



Teacher's PET

Lending a helping paw
See [pages 8-9](#).

ATA NEWS

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A ray of wintertime joy
See [Tale End, page 16](#).



SUPPLIED

Teachers from St. Patrick's School in Medicine Hat wear red to show their support for public education. See how your colleagues are going Red for Ed on [page 3](#).



Happy New Year, colleagues!

Tackling that first day back

See [Off Script, page 5](#).



First-of-its kind collaboration

New AI policy focused on maintaining autonomy

See [page 4](#).



Don't wait, don't forget

Reminder to take care of your mental health

See [Viewpoints, page 3](#).



Labour action

Ft. Mac support staff expand strike action, others serve strike notice

See [page 5](#).



Edmonton District by-election results

Deneen Zielke joins Provincial Executive Council

See [page 4](#).



Assessing assessments

ATA research looks at how provincial testing is measuring up

See [page 11](#).

Enough of the “overtest and undersupport” approach



EDITORIAL

Kristine Wilkinson
 ATA News
 Editor-in-Chief

COVID learning loss—we have heard that a lot. Recently, the government was proud to announce that students are catching up after COVID.

“The 2023–24 diploma exams and provincial achievement test results are a strong indicator that learning gaps caused by the pandemic are closing,” said Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaidis. “We recognize there are opportunities for improvement, but I am confident that through our investments, proposed legislation amendments and enhanced assessments, our K–12 students will gain the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.”

That sounds great, right? But we all

know that teaching and assessment are not the same thing, and that more (or “enhanced”) assessment doesn’t equal improved learning outcomes.

The government has recently introduced their literacy and numeracy screeners to primary grades. These have been added to the government data collection repertoire of exams already in place, including provincial achievement tests (PATs) in grades 6 and 9 and diploma exams in Grade 12 courses.

I have had a lot of experience administering PATs and diploma exams. As a principal, my heart broke seeing the stress students carried into those exams.

The student whose car wouldn’t start the morning of the diploma exam. The one whose calculator ran out of batteries. The one who slept in. The one who slid into the ditch on the way to school. It was unlikely these students performed well on their test, not because they knew less than their peers but because they

were just stressed out! They weren’t underachievers, just students with bad luck. So, what did we learn from their assessments? Probably not much.

Often the results of standardized, one-size-fits-all exams are inaccurate. That is why the teacher assesses the students in their class every day in a manner that provides them the information they need about a student.

Students are assessed on curricular outcomes through assignments, projects, quizzes and tests. Teachers have the information they need from the student work they see in the classroom. The big question is, if a student has needs, then what? Teachers do their best in overcrowded, unsupported classrooms to fill in the gaps that differ for every student. But retesting students, once again, to find these deficits is not helpful.

We have had PATs in Alberta since 1983, and diploma exams have been around much longer than that, but the introduction of further testing simply

takes time away from teaching, and that is time away from learning.

Students aren’t learning anything from these additional assessments, which are also diverting funds from our classrooms. Moreover, even as the provincial government has introduced more testing, Alberta continues to be the least funded education system in Canada per student. The model is not working, and it is frustrating to see yet another way money is being spent in education that is not helping support students.

“Overtest and undersupport” shouldn’t be the tagline for public education in Alberta. If we know students have gaps in knowledge, let’s get supports in place. Let’s start by managing class size and complexity so that teachers have time to help each student.

It shouldn’t be so hard to fund public education properly. ■

I welcome your comments. Contact me at kristine.wilkinson@ata.ab.ca.

Dusting off the crystal ball, part two



Q & A

Dennis Theobald
 ATA Executive
 Secretary

Question: So, you were talking about the potential shape of things to come. Carry on!

Answer: In the last issue of the *ATA News*, I identified President Trump’s proposed trade policy as posing a serious threat to Canada and Alberta, with implications for public education in our province. In the weeks that have passed since I scribbled down those comments, things have actually gotten worse, with Trump explicitly identifying the United States’ (US) trade deficit with Canada as sufficient justification for the imposition of wide-ranging tariffs (effectively taxes) on imports from Canada.

The simplistic but attractive idea that a trade imbalance is inherently “unfair” and detracts from a nation’s wealth and power dates back to the 16th and 17th centuries. “Mercantilism,” as it was known, emphasized the importance of maintaining trade surpluses by limiting imports by means of tariffs and other trade barriers, hoarding gold and silver, and creating captive markets through colonial expansion. Mercantilism was largely abandoned beginning in the 19th century in favour of freer trade, but its impact on global economic and political structures resonates to this day.

If the new American administration introduces a neomercantilist policy program, including the imposition of sweeping tariffs on Canadian exports, the highly integrated North American economy will be entirely upended. Since the passage of the original free trade agreement between Canada and the United States in 1987, the two nations have been set on a path of increasing economic interdependency. This was heightened with the passage of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, which brought Mexico into the fold, and effectively

sold by the province to international customers over the first 11 months of 2024, \$147 billion (89 per cent) went to the US, the overwhelming majority of this export trade being oil and gas. While some in government are hoping that energy exports might be exempted from tariffs or be treated preferentially, there is substantial capacity for increasing domestic energy production in the US and no shortage of commercial interests wanting to do just that. Furthermore, because of its inherently high cost of production, Canadian oil is a marginal

Albertans have become used to riding the resource revenue rollercoaster, but this will be different. The downturn will not be due to the usual vagaries of international markets with the prospect of a natural return to better times, but rather the product of policy decisions made by a foreign government. Albertans will not even be able to blame their favourite scapegoat, Justin Trudeau and the federal Liberals (though they might try).

This might precipitate a long overdue, grown-up conversation about how Alberta is going to sustain critical services, including public education. It will be crucial not to let the government of the day use these circumstances to justify simple-minded austerity and then to attempt to balance the books on the backs of teachers, doctors, nurses, post-secondary educators and other public servants. Other provinces that have not been blessed/cursed with abundant fossil energy have still managed to do a better and more consistent job of funding public services in the public interest—Alberta can and must do the same.

As teachers, we very much have skin in this game. Despite the temptation to stay on the sidelines, our leadership, advocacy and activism will be essential in shaping the course this province will take for years to come. ■

“ [A downturn] might precipitate a long overdue, grown-up conversation about how Alberta is going to sustain critical services, including public education. ”

reaffirmed with the ratification in 2020 of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. Over the last 38 years, these economies have effectively become one, with the United States, Canada and Mexico being each other’s largest trading partners.

Alberta is particularly vulnerable to changing economic arrangements. As reported by Statistics Canada, of the \$166 billion worth of goods

proposition even at the best of times.

