

Minister Hancock's Address to the 60th ATA Summer Conference

Thank you.

I want to begin by saying thank you. It's absolutely exceptional that you're taking time from your summer and your family for professional development. Thank you for that and your leadership in education.

It's a pleasure to be able to join you today and tomorrow morning for Dr. Berliner's session on accountability and testing. Hopefully you'll allow me to stay after my remarks.

I'm glad to have the important opportunity to discuss with you how – together – we can best chart a course for the future of education in this province. Having so many engaged, expert teachers in one facility is a great opportunity to hear each other's thoughts, and perhaps to change each other's minds. Your experience and expertise is crucial.

As one gets older, one often has to change one's beliefs. What was an unassailable fact when one was young often seems of dubious veracity a few years later. However, one thing that I've believed all my life has never changed.

And that is that educating our children is the most important function of our society.

As Gordon said, I've been through quite a few ministries in my time in government. I haven't been able to keep a job. But I know I must have been interested in education because I have to answer a lot of my own memos.

How we equip our children for the future not only affects their ability to survive and thrive, but in great measure determines the quality of the society in which we live. Educating our children can't be a matter of trial and error. It can't be a matter of wishing and hoping. When it comes to education, there are no do-over's. We can't tell our children that we made a mistake in their schooling and that we'll get it right the second time around.

Only if we give our children the proper educational tools will they be able to build the best possible lives for themselves. Only if we give our children the proper educational tools will they be able to build a cohesive, caring society. And only by giving children the proper educational tools will Alberta be able to build a robust economy in a less carbon-dependent world.

Our current challenge as a society isn't only to educate our children for the realities of today, but to prepare them for the opportunities of tomorrow.

Much of the talk about educating our children now focuses on the value of post-secondary education.

We did have the opportunity to put that front and centre. As Minister of Advanced Education, I often took part in those kinds of discussions—and I must say, it's great to be back on this campus.

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And though it's true the future will demand much more than a high school education, it's worth remembering that no house is better than the foundation on which it's built.

Graduates of our K-12 system arrive at post-secondary institutions not as children but as young adults. The talents, skills and attributes a young adult already possesses can only be shaped and directed by post-secondary education. The foundation, the soul of each child is formed at a young age.

Helping shape the whole person is the role of the K-12 system. It's the foundation on which our children's lives are built. How well we build that foundation has an effect that reaches far beyond the classroom.

Well-educated children are the prime ingredient of a growing economy. However, there's a return on investment that's about much more than mere dollars and cents. Well-educated children are the basis of a fair, just, tolerant and nurturing society. Economies go up and down. Companies come and go. But those societal values remain constant.

And so it's our obligation to ensure that we graduate:

- students who are prepared for life after high school,
- students who have the skills and abilities they need to succeed,
- and students who help others to succeed.

So what does it mean for our students to be prepared for life outside the K-12 system? There are some key skills, of course: literacy and numeracy come readily to mind. But what else will our children need?

Some of the best minds in the world have said that critical thought, analysis, problem solving and the ability to work as part of a team are of vital importance.

In a world with an abundance of unvetted information, often dubious quality, we need to develop students who can sort intellectual wheat from chaff. We need students who can differentiate between thought driven by ideological bias and thought motivated by a search for the truth. The new social studies curriculum has those elements embedded in it.

However, we need to make analysis and problem solving a component of all areas of study, so that the skills learned in one subject and grade are reinforced in others. Only by doing that will we be able to achieve our goal of creating lifelong learners.

It's also important that we create students who are citizens of the world. It's quite likely that many of today's students will work with people in distant locations. They will need to understand how different cultures approach different challenges and tasks. The increasing diversity of Alberta's population gives us an advantage in that regard.

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Our students can learn firsthand about different languages and cultures, both in the classroom and in the schoolyard. The child who plays with children who are Asian, Arab, African and European is much more likely to be accepting of diversity and will begin to understand that whatever our origins, we're much more alike than we're different.

This is extremely important because cohesive societies are successful societies. The greatest threat to our society is tribalism—withdrawing into groups that put their individual ideas, needs and values ahead of those of the greater society in which they live.

We have the opportunity to create a society that's both diverse in nature and cohesive in values. And the best place we have to do that is in our education system.

Our changing society demands that we redouble our efforts to create the best prepared students anywhere.

That means recruiting the best and the brightest minds as teachers. Some of you in this room are close to retirement—who's going to replace you and the good work you're doing? Who will become a teacher if they think it's just one problem after another with few rewards? We need to raise the profile of teachers and their status in society. To do that, we'll have to work together.

I'm sure we'll have difficulties along the way—we won't agree on everything. But we should never lose sight of our shared responsibility and our shared destination.

