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## The Great Schools Project

How good is our school?

How can we know?

If a Mum asks, “How is our school doing? How well does our school meet the needs of my child?” what is our answer?

To respond appropriately to her questions we need to explore some fundamental issues. What are we trying to ‘teach’ our students? What is the purpose of our schools? What values underpin, or should underpin, our system? What are the relationships between the ‘experiences’ of learning and the ‘outcomes’ of that learning?

We often answer questions like the one from the Mum by saying, “The Fraser Institute sucks,” or, “Standardized testing tells us very little of value.” We’re right of course, but we haven’t responded to her questions. And they are completely legitimate questions.

While the progressive critique of standardized testing and its uses has gained traction over the last 10 years, we are vulnerable to the charge that we are somehow trying to avoid “accountability”. That’s a maddening irony, because it’s we who really care about what’s going on in schools and, in the broadest and most meaningful way, want them to be accountable.

The “standardization agenda” on the other hand isn’t really about accountability. It’s about creating a curriculum and a ped-

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

agogy that build an individualist, consumerist, and passive culture, community and economy.

Sometimes, we respond to questions like the Mum's defensively. We assume that her questions suggest an implicit criticism of the school and public education, a sympathy for the Fraser Institute and its ilk.

But in the vast majority of cases that's not it at all. In fact, it's often just the opposite. The Mum asked her questions because she believes in public education. It provides for her child the best chance for a happy and fulfilling life, and she knows it.

She's anxious about her school because she realizes it's under tremendous strain and pressure, and she knows it's got an enormous job to do. She wants to understand how the school is doing because she has a vital interest in defending it and in helping it do an even better job for her child and her neighbours' children.

So she asks — how is our school doing? And we answer. And our answer is our very logical and reasonable critique of the standardization agenda.

But our critique, despite its increasing sophistication, isn't enough. We need to propose our own notion of what some people call 'accountability' — for several reasons.

First, we who believe in progressive education have a responsibility to move beyond criticism. If, as we sometimes say, "another world is possible," what will that world look like? What could it look like?

Michael Apple puts it this way:

The analysis of "what is" has led to a neglect of what "might be." Thus, there has been a withering of substantive large-scale discussions of feasible alternatives to neoliberal and neoconservative visions, policies, and practices, ones that would move well beyond them...

... defensible, articulate, and fully fleshed out alternative critical and progressive policies and practices in curriculum, teaching, and evaluation need to be developed and made widely available. (*Educating the "Right" Way*; pg. 80)

Second, we need to inspire people and give them hope and confidence rather than simply telling them what's wrong. Often they already know what's wrong (or at least they know that

something is wrong), but they are demobilized because they don't know what to do about it. Donald Gutstein warns,

If public education supporters hope to counter the success of the neoliberals, they must stop denying the free-market frame and start constructing a frame based on social justice, and they must be prepared to do this consistently for many years. (Donald Gutstein; "Reframing public education: Countering school rankings and debunking the neoliberal agenda"; pg.4)

Third, in the ongoing debate around the 'standardization agenda' we will be much stronger and more successful if we can begin to point to our own notion of 'accountability'.

Finally, we really do care about how our schools are doing and are committed to the best possible education for every child. So, it's logical that we set ourselves the task of figuring out how to make an assessment of just that — how is our school doing?

### **What are the standardizers up to?**

Currently, those who purport to be interested in "school accountability" are focused on what we might call **OUTPUTS**. The standardizers want to "measure" what students have "learned" and can show on a test they have learned.

We all know the weaknesses of this approach.

- The standardizers are "measuring" lower order recall for the most part. They de-emphasize and often ignore higher order thinking — like analyzing, synthesizing, forming hypotheses and problem-solving.
- Their choice of what to "measure" is based not on what's important to learn, know or understand, but instead on what's easiest to measure on standardized tests.
- The standardizers "measure" only a tiny corner of significant **OUTPUTS**.
- Their "measurements" are simply snapshots of test-taking skills on a particular day. In fact, as many have argued, what standardized testing does best is simply to measure students' ability to write standardized tests.
- Standardized tests are not diagnostic. Even if the results were meaningful, they tell us almost nothing

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

about how to help a particular student improve a skill, process or understanding.