A tariff hit to Alberta’s energy production would have a direct impact on Alberta’s royalty revenues and on employment and investment in a sector that generates other tax revenues. We would once again be facing the prospect of diminished fiscal capacity even as demand for public services increases due to population growth.

Questions for consideration in this column are welcome. Please address them to Dennis Theobald at dennis.theobald@ata.ab.ca.



Supporting mental health



VIEWPOINTS

Crystal Walker
Communications Director,
CMHA Alberta and Centre for Suicide Prevention

At the beginning of a new year, many people focus on improving their physical health, but it's important not to forget about mental health. Just like physical health, we need to maintain our mental health and not wait until we're struggling to address it. There are many things we can do to support our own mental health and to help others.

How to support yourself

1. Self-care

Maintaining mental health includes making time for self-care even when we're not struggling. Self-care helps us balance the stress in our lives, build resilience and avoid more serious mental health challenges. Any activity you find enjoyable or relaxing, such as listening to music or reading a book, can be self-care.

- **Activity:** Make a list of activities you find enjoyable or relaxing and prioritize doing some of these regularly.

2. Self-awareness

A little self-awareness can go a long way. We can be proactive in boosting our mental health when we know the current status of our mental health and the circumstances or situations that can affect it. For example, if you know that you'll be marking papers all weekend and that this can cause stress, plan how you will maintain your mental health, either by doing self-care activities or connecting with friends, family or colleagues.

- **Activity:** Check in with yourself regularly to determine the status of your mental health. Ask yourself questions like, "How is my mental health?" "How have I been feeling lately?"
- **Activity:** List the circumstances and situations that affect your mental health and be aware of when those are happening so you can give yourself a boost by doing self-care activities or connecting with others.

3. Connection with family, friends and colleagues

Connecting with people who accept and support us is another way we can maintain our mental health. When you're mentally healthy, your support network promotes feelings of belonging, acceptance and understanding. When you're struggling, you can ask your support network for help.

- **Activity:** List the people in your support network and be sure to include some people you would feel comfortable reaching out to for help.

4. Other resources

The following resources can also be helpful in helping you maintain your mental health, and there are some

listed that can be helpful if you're in crisis, too:

- Go to ab.211.ca or call 211 to learn more about your local community services, many of which are offered at no cost.
- Be aware of what resources are available through your employee assistance program and health benefits.
- If you're really struggling with your mental health or having thoughts of suicide, call or text the Suicide Crisis Helpline at 988.

How to support others

People do not always reach out when they're struggling, but there are ways we can help someone even if they don't ask.

1. Pay attention

Be on the lookout for signs that someone is struggling. It doesn't take much. Any noticeable change in a person's behaviour is a sign that they might not be doing well.

2. Reach out

If you notice a change in someone, start an open, non-judgmental conversation and ask how they're doing. You can mention the change you've noticed. For example, "I haven't heard from you much these days. Is everything okay?" Listen to what they say and resist the urge to offer solutions unless asked.

3. Offer your support

Acknowledge that their feelings are valid and let them know you are there to support them. For example, "That sounds really hard. Can you tell me more about it? I'm here for you."

4. Connect them to resources

If you think the person could benefit from further support, connect them with resources like those listed above. If you think they may be considering suicide, ask them directly, "Are you thinking about suicide?" If they say yes, don't panic; let them know you are there for them and connect them with accessible mental health supports, such as the Suicide Crisis Helpline (988).

As you continue into the remainder of the school year, remember that mental health is health. Do your best to take care of yourself, remembering the importance of self-care, connection with others and supporting each other. ■

CMHA Alberta supports provincial-wide community mental health projects, mental health advocacy, government relations and workplace mental health training. A division of CMHA Alberta, the Centre for Suicide Prevention equips Canadians with the information, knowledge and skills necessary to respond to people considering suicide.

Red for Ed



The Red for Ed campaign offers a simple yet powerful way to demonstrate our solidarity and shared belief that the current state of education is unacceptable. While wages are a significant concern, they are only one part of the change we need. Prioritizing students and acknowledging the demands of our profession are equally essential. We must find the courage to raise our voices, stand behind our bargaining teams and remain steadfast in challenging times. Together, we can advocate for the meaningful changes our students, our profession and our future deserve.

Westpark Middle School staff are prepared to stand strong together!

— Monique Stennes-Koot, Red Deer City Local No. 60



Medicine Hat Catholic teachers are proud to be wearing our Red for Ed to support our collective fight to improve education across Alberta! The teachers pictured are from St. Mary's School (left) and Monsignor McCoy High School (right).

— Deanna Burzminski, Medicine Hat Catholic Teachers Local No. 39

Want to share how you or your team is supporting Red for Ed? Email managing editor Lindsay Yakimyshyn at lindsay.yakimyshyn@ata.ab.ca.



New AI policy focused on teacher autonomy

Collaboration the first of its kind in Alberta

Cory Hare
ATA News Staff

Preserving teacher autonomy and protecting student data are two of the cornerstones of a new artificial intelligence (AI) policy created by Northern Gateway Public Schools. It's the first school board AI policy to be created in collaboration with the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA).

The two-page policy suggests that AI tools may be used to assist teachers in areas like lesson planning, assessment and instructional design, while teachers "retain the responsibility to ensure responsive instruction and have the authority over if and how AI is deployed in their classroom or instructional space."

The policy also states that teachers will be offered training in AI and outlines parameters for its ethical use.

"It gives the foundation for teachers to really make a decision on how AI will be used and integrated within their classrooms while also ensuring that students' data is protected," said Katrina Zack, president of the ATA's Northern Gateway Local No. 43.

Northern Gateway superintendent Kevin Bird said his favourite part of the policy is its emphasis on the importance of the relationship between a teacher and student, and how artificial intelligence should be used to facilitate rather than replace that relationship.

"It's the teacher who makes that

decision about where artificial intelligence falls into that relationship," he said.

Because AI is changing much more rapidly than any previously encountered new technology, it was important that this policy include language that ensures it will be reviewed and updated regularly to reflect changes in legal and regulatory frameworks, said Philip McRae, the ATA's associate coordinator of research and AI expert who was involved in creating the policy.

Previous technological changes have typically followed something called Moore's Law, which is a doubling of power and capacity every 18 months, McRae said. In contrast, AI systems are increasing in power and capacity 10-fold each year.

"The speed of change that this intelligence explosion brings is unprecedented," McRae said. "Given this, the need for regular review, monitoring and updating becomes essential."

