

Literacy/numeracy foundation, solutions flawed



Try building a house on quicksand. It's tough – you get stuck, and you sink. Try building a life without a foundation in literacy and numeracy.

It's hard to overstate the importance of solid skills in reading and math. Students lacking in these areas are more likely to become frustrated, discouraged, and in later years, drop out of school.

There's no shortage of debate about how to foster strength in reading, writing and math. And there are plenty of ways to measure how children in schools are faring. On a global scale, there's the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development every three years. PISA is a product of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a policy think tank that examines the economic role of schools and education. It provides a ranking of student achievement across the globe in core subjects.

Manitoba, like provinces across Canada and countries around the world, participates in PISA testing, however there's a growing movement to halt the program. The reason: the testing methodology, and therefore the findings, are flawed. One researcher went so far as to deem PISA results "useless and meaningless."

Academics around the world are speaking out over concern that the test results, and the intense media coverage they receive, pressure countries and provinces – "economies", as PISA defines them – to make drastic and detrimental changes to their education systems. All of it rooted in defective data.

Great Britain has announced that it will no longer take part. And even though PISA results place Alberta students at the top in reading and science, the Alberta Teachers' Association has called on the province to "end the PISA obsession", noting methodological deficiencies that render results, both negative and positive, unreliable. Inconsistent test questions between countries and even between individual students, and the lack of provision for cultural or socio-economic differences between countries are cited as fatal flaws.

In a 2015 article for the Washington Post called "Can PISA be saved?", researchers Alma Harris, professor of educational leadership at the Institute of Education and University College London, and Yong Zhao, presidential chair and director of the Institute for Global and Online Education at the University of Oregon argue that "it is as if every country in PISA is devoid of historical, social, economic and cultural heritage. These influences are forensically airbrushed out in favor of neatly wrapped causal attributions that can be conveniently turned into policy solutions and commercial packages. This homogenizing is not only devaluing but it is potentially dangerous."

Dangerous indeed. With intense pressure to achieve high scores, some PISA participants may test only their most proficient students, artificially inflating their results and leaving decision-makers to base education policy on fallacy over fact.

Enter into the fray the Manitoba government, which promised a plan on improvement to literacy and numeracy prior to its election two years ago. The plan has yet to emerge. Consultation, however – in a form – is underway. With consultants, not teachers.

And now the province has extended its consultation on education policy to insurance companies and software developers through the North Forge Technology Exchange, an innovation-based economic development agency.

As governments and teachers alike seek to improve student comprehension of basic and essential skills, suggestions are always welcome. Solutions, however, should be expert driven. Some 16,000 are available, and they're already on the payroll.

For more information, attend your MTS regional meeting, talk to your colleagues, students' parents and follow MTS on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for updates on this issue and others impacting you and your classroom.