

# Bury our Heads in the Sand? Not Good Enough!

By Darlene Garnier

Canada is a country comprised of ten provinces and three territories and as many education systems—each unique. There is no national educational system which provides a mechanism for comparing apples to apples or student achievement across the expansive country. Or is there?

How is quality education measured around the world? Possibly, the most consistent and effective instruments involve various forms of standardized testing. They can be used to compare apples to apples.

There are three nationally- and internationally-recognized student achievement assessments which provide data on how well each province is measuring up. They reveal how well each province's students are faring compared to students in all provinces, Canada as a whole, and numerous countries at an international level. In 2003, the [Canadian Education Statistics Council](#) carried out a Pan Canadian Study based on three recent assessments targeting 13- to 16-year-olds: TIMSS 1999, PISA 2000, and SAIP 1999.

How are Canadian students performing? Or should the question be—how effective are the education systems in each province that ensure their students have access to quality education? Across the subject areas—reading, mathematics, and science—Alberta students outperformed students from all other provinces. Not only did they reach this champion ranking, they outperformed students from almost all other countries in the world. For more specific data, refer to the ranking charts at the end of this report.

Many of us have read recent reports that in terms of student achievement *Canada is doing relatively well*. It's pleasing to know that we have an effective education system. However, what would the results be if we deleted each of the province's results in turn from the national and international analysis? Alberta is number one nationally and at or near the top internationally, while provinces such as Prince Edward Island demonstrate results consistent with 25% of the lowest-performing countries in the world. The majority of the provinces perform at about the same level as the Canadian average or much lower. Thus, what if Alberta's results were taken out of the Canadian performance? What would Canada's standing be internationally?

Alberta is the exception. Why the difference? One might argue Alberta's wealthy economy plays a significant role. That argument holds little water when one takes into consideration student achievement results ten years ago when Alberta was considered, if it was even considered, a have-not, economically-disadvantaged, western province. Student achievement results were still exemplary. It also holds little water when the results reveal that achievement spans all socio-economic levels in Alberta.

Does Alberta spend more on K-12 education? Not according to the national statistics. So what is it? Is it the strong, prairie work ethic? Is it because Alberta offers more publicly funded school choices than any other

Canadian province? Is it because parents might play a significant role in their children's education? Is it because of strong, school-level leadership? Is it because of demanding accountability plans, a history of standardized testing, or excellent teachers—or is it simply because of pride in being labelled the champion province? Do the children live up to this label as well?

The possibilities are endless. It would be a breakthrough to isolate the elements that have created champions in education in Alberta and replicate those fundamentals across the country. My direct communications from all provincial ministers of education indicate that all of them think they are *doing things right*. I propose they are not all doing things right, and in an effort to maintain the pretence, some provinces are systematically overstating their performance, hurting students and communities, and undermining the potential of effective schooling and educational policy.

As long as other provinces are in denial about their students' achievement and lack of education strategies that might assist in pulling up their results, there's little reason to expect a turnaround in underachieving provinces. The end result is that children from provinces other than Alberta are at a disadvantage—today, tomorrow, and for the rest of their lives.

Provincial leaders, communities, and parents have an important obligation to ensure schoolchildren receive a world-class education. How is this achieved? Perhaps, one of the first responsibilities involves setting high educational standards. Provinces should be compelled to develop public policy strategies to eliminate provincial systemic inequities in education and to redesign their public education systems based on universal access to high quality instruction, public choice, high academic standards, and accountability for results. If it's working in one province, it appears there's little reason not to replicate it. Provinces in Canada, other than Alberta, are missing the goalpost.

### Reading Literacy Combined Scale as Assessed on PISA 2000

PROVINCE	RANKING WITHIN CANADA	RANKING AMONG 32 COUNTRIES
Alberta	Significantly above Canada	#1
British Columbia	Average about the same as Canada	#3
Quebec		#4
Canada		#2
Ontario		#5
Manitoba		#6
Saskatchewan		#7
Nova Scotia		Average lower than Canada
Prince Edward Island	#15	
Nfld & Labrador	#16	
New Brunswick	#24	

### Reading Literacy Combined Scale as Assessed on PISA 2003

PROVINCE	RANKING WITHIN CANADA	RANKING AMONG 41 COUNTRIES
Alberta	Significantly above Canada	1 (tied with Finland)
British Columbia Ontario Canada	Average about the same as Canada	3 (similar to Korea) 5 3
Quebec Nfld & Labrador Manitoba Nova Scotia Saskatchewan New Brunswick Prince Edward Island	Average lower than Canada	7 11 12 15 17 20 28

### PISA MATHEMATICS – 2003 – 15-Year-Old Students

PROV	SPACE & SHAPE		CHANGE & RELATIONSHIPS		QUANTITY		UNCERTAINTY		COMBINED	
	NAT	INT	NAT	INT	NAT	INT	NAT	INT	NAT	INT
Nfld & Lab	7	27	6	17	7	34	6	14	6	18
PEI	10	34	10	29	10	33	10	25	10	30
Nova Scotia	8	28	8	21	8	27	7	17	8	21
New Bruns	9	29	9	23	9	29	9	21	9	24
Quebec	2	10	3	8	3	9	3	6	3	7
Ontario	5	20	4	11	4	15	4	8	4	11
Manitoba	4	18	5	13	5	16	5	10	5	13
Sask	6	24	7	18	6	23	8	18	7	19
Alberta	1	7	1	1	1	3	1	2	1	2
BC	4	14	2	4	2	6	2	3	2	5

## Mathematics Problem Solving (SAIP2001) – Ranking Within Canada

PROVINCE	13-Year-Old Students	16-Year-Old Students
Alberta	1	1
Quebec	2	NA
Ontario	3	3
<b>Canada</b>		
Yukon	4	10
British Columbia	5	6
Manitoba	6	2
Saskatchewan	7	5
New Brunswick	8	4
Nfld & Labrador	9	9
Prince Edward Island	10	8
Nova Scotia	11	7
Northwest Territories	12	11
Nunavut	13	12

## Estimated Average Performance in Science (PISA)

PROVINCE	2000	2003
Alberta	1	1
Quebec	2	3
British Columbia	3	2
Manitoba	4	6
Ontario	5	4
Saskatchewan	5	7
Nfld & Labrador	6	5
Nova Scotia	6	8
Prince Edward Island	7	10
New Brunswick	8	9

*(Dr. Garnier is the Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer of the Canadian Charter Schools Centre. She has a doctorate in educational administration, a master's of education degree, and a bachelor of education degree from the University of Alberta. Dr. Garnier has several years experience as a high school teacher and teacher/administrator at the post secondary level and is the former principal of an elementary charter public school in Calgary and a conventional public high school in Bonnyville, Alberta. She has written curriculum for Alberta Learning, was Coordinator of Practical Arts & Technologies for the Government of the Northwest Territories, and a central office administrator for an Alberta school district.)*