic status is a key factor in determining his/her success. But why do some schools in low socioeconomic environments have great student success while some schools in high socioeconomic areas under-perform expectations? The FSA won't give us the answer to the questions, but will start the dialogue that will help us understand what needs to be done to improve student achievement.

8. FSAs are more reliable than report card marks. In most school districts the vast majority of students have C+ or better on report cards in most subjects. In the Central Okanagan, 94% of all students have achieved success according to report card marks. While I wish it were so, graduation rates, provincial exams, and post secondary attendance tell us a far different story.

9. While we know that every kid can learn, we also know that every parent wants to know how their son or daughter learns in comparison to their peers. Standardized testing gives us reference points in a kid's journey through the system. They don't specify what must be taught, but they provide some "dashboard" information on how the journey is going. In an age where teacher autonomy is a standard feature in public education, standardized testing is a good way of establishing minimal (at best) benchmarks.

10. Standardized testing reveals the strength of public education. I believe that our teachers and our leaders in public schools are of superior quality. But as we lose more of our student market share each year to private education, it would be wise to use our excellent standardized test results to help reveal just how good we really are. We foolishly let the Fraser Institute publish their ranking report that will always show private schools at the top of the list. We've got the socioeconomic data to intersect with our standardized data which demonstrates the significant success of public education. Rather than trying to toss the FSAs because we don't like how the Fraser Institute uses them, why not turn the table and jointly rank schools by these two criteria?

While I believe that there is a compelling case for standardized assessments in public education, I would be the strongest advocate for the abolition of same if any one of the following conditions became apparent:

- we stop all innovation.
- market share no longer matters.
- we do exactly the same thing with every class every year.
- we no longer need to differentiate resources.
- our public no longer sees a value in them.
- everyone graduates.
- it is discovered that pigs get fatter only if you don't weigh them.

Thank you to Ron for stirring our thinking on this topic again.

**Rural Schools Renewal Conference 2006:
Quality Instruction: The Great Equalizer**

October 19 - 21, 2006

Delta Vancouver Airport Hotel, Richmond

This conference will focus on the unique needs of rural educators as they relate to five themes: multi-grade classrooms; success for Aboriginal learners; increasing community involvement; utilizing electronic learning; and supporting special needs learners. The key objectives are to reduce the professional isolation that is so prevalent in small schools by providing an opportunity to share effective practices, offering concrete strategies to assist in classrooms, schools and communities, and encouraging the creation of networks of educators linked to the five conference themes. Attendance will be limited to 250 registrants from 40 districts that have identified rural settings and challenges. There will be elementary and secondary plenaries, and five breakout sessions which will include plenty of time for sharing successes and challenges – expect a very illuminating and interactive conference!

Bargaining Update

A total of 111 agreements have been reached under the Province's new negotiating framework. The agreements to date encompass 251,106 people and account for 81 per cent of all public sector employees.

Support staff in the Okanagan-Similkameen school district are the latest public sector employees to agree to a four-year contract. The agreement covers more than 160 support workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). These employees include teacher aides and staff who provide administrative, maintenance and trades-related services.

CUPE Local 523 members and the Okanagan-Similkameen school district will vote on ratification over the next few weeks.

We have now reached full agreements with more than half the K-12 support staff.

More than 70,000 employees are covered by contracts that expire at the end of June, including 40,000 K-12 teachers, 25,000 K-12 support staff and 5,000 college support staff. All 11 college support staff contracts have now been ratified. An umbrella agreement has been reached for K-12 support staff, which must be approved by union locals. All agreements reached before June 30 will be eligible for the incentive payment.

A further 9,000 employees are under contracts that expire after that date.

Updated bargaining information is available at www.negotiatingframework.com

Appointment - British Columbia Education Leadership Council

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the British Columbia Leadership Council (BCELC), Rick Davis, President, is pleased to announce the appointment of Catherine Elliott as the Chief Executive Officer of BCELC.

BCELC is a not-for-profit society established under the authority of the Society Act for the purpose of advancing Education Leadership in the K – 12 public school sector. The Society was established in March 2005 with an inaugural operating grant provided by the Government of British Columbia. The members of the society are organizations representing the Ministries of Education and Advanced Education, School Trustees, Principals and Vice-Principals, Superintendents, Secretary-Treasurers and Parents.

Catherine Elliott comes to this position with a comprehensive background in many aspects of public education in British Columbia. Most recently she has brought together partner groups working in the area of Leadership Programs and a variety of initiatives that further the work of educators in support of student achievement in our province.

Catherine Elliott has been a teacher, a vice-principal and a principal in our school system over the past 25 years. She has worked at the school, district and provincial level. She completed a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in Education at Simon Fraser University.

As Program Consultant for the Ministry of Education, Cathy successfully connected schools and districts, fostered networks and developed collaborative teams supporting the use of data, dialogue and inquiry. Cathy was seconded to the Ministry of Education from the British Columbia Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association where she held the role of Programs Manager.

Cathy is very well known among teachers, principals, district staff, trustees and parents from around the province. She has presented before all of these audiences and has engaged with individuals from the partner organizations to plan for the needs of leadership development. Her work has influenced the success of students, teachers, administrators and the other educational partners. Her inclusive vision for leadership will bring coherence to educational leadership across British Columbia in support of student achievement.