

## ASCA 2024 Virtual Engagement Event: Advocacy & Education Scan Summary November 2024

### \* Assessment and Standardized Testing

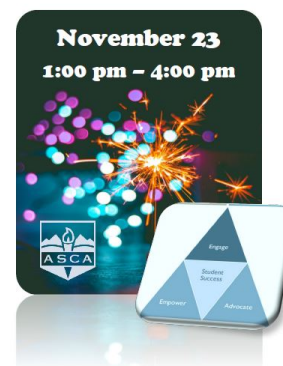
There are a variety of standardized tests for students in Alberta such as the PATs (provincial achievement tests for students in grade 6 and 9), diploma exams for grade 12 students, SLAs student learning assessments which are currently under review and will not be offered for the 2024/25 school year. Recently, 2022/23 literacy and numeracy screening assessments became mandatory for students in grades 1 to 3. School authorities must use screening tools prepared by or approved by Alberta Education.

In the 2024/25 school year there is also mandatory screening assessments in September and January for all students in grades 1 to 3 with a follow up assessment in June for those students requiring additional supports after completing the January assessment. There will also be mandatory screening assessments in January for all students in Kindergarten beginning in January 2025. School authorities are also required to share student literacy and numeracy results in their Annual Education Results Report in order to engage with stakeholders to set priorities and build their education plans.

It is incredibly important to understand individual students and their needs and where they are at in their learning journey. With that in mind, the hundreds of hours that educators are now required to assess at the start of the school year, are hundreds of hours not spent building relationships, helping students adjust to new learning and empowering them to grow their skill sets. Some perspectives that have been shared from some parents with us is that these assessments are not the solution they are intended to be and are instead preventing their children from having the start to the school year they hoped for. In speaking with some teachers, some who are also parents, they've shared that these assessments are cumbersome and they are witnessing children feel demoralized because of the assessments because the content being assessed is often content that the students would learn during that school year; they would not have those skills coming into that grade. From some students who have experienced these initial assessments they felt frustrated because they often did not yet know the skills they were being assessed for, and it made them anxious for what they would be learning and predisposed them to feeling that their school year was going to be hard and they weren't smart enough to learn during that year. Some of the negative experiences and impacts were especially harder for youth with additional learning needs and supports. As these assessment standards progress, we hope that appropriate supports and timelines are implemented.

From an ASCA lens the importance of building relationship and understanding the individual needs of a student on their learning journey is paramount to their success. The intent of these additional assessments is to be helpful on a variety of levels, but the lived experience has yet to yield the improvements intended. Additionally, as Alberta Education gathers this data, and encourages divisions to use this data, ASCA understands the complexities of student success. In crowded classrooms, students are unable to receive the individual attention they deserve. As the ministry collects data related to metrics of student success, we continue to encourage them to gather data related to class size and complexity so that they, and all Albertans, have a better understanding and a broader picture of what is contributing to, or hindering, student success.

### Engagement Event



## \* Legislative Changes Impacting Students

### - Standards for the Use of Personal Mobile Devices and Social Media in Schools

As of September 1, 2024 the Ministerial Order on Standards for the Use of Personal Mobile Devices and Social Media in Schools came into effect. Overall, students in Early Childhood Services through Grade 12 may not use personal mobile devices during instructional time. If students have their devices with them during instructional time, they are required to keep these devices on silent or powered off and out of view. Individual school authorities are required to create policies and/or procedures related to this order.

The purpose of this Order is to address growing concerns related to increased distraction among students as well as inappropriate usage of personal mobile devices during school instructional time. These distractions and inappropriate usage negatively impact learning as well as mental health.

There are multiple divisions who already had device policies for students and while initially there was some distress among students, families and staff as they were implemented, once these policies became part of the school culture and expectations, there have been marked differences in students's ability to focus as well as their mental health due to less anxiety around being social media bullied during school or having content made of them while at school.

As Alberta divisions collectively implement their own policies with the benchmarks set within the Order, there has been some stress among students, families and staff, however initial feedback has been successful. As students and families adjust to the expectations, many students are expressing they feel more connected to their classroom and peers rather than focusing on notifications or creating content. Some staff have shared their feedback with us related to the importance of relationships as they navigate helping students adjust to the policies. Some families have shared that they've had success navigating acquiring accommodation for their students that need one related to these polices, and other families have shared that they have worked out communication strategies that work within the framework of the new policies and are having success.

As our organization really values and priorities the connections and relationships our students cultivate at school and in their communities, we understand that technology is incredibly useful for learning and connecting. We also understand that helping students prioritize relationship, connection, and learning throughout their school day is important, and mobile cellular devices have not always been the appropriate tool for helping them on their journey.

### - Bill 27

Bill 27 in Alberta states the intent to be setting transparent and consistent rules to support student success and well-being in Alberta schools. Initially it was announced earlier in 2024 as a parent rights bill, then as a gender policies framework, and has since been introduced on October 31, 2024 as the Education Amendment Act, 2024.

If passed the Education Amendment Act 2024, will add new sections as well as amend sections of the Education Act.

