

Has AISI Run Out of Gas?

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I believe we are here to be thought provoking so today I am going to ask you to consider the following question: *Has AISI run out of gas?* AISI – the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement – was born in December 1999. It was the offspring of a frantic – yet much enjoyed – collaboration of six¹ enthusiastic partners:

- Alberta Learning
- Alberta Home and School Councils' Association
- Association of School Business Officials of Alberta
- College of Alberta School Superintendents
- Alberta Teachers' Association
- Alberta School Boards Association

This year marks the end of Cycle 3 of AISI. Just think of it, three three-year cycles of AISI initiatives. Our pride and joy is nine years old! And hasn't she grown up to be a real beauty! Of course she has. After all AISI represents about half a billion dollars of taxpayer dollars over those nine years – an investment that has catapulted student achievement through the roof!! Well maybe not quite. In fact during AISI's entire life as the "showpiece" of Alberta's education system, when we just look our student achievement results – as measured by our Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) and Diploma Exam results – they have remained flat or in some measures, modestly declined. Our high school completion rates are also fairly flat. What would an auditor looking at value for money tell us?

PATs and diploma exams don't tell us everything about student achievement in our schools, but I'm sure that everyone in this room will agree, they do tell us something about student achievement at the jurisdiction and provincial levels. Staff are changing how they learn, assess, and teach, but *student learning* is at the top of the pyramid and our ultimate goal.

What is AISI?

So what is it about AISI, this peripatetic paragon of provincial pedagogical programming? Have we arrived at the point where AISI has just become a part of the family and the plans and excitement we had for our newborn have been lost in every day living? We

¹ *Editor's Note.* University Faculties of Education (Alberta, Calgary, Lethbridge) were invited to join the partnership in spring 2000.

pampered and planned for our first born, talked, took pictures and bragged. We welcomed the second child too, but with a little less ceremony and attention. By the time the third child came along, we just weren't as enthusiastic. New excitement, recordings of life and enthusiasm were lost but no one dares to admit that the third child, who is cared for and loved as much as the first, didn't get the same treatment! Every organization involved in AISI supports the initiative, and the organization that I serve – the Alberta School Boards Association – is certainly no exception.

And while we can all be deluded into group think from time to time, I'm convinced that the core of AISI success, and its reputation, rests on the circumstances surrounding its birth some nine years ago.

After all else is cast aside, the AISI secret is *collaboration*, spelled in great big 30 point font characters. Collaboration among teachers, school boards, parents, central office staff, and Alberta Education. In a world that has become characterized by top-down directives, AISI stands out as “bottom-up” governance.

AISI works because those in the field all want it to work. We want to believe that we can make a difference and we do because everyday wonderful things are happening in Alberta's classrooms. Many of these wonderful things are as a result of AISI.

Making AISI Better

But what I would like to say to you forthrightly this morning is “I believe we can, and must, do better with AISI.” AISI is just too good a program to let drift into yet another bureaucratic exercise in school improvement. And the challenge I place before you is: *How do we best do this? How do we rekindle the promise of AISI? How do we breathe new life into this precious initiative?*

Now that surely is the central question at this colloquium. I hope you'll allow me a few more minutes to muse about some of my own thoughts on this question. I have three to share with you.

1. *Risk*. AISI has become “risk adverse.” We need to find a way to encourage school jurisdictions to stretch the envelope again. You know the saying “no pain – no gain”. I believe this is true if we are to springboard Alberta's education system – already one of the best in the world – to the next level. We need to be bold and innovative. We need to recognize that with good research and change, there may be failures along the way. We must balance the need for innovation with the reality that with innovation there sometimes comes the risk of failure. But I believe that's what AISI is all about, finding ways to move our student achievement forward.
2. *Focus*. I believe that all school jurisdictions should target their AISI projects in areas where they are struggling to find ways to improve. Our province is facing two

educational issues: improving high school completion and/or the achievement gap facing our First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. All jurisdictions can and must do better in these areas. Our current results are just not acceptable. Just think of the potential gains if all jurisdictions targeted their AISI projects towards these challenges according to their own unique local needs.

Imagine some bold and innovative projects for school boards. It may come as a shock to some people here that many of our teenagers have trouble getting up in the morning (actually some of our trustees and staff do too). I am told brain research confirms this is because teens' brains work differently. Could an AISI project which recognizes this reality and designed the school day around the biological needs of students with programming at different hours, six or seven days per week make a difference in our high school completion rates? In my books a project like this is definitely worth a try.

3. *Knowledge transfer.* Finally, I want to speak about the need to improve how we share and learn from one another. There are a number of efforts that AISI makes to transfer information gleaned from one school jurisdiction to another. We need to get much better at the science of “knowledge transfer”. This is not a problem confined to AISI; it is endemic to our entire education system. It takes time to share with everyone and we have turnover within our systems. We need to find a way to make sure that AISI initiatives that are successful in one jurisdiction, those gems of brilliance that are shimmering out there, are shared and implemented in others, with the necessary changes to adapt to local circumstances. After all, if our teachers, administrators, and school trustees don't have the opportunity to learn from what is successful in other parts of the province, how can we expect the public to know their system is being managed well and we are continually striving for improvement?

Now those are just my thoughts – not those of every school district in the province. I'd be remiss in my duty if I didn't tell you that many school boards tell me there is too much paper work, too much bureaucracy, and the project cycle needs to be longer. I don't believe that is why we are here for the next three days. We need to focus on the *big picture* and that is why I have tried to be thought provoking. I hope this colloquium takes up the challenge of not just praising AISI, but of critiquing it, of showing us how we can get better bang for our buck, how we can do it better, and do it more efficiently.

Let this colloquium and a subsequent meeting of the original partners present at the birth, review our discussions and set the scene for a revitalized and reborn AISI. An AISI that is innovative and takes risks, focuses our efforts on our key problems, and one which fosters sharing and learning transfer among all partners. Best wishes for a successful colloquium and thank you to all the people who have made it possible.

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