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## A School System in Decline

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This year is different for Grade 12 students heading for university. Except for English 12 or its equivalent, the Ministry of Education has abandoned provincial examinations in all senior academic courses.

Grade 12 exams are no longer offered in key courses such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, English literature, French and Mandarin. Students aiming for university entrance typically are required to achieve at a high level in three or more of these courses.

The decision to drop Grade 12 exams in academic courses follows a stream of similar actions taken over the past ten years that have weakened standards in the public school system.

In 2002 the education ministry began to retreat from routinely updating the provincial curriculum, the prime vehicle used to define what is taught in classrooms. This was followed by termination of the school accreditation system, which served as a planning and accountability mechanism throughout the province. And in recent years, the BC Teachers' Federation launched an aggressive campaign to undermine provincial tests in Grades 4 and 7.

These actions, combined with the never-ending conflict between the BCTF and successive provincial governments, are eroding the foundations of our K-12 school system and set the stage for a decline in the quality of public education.

A close review of recent international and national assessments suggests that the decline may have already started.

Reports from the latest OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that while British Columbia 15 year-olds perform at a high level, the province's global rankings have declined. The lower rankings are attributable to improvements in performance of other countries -- and to actual drops in BC's scores.

PISA reports show that between the years 2000 and 2009 the proportion of BC

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students attaining top international reading levels dropped from 47% to 40%. In mathematics, average BC scores also fell over the period 2003 and 2009.

In the 2010 Canadian mathematics assessment conducted by the Council of Ministers of Education, Grade 8 students scored below the Canadian average and were outperformed by Quebec, Ontario and Alberta.

The Ministry's Foundation Skills Assessment for Grades 4 and 7 shows drops in the percentage of students meeting reading and numeracy standards, but the BCTF campaign against the tests obscures these results.

Educators in the top performing school systems in the world are focused on the continuous improvement of teaching and student learning. This dominant focus is built on foundations that include a strong curriculum that is routinely modernized and a student assessment system that supports student growth and public accountability.

Not all high performing school systems around the globe do things the same way. Successful systems reflect the unique culture and education history of each country.

Eliminating provincial Grade 12 exams is significant because this program has played a key role over the past century in developing tens of thousands of graduates who entered professions and who have played a leadership role in the social and economic development of British Columbia.

Although their design and content have changed over the years, the basic purpose of these exams has remained the same: to provide young men and women in every corner of the province -- regardless of their social or economic circumstance -- with the opportunity to work hard and attain levels of achievement that are readily recognized by top universities across North America.

A key feature of the Grade 12 exam program was that experienced teachers from across the province designed and marked the examinations. Each year, hundreds of teachers reviewed student performance standards, identified trends and issues, and provided suggestions to their classroom colleagues on how to improve instruction.

This group of leading professionals played a central role in transmitting a culture

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of academic excellence to the next generation of teachers, probably the most important benefit of the program now being lost.

Experienced teachers and principals know that dropping these exams, and the absence of benchmarks they provide, will result in grade inflation and fragmented academic standards across the province.

From its modest beginnings in the late nineteenth century, the province's public school system has been built on solid standards to become one of the best in the world.

But in a global society where education is a major determinant of the social and economic health of nations, eroding standards, weakening test scores and endless conflict are all indicators of a school system in decline.

*Jerry Mussio was Canada's representative in the development of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment between 2000 and 2004.*