



DAVID CHUDNOVSKY

## The Great Schools Project

### An update

The Great Schools Project (GSP) is a collaboration between individuals who want to strengthen and protect public education in British Columbia. For almost four years, educators, parents, researchers, and leaders, both inside and outside the education system, have met to discuss how to improve the way we evaluate and assess our schools.

In the fall of 2010 I wrote in *Our Schools/Our Selves* about the GSP to that date:

The purpose of the Great Schools Project is to develop methods to assess schools that support students, communities, and the public education system, so that we can provide the best education possible for every child — so that we have a useful answer to [a] Mum's questions: How is our school doing? How well is our school meeting the needs of my child?

It's also an attempt to live up to our responsibility to move beyond simply criticizing — to make concrete proposals we believe will improve the public education system for kids.

Since that time our working group has continued to meet and to refine our thinking. In that 2010 *OS/OS* article we at the GSP made a

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promise: “For our part, we commit to reporting the progress of the Great Schools Project to you in an ongoing way.

There are a number of developments worth reporting. It’s perhaps most useful to describe the last one first.

### **The Great Schools Teach-In**

On December 3, 2012 the Great Schools Project held a Teach-In at Simon Fraser University in Surrey BC. It was attended by an extremely diverse group — teachers, parents, school trustees, trade unionists, academics, district superintendents, graduate students, education activists and advocates.

We were especially excited that Alfie Kohn agreed to provide an “electronic keynote address” which was provocative, stimulating and tremendously respectful of the work of the GSP.

The Teach-In was an opportunity for us to present our thinking and to test our ideas to a wider audience. The response to the work of the GSP was unanimously favourable and overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

Participants especially appreciated what they described as the “positive” aspects of the project. That is, they supported our commitment as progressive educators to “propose” as well as “oppose”. Nevertheless, we made it clear that each of the members of the GSP working group would continue to resist those governments and their supporters among the “privatizers” and “centralizers” who work to weaken public schools and public education and to scapegoat teachers and teacher unions.

We also made our belief clear: that by any measure British Columbia’s public schools are among the best in the world.

### **Principles for school evaluation and assessment**

Over the past couple of years the GSP working group concluded that our “Tool Kit for School Evaluation and Assessment” was incomplete without an explanation of the principles that underlay our recommendations. Furthermore, we believe that our Tool Kit itself needs to be assessed and evaluated on the basis of these principles.

The “Principles for School Assessment and Evaluation” is a foundational guide for establishing any system of assessment and account-

ability. These principles must be adhered to if accountability is to be ethical, educationally sound and useful.

### *Principles for School Evaluation and Assessment*

We accept as a matter of course that British Columbia public schools should be accountable to the citizens of the province for the educational health and welfare of the children enrolled in the public schools. The following principles are intended to help stakeholders in education build a system focused on strengthening outcomes for children, families, and the communities in which they reside. Effective school evaluation and assessment support both the system (by increasing its credibility and legitimacy, and supporting improvement and change) and its stakeholders (by ensuring that their needs are met in an open and transparent manner).<sup>1</sup>

Education takes multiple forms, occurring in many different places, and evolves as society changes. As such, there is no one best system of accountability, although there are principles to which such systems should adhere.

#### *Focus on the system*

In a public education system, evaluation and assessment mechanisms should be focused at the system level. Within the public school system, there are many other mechanisms already in place to support the individual accountability of teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

#### *Increase transparency*

The primary goals should be to increase stakeholder understanding of that system and to improve student learning. Such understanding can only be built by opening that system to public view. Transparency is increased when there is free and open access to a diversity of high quality evidence of student learning and growth.

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### *Protect stakeholder personal privacy and individual rights*

For a school evaluation and assessment system to be effective and transparent, it must be built on accurate information. Protecting the privacy rights of individuals within the system (students, parents, teachers and administrators) increases the integrity of the data collected by removing incentives to artificially manipulate outcomes.

### *Engage stakeholders*

An effective school evaluation and assessment system includes all stakeholder groups (students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the general public) in the design and implementation of the system and ensures the opportunity to inform decision making through diverse mechanisms for feedback and input. Respectful communication across stakeholder groups is nurtured and supported.

### *Ensure flexibility*

Schools represent an important public commitment to local communities. As such, evaluation and assessment systems are flexible enough to allow schools to focus on the local needs of students, families, and the broader community.

### *Focus on the learner*

The learner is at the center of public education. An effective school evaluation and assessment system supports a broad-based education that includes the aesthetic, artistic, cultural, emotional, social, intellectual, academic, physical and vocational development of students.

### *Recognizes complexity*

Teaching and learning are complex tasks that can only be demonstrated by a diversity of evidence. An effective system uses multiple data sources, including qualitative and quantitative data, with particular attention to professional standards for data collection, use, and reporting.

*Protect the public interest*

An effective school evaluation and assessment system seeks to protect the public interest by ensuring that schools prepare learners for a socially responsible life in a free and democratic society. The system recognizes the social context of education and the school's role in breaking down the barriers of poverty, marginalization, and social inequality, through the strengthening of educational opportunity.