- The results of the tests are used by the standardizers in a completely irresponsible way (for example, the Fraser Institute so-called Report Card on Schools) and this means, among other things, the further marginalization of already disadvantaged communities, schools and students. Moreover, the methodology used by the Fraser Institute to turn standardized test scores into a so-called report card on schools is so flawed that its results cannot be taken seriously — even in their own terms. (see, for example, Gutstein; “Reframing public education: Countering school rankings and debunking the neoliberal agenda” on the web at <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Issues/FSA/Gutstein-ReframingPublicEducation.pdf> )

And there are of course lots more reasons to be skeptical of the value of this kind of testing.

### **What’s important to us?**

We are interested in the **OUTPUTS** of the educational system. But there is a tremendously wide range of **OUTPUTS** that is ignored by those who push the “standardization agenda”. That’s partly because it’s hard to figure out how to assess things like critical thinking, aesthetic and cultural sensibility, problem solving, self-confidence, sense of self in historical, geographic, social, class, gender and ethnic context, vocational readiness, emotional resilience, social solidarity, community responsibility, media and computer literacy, democratic citizenship, etc.

So it’s partly because it is hard to assess these absolutely central skills, goals, values, processes, and knowledge that the standardizers ignore them for the most part. But it’s also because the standardizers aren’t interested in some of these **OUTPUTS**, and are opposed to others.

We, on the other hand, are interested in all of these and many more. It’s significant to note here that literacy and numeracy, which the standardizers claim to be measuring, are central and incredibly important. But they’re much more complicated than they want us to believe.

A second area of importance might be described as INPUTS. These are a range of conditions that students live with in their communities and find when they arrive at school.

What are the school's class sizes and class composition? Is it a healthy physical environment (mold, dust, air quality, etc.)? Is there sufficient custodial staff to keep the school clean and functioning? Are specialist teachers and other support workers available to deal with special needs? Is there a school library with appropriate materials and appropriate staff? Are counselors available to deal with crises and to provide appropriate advice and support? Are teaching and learning materials in good condition and up to date? Are teachers well-trained, in appropriate assignments, and do they have available to them ongoing professional development experiences? Is there enough and appropriate administrative support? Is there appropriate out of school care, etc. etc?

**Do students get the opportunity for EXPERIENCES that inspire their imagination, compassion and interest?**

A third area of importance might be called EXPERIENCES. Too often schools are seen as simply means to an end. They are judged on the basis of how well they might be preparing students for something else — whether it is the next level of schooling or, more often, the economy and employment (or perhaps unemployment or underemployment).

But surely schools need to be assessed, to a great extent, on the value of the immediate experiences they provide for students. Are the students happy and do they feel fulfilled at school? Are their families confident in the school? Is there a feeling and an experience of community among the students, staff and neighbourhood? Are extra-curricular activities available and do students take advantage of them? Do students get the opportunity for EXPERIENCES that inspire their imagination, compassion and interest? etc.

Any attempt to answer the Mum's questions — How is our school doing? How well is our school meeting the needs of my child? — will need to take into account all three — OUTPUTS, INPUTS and EXPERIENCES.

### **The Great Schools Project**

For more than a year, a group of teachers, parents, academics, unionists, education activists, school trustees, school and district administrators, recent graduates and others in Vancouver have begun to meet to discuss this challenge. Everyone is a volunteer. Nobody gets paid to participate in this work. We call ourselves the Great Schools Project.

The purpose of the Great Schools Project is to develop methods to assess schools that support students, communities, and the public education system, so that we can provide the best education possible for every child — so that we have a useful answer to that Mum's questions: How is our school doing? How well is our school meeting the needs of my child?

It's also an attempt to live up to our responsibility to move beyond simply criticizing — to make concrete proposals we believe will improve the public education system for kids.

Our conversations, which have included more than 50 people, have been rich, textured and diverse. The debates have been complex and provocative. We've reviewed and discussed a wide range of methodologies and processes that could be used in assessing the job our schools are doing.

### **How is our school doing?**

What follows is a list of ways we might assess schools to support students, learning and public education, together with some thoughts about the complexities and challenges attached to each.

We in the Great Schools Project have discussed some of these tools and processes at length, others only in passing. It's important to stress that these are tentative and preliminary thoughts arising from our deliberations. We will look at all of these ideas in much more depth in the months to come.

