

Dear New Brunswick,

by Ardith Shirley, NBTA Staff Officer

In a short while, it will once again be the time for our annual Provincial Assessment results to be released. While I won't presume to know the exact results of our most recent efforts (they are still under embargo at the time I write this). I have been in education long enough to expect that our literacy and math assessment results will not see our provincial trend lines increasing. (Please read to the end to know the reasons I make that assumption.)

I can predict the negative headlines, and flurry of press that will follow. "Literacy scores falling for Grade 2 students in New Brunswick" and other such declarations will cause people to shake their heads and commiserate over the 'sad state' of our New Brunswick public education system. Those who are eyeing the potential profits to be made in schools will seize the opportunity to declare public education 'broken' as they continue to push their self-serving privatization agenda.

Hearing the negative rhetoric, parents will start to assume (despite the evidence they see every day when their child comes home from school) that we have a sub-standard education system in our province and that their children will never be able to compete globally.

Sadly, our teachers will start to question all of their extra efforts, "How can we be working so hard and not see provincial improvements?"

Worse still, our students may pick up on the negativity and start to lose faith in their own abilities, as well as their teachers, schools and province.

A Self-fulfilling Prophecy?

According to educational researcher John Hattie, this is when the headlines can start to create a self-fulfilling prophecy - we hear that negative story and start to behave like it is true.

John Hattie's work in Visible Learning is a synthesis of over 800 meta-analysis studies of 80 million students over 15 years. His goal was to determine what works best to assure learning in our schools. After all of his research, Hattie has determined the three factors having

the largest effects on student learning are:

1. Teacher estimates of achievement (does the teacher believe students can do well)
2. Collective Teacher Efficacy (do teachers believe in their own abilities and that their daily work is making a positive difference in student learning)
3. Student self-reported grades/student expectations (do students believe and expect that they can achieve)

Digging Deeper

Considering that Hattie's "Top 3" have more to do with teacher and student confidence in themselves and the systems they work and learn within, perhaps we need to dig a little deeper before reacting to this year's results? Other than the current, more negative trend lines, here are some facts about our New Brunswick Education System that might be worthwhile reporting and remembering:

- Between 2004 and 2010 our NB Grade 2 Reading assessment scores rose from 59.4% of students successful to 83.6% successful. **A gain of 24.2% in 6 years.**
- Between 2007 and 2014 the number of students passing their Grade 9 English Language Proficiency Assessment in Reading rose from 59.9% to 80.4%. **A gain of 20.5% in 7 years.**
- Between 2007 and 2014, the writing component of the same Grade 9 ELPA assessment rose from a low of 51.6% in 2007 to 90.7% success in 2015. **A total gain of 39.1% in an eight-year trend of improvement!**
- If New Brunswick's 2012 PISA results were compared to other countries we would have been ranked higher than Ireland, Denmark, New Zealand, France, Iceland, the United Kingdom and **every** US State.
- New Brunswick schools manage to minimize the impact of poverty on academic performance meaning that the socio-economic status of a child's family matters less in New Brunswick

than in most other countries in the world.

- Our classrooms are celebrated as being some of the **most inclusive classroom environments** with the **lowest drop out rates** of any system in the world. (NB hovers around 3% with our lowest to date being 1.7% in 2012 - more celebrated jurisdictions regularly report trends upwards of 10%.)

What has changed in our system?

Let's recall that intermittent provincial assessments are designed to be a systems check rather than a summative assessment of individual teacher and student performance. Since 2010 we have seen our Grade 2 results slip from our provincial high of 83.6%. This should beg the question, "What has changed in our system in that time?" Hmmm....

- A decrease in K-12 Education per pupil investment by almost \$2000.00 per student. (\$9960.73 in 2010 to \$8034.31 in 2014).
- A reduction of 569.1 teachers and at least 52 District Office positions that supported classrooms and students.
- The number of combined classes is up in the Anglophone sector from 313 (2010) to 384 (2014).
- An increase of 210 Educational Assistants signaling that individual student needs and classroom composition issues are increasing.
- The amalgamation of school districts resulting in major systemic instability and supports for teachers becoming further removed from our schools and classrooms.

Given all of the above, it doesn't take a fortuneteller to predict that this year's assessment results will not be stellar. Considering all of the negative trends in funding, being able to maintain previous gains would be nothing short of a miracle.

The story we choose to tell...

Our new education plan is titled "Everyone at their Best". We are beginning to see some of the resources that allowed our system to flourish between 2004 and

2010 restored. This is a step in the right direction.

As we approach the 2016 provincial assessment public release, I challenge every New Brunswicker to resist the temptation to re-tell the superficial tale of gloom and doom. Instead, I propose we dig deeper to a much more motivating and optimistic narrative:

- Let's remind our students that even though provincial test scores have slipped since 2010, they still would rank easily in the top 1/3 of any international heap.
- Let's celebrate our teachers, support staff and other educators whose hard work and dedication have led our system to unparalleled gains in literacy since 2004 and recognize that they are a highly qualified teaching force.
- As we look with disappointment at the 'flat-line' trend in our provincial Math scores, let's also think to mention that almost every other jurisdiction that participates in PISA is also experiencing the same depressing situation and therefore we are not alone in the struggle for a solution.
- Let's acknowledge that the recent decline in our results are predictable considering past systemic cuts and commit to stability of funding and focus as we move forward.

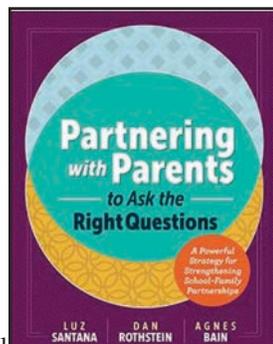
Everyone at their Best...

Thankfully, I have yet to meet many people who are satisfied with status quo when it comes to learning in New Brunswick. We all agree we want better for our children.



Book Give-Away!

Congratulations to Mitchell Linkletter of NSER Middle School in ASD-N who was the winner of our September Book draw! Our October draw is **Partnering with Parents to Ask the Right Questions: A Powerful Strategy for Strengthening School-Family Partnerships** by Luz Santana, Dan Rothstein and Agnes S. Bain. Sound interesting? Send me an email with 'Book Draw' in the subject line sometime before November 14th.



The significant gains in literacy between 2004 and 2010 prove that we have the knowledge, skills, and capacity to build an exceptional education system in New Brunswick. Let's assume that, for the most part, our children's abilities haven't changed that much in the last six years. Let's also appreciate that the majority of classroom teachers and educational leaders in our schools, districts and Education and Early Childhood Development are the same highly qualified professionals who lead the incredible improvements during those six transformational years. This bodes well for our future!

As we co-create the story of our future, we must understand that what happens on a daily basis in our legislature, in the media, and in thousands of coffee shop conversations that celebrate austerity over social obligation has a profound influence on our children's learning. Perhaps when **all** New Brunswickers choose to tell a hopeful and inspiring story of cooperation and collective responsibility for improving, rather than a sordid tragedy of blame, shame, flip-flopping priorities and finger pointing we will once again see those trend lines increasing. Yes, New Brunswick, I have no doubt that **everyone** will definitely need to be at their best - now let's get going!

Sincerely,



May I Recommend:

Since I have focussed on John Hattie's research, I do recommend checking out his Visible Learning website.

<http://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/>

The October issue of Kappan magazine is filled with articles on programs, policy and actions that are designed to improve the epidemic of chronic absenteeism. The whole issue is excellent, but one of my favourite articles titled 'Missing School Matters'. It can be found online at:

<http://www.kappanonline.org/missing-school-matters>

Closing Quote:

"Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our world."

John Fitzgerald Kennedy