Productive collaboration

The policy came about when, back in September, a teacher asked Zack whether the division had an AI policy. Zack found nothing in the division's administrative procedures, so she turned to McRae, who happened to be working on a boilerplate policy that school divisions could adopt and adapt to their own purposes.

After Zack and McRae collaborated on a draft version of the policy for



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Katrina Zack, local president of the ATA's Northern Gateway Local No. 43

Northern Gateway, Zack approached Bird, who also happened to be working on a policy along with other division officials. For Bird, the ATA policy filled a gap in the work the division had underway.

"We were missing that thing that was going to tie it all together to our purpose," Bird said.

The collaboration yielded a document that also received input and endorsement by the Northern Gateway board in November. The policy has since been shared via various internal meetings and processes.

"It's an excellent example of how important it is to be out of our silos and not in echo chambers, and to be able to listen to each other and just have these conversations regularly around teaching and learning," Bird said.

For Zack, it was the first time in her 10 years as local president that she's collaborated with the board. She



SUPPLIED

Kevin Bird, superintendent of Northern Gateway Public Schools

said approaching the division was a bit outside her comfort zone, but the positive experience and result has been worth it.

"I'm definitely feeling that this was a very positive step forward in the partnership between our local and the division in terms of working for what is best for students and working for what is best for teachers," she said. ■

Appointment

Dr. Philip McRae, associate coordinator of research for the ATA, has recently been appointed a special advisor on artificial intelligence and education to the general secretary of Education International, which represents more than 32 million educators worldwide.

CHECK OUT A DRAFT

A draft AI policy is available for viewing and adaptation at Philip McRae's website: philmcrae.com. Select "blog" from the top menu.

Sherwood Park teacher wins Edmonton District by-election

Sandra Bit
ATA News Staff

Deneen Zielke has won the 2024 Edmonton District by-election.

Born in Viking, Alberta, Zielke's teaching career began in Sherwood Park, where she currently lives and teaches.

"I have taught elementary school ranging from grades 1 to 5 and am currently teaching grade 3. I taught physical education to ECS one day a week a few years ago, and that was the longest half hour of my teaching career!"

Soon after starting her teaching career, Zielke became a school representative and has been involved in the work of the ATA since then.

As Teacher Board Advisory Committee chair, she met the superintendent to discuss teachers' concerns. This led to a role on Teacher Welfare Committee and becoming Negotiating Subcommittee chair, leading teachers as they negotiated at the local level. At the provincial level, in addition to supporting her local executive at their scheduled seminars, Zielke was selected to serve on the provincial Committee on Coordinating Communications to Members to support member engagement.



SUPPLIED

Deneen Zielke takes on district rep role.

"As local president, I am so proud of the work our local has accomplished," Zielke said. "Our executive is an amazing group of professionals. Supporting these local leaders and our school representatives in the work they do is key to our success."

About her win and what it means to her personally and professionally, Zielke said, "I am very excited to begin this new chapter. My mentor, Paul Froese, was an extremely engaged and

supportive district representative, and with his passing there was a huge void to fill in Edmonton District. I felt that, with my experience, I could support these locals through this difficult year and the challenges to come, as well be their voice on Provincial Executive Council. I'm looking forward to the work ahead."

Voting for the by-election took place from December 9 to 12, 2024. The results were announced on December 13, 2024.

About Edmonton District

The Alberta Teachers' Association organizes the province into 11 geographic districts, of which Edmonton District is one. It is represented on the Association's Provincial Executive Council by one district representative. The more than 3,100 teachers of Edmonton District are employed by a total of five school jurisdictions and belong to five correlating ATA locals. ■

Role of a District Representative

District representatives (DRs) are elected members of Provincial Executive Council and responsible for

- attending Council meetings and the Annual Representative Assembly;
- ascertaining the views and issues of teachers in their district;
- sharing at Council meetings the views and issues of teachers in their district;
- familiarizing themselves with all aspects of Association business in order to
 - act as a resource person to the ATA locals in their district;
 - participate in Council decision making; and,
- continuing their professional development.

School Jurisdiction

Elk Island Public
Elk Island Catholic
St. Albert Public
St. Albert Catholic
Sturgeon

ATA Local

Elk Island Local No. 28
Elk Island Catholic Teachers Local No. 21
St. Albert Public Teachers Local No. 73
Greater St. Albert Catholic Local No. 23
Sturgeon Local No. 27

Education support staff expand labour action

ATA News Staff

Education support workers are not satisfied with what they've been offered at the bargaining table. Now, Fort McMurray is seeing expanded labour action, with other areas set to follow suit.

Ft. Mc. strike action expanded

Education support workers in Fort McMurray resumed strike action on Jan. 7.

Workers for the Fort McMurray Public and Catholic school districts first went on strike on Nov. 13 after



Rory Gill, CUPE Alberta president

rejecting the recommendations of a disputes inquiry board appointed by the province.

The strike began as rotating job action, but all members of CUPE local 2545 and 2559 will now be on strike until a contract is settled, said CUPE Alberta president Rory Gill in a news release issued Jan. 7.

Gill said the expansion of the job action is taking place because the provincial government has not acted to address the poor wages of school support workers, whose average annual pay is \$34,500 in Alberta.

"The wages of these workers haven't improved in over a decade," said Gill. "They need a substantial increase to make up the ground lost to inflation."

Gill warned that if the Alberta government doesn't act soon, other workers at other school districts will follow soon.

The Fort McMurray locals wanted to give notice to parents and students who will be impacted by the escalated job action. Efforts were made to push the job action past the holidays.

"We understand the impact this will have on students, especially special needs students," said Gill. "However, students are being negatively affected by high turnover of staff. A good education requires well-paid, satisfied support staff."

On their websites, both Fort McMurray school divisions stated that they would be suspending their early childhood programs and asking some students with special needs to refrain from attending school.

In a statement to CTV News,

Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides said it seems "unreasonable that the union is demanding more" when a third-party mediator agreed that the wage increases offered are appropriate.

Nicolaides said he's hopeful the union will put "students and families first" by returning to the bargaining table to find a deal that's fair and reasonable.

Support workers in Edmonton and Sturgeon serve strike notice

Education support workers employed by Edmonton Public and Sturgeon Public school divisions served strike notice on Jan. 9. Job action was expected to begin as early as Jan. 13.

In a news release, CUPE 3550 local president Mandy Lamoureux, who represents Edmonton Public staff, said the action is part of CUPE's plans to escalate job action until the government addresses low wages in the sector.

"Some support staff have gone 10 years without a cost-of-living wage," Lamoureux said. "Many of our members work two to three jobs to earn a living wage."

Lamoureux said CUPE locals across the province have been bargaining since 2020, but face "mandates" from the provincial government limiting increases to less than inflation.