It's also worth noting, that while the Great Schools Project is a participatory endeavour, with the opportunity for debate, input, reflection and review afforded to all who take part, this article is the thoughts and reflections of only one individual, its author.

### **Let a thousand flowers bloom — multiple analysis of test data**

The use of FSA results (standardized testing) to create a so-

called report card on schools at both the elementary and secondary level, has come under increasing scrutiny and criticism. Two recent developments are of particular note.

First is the devastating critique of the methodology used by the Fraser Institute to create their so-called report card. Donald Gutstein's analysis reveals the shocking, and at times inexplicable, weighting of factors which result in a school's placement on the list. His assessment of Fraser Institute methods takes the critique to a new level because it shows clearly their claim to some kind of "objective" measurement of schools is bogus.

**Variables outside the school experience are much more important in explaining how children do on standardized tests than anything that happens to them in school.**

Second, an analysis of BC schools by the C. D. Howe Institute (a business oriented think tank) using the same FSA and final exam results for their base data, resulted in dramatically different rankings. This is because C. D. Howe attempted to take into account, to some extent, socio-economic status and other demographic information in determining a school's performance. (for a more in-depth review of this issue see Donald Gutstein; "Reframing public education: Countering school rankings and debunking the neoliberal agenda"; pg 23-24)

Great Schools Project participants discussed this turn of events at some length. What would happen, we asked ourselves, if other groups used the same FSA test data, but filtered it through even more rigorous demographic lenses? Surely the results would change again. Different schools would be determined to be "best." Similarly, different schools would be "worst." And what if school communities got to choose which of the lenses or filters they wanted to use to analyze the FSA data for their school?

Such a methodology has much to recommend it. It would help show that variables outside the school experience are much more important in explaining how children do on standardized tests than anything that happens to them in school. The importance of socio-economic factors would be immediately apparent. Each community would have a range of filters through which to understand their school's progress and would be free to "plug in" the variables that make most sense to them.

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Nevertheless, there are some distinct disadvantages to this approach. Most importantly, it accepts by implication that FSA (or similar provincial standardized) testing is the standard by which students and schools are to be measured — no matter how much those test scores are tweaked, mediated or “corrected” by looking at them through a socio-economic lens. It therefore does not deal with the fundamental concern expressed by progressive critics, that the range of educational OUTPUTS we are interested in is dramatically wider and deeper than what is or can be measured on a standardized test. Additionally, the result of such a scheme is still a ranking of “good schools” and “bad schools” with all of the problems that creates. In effect, with the help of the real estate industry, we would still be contributing to the commodification of schools. This conundrum, which might be expressed as a question — Should we be comparing schools to one another in any way? — is discussed in more detail below. Finally, it is not clear what the mechanism is between such results and improving the situation for individual students or groups of students in schools.

### **What about resources? Input-based based assessments**

A widely held criticism of the “standardization agenda” is that it ignores the impact of the level of resources available to schools. This problem expresses itself in more than one way. Some schools have been relatively privileged because of the socio-economic background of their communities, with all of the advantages that brings. In addition, some of these very schools have benefited from disproportionate allocations of resources — sometimes because school boards and administrators simply favoured them, and sometimes because these communities have had the time, energy and expertise to advocate successfully for their schools. Moreover, all schools are dramatically affected by cut-backs and reductions in financial support from the state — a situation which has been increasingly prevalent over the last two decades. Simply put, resources do make a difference.

The Great Schools Project participants have discussed at some length, therefore, the use of some kind of input-based assessment as part of a broader assessment of schools.

Many education theorists, advocates and activists have done interesting work in this area, and have, additionally, provided a number of strategies which may prove to be extremely helpful at



reframing the debate to better reflect the ways in which we can work towards authentic school assessment. Examples of some of these are described below.

### ***1. Susan Ohanion's "What Does a Good School Look Like?" checklist***

([http://www.susanohanian.org/show\\_commentary.php?id=742](http://www.susanohanian.org/show_commentary.php?id=742)), includes a range of inputs (class sizes, teaching materials, cleanliness and healthiness, specialist teacher availability, number of library books, etc.). It also suggests other characteristics (encouraging students to choose what they want to read, with no points or prizes attached: [school] is headed by a principal who regularly reads to students; requires no homework; [school] offers varied approaches to instruction and evaluation, etc.) which speak to teaching and assessment methodologies. As well, Ohanion puts forward school management criteria and school/parent/community relationships which she argues are necessary for the "good school."

