Allen Gregg, one of Canada’s most respected political observers has noted that increasingly we have been convinced of a new narrative where “we seem to be living in a zero-sum society” characterized by “a politics of polarization, over-torqued partisanship and dogma.” This new ‘zero sum’ story where opportunity is framed as shrinking for everyone not only explains the anger of the Occupy Movement or the students protesting in the streets of Montreal but also the growing “disdain that the middle class has for “pampered” public sector employees or the excessive obsession the rich seem to have about the poor “ripping off the system.” The downstream effect, Gregg argues, is a citizenry increasingly convinced that governments are powerless and that equity and social justice will remain ephemeral goals. Now that we are caught in the post-2008 economic maelstrom we are at risk of turning against ourselves, becoming as Gregg describes, “a fearful divided citizenry.”

Last year in Canada, the top 10% of the working population earned on average $165,322 in contrast to an average of $9,750 after tax for the bottom 10%. While in the past 30 years the average income for the top 10% increased in 34%, the increase for the bottom 10% was only 11%. This perceived ‘shrinking pie’ is leading to a new age of imposed austerity and a major rethink of spending across Canada. While doing comparatively better than most countries following the 2008 meltdown, our country is not immune. Public services across the board including education will be challenged to sustain their resource base. The resulting pressure is already on across all education sectors in Alberta.

In Alberta, public cynicism and complacency are our worst enemies when we imagine a future where equity and community are vibrant possibilities. Consider that Albertans are materially ranked as in the top five richest people on the planet yet one out of five Albertans are at risk of turning against themselves.}

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE SIG
Educational Change SIG adopts an interdisciplinary and international approach to understanding many aspects of educational change, including large-scale reform, school-initiated change, school improvement, and classroom-level change.

OFFICERS
Dennis Shirley
Chair
Kristin Kew
Program Chair
Santiago Rincón-Gallardo
Secretary/Treasurer
Osnat Fellus
Web Manager

ABOUT THE SERIES
Lead the Change series, featuring renowned educational change experts from around the globe, serves to highlight promising research and practice, to offer expert insight on small- and large-scale educational change, and to spark collaboration within our SIG.

Series Co-Editors
Santiago Rincón-Gallardo and Kristin Kew

American Educational Research Association
seven Alberta children live in poverty and over two-thirds of low-wage workers in Alberta are women. The downstream impacts of public policies that marginalize and ignore the systemic day-to-day problems faced by Alberta’s children and youth require courageous and decisive action.

In terms of the lessons for educational change and poverty, Ben Levin, Professor at the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education, said it best, “In terms of public policy, equity is best defined as providing the least disadvantaged with the most resources.” This principle needs our unwavering commitment across a number of priority areas in education – among the most important: sustaining inclusive schools where all students learn. Who is considered inside and who is considered outside of our government’s long-touted “Alberta advantage” continues to be a challenge the government side steps. For example, support for students with special needs has declined dramatically. Between 2005 and 2011, the percentage of teachers reporting worsened conditions of support for students with special needs rose from 25 to 50 percent.

We need to fundamentally refocus and recommit to equity and community, setting aside the distractions of the growing corporatist agenda driving education policy makers with the hollow and unproven promises of digitally-driven personalization and unrestricted choice. The upcoming AERA theme compels us to move beyond the epidemic of policies and pronouncements that has come to shape the equity and inclusion conversations in the Alberta education sector and globally. As Pasi Sahlberg has reminded us over the past year, “the path to excellence is through equity.”

**Teachers’ Association (ATA)?**

The current position of Alberta as a high performing jurisdiction is a story that has over many decades been shaped by key defining moments. In the view of the ATA’s Executive Secretary, Gordon Thomas, three themes define the parallel growth of the capacity of Alberta’s K-12 system and the enhanced status of the ATA: basic welfare guarantees for teachers, ongoing enhancements of their professional status and the commitment of the Association to engaging the public about the importance of a vibrant public education system.

