

Scandal in Saskatchewan

The province's low standings in SAIP Math cause consternation.

By Douglas Stewart

Back in 1993, when national testing (SAIP) was launched by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), all the provinces and territories agreed to participate — except for Saskatchewan. Even when the province's concerns about such things as cultural insensitivity had been addressed, Saskatchewan still refused to take part.

When ministry officials in Regina were asked why, the best reasons they could muster at the time were essentially to do with costs (it would be too expensive) and redundancy (the province would soon be implementing its own made-in-Saskatchewan assessments for grades 5, 8 and 11). The first reason seemed flimsy, bearing in mind that Saskatchewan was in a much healthier economic position than several of the participating provinces and territories. The second reason seemed flawed, bearing in mind that provincial and national testing programs are not mutually exclusive and that reliance on the former alone could not yield good data on how Saskatchewan students would measure up.

From a public perspective, it is unclear what led the department to rather hastily reverse its traditional opposition to national testing. One can only speculate as to what the reasons were. Yet, for the first time and without fanfare, Saskatchewan students participated in the SAIP science test in 1996 and the SAIP mathematics tests in 1997. While the reasons for the province's finally joining the national scheme may be obscure, the mathematics results were not.

Saskatchewan had some of the worst results in the nation. Using levels 2 and 3 as measures of acceptable performance, the percentage of 13-year-olds who performed at level 2 in mathematics content was the lowest of

all the provinces, and for 13-year-olds at level 3, next to the lowest. For 16-year-olds who performed at levels 2 and 3, in mathematics content the province's position was only marginally better.

No one in the province was ready for these findings. A new improved elementary mathematics curriculum had been in place since the early 1990's, and everything was assumed to be in good order. The current minister of education, Pat Atkinson, and her department seemed completely caught off guard by the gravity of the results. "We obviously have a problem," she said, and then announced an "action plan" to improve the mathematics performance of Saskatchewan students.

Reactions from the "partners" were entirely predictable. The Saskatchewan School Trustees Association (SSTA) president, Debbie Ward, thought the government's action plan (calling for more mathematics class time and mentoring for inexperienced math teachers) "a bit premature." According to Ms. Ward, "We need to find out what the problem is so that we can fix it."

The newly-elected head of the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation (STF), Doug Willard, seemed to concur. "I think we sometimes get a little premature and rush to a solution. If there is something going on in math that shouldn't be going on, we first of all have to identify what it is." Nor was this year's annual spring council of the STF in any mood to support the Minister. A hefty 70% of delegates voted to end the province's new affiliation with the SAIP — a move the Minister fortunately refused to endorse. The hitherto well-established solidarity among partners and the Department of Education may well be in shambles.

Those who speak of "needing to find what the problem is" and of "not rushing to premature solutions" are grandstanding. The problem is obvious. It is a battery of unacceptably-low mathematics results. The causal factors contributing to this need to be urgently identified. Whether the Minister's action plan will do the job remains to be seen, but at least she has some ideas about "causes" and what needs to be done.

My own views on causal factors are three-fold. First, too many elementary teachers are not comfortable with teaching mathematics. In addition, it is worth noting that the recent curriculum reform project had (ironically) allotted far less time to mathematics for grades 1-6 (roughly 200 minutes per week) than to language arts (roughly 500 per week).

Second, too many homes are failing to provide the necessary parental support and monitoring of homework. The issues here are complex and extend well beyond schooling per se. This is obviously a problem that the minister of education should not be expected to tackle.

Third, some aspects of the newly-approved mathematics curriculum are weak. There are concerns that, at senior levels especially, a dumbing down effect has occurred. Further analysis of the new curriculum is evidently needed, scarcely ere the ink has dried.

Whether Saskatchewan plans to stay the course for the balance of scheduled SAIP assessments is a moot point. It may prove irresistible for the government to opt out of future testing in order to avoid the unpleasantness of coping with more bad results.

(Dr. Stewart is professor of education at the University of Regina.)