***2. People for Education in Ontario*** (a parent-based advocacy organization) have, for many years created, distributed, collated and publicized the results of a survey of schools which focuses on resources available in individual schools. Staffing, class sizes, specialist teacher numbers and programs are central aspects of the surveys. Significantly, their elementary survey deals with child care availability (find the links to elementary principal, secondary principal and school council surveys here: [http://www.peopleforeducation.com/school\\_survey](http://www.peopleforeducation.com/school_survey)).

### ***3. The Healthy School Report Card***

(<http://www.healthyschoolcommunities.org/HSRC/pages/reportcard/reportcardlogin.aspx>) uses the concept of "school health" to create a "report card" that allows for assessment of a range of critical inputs. It calls on schools to: meet guidelines and standards established by your state or provincial government; meet the U.S. Department of Agriculture Local Wellness Policy requirements; establish a school environment consistent with the World Health Organization's concept of health-promoting school; integrate best practices and methods of providing school health programming for a high-quality school.

Each of these, and many more, suggest approaches that the Great Schools Project will likely embrace in some form. Still, there are many questions left unanswered. What importance should be given to resources, in terms of our assessment of how a school is doing, as compared to the other two general categories we have discussed: **OUTPUTS** and **EXPERIENCES**? What is the relationship between and among these three? Who has the time, energy and resources — and, more important, who has the responsibility — to do the assessment of **INPUTS**?

### ***4. Knowledge, wisdom and the joy of learning — assessing a broad range of outputs***

Most serious observers of education policy are critical of the narrow and shallow assessment of students and schools based on standardized tests like the BC FSA. We understand the goal of our schools to be much broader and deeper than a relatively cursory teaching of literacy and numeracy. Therefore, we argue, assessment tools must take into account this much richer and more textured understanding of what we hope students are learning.

So our first task is to come to consensus on what to assess. Simply asserting that we need to look at a broad range of results isn't good enough. What are those **OUTPUTS**? Second, and much more complicated, is figuring out a useful and authentic way to assess them. Much of the the Great Schools Project discussion to date has focused on these issues. There are many suggestions of what a broad range of learning outcomes might look like. Here are just two examples.

Australians Leonie Rowan and Chris Bigum suggest what they call “Knowledge Producing Schools,” which would engage in “future proofing” students. This would be done by providing, “... robust and durable skills and dispositions ...” which provide students with, ... the opportunity to develop, rehearse and display:

- Strong literacy and numeracy skills.
- Excellent multi-literacy skills including high-level capacities in the ‘new basics’ of ICT.
- Operational, cultural, critical literacy.
- An understanding of a changed and changing social and economic environment for their present and their future (career, relationships, family and health).

- The ability to live harmoniously in a community characterized by social and cultural diversity.
- The potential to contribute to the social, emotional, intellectual and financial future of the nation.
- A strong sense of self, and a positive attitude towards change and life long/life wide learning. (see “At the Hub Of It All; Knowledge Producing Schools as Sites For educational and Social Innovation” in *The School and Community Hub; Our Schools/Our Selves*; Summer 2010; pg190-191.)

The “Charter for Public Education,” developed in British Columbia after months of public hearings in 2002-2003 posits to a different set of learning outcomes:

a broad-based education which includes aesthetic, artistic, cultural, emotional, social, intellectual, academic, physical and vocational development in order that [students] can find and follow their hopes, dreams and passions ... critical thinking so that learners are equipped to be reflective and analytical global citizens. (<http://charter.publiced.ca/the-charter/languages/english.php>)

Again, the notion that our enterprise in public education is much broader than what can be measured on standardized tests is not at issue. What is still under discussion and debate among Great School Project participants is how to assess these learning outcomes and whether such an assessment necessarily results in school-to-school comparisons, with all of the complications that implies.

### ***5. Narratives and testimonials — telling our stories***

A process that we in the Great Schools Project keep returning to is some form of narrative description of just what goes on in the school. Such story-telling could be valuable in several different ways. First, and most important, a fundamental characteristic of accountability is communicating and explaining the reality of an institution.