"The impact of the UCP policy of starvation wages on the classroom is staggering," Lamoureux said. "People are quitting, no one will take the jobs at these wages, and students and education are suffering."

The situation is similar in Sturgeon, said CUPE 4625 president Kelly Salisbury.

"It was a hard decision to vote to strike," Salisbury said. "But doing nothing will make a bad situation for students even worse in the long run. We need to take action now to protect education in Alberta."



Mandy Lamoureux, CUPE Local 355 president

FOR THE RECORD

“ There isn't a snowball's chance in hell that Canada would become part of the United States.

Workers and communities in both our countries benefit from being each other's biggest trading and security partner. ”

—Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in an X post on Jan. 7

YOUR VIEWS

Do you make a New Year's resolution? Why or why not?

f Sheila Mackay
I don't make New Year's resolutions. I make "sweet intentions"!

@ Andrew Doyle
I make habit changes. I focus on a habit I want to add or change and work on that.

@ Andrea Vasquez
No, each day has enough goals of its own to try to meet!

@ Abbi Salter
Work-life balance!

@ Jin McRae
Not anymore because there are goals from previous years still being pursued.

@ Keltey Quast
Yes, but they are mostly things I was already working on! I try to keep it real.



Getting through that back-to-school Monday, together

Happy New Year, colleagues! As we embark on what will be a very interesting and complicated 2025, I wanted to wish you the very best as we start the new year.

I tried to take my own advice from my last Offscript and find some down time with friends and family. I did, and it was very enjoyable. However, I am not sure about you, but I am terrible with downtime. Often, I found myself feeling guilty for resting or watching a movie when I knew there was probably something work related I could be doing. I had to remind myself that it was okay not to work, that it was okay to use the time to rest and refresh, as I know the challenges we will be facing this year will take a lot of collective energy to address.

The return to classes after a break is always tough for everyone: teachers, students and parents. The fact that the return to school after the winter break this year fell on a Monday made it seem somewhat crueler. To be honest, I was not sure there would be enough coffee to make the day tolerable. It was a Monday to rival all other Mondays. Now, don't get me wrong, I am not a Monday hater. In fact, I find Tuesday to be the real joker of the work week. But this last Monday (January 6) saw a plethora of dropped items, spilled beverages, slow moving

traffic, bad connections, grey skies and, to top it all off, political drama with the resignation of our prime minister. It was a rough first day back.

I have found in the past the return after winter break was difficult for my students, especially my Grade 12 English students, who were often scheduled to take Part A of their diploma exams only days after resuming class. They would come into class tired and cranky, and without any ability to remember any significant details about the literature we had studied all semester—literature they needed to know. That first week back always seemed like a mad dash to prepare students for diplomas when I would have much preferred to ease our collective way back into the routine of the school week.

As much the return to school after a winter break can be a bear, there is some comfort in knowing that we are all in it together. My colleagues and I were in it together, supporting our students and getting through that first Monday back. We got through the day knowing that tomorrow would be better (despite it being a Tuesday). That sense of unity and collegiality is something we will need as we navigate the back end of the school year, perhaps this year more than ever. ■



Grow your potential

Learn the skills to be a principal or superintendent

University of Calgary Continuing Education offers two online programs for Alberta certified teachers or education professionals who want to work in the Alberta education system:

- School Leadership Quality Standard Program, for aspiring school principals
- Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard Program, for aspiring superintendents

Earn your Leadership Certificate with us today. Register for these online courses at conted.ucalgary.ca/abed

conted.ucalgary.ca/abed



Planning Your Finances for Retirement?



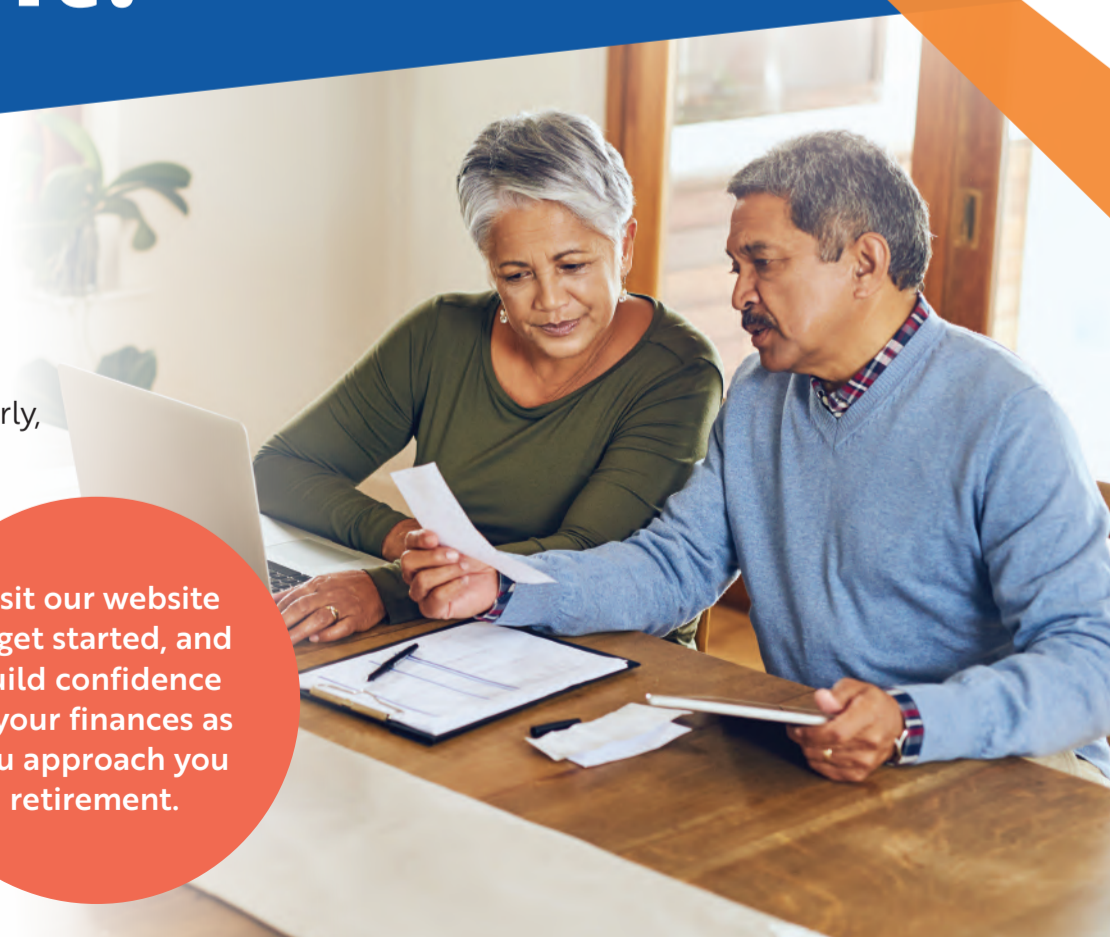
ARTA can help.