The enactment of the progressive Teaching Profession Act in 1935, surprisingly in the midst of the Great Depression, and further amendments in 1936 accorded professional status to teaching and made membership in the Association automatic for all teachers employed by public and separate school boards. Subsequent amendments requiring mandatory membership in the ATA for all certificate holders in public schools were the ‘game-changer’: creating a truly professional organization that had the power to discipline its members. Alberta established a pension plan for teachers in 1939. In 1941, the ATA was the first teachers’ organization in the country to obtain the right to bargain collectively on behalf of its members.

On the professional side, similar accomplishments can be noted. Quality teaching practice built on the foundations of solid teacher preparation and curriculum development and support has been the hallmark of our success. At the insistence of the ATA, the University of Alberta’s faculty of education was established in 1942 and, in the years following, teacher preparation was transferred from Alberta’s normal schools to the university, enhancing the professional status of teachers. In a 1942 agreement, the ATA took over responsibility from the department of education for the organization and delivery of teachers’ conventions across the province.
expansion of the Association’s commitment to its professional goals occurred in the late 1950s and 1960s with the establishment of specialist councils, which provide support and assistance to teachers in their chosen specialty. These specialist councils are critical to sustaining the focus of our teachers on what it takes to enhance teaching practice.

Extensive discussions with government over several decades have been successful in achieving professional self-governance for teachers through their Association. In 2009, the ATA became the first teachers’ organization in North America to be given the right, under legislation, to monitor the professional practice of its members. The ATA now has the responsibility to determine if a member’s professional practice meets the professional practice standard, and if the member’s practice does not meet the standard, it can take action that will remove the member from the classroom. The Minister retains responsibility for reviewing the practice of the relatively small number of teachers working in private and charter schools.

Key to the success of Alberta’s policies and supports is that since its inception, the ATA has been a unitary organization with school administrators as fully integrated members of the organization. However, to this day many policy makers fail to recognize the pivotal cultural driver that exists for Alberta school leaders: they remain primus inter pares, or first among equals, and are teachers first.

The past two decades have also seen substantial efforts by the ATA to respond to the challenges of the global economic volatility, complexity, and uncertainty that also characterize Alberta with its roller-coaster economy driven by an over-reliance on oil and revenues from primary resources. Despite recurring dramatic fluctuations in education funding over the past two decades, the ATA has worked hard to achieve the government’s policy goals.

The ATA has also endeavored to build further support for public education in the province with the establishment of the Public Education Action Centre, devoted to increasing awareness of the foundational role of public education in a democratic society.

Historically, the ATA has worked to halt poorly thought-out directions such as the School Performance Incentive Program (SPIP); to support and facilitate constructive efforts such as the Alberta Initiative in School Improvement (AISI); and to support revisions to the teacher discipline provisions of the Teaching Profession Act. In 1999, the provincial budget introduced the SPIP, a plan to reinvest $66 million into Alberta’s cash-strapped schools through bonuses paid to teachers on the basis of standardized test scores. This ‘merit-pay scheme’ was criticized by every provincial education partner and organization. Following the cancellation of SPIP, AISI was developed through the formation of a collaborative partnership. This grassroots educational program funds research projects designed by Alberta teachers—projects with the potential to improve schools and help children learn. In three-year AISI cycles, teachers design research methods, collect and analyze data, and report findings.

The history of ATA clearly shows a teachers' organization dedicated to improving public education and the welfare of teachers, and to raising the status of the profession. These objectives go far beyond the goals of a trade union and are a hallmark of the ATA history and culture.

*It is known that most countries with high-performing educational systems also have strong unions. Why is this the case?*

Having witnessed first-hand a number of labor actions for twenty years, I see the success of the ATA having shifted a rather simplistic bargaining dictum focus from “what you deserve” to include “what teachers deserve so students can learn.”
Framing teachers’ collective bargaining around a broader societal commitment to advocate for optimal teaching and learning conditions is the new work of teacher organizations.