Second, for many reasons schools can be intimidating, confusing and mysterious places for those who aren't in them every day (students, teachers, administrators, support workers.) It's also true that some in the community, and particularly pundits

and ideologues, either don't want to deal with the reality of schools, or worse, create narratives which deliberately obscure and distort that reality. Regular, organized and comprehensive narratives might be helpful in explaining "what's really going on" in a way that breaks through some of the intimidation, confusion and mystery and counters those who would obscure and distort.

But there are, clearly, some limitations and challenges in using narratives, story telling and testimonials as an accountability mechanism. One is the problem of how to communicate in an accessible way. Many parents and community members aren't comfortable with English. Some don't have the literacy skills to deal with written material (although one can imagine other, more creative and engaging ways to communicate.) Another problem is the challenge of telling our stories in an interesting way. Won't the narratives inevitably become, "Same old same old?" Who has the time and resources to report in such a way on a regular basis?

The most important challenge is deciding what stories need to be reported. Which stories are important to tell? Good news? Inspiring stories? Only testimonials? Problems faced by the school, its students and teachers? If the measure of what stories to tell is how such reporting helps us to do better for students, which narratives meet this criterion?

Still, we are interested in the idea of story telling and will investigate it further.

**6. "Prudent sampling or profligate and politically controlling census" — the case for randomized testing**  
Those who oppose the standardization agenda don't necessarily reject all standardized tests all of the time. A broad brush, system-wide assessment can be done, it is argued, on a randomized basis. Indeed, in British Columbia, this was the initial stated purpose and methodology of FSA testing. Hargreaves and Shirley put it this way,

... system wide accountability ... can be achieved through prudent sampling rather than through a profligate and politically controlling census..." (Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley; *The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change*; pg 103)

Annie Kidder of Ontario's People for Education has stated testing every single student in Ontario is not necessary. She too, argues assessments should be done by sample testing.

The testing drives the system rather than the other way around ... We have a system in Ontario where people are working very hard to get the top 10% of Level 2 students up to Level 3, now — to me — that doesn't sound like a vision of education. (<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/story/2010/08/16/standardized-testing.html>)

One suggestion we have discussed (as have many others) is the use of randomized testing for the purpose of system-wide assessment, together with one or more of the alternatives examined in this summary at the school level. This will be investigated and debated as the project continues.

### **7. Accreditation — *Internal? External? Collegial***

Our discussions have turned on a number of occasions to some form of accreditation. This term is used to describe a range of experiences.

Typically a team (often made up of people external to the school working together with an internal group) identify — always involving some form of engagement with school staff, sometimes in consultation with parents and students — a list of issues, characteristics, areas of common interest and concern — to study. Discussions are held, data is collected, presentations are made, a report is written, areas of possible improvement are identified, recommendations for change are made. It is not important here to identify the various possible structures and processes used in accreditation. They may include emphasis on the external team, the internal team, or even the possibility of internal collegial self-assessment. It's enough to say that the Great Schools Project participants are attracted to the possible use of this kind of tool.

The challenge here is that accreditation has been very controversial. There are a number of reasons for this, but here in British Columbia the criticism has focused on two issues. First, accreditation, when it was used, took up enormous amounts of time and resources. In secondary schools teachers and administrators on internal teams were often provided blocks of teaching time to do accreditation work during years when budget con-

straints meant cuts in education services to children. Even in good times it's difficult to justify the kind of time, money and energy which were used on accreditation.

A second concern was that the recommendations that arose from the accreditation process were often not acted upon. This was sometimes because the accreditation itself was pro forma: it had to be done so it was done. Often though, the reason the recommendations were ignored was that to deal with them effectively, additional resources were needed and those resources were just not available.

Notwithstanding these legitimate concerns and criticisms, we will discuss the accreditation option further.

### ***8. What's it like in there? — Open schools week***

Virtually every teacher has had the experience of friends or acquaintances asking, "What's that school like? Is it a good school? How do I know if it's a school I should send my child to?" In effect, they're asking us to assess the school. The fact that this is such a common occurrence is good news. People have confidence that teachers, because of their experience, skills and expertise, can make useful judgments.

#### **Spending time in the school can't be beat.**

When I'm asked to do such an "assessment" I almost always suggest that people visit the school, walk through the hallways, stand for a while in the foyer, spend some time in a couple of classrooms. That's because most people can learn a lot more about a school in a one hour visit than in all the "data" that the standardizers can trot out.

