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May 14, 2008

Honorable Jackson Lafferty, Minister  
Education, Culture and Employment  
Government of the NWT  
P.O. Box 1320  
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9

Dear Honorable Lafferty:

I am writing this letter to register my concern about the proposed abandonment of the recently implemented Alberta Achievement Testing program (AAT's) and to ask the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) to reconsider this move.

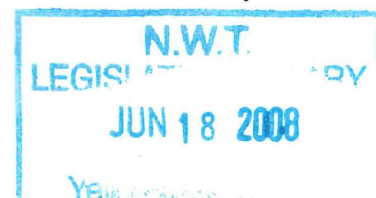
I recognize that this proposed direction is a result of recent GNWT spending reductions and that this particular item is quite costly. However, it is our contention that it is likely to be very costly in many other ways should ECE move ahead with this.

I would remind the Minister about why AAT's were implemented in the first place. They were to assist us in:

- a) determining if students are learning what they are expected to learn;
- b) reporting to NWT citizens how well students have achieved Territorial standards at given points in their schooling;
- c) assisting schools, educational authorities, and the Territory in monitoring and improving student learning.

The Alberta Achievement Tests are quality, standardized tests that are tied to curricular outcomes. They are likely the best constructed tests in North America and every effort is made to ensure that the achievement tests show respect for cultural diversity. I would suggest that if there is still a concern in this regard that ECE should seek to have some of its staff and NWT educators as part of the test construction process like they do with the diploma exams.

While our curriculum is somewhat different than Alberta, for the most part we have many similar programs. We use AAT's in both Language Arts and Math and we use the same curriculum in these two content areas as Alberta. The complaint that the AAT's are not culturally sensitive is not a valid reason to dispose of them. If that is the case then we should not be using curricula from other provinces or from the Western Canadian Protocol. For that matter, we may as well abandon the Alberta Diploma Exams as well. In all of these instances, more care than ever is taken to ensure that the content and context of the tests, materials and resources are culturally sensitive.



As a Divisional Education Authority, we make invaluable use of the results to ensure that we know how our students are doing compared to themselves and in how they are doing comparatively with Alberta. This also assists us with internal, division-wide accountability. The implementation of this testing program has increased accountability with respect to completing all parts of the curriculum. Teacher developed tests don't do this as they can be developed according to what the teacher has taught and not according to what was supposed to have been taught. Furthermore, the data generated from these tests assists our Board in making budgetary decisions to better support student achievement.


The question I would pose is what is ECE going to do to replace such a testing program. I have heard it said that the Functional Grade Level (FGL's) process is thought to be adequate for achieving the outcomes I have reviewed above. This would be very concerning to me as I am very aware that the results from this process are very inconsistent in terms of administration, data gathering, and interpretation of results across the regions. I would suggest that there is neither credibility nor validity in this process, such that it can provide the information that AAT's provide.

The Yellowknife Catholic School staff has spent considerable time and effort in assigning functional grade levels. Even with this investment, we cannot get consistency within our jurisdiction. Based on this experience, I would think it impossible to achieve consistent FGL results across the NWT. AAT results helped us calibrate our FGL determinations. Without the AAT's it is quite likely that FGL results will become even less valid.

Minister Lafferty, if ECE is going to proceed with the abolishment of AAT's based upon fiscal concerns, despite the concerns we are expressing, can he advise whether he will negotiate with Alberta Learning to reduce costs for DEC's and DEA's who wish to continue with the testing? It is our belief that this is a step backwards and done for all the wrong reasons. Instead of throwing everything out, we should be reviewing how to improve the process and how to address concerns.

We appreciate that these are difficult fiscal times and that there are no easy solutions. However, we would hate to see the quality of our learning environments impacted by this type of quick decision. I look forward to your response on this matter. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Mary Vane  
Chair – Yellowknife Catholic Schools  
/mfh

c Mina McLeod, Chair – Beaufort-Delta Divisional Education Council  
Andre Legare, Chair – Commission Scolaire Francophone de Division  
Martina Norwegian, Chair – Dehcho Divisional Education Council  
Alfonz Nitsiza, Chair – Taicho Community Services Agency  
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Dan Daniels, Deputy Minister – Education, Culture & Employment