While teaching has professional status, the reality of the profession is that teachers remain somewhat paradoxically, as David Livingstone calls them, “professional employees.” In this paradoxical public policy space, the professional responsibilities of Alberta teachers reside in a nuanced balance between the essential union functions that live alongside the elements of the profession. The difficulty for teacher unions remains that, while teachers aspire to be seen as professionals, their efficacy and professional autonomy “is continually in jeopardy because of organizational decisions made outside the influence of classroom teachers. Educational practices such as standardized curricula, testing and reporting, bigger classroom sizes, and increased administrative duties, just to name a few, have an enormous impact upon the immediate workspace of teachers.”

As Dennis Shirley and Andy Hargreaves emphasize in their most recent book, *The Global Fourth Way: The Quest for Educational Excellence*, there is a real need for teacher organizations (all-too-often derisively written off merely as “teacher unions”) to become much more connected to the core work of their profession—teaching and learning. They point to Ontario’s efforts several years ago when the government reform policies included a $20 million infusion into the province’s teacher unions for professional development. Citing the ATA as another powerful example of a progressive teacher organization, they point out that over 50% of the revenues of the ATA (all derived from member fees) are allocated to professional development. This contrasts with a figure of under 5% in most U.S. teachers’ associations.

What are some of the major struggles and greatest victories of the Alberta’s Teachers Association? How has the ATA navigated those struggles and obtained such victories?

For too long, Alberta’s K–12 education sector has been over-managed and under-imagined. This critique, shared by many international scholars who have studied Alberta, is offered both as a hopeful provocation and as a call to action.

In our Association’s work with government and dialogue with the public our over-riding message has been clear: while Alberta is a global high flyer, the current system is not sustainable. The average teacher in Alberta works 56 hours a week, the equivalent of almost two days a week of unpaid time. Thirty-two percent of Alberta teachers report that they have little control over their work lives and 72 percent report high levels of conflict between their working life and their personal time. Further, one reason that teachers are experiencing a dramatic decline in their professional autonomy is that they are seldom consulted about the acquisition of new technologies, especially those used to track and report on student progress.

Given Alberta’s internationally recognized education system (the top performer in the English-speaking world), its booming economy and its population that is materially one of the richest on the planet, some have argued that incremental change and small “tweaks” are all that Alberta needs at this point to maintain its prosperity.

Our current struggles are great but so too are the promises ahead. Before the end of this decade, Alberta’s student population is expected to grow from 500,000 to 600,000. Furthermore, Alberta’s major cities are expected to become home to more immigrants per capita than so-called cosmopolitan centers such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Alberta, with its boom-and-bust economy, is all too familiar with the “poverty of plenty.”
Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley, long-time observers of Alberta’s education system, have offered their views about what Alberta needs to do to move forward. In a nutshell, Hargreaves and Shirley argue that Alberta needs to push beyond the stalled promises of what they call the “Third Way,” an approach to public services, espoused by leaders such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, which attempted to combine the best features of state support and market competition. Hargreaves argues that the thin promises of standards and accountability that characterized the Third Way must be replaced by a deeper understanding of the true value of education. Hargreaves and Shirley further argue that a society’s vision of the future should be created by citizens and community members who are actively engaged and by leaders who can tap into and elevate public spiritedness.

Looked at from this perspective, redesigning Alberta’s education system will involve addressing broad existential questions such as: What is the Alberta that the world needs to see? What kind of Albertans do we need to become to get us there? How will leadership in learning help us become our best selves? The leadership shown by former education minister David Hancock in documents such as Inspiring Education, Setting the Direction, Speak Out and Inspiring Action is, without question, a positive first step in developing such a vision. Taken together, the choices outlined in these documents present the education partners with exciting opportunities to rethink their structures and moral purposes in ways that will improve learning for students.

At the same time, aggressive corporate interests are attempting to privatize curriculum development and student assessment and to find “technology solutions” for educational problems. Clearly such corporate interests and commercial developments are distractions from sustainable educational reform. Globally, corporations are eyeing education as an untapped market worth up to $500 billion. In Alberta where consecutive governments have not been averse to pouring money into unproven ‘technology solutions’ for education, the distractions from priority needs such as investing in early learning and providing optimal conditions for teaching and learning have unfortunately been all too often hard to resist.