In terms of finding out, "How is our school doing?" spending time in the school can't be beat. So why haven't schools organized more opportunities for parents and the wider community to visit schools? Here we're talking about much more than parent-teacher interviews three times a year or a concert to celebrate the end of the school year.

Opening up the school for a week or more — for classroom visits during the day, for special presentations by students, for performances, for debates about teaching and learning and discussions among students, parents, teachers and the wider community, for reviews and explanations of school goals and progress

and problems in achieving them, and to discuss together ways of improving the situation for students — is a daunting prospect. Time, energy, resources, logistical complications, facilitation issues, language challenges, work schedule problems — all make the prospect seem virtually impossible. In addition, such a process could easily become a “showcase” of what’s working (not a bad idea) rather than a critical engagement about how to make the education experience of every child as successful as it can possibly be.

Yet what more direct accountability to the community could be imagined than making real participation in the life and functioning of the school a reality?

Participants in the project have been intrigued by the notion of a comprehensive “Open Schools Week.” We are well aware of the real and legitimate obstacles to such an idea, but will certainly explore and discuss it further.

### ***9. A parent handbook — important and provocative questions***

One suggestion we have discussed is the production of a “handbook for parents” to help them engage with the school. What questions should they ask students, teachers and administrators to help them make an assessment of how the school is doing? This might be attached to, or done parallel with, an INPUTS based assessment of the school. The questions and handbook might be prepared by parents and the community or produced by school staffs (or a combination of the two).

Such an innovation is based on the assumption that increased information is fundamental to “accountability”. It also takes as a starting point that individual parents, especially poor, marginalized, immigrant, and working class parents, are often very uncomfortable and feel, or are made to feel, inadequate in the school setting. So suggesting to many parents that they “Just ask the teacher. Make an appointment with the principal. Express your concerns. Feel free to criticize,” is perhaps well meaning, but often of little value. A handbook with prepared questions which ask important and provocative questions could make the task easier for many parents.

Of course such a handbook doesn’t deal with a number of significant challenges. Many parents don’t speak or read English.

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Many work long hours and have little time to get into the school even when they want to. And however hard we work to make such a process and handbook accessible the fact remains that our schools are, for many parents and community members, not comfortable places to be, and teachers and principals are not easy people to speak with.

### ***10. Why not ask the kids — student surveys***

Accountability, at its most basic, should take into account assessments made by students themselves. Care must be taken that such a process is not simply pro forma or token. What mechanisms could be used to solicit student input? What guarantees must be put in place to ensure their criticisms, suggestions and advice are acted upon? What cultural norms need to be fostered in the school to make sure such an opportunity is taken seriously by students, teachers and the community?

At Chief Maquinna Elementary School in Vancouver an attempt is being made to do all of these things. Introduced in

**[A new survey] monitors the connectedness each student feels to the school to gain a deeper understanding of their individual needs and concerns and then uses this understanding to help meet these needs more effectively.**

2009/2010 a survey will be done three times in the 2010/2011 school year. The survey is based on a tool developed by educators at the district level working with aboriginal students. It monitors the connectedness each student feels to the school to gain a deeper understanding of their individual needs and concerns and then uses this

understanding to help meet these needs more effectively. Bill Hood, one of the teachers at the school and a leader in moving the school community in this direction describes the project:

Students who take the survey are anonymous, but do record their grade level. The survey asks students to place themselves on seven basic questions about feelings of safety, fair treatment, happiness at school, self-concept and pride of heritage. There is also an opportunity to simply tell the staff something students want them to know.

The plan is to use the results in a public way, within the school by posting the results of individual questions on a centrally locat-



ed bulletin board, and by referring to sections of the survey at weekly assemblies, as a regular part of school business.

The school is also hoping to combine this student centered activity with a parent directed activity asking parents to report their feelings about their child's/children's progress. Parents will be invited to comment on something they are happy about, wish for, and are concerned about their child's education at the school. The plan is to share the results of all of these activities with the Parents' Advisory Council, and to share the results of the student surveys with parents as well.

The hope is to use both the student and parent generated information to help direct a reflection session for the community, led by some of the staff at the school. All of this is imagined as contributing pro-actively to an alternative to the narrow, misleading, and poorly conceived inferences currently being made by some from the results of a series of standardized tests given to some students. (This is a very short, and therefore simplified, summary of the plans at Chief Maquinna Elementary. For more information email Bill Hood at HoodWE@gmail.com.)