It's important to have a financial plan in retirement, and while it's best to start early, it's never too late to put one in place.

The Alberta Retired Teachers' Association can help by sharing valuable resources on **pensions**, **TFSAs**, **estate planning**, and more.

Visit our website to get started, and build confidence in your finances as you approach your retirement.

bit.ly/RetirementWellness





LEGISLATURE HIGHLIGHTS

Government and opposition debate education issues

Kim Clement
ATA News Staff

Alberta's legislature resumed for the fall sitting on October 28. Here is a summary of the education-related discussions that took place in question period from Oct. 28 to Dec. 5.

Sexual health education curriculum

Oct. 29 – Amanda Chapman (NDP–Calgary Beddington) questioned the need for the UCP's proposed change from an opt-out to an opt-in model for Alberta's sexual health curriculum, arguing that the current system works well for parents and that additional forms would be a burden, especially for non-English-speaking families. She asked Minister of Education Demetrios Nicolaides what issue the government was attempting to solve.

Nicolaides responded that the goal was to strengthen parental involvement, which he believes is essential for achieving the best educational outcomes. He assured that the government would collaborate with school divisions and partners to implement any changes.

Chapman cited research supporting sexual health education's benefits, expressing concern that an opt-in model might stigmatize sexual health. Nicolaides denied politicizing sex education, reiterating the importance of parents as partners in education and challenging the NDP's stance on parental involvement.

Chapman quoted parts of the curriculum, arguing that the proposed changes could hinder students' access to essential health education. Nicolaides responded that the curriculum remains robust, and parents retain the final say on their child's participation in sexual education. He stated that this parental right has long been part of Alberta's system.

Transgender youth policy

Nov. 5 – Rakhi Pancholi (NDP–Edmonton-Whitemud) criticized Premier Danielle Smith for reversing her stance on policies concerning transgender youth, recalling a 2014 speech where the premier expressed deep concern over policies that forced parental notification, which, according to her, jeopardized the privacy, dignity and safety of transgender youth. Pancholi questioned if the premier now valued her political future over the lives of transgender kids.

Nicolaides responded by affirming the importance of parental involvement in decisions regarding a student's preferred name or pronoun, emphasizing that the government's approach aimed to include parents, educators and professionals in challenging conversations for the best outcomes for students. He assured that additional supports were available within the education system.

Pancholi then argued that policies under the UCP would cause children

who change names or pronouns to face bureaucratic barriers, potentially leaving them feeling vulnerable and ashamed. She questioned the premier's commitment to children's safety and well-being, suggesting political motivations.

Nicolaides defended the premier and the UCP's commitment to children and called Pancholi's comments unfounded. He stated that the government's legislation aimed to ensure parental involvement in children's significant decisions, arguing that collaboration among parents, educators and professionals yields the best results.



CHRIS SCHWARZ/GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA
Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides at a press conference on Sept. 18.

Funding for complex classrooms

Nov. 19 – Julie Hayter (NDP–Calgary Edgemont) raised concerns about overcrowded and complex classrooms, noting that Alberta's Commission on Learning recommended smaller class sizes. She highlighted cases in her riding where classrooms exceed recommendations and lack educational assistants, questioning why the minister had failed to address staffing shortages. Nicolaides responded by emphasizing the government's \$8.5 billion investment in building and modernizing schools to improve learning environments.

Hayter shifted focus to staffing rather than infrastructure, sharing stories of families struggling without proper supports, including a child who was high-needs coded but without an educational assistant. She pressed Nicolaides on supporting Bill 208. Nicolaides reiterated the government's commitment to young learners, citing new literacy and numeracy screening initiatives, which he claimed were well-received by advocacy groups.

Hayter further highlighted the low wages of educational assistants, mostly women, earning below a living wage, and urged the government to increase their pay as a sign of respect for their essential work. Nicolaides responded by acknowledging the contributions of education staff but pivoted to criticize the opposition for past governance issues, claiming the current government has reversed negative trends and fostered growth. ■

Associate coordinator named for diversity, equity and inclusion subunit

Mark Milne
ATA News Staff

The start of the new year marked a new and significant addition to the ATA's Professional Development (PD) program area. On Jan. 1, Andrea Berg took the helm as the inaugural associate coordinator for a brand new subunit dedicated to the coordination of the Association's programming, policy and services relating to Indigeneity, diversity, equity and inclusion.

Berg says she was honoured to have been selected for this challenging new role. She hopes the new direction will provide an opportunity for diversity to be infused throughout everything the Association does across its various program areas.

"I hope that it will create a space for all of our members to feel that they belong and are heard, that they can come together to network and receive support," said Berg.

Berg began her teaching career at Julia Kiniski School in Edmonton. For the next 13 years, she worked at a variety of different schools in the Edmonton Public School Division until she joined the ATA's PD program area in 2009.

During her time at the ATA, Berg has played a key role in developing the Association's Diversity, Equity and Human Rights (DEHR) Committee. She was also instrumental in building the ATA's Walking Together Indigenous Education program, the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) initiative, and the Status of Racialized Teachers Working Group. Though Berg moved to the Communications program area in 2017, she retained her DEHR file.

In 2017, Berg earned her doctorate in education from the University of Alberta. Her research centred on integrating diverse viewpoints, such as francophone and Indigenous perspectives, into the curriculum.

Berg says her education and experience will play an important role in her new position.



Andrea Berg will be leading a new subunit of the PD program area.

"I'm a good listener," said Berg. "I want to meet with members, talk with members and take direction from members about what they need in order to feel supported by the Association."

Berg is excited to return to the program area where she began her career with the ATA. Familiar with building programs from the ground up, her first task is to get the new Diversity and Equity Networks (DENs) up and running.

"The purpose of DENs is to provide opportunities for teachers to network and support each other. It's an avenue for advocacy in areas of diversity."

She's also looking forward to developing the first-ever diversity sessions at the annual Summer Conference in Banff.

The Provincial Executive Council (PEC) selected Berg as the successful candidate for the new associate coordinator position at their November meeting.