There are few members of our society who care more about the success of our students than teachers. All of you, and all of your colleagues, have dedicated your lives to helping our children learn.

My job as Minister, and the role of government, is to enable you to do your job to the fullest extent of your abilities.

The ATA and many individual teachers have raised with me many issues, including concerns about our current assessment practices.

As Minister, I have to be able to report to Albertans that our schools are working on a system-wide level. But I have heard from many teachers that our assessment practices are not helpful in improving classroom instruction. I'm here today to listen and learn so we can improve.

I was surprised to learn, for example, that Grade 3 PATs are strong predictors of future success in school. That tells me we're not using the information appropriately.

If a student performs poorly in Grade 3, they should get the support they need to succeed later in school. I welcome your thoughts on how we can improve assessment so that our students develop all the knowledge, skills and attributes they need – and you as teachers can better meet their needs.

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Conferences like this where all of us can learn about what helps students succeed are essential in developing better policies. They are central to developing better leadership in our school system.

For too long, we've been talking about the problems in education and not getting anywhere. It's now time to start talking about education positively. We need to stop spending all our time on the issues and irritants of today – though we'll have to meet on those that do come up.

Our focus has to be on the long-term objective of ensuring success for every student. Creating the best prepared graduates anywhere isn't a goal we can achieve on our own—we need the broader community to play an active role in the education of our children. All sectors in society need to pay more than lip service to the importance of education to the future of this province.

That's one of the reasons I will be initiating a dialogue with Albertans about education that will form the basis of our future activities. We need a policy framework that sets out what our schools will be for the next ten to fifteen years.

There was a time the school was the heart and soul of the community. We need to make that a current reality. Our challenge is to show that education is a collaborative enterprise. We need to make the school a centre for the services children need.

We can't overlook the need to graduate physically and mentally healthy students. The path to good physical and mental health starts before the child enters the classroom. We must ensure that all the needs of the child are addressed before and during their years in the K-12 system.

Children who are victims of bullying are likely to bully other children. Children who come from abusive or neglectful home environments begin their education at a distinct disadvantage. Children who begin the day without enough to eat are at a disadvantage. And children who haven't had their developmental needs addressed early on are at a disadvantage.

If we can encourage other service providers to work through schools to meet student needs, teachers will be able to focus more of their efforts on teaching.

At the end of August, I'm partnering with my colleagues in Health and Wellness and Children and Youth Services to host a gathering called *Collaborate... For Kids' Sake*. We're bringing together 100 people from within government and service organizations to demonstrate the effectiveness of what has been called "wrap-around services." We'll be recording the sessions and putting the video online.

The idea is simple: There's no point in asking a student to wait until next week and to go across town to see a counsellor if they need one right here, right now. These supports belong in schools.

We've had 32 pilot projects running this past year across the province that have brought all sorts of services into the classroom. I hope *Collaborate... For Kids' Sake* will help other projects get underway.

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However, making the school an access point for children's services also requires the leadership of individual school principals and other community leaders. It takes local initiative to identify the needs of students and determine what resources are available in the community. As Minister, I'm working to build good working relationships with the other ministries that touch the lives of our children and youth.

When I had the good fortune of being Minister of Health and Wellness, my ministry undertook a number of wellness initiatives targeted at children and youth, so the groundwork for the future has already been laid.

There's another area where I hope to hear your thoughts about how we can improve on our current practices. One of our goals is to prepare our students for the world of work. We have to make them more aware of how what they are learning will prepare them for the world they will enter as young adults.

We need greater involvement of business and industry in that regard. We need more from the business community than a willingness to contribute funds in return for a branding opportunity. The business community knows what kind of skill sets it's looking for. They are the best positioned to help us connect learning to work.

Labour associations know what kinds of education our students will need to be a part of a skilled trade. We need them to get more involved in K-12 education as well.

There are a number of initiatives in place or in development to address the issues I've raised today. However, teaching is hard work. You can't do your job alone, and neither can I. We need to work together with each other and the broader community to ensure that every child finds their passion and succeeds.

Many of the challenges facing education are societal and require a societal response. We need to ensure we get input from all areas that touch on education and that such input is fairly examined and evaluated.

Good ideas are good ideas, regardless of where they originate. I'm supportive of any idea that will help create an education system that produces the best prepared graduates anywhere in the world, that helps each child overcome any barriers to learning to their full abilities.

We're off to a great start, and I'm delighted to be working with you to achieve that goal. I'm looking forward to discussing the long-term policy framework and supports for children.

I'll end where I started, with a thank you for the good work you are doing. We know why we're here. I wear this lapel pin that says "Children First." You see that same priority in your slogan – "The Future – It's Why Teachers Teach".

Keep up the great work!