*Ensure equity*

Schools serve a diverse constituency within their communities. An effective school evaluation and assessment system supports and encourages equity for students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and seeks to ensure the adequate distribution of resources within and across those communities so that students from marginalized and less privileged communities have as much opportunity to achieve success as those from more privileged backgrounds.

*Require reciprocity*

An effective school evaluation and assessment system holds the public accountable, through its elected representatives, for providing the resources necessary to carry out the mission and mandates placed upon the public schools.

<sup>1</sup> Much of this work is based on previous national and international efforts to strengthen public accountability systems, including the GAP Framework from the One World Trust and The Charter for Public Education.

### Toolkit for School Evaluation and Assessment

The Toolkit outlines the specific recommendations we have developed for use in assessing BC schools. We expect that those processes that are recommended for the school level would not all be implemented at the same time, but that school communities would choose those that best meet their needs.

Since 2010 the Toolkit has been refined, simplified and focused.

#### 1. KEY INDICATORS OF EDUCATION RESOURCES:

The GSP recommends that each year in each school there should be a survey of key indicators of education resources available in that school. This would include class sizes, availability of services for students with special needs, cleanliness of schools, whether there is a library, whether it is open and has teacher librarian available, air quality, adequacy of administrator time, availability of teacher counselor etc.

#### 2. ACCREDITATION/NEEDS ASSESSMENT/GOAL SETTING:

The GSP recommends that every six years schools should carry out a formal accreditation/needs assessment/goal setting process. This process should be time-limited, should be explicitly oriented to school improvement (as determined by the school community), and resources should be available to implement the goals for improvement identified by the process.

3. CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL LEVEL ASSESSMENT: Assessments developed and administered at the school and classroom levels must be the foundation of all assessment work, which means skilled teachers and administrators employing a wide array of methods to discern student achievement, how students learn, how best to help them, and how to ensure that students also learn to self-assess. Assessments at the local level are important to insure a broad range of educational outcomes are addressed including literacy and numeracy skills, critical thinking, aesthetic

and cultural sensibility, problem solving, self-confidence, sense of self in historical, geographic, social, class, gender and ethnic context, vocational readiness, emotional resilience, social solidarity, individual responsibility, readiness and ability to apply oneself to difficult tasks, media and computer literacy, democratic citizenship, etc.

#### 4. RANDOMIZED TESTING:

The GSP recommends that the Ministry of Education carry out randomized testing or sampling to get a high-level understanding of progress in the system. The tests must be determined to be both valid and reliable indicators of system health, and meet all appropriate professional and ethical assessment standards.<sup>1</sup>

#### 5. DIRECT REPORTING BY THE SCHOOL TO ITS COMMUNITY:

The GSP recommends that each year each school report directly, in an anecdotal form, to its school community. The report should be rooted in the actual activities, learning and progress of students in the school. This reporting should be done in an accessible way, taking into account parents' language requirements, literacy skills etc.

#### 6. USER'S GUIDE TO THE SCHOOL:

The GSP recommends the preparation of a "User's Guide to the School". This guide, especially aimed at parents who aren't comfortable interacting in the school setting, should provide key information about the school and how it works, and suggested questions for parents to ask to help them make their own assessment of their school. Some parents, especially poor, marginalized, immigrant, and working class parents, are often very uncomfortable and feel, or are made to feel, inadequate in the school setting. A handbook with prepared questions, which ask important and provocative questions, could make the task easier for many parents.

### 7. STUDENT VOICE:

The GSP recommends that one important element of school assessment and accountability is “student voice”. Children should be asked to participate and be involved in an ongoing way in assessing their school. Care must be taken that such a process is not simply pro forma or token. Cultural norms need to be fostered in the school to make sure such an opportunity is taken seriously by students, teachers and the community.

### 8. PARTICULAR EMPHASIS ON THE REQUIREMENTS OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES:

The GSP recommends that special emphasis be placed on meeting the school accountability and assessment requirements of students with special needs and their families. This would include, among many other elements integrated in #1 – #6 above, communicating to them in an accessible and transparent way whether the programs, teachers and attitudes needed by their children are available in any given school.

*We are keenly aware of the danger of contributing to further marginalization of those already marginalized children, schools and communities if the recommendations that come out of our Project aren't carefully developed and implemented. If the goal of redressing educational and social inequality is not at the forefront of our discussions, our debates and our recommendations, we will have failed in our work.*

The GSP presents all of these recommendations — both the Principles and the Tool Kit — as a work in progress, and seeks comments, criticisms and suggestions. While we have spent countless hours researching, discussing, and debating our recommendations, we acknowledge that the experience and wisdom of others can only strengthen, reinforce and fortify our work.



**GREAT SCHOOLS PROJECT WORKING COMMITTEE:**

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**JANET DEMPSEY** (retired teacher; ESL specialist)

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**DAVID CHUDNOVSKY** is a retired teacher, a former MLA in British Columbia, and the president of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation from 1999-2002.

**ENDNOTES**

1 See for example *The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, jointly published by the American Psychological Association; the American Education Research Association, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and endorsed by the Canadian Psychological Association.