"Diversity and inclusion have long been identified by PEC as areas in need of attention," said ATA president Jason Schilling. "Council is excited to see what Dr. Berg will bring to this new and vital role within the Association." ■

Teachers who identify as living with a disability invited to listening circle

ATA News Staff

According to Statistics Canada, between 2017 and 2022, the disability rate rose in all provinces and most of the territories. Due to this growth in the population, the ATA sought to better understand the employment challenges faced by members who identify as living with disabilities. In spring 2024, the ATA held its first online listening circle to explore these issues further.

A small group of teachers decided to continue to host monthly online listening circles on their own to provide opportunities for networking, support and advocacy. They would like to invite all interested teachers to their upcoming gatherings.

The next online listening circle for teachers who identify as living with a disability is January 21, 4:30 – 5:30 p.m. Please contact dehr@ata.ab.ca or check out the ATA's social media for more information. ■



Teacher's PET

Teachers share pictures of their pets along with an explanation of how the animal helps them in their profession.



Mika and Abbie

These sweet girls are always the characters in any story that I write with my Grade 2 students.
Ashley Reynolds



Pets create connections for teachers and students

Gordie

Coming home to this face every day releases all my stress and always makes me smile, no matter how bad the day was.
Amy Ciezki



Kally

She comes into my classes often. The students think she is fabulous.
Ingrid Rose



Peanut 🐾

Peanut is our class pet. She is a six- to seven-month-old leopard gecko. Kids just love her, as does my family.

Joanne Cudmore



Leonardo da Pinchy 🐾

He's a blue Borneo crab that lives with his older brother, Leggy Krabbitz, in my Grade 9 class. I also have yellow and blue shrimp, different fish and snails in two small tanks. My Grade 9s sometimes like to get up and stretch and wander around, and instead of wandering over to bother their peers, they often just watch the critters in their peaceful environment. Or, when they just need a brain break, they're welcome to try to spot the crabs or count the shrimp. Students are super interested in the care and natural planted environment, so apart from experiencing the calming effect, they learn a little bit too!

Christy Haggarty



Mitzy and Mara 🐾

Upset kiddos love animals and to help them regulate, I sit with them and quietly, calmly talk about my cats. They are two different personalities and the kids enjoy the stories. I will show [students] their pictures and this helps get past the moment. Periodically, I will share updates and pictures of their latest adventures with the whole class.

Shawna Reagan



Hugo 🐾

He is our classroom rabbit and helps students regulate, and teaches them responsibility, as they take turns caring for him every day. He's just as curious as my students, and sometimes gets into places that he shouldn't!

Teresa Andersson



Reba 🐾

I often speak of her and show update photos. She helps build connections during our sharing circle when we welcome a new student to our class. I used to take her to school for visits and former students still come by years later and ask how Reba is doing. She is my greatest source of joy and reminds me to live in the moment.

Lisa Schafer



TEACHERS' PETS ROCKING Red for Ed



Zeus

Jennifer Robinson



Izzie

Heather Quinn



Lucille

Jennifer Daniel



Titan

Helyn Akranis



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Alberta's teachers sound alarm on testing explosion



EXECUTIVE REPORT

Philip McRae
ATA Associate Coordinator, Research

Alberta's education system is grappling with a significant increase in elementary school testing, especially in literacy and numeracy. This surge has added roughly four extra days of work to teachers' responsibilities, all while they adapt to a new curriculum. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), in collaboration with Richelle Marynowski from the University of Lethbridge, examined these Standardized Diagnostic Assessment Tests (SDATs) and found that the classroom realities sharply contrast with the government's goals for the tests.

Key findings from ATA research

1. Negative impact on students

SDATs are causing stress and anxiety, especially for younger students, English language learners (ELLs) and those with exceptionalities. Teachers report that the timed nature of tests creates undue pressure. "Children are coming to school and all they want to do is perform well... Many develop a sense of failure," one respondent noted. Misaligned content exacerbates frustration and erodes confidence.

2. Limited usefulness of results

Teachers describe the SDAT results as delayed and unhelpful. One commented, "We won't get the results... until the end of April. It makes no sense." Without timely feedback or

actionable insights, teachers continue to rely on their professional judgment to identify struggling students far earlier, rendering the assessments redundant. The findings suggest the SDATs function more as accountability tools than as meaningful diagnostic instruments.

3. Misalignment with curriculum and developmental needs

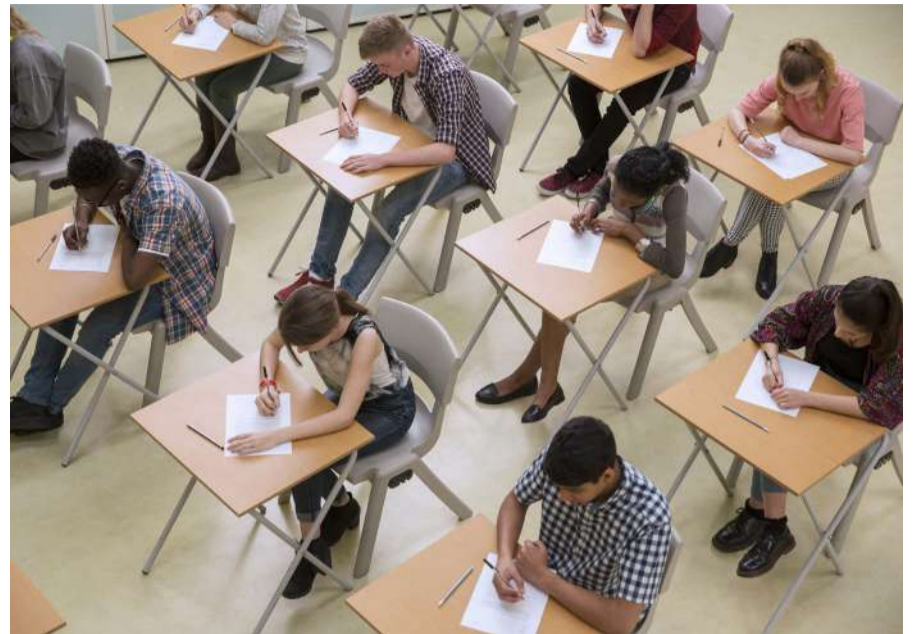
Teachers report that the tests assume knowledge of outcomes not yet taught, disregarding individual learning stages. One teacher highlighted, "The tests assume all students are capable of demonstrating understanding, regardless of ELL levels, communication delays or prior exposure." This mismatch undermines the effectiveness of the SDATs.

4. Lack of support and resources

Insufficient training and inadequate substitute teacher availability compound the challenges of administering SDATs. Teachers frequently use personal time to manage technical demands, a strain exacerbated by the lack of systemic support. One teacher shared they received "no sub time provided to administer or input data," emphasizing the need for better resource allocation.