This exciting project points to a potentially useful and rich process for school improvement. School tone, safety and security of students, school philosophy, etc. seem to be the most straightforward topics to be explored with this method. It would be much more complex, though no less interesting, to imagine a way to use the process to look more closely at pedagogical and curricular issues. Certainly the Great Schools Project will be looking at the notion of students as assessors of accountability.

***11. Don't forget my child with special needs — does our school have the programs, teachers and attitudes she requires to be successful?***

Some participants in the Great Schools Project are parents of students with special needs. They have reminded us that for their families, an important element of accountability is simply to communicate to them in an accessible and transparent way whether the programs, teachers and attitudes needed by their children are available in any given school.

For these families the questions, "How is our school doing? How well does our school meet the needs of my child?" need to be asked before the child enters the school and answered in a way that takes into account the specific needs of that child.

While this use of the term “accountability” is clearly a different kettle of fish from much of what we have been discussing, it is no less valid and needs to be taken seriously as the project moves forward.

### ***12. Rights respecting schools***

A fascinating attempt to educate (and assess that education) on the basis of a set of criteria dramatically different from those underlying standardized testing methods is “Rights Respecting Schools.” This innovation takes as its starting point the commitments made to children by virtually every country on earth in the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. Work on this approach has been going on at Cape Breton University Children’s Rights Centre and the County of Hampshire Rights Education Initiative in England. (see <http://discovery.cbu.ca/psych/images/uploads/RRR2008report.pdf> and [http://discovery.cbu.ca/psych/index.php?/children/journal\\_list/](http://discovery.cbu.ca/psych/index.php?/children/journal_list/)).

Evaluations of children’s rights curricula developed by the Children’s Rights Centre with funding from Canadian Heritage, and pilot tested in grade six and grade eight classes in the Cape Breton-Victoria Region, showed a positive impact on students’ attitudes and behaviors. Children who learned about their rights in the context of a caring and participatory classroom environment demonstrated increased support for the rights of others and more positive interactions with peers and teachers, and engaged less frequently in bullying and teasing of classmates. ([http://discovery.cbu.ca/psych/index.php?/children/resources\\_list/](http://discovery.cbu.ca/psych/index.php?/children/resources_list/)).

Two things are clear about such an approach. First, it differs from and therefore challenges the orthodox view that simple assessment of literacy and numeracy through the use of standardized testing is “what counts.” Second, a wider range of OUTPUTS than is contemplated in these projects would certainly be of interest to students, parents, communities and policy makers. Nevertheless, the concerns raised by “Rights Respecting Schools” should be a fundamental part of what we assess.

Additionally, the Great Schools Project will need to look carefully at the methodologies and tools used by RRS adherents in assessing progress.

## **TEAC — principles and choice**

“Teacher Education Accreditation Council” is a system, process and institution for assessing teacher education programs in the U.S. (<http://www.teac.org/>). They have become slightly more prescriptive over time, but are still committed to letting programs define their own indicators for success in relation to general principles. (See <http://www.teac.org/accreditation/goals-principles/> for details.)

One possibility is a similar system in K-12, with the principles based on the Charter for Public Education or a similar set of criteria.

## **The case against school assessment**

There are many, of course, who reject the need for a new system of school assessment. They make a number of coherent and attractive arguments to support their position. First, they argue correctly, that assessment of student progress is best accomplished by classroom teachers using a range of assessment tools as diverse as the learning styles and learning needs of their students. Certainly no one working on the Great Schools Project has any argument with this proposition. Classroom teachers using classroom based evaluation techniques over the period of a school year are best placed to make judgments about student progress. More important, classroom teachers design and use assessment tools to help improve learning, rather than to measure students against students or schools against schools.

Second, it is argued that a concern with school assessment somehow implies a “deficit” that needs to be dealt with, either at the school or system level. This position includes two elements, one substantive and one “political”. Proponents of this view argue that while our schools may not be perfect, there is no dramatic “deficit” that needs to be dealt with, nor do they have confidence that school level assessment will improve those elements of our schools that need to be changed. They also contend that a concern with and energy devoted to new school assessment methodology plays into the hands of reactionary critics by reinforcing their contention that there is a “crisis” in public education.

