

Top of the Class

Two of the best 15 young spellers in the world come from Alberta. Hardly surprising, given the province's remarkable education system

By Patrick McGee

It begins with 10 million students, but after thousands of competitions, and countless more mental lapses and misplaced letters, just 286 pupils make the final cut to compete in the prestigious Scripps National Spelling Bee. In late May, 20 Canadians flew to Washington, D.C., to compete, and of the three who made the top 15, two were from Alberta's public schools, with Edmonton's Nate Gartke picking up the silver medal. But it isn't only Alberta's spelling savants who are showing off the province's superior education; a host of other achievements are putting Wild Rose country on the map, year after year.

In the 2004 results of tests conducted by the Programme for International Student Assessment, Alberta's 15-year-olds scored well above the national average in each category, and ranked among the top four nations in the world in reading, mathematics, and science. In the test's main area of focus, mathematics, Alberta placed ahead of 39 nations, second only to Hong Kong.

Such consistent results were noteworthy enough that, last September, the influential magazine *The Economist* published an article headlined "Clever Rednecks," documenting how "over the past 30 years Alberta has quietly built the finest public education system in Canada". The message is being heard, and according to Kathy Telfer, spokesperson for Alberta Education, delegations from Australia, China, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Singapore, and South Africa have visited Alberta to study the education system in the past year alone.

Helen Raham, research director for the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, a Kelowna, B.C.-based think-tank, says Alberta's success started when declining enrolment and budget deficits in urban communities forced the public education system to respond by encouraging an environment where parents had more choices available to them. A growing number of alternative programs and charter schools offer "specialized programs of choice as a mechanism to hold and draw back people," Raham says. Parents can send their children to religious schools or performing arts or science schools, for instance, or enroll them in special classes where languages such as Mandarin or German are offered. Spelling champ Nick Gartke attends a school that offers the International Baccalaureate program.

The choice-driven system produced results last February, when the conference Board of Canada awarded its overall National Award in Governance to the Calgary Board of Education, marking the first time an education board has won the prestigious award. Ted Flitton, a CBE spokesman, is proud of the award because it recognizes the board's program isn't only about students attaining high marks, but becoming good citizens as well.

Norm Sigalet, a specialist in Career Pathways, one of CBE's unique initiatives, concurs, adding that the goal is "helping students find their passion while they're in high school". And it's not only the school system, says Telfer. Alberta's academic success is supported by what she calls a "yearning to learn" culture found across the province. Being enveloped in this broader environment of education helps motivate kids to do well, she says.

A unique example of this will take place this July for six gifted Canadian high-school students who will spend 16 days at special training camps in Alberta. With two team leaders from Calgary, the students will train at the University of Calgary and at the Banff International Research Station, before flying off to represent Canada at the 48th International Mathematical Olympiad in Hanoi, Vietnam.

No wonder Alberta excelled in a novel evaluation carried out by the Canadian Council on Learning, published in late May. Called the Composite Learning Index, the survey measured the environment and resources available for lifelong learning. Calgary recorded the nation's highest score with 93, joining with Edmonton's 89 to make Alberta the highest-ranked province in the country. The national average was 76.

About the only thing going wrong with the province's education system is its higher-than-average dropout rate, which experts blame on plentiful, high-paying oil-patch jobs. But if the CCL's lifelong learning findings are to be believed, there's every chance those dropouts will eventually return to pick up where they left off, making them wealthier and wiser too.

*(Reprinted with permission from the Western Standard, July 2, 2007.
www.westernstandard.ca)*