

## MCATA Fall Symposium Report

*Darryl Smith*

The MCATA fall symposium was held October 22 at the River Cree Resort, in Enoch. Minister of Education Dave Hancock weathered the storm, as members of the panel and the audience were unanimous in their responses to the questions up for discussion. The questions, which were inspired by the provincial government's recent decision to eliminate the written-response section of the mathematics and science diploma exams, were phrased as follows:

- What is the value and role of communication in mathematics literacy? What does communication in the mathematics classroom look like?
- What is the value of the mathematics diploma exams for Alberta students? In particular, what is the value of the written-response section of the mathematics diploma exams?

ATA president Carol Henderson served as moderator, and she did an excellent job of keeping the discussion open and to the point, tactfully and humorously enforcing time limits on speakers.

Minister Hancock began by saying that the removal of the written-response component was done in the context of planning for the future, and he questioned whether written-response questions help us to achieve outcomes and whether they are the best use of resources. The well-spoken minister candidly admitted that "assessment is a target," and it seems that the decision to eliminate the written-response component was based on what the government sees as a "high correlation" between the machine-scored and the written-response components. Numerous times throughout the panel discussion, he cited a correlation of 0.977 (which was given to him by his advisors, and no information was forthcoming on how the correlation had been calculated). He seemed to view the evaluation of Part A (written-response) questions as a duplication of effort and, of course, an unnecessary cost. "Classroom teachers are in the best position to do assessment," he said, and "removing Part A is in

no way an indication that math/science literacy is unimportant." He went on to say that "there is not a lot of literacy in Part A"—a further attempt to justify the removal of the written-response section.

To his credit, Minister Hancock stated several times that he would talk to his advisors on many of these issues, and he seemed genuinely surprised that there was so much concern.

Panel member Carolyn Martin, a teacher, called the removal of the written-response section a travesty. Moderator Henderson suggested that if the written-response section is indeed removed, the weightings of the teacher mark and the diploma exam mark should be 80 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, rather than the current 50-50 split. Indy Lagu, a professor of mathematics at Mount Royal University, declared that "communication is a necessary part of mathematics education," and he noted that he had not encountered even one multiple-choice question in pursuing his own mathematics education.

Sherry Bennett, of the Alberta Assessment Consortium, offered the opinion that the diploma exam is "high stakes" and implored the government to "not make decisions regarding examinations based on budget!" Both Lagu and Martin opined that machine-scored questions set students up for failure.

Elaine Simmt, a professor of secondary mathematics education at the University of Alberta, stated that "teaching mathematical communication ensures that the mathematically literate person can communicate mathematically." She noted that "society today is held together by mathematics." Simmt reported that the US-based National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) holds that "all students should be able to organize their thinking mathematically," and she added that "nothing in the classroom is more fundamental than communication."

The people most affected by diploma exam decisions are, of course, the students, who were most ably

represented by Ainslie Fowler, a recent high school graduate who is now studying English at the University of Alberta. Ainslie, in response to the first question, asked, "If communication is so important, why would it be done away with on the biggest exam of the year?" She observed that "written response is communication between student and teacher" and that "clear goals lead to an incentive to work hard." She was candid about her results on the Pure Mathematics 30 diploma exam. Unfortunately, she was one of the outliers with respect to Minister Hancock's stated correlation of 0.977: she scored 93 per cent on

the written-response section, but about 20 percentage points lower on the machine-scored section. This is a clear example of panel member Donna Chanasyk's observation that "every question on a machine-scored exam is an all-or-nothing deal."

I congratulate Minister Hancock and all of the panel members for the professional manner in which they examined these questions. It remains to be seen what impact, if any, this frank and open discussion will ultimately have on the government's decision. We can only hope!