



LEADERSHIP, ADVOCACY AND SERVICE FOR MANITOBA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS

Manitoba Students Actually Do Make the Grade

Our Response to the Report of the 2016 Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) April 30, 2018

For many years, Manitobans have been told that our students are the lowest performing in the country. Whether in reading, math or science, they have heard they are “in last place”. Critics have responded in varied ways: by attacking investments in public education as misplaced or ill-conceived; by embarking on fault-finding missions, with school boards, teachers, and parents among the preferred targets; and even by heaping blame on the universities from which our teachers graduate.

Today's release of scores from the 2016 Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) should provide these critics with some additional food for thought. Designed by Canada's Ministers of Education, PCAP is a skills-based test written nationwide, every three years, by randomly selected students in Grade 8. According to PCAP 2016, Manitoba students have, over time, shown positive change in reading, math and science. For Manitoba, there have been gains in overall reading and science achievement, along with significant improvements in mathematics.

PCAP 2016 also confirms a long-standing trend: like every other Canadian jurisdiction, eight out of ten Manitoba students perform at or above the national standard in these subjects. While much ado can be made concerning the mean scores for each subject province by province, PCAP 2016 also has something important to say about this: no province scored above the Canadian mean across all three of the subject areas and only Quebec, Ontario and PEI scored at or above the Canadian mean when these subject areas are reviewed independently from one another.

The final message: when looking at PCAP, it is important for us to keep calm and carry on. From coast to coast, we all have a lot of work to do. Here in Manitoba, we are improving our outcomes over time but in so doing, it is important to recognize at all times that we remain global leaders in offering quality education. Whether we achieve an 18 or 24 karat standard compared to our next nearest neighbours in Canada, gold remains gold. This is an important truth long understood by Manitoba's education community.

All Manitobans need to take stock of these results, and recognize what's behind them. We need to celebrate our teachers, who help students of every background, language, and ability overcome whatever challenges and obstacles they face. We salute our parents and caregivers, whose love and commitment at home make success at school possible. We gratefully acknowledge the citizens of Manitoba, who continue to invest in our kids and their education. Manitoba's progress under PCAP 2016 reflects Manitobans working together to ensure that our students have what they need as they work their way to the very top.

The 2016 PCAP results should also put to rest another myth: that our current provincial government inherited a broken education system that needed to be fixed. At the same time that citizens were casting their ballots during the spring 2016 election, our students were writing the same test that

would show how far they had come since PCAP 2010 and 2013. With the latest results now coming two years after the provincial elections, what is clear is that Manitoba remains on the right track. Reaching for the top continues to be our foremost priority.

The critics will however, choose to narrowly point out that Manitoba's mean scores in reading, math and science remain lower than any other province. If these are truly the only measures that count, and they most certainly are not, what then can help to fix these scores, as we reach for the top? In Manitoba, we have long known that poverty is an important factor in student success. Manitoba's children continue to hold the regrettable distinction of being those who are most in poverty nationwide. We also know that most of those students who do not meet or exceed PCAP's national standards come from homes where parents struggle to make ends meet, where having any money left at the end of the month is an exception, not the rule. And what we do know is that such home-front realities for our kids can influence test scores between provinces by up to 40 percent.

It is therefore always true that, when national test scores are adjusted to account for household income, Manitoba rises even closer to the top. In such a context, we therefore cannot take our students' test results for granted. Manitoba has work to be done, both within but especially beyond the classroom, if all students are to have an equal opportunity to excel. Poverty is a factor that we must all address. In this respect, that our children can continue to rise above such a challenge is the result of our concerted efforts, continued investment, and concrete faith in the children of this province. But we have to stay the course.

Staying the course means maintaining or expanding funding and resources. PCAP 2016 comes just as our classrooms received the lowest Provincial budget commitment in nearly two decades. As contingency supports for newcomer and refugee students have been adjusted by just \$40,000 province-wide. As we learn that \$60 million in spending on education is to disappear, cent by cent over the next six years, from those school boards who need this support the most. In this context, staying the course will become increasingly difficult.

Staying the course also means taking time for reflection. As Manitoba waits for the launch of an "education review" by the provincial government, PCAP 2016 shows what can happen when we do work together. It clearly demonstrates that ours is not a broken school system in need of repair or reform. Instead, PCAP 2016 results should encourage all Manitobans to continue to partner with their public education system for even greater improvements, and to remain focused on meeting the needs of our kids. Now more than ever, we cannot allow an education review to rearrange and restack the jenga blocks of our public school system. To do so may risk future progress, because we know what can happen when even one of those blocks is removed.

PCAP 2016 shows that the public's continued investment in education pays dividends. PCAP 2016 also proves that neither our students nor those who provide for their education deserve our collective criticism. Across this province, trustees and superintendents are striving to create the right conditions for improved academic success. Teachers are helping students to face their challenges face forward and to succeed. Parents and caregivers are providing that extra support needed beyond the classroom, helping our kids rise towards the very top. And as the end result, our students truly are making the grade.