5. Excessive time demands

SDATs consume valuable instructional time, with teachers losing an estimated four full days. "September and October



ISTOCK

are busy months trying to get to know students and establish routines. Adding additional expectations was exhausting," one respondent said. This raises questions about the priorities driving these assessments.

6. Inadequate training for teachers

A staggering 82 percent of teachers reported that they received no training in interpreting SDAT results but only had self-directed learning. Many found the data unclear and unhelpful, with one teacher stating, "No one has told me what these scores mean. There is no median or average dataset to see if students are at level."

Call to action

ATA President Jason Schilling summarized teachers' frustration with the SDATs.

"What teachers need is the discretion to decide when diagnostic

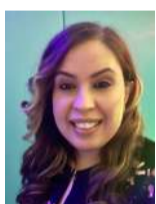
testing can be useful and the ability to provide timely, impactful support for all students," he said.

Schilling urges the government to refocus on fostering responsibility — teachers' ability to respond and address students' unique and diverse needs in real time — over the imposition of accountability metrics that are seen as low value in improving student learning.

"Given our research, I encourage the government to assess the value of their own assessments," Schilling said.

Current policies risk reducing education to a simple set of numbers, neglecting the professional judgment and human connection vital to teaching and learning. Alberta's students and teachers deserve a system valuing support and empowerment over bureaucratic data collection for those far away from students and their human potential. ■

Sensory wall fosters inclusion in classroom



SUCCESS STORIES

Swapna Bhagat
Luthra
Teacher

At McKenzie Towne School, we're always looking for new ways to support our students and help them thrive. This year, the school's enhanced educational supports (EES) classroom was excited to introduce the sensory wall, a project that is already making a huge difference for our students.

Created by our dedicated team — a teacher (myself) and two educational assistants (Ms. Erin and Ms. Cheryl) — the sensory wall is designed to provide a hands-on, sensory-rich experience that helps students self-regulate and stay engaged. Located right in the heart of the EES classroom, it has quickly become a space where students can feel safe, calm and focused, all while exploring different textures, colours and interactive features.

Designed with input from both students and staff, the wall includes a variety of sensory-friendly elements that give students the chance to calm their nerves or refocus when they start to feel overwhelmed. The tactile elements include soft fabrics, textured panels, spongy materials, grooved surfaces, bubble wrap and pom-poms. It's like a mini-break within the classroom, giving students the space to regroup and return to

their learning with a refreshed mind.

For many of the students in the EES classroom, sensory input plays a huge role in their ability to engage with the world around them. Some students may be more sensitive to certain lights, sounds or physical sensations, and this can sometimes make it harder for them to focus on learning. The sensory wall offers a space for students to explore different textures and interact with objects to help them self-regulate.

Regulation can sometimes be the key to unlocking the learning potential of students who face sensory challenges. It's tough for anyone to concentrate when overwhelmed, and this is especially true for students with sensory processing needs. By providing a space where students can engage with the wall's tactile features — whether it's pressing buttons or feeling different textures — they can quickly recenter themselves and get back to what they do best: learning.

More than just a calming space, the wall also promotes important social and emotional skills. Students are encouraged to take turns, ask questions and share their experiences with peers. It's a tool for building empathy and understanding, as students discover that everyone has different ways of processing the world around them.

One of the things we're most proud of is how the sensory wall supports the inclusive environment we're building here at McKenzie Towne School. We



SUPPLIED

The sensory wall was a collaborative project designed with student needs in mind.

want all our students, whether they have sensory sensitivities or not, to feel welcome and comfortable in the classroom. The sensory wall is a reminder that everyone's needs are different, and that's something we celebrate.

The sensory wall is already making a noticeable difference in helping our students feel more grounded and ready to learn. We are now looking forward to creating a sensory area near the school office, making a space where everyone is welcome to come and explore. We hope this will further enhance the sensory experience for our school community.

Creating effective supports for sensory needs can foster a more inclusive environment and build community. After all, when every student feels valued and empowered to learn in the way that suits them best, everyone wins. ■

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Success Stories is an ongoing feature that enables teachers to share their successes with their colleagues. To submit an idea or an article about a new program or approach that you've instituted, please contact managing editor Lindsay Yakimyshyn at lindsay.yakimyshyn@ata.ab.ca.



Pension Basics Webinar for Retired Members

ATRF is hosting a 30-minute Pension Basics webinar specifically for retired members on February 4 and February 26. Retired members can register for this ARTF webinar through MyPension.



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	5	3			4	1		2
7	6							8
2		4	3	1		6	9	
1		5			3			8
		9	1		8	5		6
6				7	5		2	
	9			3			1	4
3			2		9	8		
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READY... SET... GROW

ATA workshops offer another avenue for professional learning

Cory Hare
ATA News Staff

Teachers' convention season is nearly here, but the ATA offers professional development (PD) opportunities throughout the year and in various forms. ATA workshops give teachers a chance to delve into a particular topic. Check out what's new below.

ATA workshop addresses crisis in boys' education

- Males account for 75 percent of suicides in Canada.
- Boys are more likely than girls to drop out of high school.
- Fewer boys are pursuing post-secondary education.

These statistics indicate a deep issue with boys' education, which is the focus of a new workshop offered by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA).

Rethinking "Boys will be Boys" — Gender Bias and Boys' Education is the creation of Teresa Fowler, an assistant professor at Concordia University in Edmonton. Fowler has gained national prominence through her work on gender bias with Hockey Canada and the National Hockey League. The new ATA workshop is an adaptation of a presentation Fowler has delivered to standing-room-only crowds at teachers' conventions in recent years.

"The problem, especially with boys as they get older, is they do things like get really tall and their voices change, and so we tend to adultify young boys and think that they don't need help," Fowler says. "The danger in that is ... it leaves them alone and it leaves them to find their own connections."

In the absence of healthy examples of masculinity that meet their complex emotional needs, boys tend to gravitate toward social media, where influential figures like Joe Rogan and Andrew Tate portray narrow, unhealthy images of masculinity that are rooted in unbridled power, outward displays of material success and disrespect for women — in short, a "boys-will-be-boys" mentality that downplays poor behaviour. In contrast, research shows that boys are really craving permission to express a full range of emotions, Fowler says.

"Boys are just really kind of getting glossed over with respect to some of the social-emotional learning that they would really benefit from," Fowler says.

When boys are not heard, like all children, they will find other ways to express themselves, Fowler says. With boys, the data shows that this expression tends to come in the form of bullying and violence, since the "boys-will-be-boys" mindset says that is acceptable. In school, this can lead to boys being disciplined for their behaviour rather than receiving the social-emotional support they need to address their problems.

