

Student Assessment in B.C.'s Public Schools

A Guide for Parents

By Catherine Abraham and Joyce Gram

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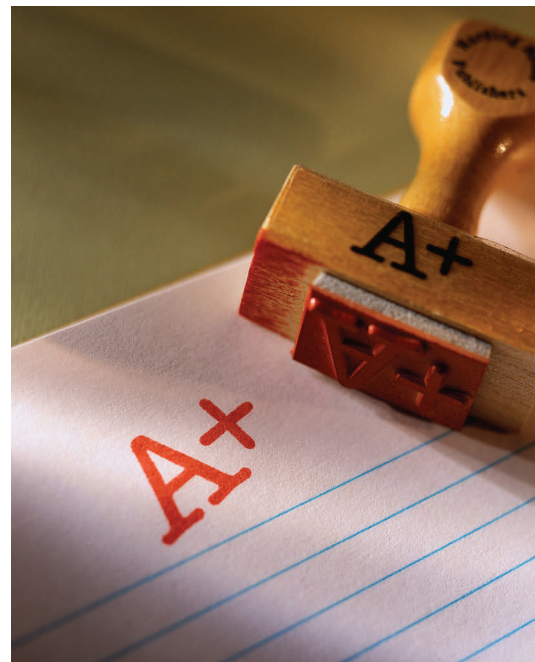
Student Assessment: How It Works in B.C.'s Public Schools

As parents, we are keenly interested in how well our children are doing in school. We pay close attention to our children's report cards and the comments of their teachers. We ask questions about what our children need, or need to do, to excel or move on to the next level. We want our children to succeed in school and beyond.

But do we understand how our schools measure our children's performance? Do we know what standards they use, how they arrive at those standards, and how they decide whether our children are meeting those standards? And do we understand how our schools and school districts assess the "big picture"—how they, as a public school system, are doing?

With background information on key areas of assessment, followed by *What the Research Tells Us*, this guide will give you a clearer view of student assessment in our schools.

We hope the information that follows will show you why and how student performance is assessed and how this assessment is used. We also hope it will help you, as a parent, as a member of your Parent Advisory Council, or as a parent representative on your School Planning Council, use assessment more effectively to improve our schools and school districts.



Why Do We Test Students?

Background

Testing is one way to assess a student's learning. Testing has many purposes:

- It tells us what a student has learned or not yet learned.
- It tracks a student's progress.
- It helps us understand learning differences among students.
- It tells us whether a student is eligible for placement, promotion, or graduation.
- It helps teachers plan instruction.

What the Research Tells Us

There are a number of reasons why we use tests to assess student performance:

1. Testing helps teachers make decisions for the classroom.

Tests can detect reading difficulties, assess how well students are learning the curriculum, and identify problem-solving abilities among students. Tests can be used to identify areas that need attention, and to design programs to suit students' strengths and weaknesses.

2. Testing motivates students, parents, and teachers.

Students who know they will be tested study more and learn more. As well, teachers and parents get involved in preparing students for tests. Teachers make changes in how and what they teach based on test results.

3. Testing tells us how effective particular programs are.

Testing conducted before and after a program is implemented tells us how well the program is working. National and international tests tell us how our schools compare with schools in other provinces and countries.

4. Testing helps achieve accountability.

Accountability is, in part, about giving information to the public. Disclosing test results makes our schools accountable to the school district, the province, and the public. Tests help teachers and schools identify students who need support. They also help to ensure that resources are put where they are most needed.

Importantly, test results encourage us to talk about student and school progress and to make changes.

Have you ever talked to teachers in your school about how testing is used?

Setting the Stage—Performance Standards

Background

B.C.'s Ministry of Education has developed a set of standards, called the B.C. Performance Standards, to help teachers, students, and parents assess a student's learning in the classroom.

The Performance Standards are a detailed set of criteria, organized by grade and subject, that describe the skills a student in that grade and subject can be expected to master. These criteria, or standards, are a relatively new way of assessing students. Use of the standards is voluntary.