**What models/ideas promise greatest success for large-scale educational improvement?**

Educational improvement in Alberta will hinge on the willingness of governments such as Alberta’s to adopt a distributed approach to school innovation and governance, one that allows schools to become community hubs of care, creativity and enterprise.

Unfortunately, attempts to improve high performing systems that have reached the “mature” stage and are prone to complacency, tend to focus on seeking short-term performance and productivity gains by tweaking the existing system in an effort to sustain its integrity. Alberta’s education sector has taken this approach on a number of occasions: by adding more instructional time in the hope of improving student performance; by hiring teacher assistants to work with special needs children; by enhancing technology to help teachers meet the demands of an overly prescriptive curriculum; and by introducing a system of performance-based pay to encourage teachers to improve student outcomes. Pasi Sahlberg has coined the term *Global Educational Reform Movement* (GERM) to describe the ideology that prevents many governments from undertaking meaningful educational reforms. Driven by a small group of elite policymakers and corporate leaders, this neoliberal movement promotes an agenda with which Albertans are all too familiar: a narrow focus on basic knowledge and skills in so-called core subjects, the implementation of
“universal” standards for teaching practice and school leadership, and a fixation with emerging technologies as a way of improving schools. Fueled by powerful organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, GERM compels schools and nations to compete rather than to network and learn from one another.

There are alternatives to the distractions and wrong drivers of GERM. The Association’s efforts to support educational improvement are focused on the growing body of evidence that educational development is most effectively achieved through innovations undertaken by networks of schools rather than by system edicts or policy pronouncements. Driven by this evidence, the partners of the Finland-Alberta partnership (FINAL) are committed to “creating a great school for all,” believe that governments should build capacity for local leadership enabled by a supportive system that provides infrastructure and capital.

To foster school cultures of creativity and ingenuity, Alberta is building on the professional capital of its already-strong teaching force. Efforts such as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement reinforce the conclusion that educational improvement cannot happen unless teachers have the support to undertake ongoing school-based research that pushes the limits of sound teaching practice, curriculum design and school development.

Paradoxically, establishing international partnerships can help to foster innovation and creativity at the school level by emphasizing that school reform is part of the internationalization of education. The Finland-Alberta partnership is one that other education partners across the globe, including Singapore, are embracing with us.

The implications for rethinking leadership in educational improvement in Alberta are clear. The government’s current complicated architecture of system-level reforms will likely have little impact on an already-high-performing jurisdiction such as Alberta. Ben Levin predicted two decades ago that the “epidemic” of centrally managed policy reforms already evident would ultimately prove more of a barrier rather than an asset to the authentic transformation of schools. Rethinking leadership by thinking ahead, delivering within and reaching across, will be a catalyst for educational improvement that advances equity in a great school for all. In this regard, I am given hope by Ronald Edmonds, who reminds us “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us: we already know more than we need to do that; and whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.”
J-C COUTURE

Dr. J-C Couture is currently Associate Coordinator of Research with the Alberta Teachers’ Association. During his twenty years as a classroom teacher, he worked on a number of provincial curriculum development initiatives and co-authored social-studies textbooks and other classroom resources. In 1999, he completed his PhD focusing on cultural psychoanalytic theory and its implications for understanding teacher identity and organized culture. He joined the Alberta Teachers’ Association in 1999 and since then has worked in professional development, leadership, and research. He currently represents the Association on a number of provincial and national advisory groups including the Canadian Teachers’ Federation Work Group on Teacher Quality. His most recent publications focus on teachers’ work life and optimal conditions of practice that sustain school improvement. He is actively engaged in the Association’ strategic planning work and collaboration with international partners on educational development projects. His most recent publications include the research report (in collaboration with Association staff): A Great School for All – Transforming Education in Alberta Schools, and the book: Rethinking School Leadership – Creating Great Schools for All Students, co-edited with Stephen Murgatroyd. Dr. Couture can be reached at jc.couture@ata.ab.ca