"We're not really connecting the dots," Fowler says. "That leaves boys to swim these waters by themselves."

In the workshop, participants examine the complexities of masculinity; the impacts of gender bias on boys' mental health, learning experiences and career pathways; and strategies for fostering inclusive classrooms.

"There are different ways to be a boy, and there shouldn't be one specific sort of mold that we fit our boys into," Fowler says. "I think our role as educators is to really ensure we give all students the opportunity to just become who they want to be without a script."

Workshop helps teachers meet the needs of new English speakers

As new English speakers continue to flock to Alberta, a new ATA workshop is available to help teachers meet the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms.

Entitled UDL Meets EAL: Empowerment for All Learners, this workshop aims to help teachers develop strategies for weaving language instruction into any and all content instruction. The workshop takes the principles of Universal Design Learning (UDL) and applies it to the needs of English as an additional language learners (EAL), says workshop creator Jacqueline Werstiuk, an EAL consultant with Edmonton Catholic Schools.

"Any teacher can take their class profile and the UDL guidelines and start to build in ways to address barriers to learning," Werstiuk says.

UDL is a framework developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology, a U.S.-based non-profit education research

ATA WORKSHOPS
continued on page 15

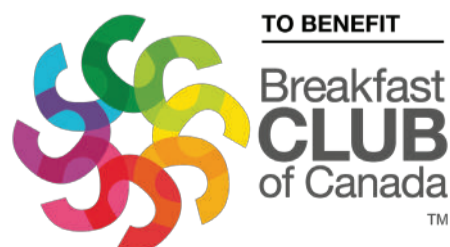
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The Alberta Teachers' Association

ATA WORKSHOPS

continued from page 13

and development organization. Embraced by many school jurisdictions, the UDL framework is based on the principle of designing lessons to include multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression.

In this workshop, participants will explore how to use UDL approaches to support students who are new to English, consider learner variability and potential barriers to student learning and examine UDL strategies that can help address barriers and enhance student learning.

The workshop is designed to be relevant to teachers at all grade levels, Werstiuk says.

"I would hope that educators would begin to weave language development throughout any and all content instruction to ensure that all students have the opportunity to access the curriculum with rigour and experience success in both content and language progression." ■

Workshop demand shift signals pressing challenges for teachers

The Professional Development (PD) program area of the ATA delivers a variety of workshops on an ongoing basis and is continually developing new ones.

PD executive staff officer Terra Kaliszuk, who oversees the ATA's workshop program, has noticed a shift in the last 18 months or so: the most sought-after workshops are no longer related to teacher wellness. Instead, demand is currently highest for workshops that relate to in-class issues such as classroom complexity, challenging behaviours, executive function and racial bias.

"Seeing this shift from a focus on our own wellness to these immediate and very pressing needs in our classrooms just shows us how difficult it is to be a teacher right now, how many things we have to think about and how many areas we need to be expert in in order to manage the complexities of our classroom environment," Kaliszuk says.

"Teachers are putting themselves last."

While teachers are clearly exhausted from all the competing pressures they face daily, Kaliszuk is hopeful that the ATA's new lineup of workshops can help ease teachers' burden.

"These workshops do two things," Kaliszuk says. "They help us to build our own professional capacity to create amazing learning experiences and navigate challenges in our classroom, but they also give us an opportunity to slow down and be with each other and talk about a profession that we love."

OTHER NEW WORKSHOPS

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Fostering Inclusive Classrooms

Newly revised, this workshop focuses more on exploring practical strategies for the classroom than it has in past versions. This workshop aims to equip teachers with strategies that reflect current research and are responsive to the increasing complexity of Alberta's classrooms.

Unlocking the Power of Numbers—Building Versatile Numeracy Skills in All Subjects

Numeracy skills belong in all subjects, not just math class! Join this engaging session to explore versatile numeracy skills that can be applied to a variety of subjects, concepts and contexts. Come prepared to engage in a variety of activities and discussions to explore the benefits and potential of discipline-embedded numeracy skills.

SCHEDULE A WORKSHOP

Delivered by an instructor corps of 68 teacher volunteers, ATA workshops are available throughout the province to teachers and administrators. A full lineup is available on the ATA website. Further information is available by email at pdworkshops@ata.ab.ca.

TEACHERS' CONVENTIONS

Looking for information on your upcoming teachers' convention? Visit <https://teachers.ab.ca/professional-development/teachers-conventions>.

SPECIALIST COUNCIL EVENTS

For an up-to-date list of all ATA specialist council conferences, workshops and events, check out the ATAPD Sched site <https://atapd.sched.com/>.

TALENT

January 14, 2025 | Volume 59, Number 7

In January, we are having a book advent. Each Grade 1 student brings in one of their favourite picture books wrapped up. Every day, I choose one book, unwrap it and then read it. We all try to guess the mystery student who shared this book. Finally, the student gets to bring their favourite book back home. Literacy, connection and a mystery. It is fun.

Rebecca Robins

I play my guitar a little more than usual.

James Hudyma

Healthy reset: food and exercise!

Edlyn Kay

Get outside!

Brian Kim

Bullet journals!

Jessica Callaway

Lean into joy! Silly read alouds, getting outside and lots of "scoot" activities.

Joclyn Beliveau

Lots and lots of bad dad jokes and puns!

Matteo Giuseppe

Lots of art.

Tesha Kazakoff

Getting outdoors for fresh air. After school, I see parents pick up their children with toboggan in tow as they head to the community hill for some fun. It's nice to see the children having fun and forming friendships.

Andrea Schoenmetzler

Natural light. Alternate lighting. Picture of an island on the smartboard.

Monika Cupido

Focus on the positive connections with my students and laugh lots!

Kristy Kempt Walker

January is a great time to focus on community and being together without interruption!

Shannon Salomons

Figure out when the next break is and chunk the rest of the year into weeks to breaks.

Erin Kilbride

SAD lamp and listen to soothing music.

Brenda Steringa-Bowman

A ray of (winter) sunshine

We asked teachers:
How do you chase the January blues away and bring the sunshine to yourself and your students?

Festive fun contest winner announced



Devon Zdeb shows off her Red for Ed prize.



Devon Zdeb, a teacher from Girouxville, AB, won the Festive Fun holiday trivia contest, which ran in the December 10 issue of the *ATA News*. All contest entrants who answered the trivia questions correctly were submitted into a random draw for the prize, a Red for Ed gift pack and a \$50 gift card, and Devon was the lucky winner!

Keep your eye on the *ATA News* for future contests.