The Performance Standards have been developed in key areas—reading, writing, numeracy, social responsibility, and information and communications technology. Teachers compare a student's work with the standards for the grade and subject. For example, a Grade 1 student who knows that books work from front to back and sentences go from left to right, but who often guesses at words, would be *Not Yet Within Expectations* in reading. A Grade 8 student who often volunteers for extra responsibilities and shows leadership would *Exceed Expectations* in social responsibility.

Unlike most forms of testing which assess student learning *after the fact*, the standards allow assessment to be done while learning goes on. This is sometimes called *formative assessment*. The standards are not a type of test, but they can be used as the basis for teacher tests, standardized tests, credentialing exams, and other forms of assessment.

What the Research Tells Us

There are many benefits to the B.C. Performance Standards:

- Students know exactly what is expected of them. They can use the standards to assess their own work and, in doing so, acquire a better sense of the quality of their work.
- Teachers can clarify their expectations. Because the standards are based on the curriculum, teachers can plan learning activities around them. The standards assist teachers in marking assignments and reporting to parents.
- Parents gain a better understanding of assignments, homework, and expectations. Reports on their child's progress become more meaningful: Parents can see how their children measure up to appropriate expectations.

Does your school use the B.C. Performance Standards?

Types of Testing

Classroom Tests

Background

Teachers assess students in the classroom in a variety of ways:

- Observation
- Projects
- Presentations
- Quizzes
- Teacher-made tests

Each of these assessments should correspond to what is being taught in the classroom. They should also be weighted to reflect their importance and measure the goals of the curriculum.

Teachers in the classroom can measure learning in ways that fit the subject and how it is being taught. They can also evaluate students in areas not easily measured by other types of tests. For example, a teacher might assign small group projects on Canadian history. Marks may reflect not only content, but also the students' ability to plan, write up or illustrate their findings, and present them to the class.

What the Research Tells Us

Teachers have first-hand knowledge of their students. This gives them an advantage in interpreting results from their own measurements. Teachers are in a good position to assess how well their students understand the concepts being examined.

Classroom tests can take many forms. They are highly relevant to what is being taught.

One teacher's standard of excellence might be quite different from another's. Teacher-designed tests are, therefore, not always reliable. This limitation can be addressed by combining teacher-made tests with other kinds of tests linked to standards.

Do you know how often teachers test in your school? How consistent is testing by grade, teacher, or subject?

Program Assessment

Background

When a new program is implemented, for example, a Grade 1 reading program or new curriculum for Math 9, it is important to evaluate it.

Program assessments help schools and school districts allocate resources, direct curriculum change, and plan courses. Assessments might include achievement tests, surveys of students' attitudes and perceptions, and anecdotal reports. Program assessments can, and often do, take a wider look at services than other forms of assessment.

Program assessments aim to answer the question: "Did this program achieve what we wanted?"

What the Research Tells Us

Program assessments are considered to be reliable and valid. They provide an objective measure of achievement. They also collect information in many areas:

- Student achievement and attitudes
- Student background
- Classroom processes
- Need for professional development

Program assessments must be carefully interpreted or they may result in inappropriate comparisons.

Do your school and school district assess the programs they implement? Are the results communicated to parents?

Standardized Testing

Background

Standardized testing is used with large groups of students to assess common skills and areas of knowledge, for example, problem-solving skills or knowledge considered important for an educated citizen.

A good example of standardized testing is B.C.'s Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) which assesses reading, writing, and numeracy in grades 4 and 7. The purpose of the FSA is to provide schools and school districts with a common provincial standard against which student performance can be gauged.

Standardized testing is controversial. Proponents support standardized testing because well-designed tests show us who needs help, what changes need to be made in teaching, and which schools need improvement. Opponents say these tests should only be done on a sample basis to assess programs.

Are the results of standardized tests communicated to parents in your school and school district? Are changes made based on the results?

What the Research Tells Us

Standardized testing helps us answer the question “How are we doing?” in a reliable way. It gives us an accurate measure of student performance on selected skills at a given time.