Third is a concern that any new system that leads to the possibility of school-to-school comparisons will have the same negative impacts, especially on schools in marginalized and poor com-

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

munities, as the current standardized tests and their rankings. Whatever our good intentions, our critics believe we will end up with a plan that contributes to the commodification of schools. Our work will be used to create comparisons and rankings, they suggest, that will be used to fuel the dangerous argument for so-called “choice”. All of this is a distraction from the real issue, which is to advocate for improvements in all schools so that all students can benefit.

**The real issue ... is to advocate for improvements in all schools so that all students can benefit.**

Fourth is a concern about the time and energy that will inevitably be needed to introduce and implement any new school assessment plan.

Students, teachers, parents and communities are already stretched, each in their own way. With ongoing cuts to programs and services, what will the cost be in money, time and energy to carry out school assessments?

Finally, some disagree with us about the emphasis we put on school assessment because they believe there are much more pressing tasks we should be focused on. These include, for example, the struggle for adequate resources, especially reductions in class sizes and improvements in services to students with special needs; organizing communities, in particular marginalized and poor communities, to participate in, advocate for and defend their children’s education; continuing with the ongoing campaign to analyze, criticize and discredit standardized testing and school rankings.

### **Why we’re committed to the project**

Our response to these criticisms takes us back to the two reasons we established the Great Schools Project in the first place. First, progressive educators, advocates and policy makers need an answer to the concern expressed by the Mum in her questions and by many others who care about public education. We’ve all had the experience of explaining our critique of standardized testing and school rankings only to have those to whom we are speaking respond, “OK, I get your point. I agree with your criticisms. But how would you assess our schools? What would you do?”

It’s not enough to oppose. We also need to propose. Otherwise we debate on someone else’s turf, using their narrative and their

framing. As long as they set the terms of the debate, even if our criticisms are just, logical, and reasonable, we add to the standardizers' credibility every time we argue with them.

More important, progressive educators have a responsibility to model the kind of critical thinking we seek to encourage in our students. And critical thinking means much more than simply criticizing. It means, among other things, imagining a better future, reforming and transforming our institutions and our world — including and especially public education.

A vital element of our own critical thinking is dealing with the truism that, for the most part, the standardizers simply measure wealth and power with their tests and their league tables. Everybody knows the results of the Fraser Institute's so-called report card can be accurately predicted before any children write any tests by looking at who is wealthy and who isn't.

But just because it's obvious doesn't mean it isn't important. Poor, working class and marginalized kids and their schools are relatively poorly served by the public education system, and always have been. And that's unacceptable. So project participants see as a priority assessing our schools in a way that speaks directly to the problem of social class inequality that is reinforced by all the institutions and structures of our communities — including the public school system.

Great Schools Project participants are keenly aware of the danger of contributing to further marginalization of those already marginalized children, schools and communities if the recommendations that come out of our project aren't carefully developed and implemented. If the goal of redressing educational and social inequality is not at the forefront of our discussions, our debates and our recommendations, we will have failed in our work.

## **We've only just begun**

Education activists used to spend most of our time talking about and debating ways to transform the education system for the better. In our discussions during the 1960s and 1970s, curriculum, pedagogy, structures, power, social class and inequality were all grist for our mill. We were mistaken about a lot of things (although not everything). To our credit though, we dreamed of a better world and believed we could make the world better.

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

In contrast to those years dominated by debates about a better future, we've spent the last 30 years doing our best to defend an already existing public education system under attack. That has meant advocating for what is, rather than imagining what could be. It was what we had to do and we were right to do it. Still, one of the most important lessons of those three decades is that advocating for and defending the public education system that we rightly treasure is not enough.

The Great Schools Project is a year old. We've begun to think in an organized way about how we might assess our schools to serve children and strengthen public education. We're preparing ourselves to propose, not simply to oppose. We're aware of many of the pitfalls and challenges that lie ahead. We have lots of work to do yet. We need to look at the range of possible assessment tools and processes, evaluate them, make judgments about them and recommend change. It's likely our recommendations will include several methods of assessment that work in parallel and together.

You can help us in this work. We invite you to send us your criticisms, ideas and suggestions. If there are directions you think we should take the project, don't hesitate to tell us. We thank you in advance for your participation. For our part, we commit to reporting the progress of the Great Schools Project to you in an ongoing way.

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