

# Alberta elementary schools show little improvement, mediocre results in Grade 6: Fraser Institute



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According to the Fraser Institute's Alberta Report Card on Elementary Schools 2017, students writing Grade 6 provincial achievement tests across Alberta averaged only slight improvements in language arts, math and social studies while suffering a dip in science scores over the last five years. (file photo) *SUE OGROCKI / AP*

Crowded classrooms, limited resources and inconsistent supports in the early grades are contributing to mediocre results and little improvement in Alberta's elementary schools, parents say.

According to the [Fraser Institute's Alberta Report Card](https://www.fraserinstitute.org/studies/school-report-cards) (<https://www.fraserinstitute.org/studies/school-report-cards>) on Elementary Schools 2017, students writing Grade 6 provincial achievement tests across Alberta averaged only slight improvements in language arts, math and social studies while suffering a dip in science scores over the last five years.

And overall ratings — which take into account test scores, gender gaps and percentage of tests failed or not written — show that provincewide ratings have remained at a virtual standstill, 6.0 out of 10 every year, between 2012 and 2016.

The ratings within Calgary are similarly mediocre, ranging from 6.6 to 6.7 out of 10 at the Calgary Catholic School District between 2012 and 2016, and from 5.8 to 6.2 out of 10 at the Calgary Board of Education during the same period.

According to Fraser's "all-schools average" — which measures results from across Alberta — Grade 6 students who wrote provincial achievement tests in 2016 averaged scores of 66.8 in language arts, 64.0 in math, 68.9 in science and 67.1 in social studies. The grades hardly differ from 2012 when Alberta students averaged 66.7 in language arts, 61.7 in math, 70.0 in science and 65.6 in social studies.



Althea Adams, spokeswoman for the Calgary Association of Parents and School Councils (file photo) *CRYSTAL SCHICK CRYSTAL SCHICK / POSTMEDIA*

“Those are not good scores,” said Althea Adams, spokeswoman for the Calgary Association of Parents and School Councils. “We know the issues. We know class sizes are too large; our classrooms are packed, we’re over-capacity.

“There’s just not enough transparency in terms of how our kids are doing,” Adams says, concerned the results indicate kids don’t have a strong grasp of the basics by Grade 6. “It’s because we’re not getting the feedback we need for early intervention. We’re not getting the information in report cards, and we’re not getting consistent supports.”

Parents have criticized elementary and some junior high school report cards which now score students from zero to four on a variety of subjects and academic “outcomes.”

They say a 3/4, for instance, does not provide enough information as to where a student stands, Adams says. Most would rather see a more specific percentage score out of 100, since a 3/4 might translate to anything from a 55 to a 95.

Adams, who has two boys in elementary school, says her older son faced challenges with fine motor skills but received early support through an educational assistant. But when her younger son showed similar challenges, the same teacher did not provide feedback or supports early enough, saying the assistance program had been cancelled.

“By then, it was way too late,” Adams says. “Those early years are critical in terms of setting kids up for later . . . because by the time you’re in Grade 3 or 4, things are moving very quickly and you don’t have time to catch up with skills that should have been learned in kindergarten.”



Minister of Education David Eggen talking to the media. (file photo)

Education Minister David Eggen argues Alberta students continue to excel in all subject areas, with the percentage of students achieving “acceptable standards” on PATs among the highest over the past five years.

“Our government is investing in new schools, reversed what would have been significant cuts to the education system by the former government and we have committed to a curriculum review and redevelopment for six core subjects,” Eggen says.

“Alberta is known for having a world class education system and our government is only working to improve that.”

According to Eggen’s staff, Alberta performs well at the international level, evidenced by the 2015 results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which assesses 15-year-olds on reading, math and science. Alberta students tied for 1st in reading and 2nd in science among 72 jurisdictions.



*“If they can choose their style of learning, they will be more successful, and they will be more engaged.”*  
— *Andrea Holowka, superintendent of learning for the Calgary Catholic School District*

Parents have argued that achieving the “acceptable standard” on PATs only means grades of 50 per cent or higher, and are nothing to boast about.

But educators say they’re working harder to focus on early literacy and individual learning.

Andrea Holowka, superintendent of learning for the CCSD, says a growing body of research has shown the brain goes through critical development stages between the ages of 0 and 5, and it continues to grow and develop well into the mid-20s.

As a result, the CCSD is now using springtime kindergarten orientation sessions to inform parents about early childhood learning and how to prepare kids for school.

“We remind them of the importance of reading with their kids as much as possible, having conversations with them all the time, asking, answering questions. When you engage in those ‘send and receive’ activities, the neurons in the brain are firing, creating new pathways,” she says.

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Teaching strategies also continue to evolve in the early grades so students can maximize on their learning, focusing more on movement and individual choice.

“We know they need shorter lessons, shorter activities. They need to spend more time moving, with breaks, activities, movement games, (and) songs with actions,” she says.

“We allow them to express their learning in different ways, whether it’s through writing, drawing, and presentations. If they can choose their style of learning, they will be more successful, and they will be more engaged.”

As a policy, officials with the CBE do not comment on results connected to the Fraser Institute.

“The Calgary Board of Education does not rank or rate any of our schools,” said CBE spokeswoman Megan Geyer.

“We know all of the schools in our system are excellent places to learn. Therefore, we won’t be providing comment on this year’s Fraser Institute report.”

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## **Spotlight on Calgary**

Here’s a detailed look at Grade 6 provincial achievement test results across the city and ratings applied to each school by the Fraser Institute. Ratings take into account test scores, gender gaps and percentage of tests failed or not written. (Roll mouse over the dots for details.)

Elementary schools with insufficient enrolment, or those without Grade 6 classes, are not ranked.

Go to Fraser Institute (<https://www.fraserinstitute.org/studies/report-card-on-albertas-elementary-schools-2017>) to see more detailed results, including trends over five years and gender gaps.