Standardized testing helps schools and school districts identify strengths and weaknesses and measure achievement over time. The information gained is useful in assessing programs, developing curriculum, making changes in classroom practice, and creating instructional resources for the classroom.

Researchers use standardized testing to determine how students learn most effectively and what factors have the greatest impact on learning.

Tests do not cover all the content of the curriculum. Results must be interpreted keeping in mind the purpose of the test to avoid wrong or inappropriate use of results.

Some critics say that standardized testing causes teachers to teach to the test at the expense of covering the subject area in depth. Those in favour, on the other hand, say these tests measure knowledge and skills considered to be key objectives of the curriculum. We need reliable measures of how well students are performing in these areas. Standardized testing can provide these measures without jeopardizing other areas of learning that may not lend themselves well to this kind of testing.

Credentialing Examinations

Background

Provincial credentialing exams are given to upper level students in specific subject areas to determine whether the student is ready to move on to the next level or graduate.

In B.C., credentialing exams are given to students in grades 10, 11, and 12 in certain courses. A student's results are usually combined with a school mark to determine standing in the course.

Results from credentialing exams are gathered and summarized at three levels: the school, school district, and province. This allows for comparison among the three levels as well as among different student populations, for example, urban and rural, or higher and lower socio-economic groups.

What the Research Tells Us

Credentialing exams are considered to be valid and reliable. They are limited, however, to what can be measured with a pencil and paper test.

These exams ensure that students have achieved the prescribed outcomes for the course.

Results from credentialing exams are used in setting standards for admission to post-secondary institutions.

How do results on provincial exams in your secondary school compare to classroom marks? Are they generally higher, lower, or about the same?

Portfolios

Background

Portfolios are collections of student work and teacher observations. A portfolio is meant to contain more than a student's projects—it is meant to reflect the student's progress through a collection of work relating to the instructional goals of the program. Portfolios can show student progress in areas not commonly covered by other types of assessment.

There are many kinds of portfolios. They can be used from kindergarten through to university. Electronic or e-portfolio format is becoming common in some classrooms.

In B.C., the use of portfolios as part of the Graduation Program is under review.

What the Research Tells Us

Portfolios are used in many countries to assess student learning. They create a profile of a student's progress over time.

Students, families, and teachers all benefit from the use of portfolios:

- Students are encouraged to reflect on their own progress. They become more fully engaged in their own learning when producing portfolios.
- Families become more involved in a student's learning. Parents gain a better appreciation for what the student is doing in school.
- Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their teaching practices, plan continuously, and evaluate student work on a regular and frequent basis.

How does your secondary school organize portfolios so that teachers and students work on them together? Does your elementary school use portfolios?

Individual Student Assessment

Background

Individual students may be assessed outside the classroom to detect learning disabilities, reading difficulties, language deficiency, and giftedness. With underachieving students, individual assessment such as psycho-educational assessment can point to the nature and severity of the learning difficulty and direct the educator to appropriate programs.

Individual assessment is becoming increasingly common at the kindergarten and primary levels to identify at-risk students, especially in reading. These students are often placed into intensive programs to help them catch up as quickly as possible.

What the Research Tells Us

Individual student assessment is objective and reliable. Results identify the student's strengths and weaknesses and help in planning programs and opportunities that will benefit the student.

There is a growing body of evidence that the earlier the intervention, the more effective it will be. Many school districts are screening kindergarten children to identify those at risk for developing reading problems. Students who are identified and receive intensive instruction can acquire average reading skills.

Research also suggests that children identified to be at risk who do not receive special attention during the first three years of school may never learn to read at the level of their age-mates. Their vocabulary may be limited and they may have ongoing problems with reading comprehension. Many will require ongoing assistance throughout their education.

Are individual student assessments done in your school or school district in a timely manner? How is this information used to allocate resources? Does your school or school district conduct early screening?

New and Emerging Trends

New assessment techniques and models are being developed all the time. We are constantly looking for better ways to measure student performance and interpret the results. This is because schools and school districts are recognizing that assessment is a tool for improving teaching and learning.