Changes include that schools must notify parents when their 16 or 17 year old student requests that teachers, principals, and other school staff refer to them by a new gender identity related preferred name or pronoun.

Schools must notify and obtain consent from parents for teachers, principals and other school staff to use the new preferred name or pronouns where the request is made by their student aged 15 and under.

School authorities are to ensure students are provided with counseling or other assistance prior to parental notification if the notification is expected to result in psychological or emotional harm to the student, or at the student's request.

School authorities must notify parents and provide the opportunity to opt their child in, rather than opt-out where courses, programs of study or instructional materials, instructions, or exercises include subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with gender identity, sexual orientation or human sexuality.

Also the Minister of Education would now have to approve learning and teaching resources, as well as external parties and their resources, for topics primarily and explicitly related to gender identity, sexual orientation or human sexuality.

This Bill also amends the Education Act to establish a new right to education during emergencies underscoring students must have access to in person learning throughout public health emergencies or states of emergency.

This Bill also requires school authorities to notify and obtain parental consent for non routine individual health measures applicable to a student aged 15 and under, during an emergency or be notified only if the student is aged 16 and old.

It also establishes authority for upcoming regulatory amendments which would provide guidance on expectations for learning during emergencies.

The amendments related to gender identity, sexual orientation and human sexuality will come into effect on September 1, 2025 if the Bill is passed. Those amendments ensuring education continuity during public health and states of emergencies is expected to come into force January 1, 2025.

With respect to policies specifically targeting gender diverse children and students in Alberta, there are other measures proposed in healthcare that will also impact youth in Alberta.

Focusing on the Bill points related to education, our Members were able to propose, debate and discuss advocacy policies through the ASCA AGM in April 2024. Seven policies related to preserving Safe and Inclusive spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ students came before ASCA Members. The policies passed by parents on school councils from across the province through their representatives are oppositional to many of the points within Bill 27 and are in clear support of vulnerable students.

While the Bill is being framed as supporting students and building relationships between families, the lived impact of this Bill is anticipated to be extremely harmful to trans youth and actually create barriers in relationship building between students, peers, staff, and their families.

ASCA will continue to have conversations with the Ministry, stakeholders and other partners related to Bill 27 and the Member positions we have related to supporting queer and trans youth. Previously as ASCA President, I spoke with the Minister about these proposed policies, and subsequently President Glazebrook and I have continued to speak with him about what is being solved for with these policies and the harm they will cause based on data available from other jurisdictions who have implemented similar discriminatory policies.

There are multiple groups within education, healthcare, legal fields, and grassroots organizations that are in opposition to Bill 27, are actively advocating against it, and will potentially join in any legal proceedings challenging this Bill as a violation of human rights.

## \* Education Funding

In September of 2020, a new funding model was implemented in Alberta. Funding for K to 12 education in Alberta is calculated using a weighted moving 3 year average of enrollment to provide predictable funding to school authorities. Rather than paying school boards per student based on fall enrollment, funding is based on averages of the prior and current year along with estimates for next year's growth. After about four years of criticism, Alberta Education may be considering changing how schools are funded.

There have been multiple announcements related to education funding this year including the School Construction Accelerator Program which aims to create 50,000 new student spaces within 3 years and 150,000 new spaces over seven years. This plan aims to accommodate a total of 200,000 new students by 2031.

This investment is vital and needed even though it does not immediately address the class size and infrastructure crises happening across the province. Additionally this is a fundamental shift in funding in Alberta because now private schools can also have their capital projects funded by public tax dollars through this provincial government initiative.

Also, there is a significant shortage in teachers and support staff due to the underfunding of education so even as new spaces are created for students, there will need to be additional funds to hire the appropriate staff for those spaces and for the support of students.

Currently in Canada, Alberta spends the least amount of money on its students while boasting a multi billion dollar surplus. Fiscal responsibility and efficacy should not render any provincial government incapable of investing in its future through the equitable access of a quality public education system for its children. Budgets should not be balanced, or surplussed, on the back of students.

## - Student Mental Health

Recognizing the lived experiences of thousands of students across the province, and the advocacy of many within education, the government of Alberta has invested over 50 million to support 79 mental health pilot projects. We appreciate this investment and step toward helping students.

Many students across our province experience mental health journeys that intersect with their learning journeys. ASCA encourages more investment in mental health supports for students and we have policies related to mental health care and access for students.

There are lots of things happening in education!

What I would like to leave us with as we transition to the next point of our agenda is that our babies are important. Their futures are our futures. Their individual needs and experiences and perspectives are important. They are people. Autonomous, glorious, people. Our communities and our province will thrive and prosper if we remember that and invest in that.

I would like to extend gratitude to the many parents and community members who volunteer on school councils across our province. The hundreds of thousands of hours that you give to students is impactful, you make a difference in individual lives and in the collective of our society. Education in Alberta is the world class system it is, in no small part due to the involvement of parents and school councils.

Thank you so much for all you do for our babies, for our children, for our futures.

Brandi Rai, ASCA Past President, November 23, 2024