Some of the new approaches that have recently been developed are performance assessment, criterion-referenced assessment, computer-based assessment, and value-added assessment. The first two are sometimes called *authentic assessment*.

Authentic assessment

Student portfolios, demonstrations, experiments, written projects, and open-ended response tasks are examples of authentic assessment. Their objective is to allow students to demonstrate their learning in a hands-on way.

B.C.'s Graduation Portfolio, mentioned earlier in this guide and currently under review, is an example of authentic assessment. The portfolio measures student work in areas not commonly covered in other types of testing. These include arts and culture, community involvement, education and career planning, employment skills, information technology, and personal health. Electronic or e-portfolios are becoming more common.

Criterion-referenced assessment is another example of authentic assessment. It assesses student performance against a set of pre-determined standards or criteria. B.C.'s Performance Standards, also discussed earlier, are a good example of this form of assessment.

Computer-based assessment

This is expected to play an increasing role in assessment in the near future. Still in the early stages of development, computer-based assessment may offer significant advantages over traditional paper and pencil assessment in validity, reliability, and efficient administration. Its potential for adaptability is almost unlimited; it offers testing on demand and gives students and teachers faster feedback.

Value-added assessment

Value-added assessment is a statistical tool to report student progress between two points in time, using results from standardized tests. One researcher says it is a “measure of educational effectiveness that promises to revolutionize education.”¹ However, it is costly and requires assessment every year and new data systems.

¹ Stone, J. E. (1999). Value-added assessment: An Accountability revolution. As cited by Taylor and Tubianosa in *Student Assessment in Canada*, p. 67.

Does your school or school district evaluate its assessment methods or look at new ways to assess students?

Building a Balanced Model

A constructive view of assessment

One of the main purposes of assessment is to improve student learning and the quality of education. In recent years, schools and school districts have begun using assessment results to develop plans to improve their schools. This is a different approach from the traditional method of setting goals and designing programs without reference to how students are actually performing.

This constructive view of assessment puts the emphasis on action—using assessment results to improve teaching and learning. Assessment results, says one researcher, are evidence that something has worked or not worked. All results, good or bad, provide feedback that can guide us, telling us what to do next and how to do better.²

At the core of assessment and evaluation is a continuous flow of information that allows teachers, working together with students and parents, to take the next steps. This information guides schools and school districts in improving what they do.

A balanced model

Assessment is a process, not a single event, involving several steps:

- Data collection – information from many sources using a variety of methods
- Analysis – interpretation of results
- Evaluation – for planning and decision-making

A balanced model includes a variety of measures with a variety of purposes, including the measures we have discussed in this guide:

- Performance standards
- Classroom tests
- Program assessment
- Standardized testing
- Credentialing examinations
- Portfolios
- Individual student assessment

Through systematic collection of information and careful interpretation of results, we can make informed decisions for improving our schools and school districts. Assessment can move us from “what is” to “what ought to be”. It can inspire our efforts to improve the quality of education for all our students.

² Schmoker, M. (1996). Results: The key to continuous school improvement. As cited by Taylor and Tubianosa in *Student Assessment in Canada*, p. 69.

Commonly Used Terms and References

There is a great deal of “eduspeak” in our schools, particularly in the area of student assessment. Following are some terms that are commonly used by educators to describe assessment:

Assessment OF learning

This term is commonly used to describe testing that is done at the end of a unit or term to summarize what students have learned so far. Report cards are a good example of assessment *of* learning.

Assessment FOR learning

This term refers to ongoing testing, observation, and interaction between teachers and students. Assessment *for* learning allows teachers to discover what students understand so far and what needs to be taught. It provides information to both teachers and students on areas of strength and weakness.

Assessment AS learning

This term refers to students assessing themselves. When students understand their own strengths and weaknesses, they can take greater ownership of their learning. To accomplish this, students must be familiar with criteria or standards against which to gauge their own progress.

References

B.C. Ministry of Education websites:

- Reports on Student Achievement and Enrolment.
<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reporting/>
- Performance Standards.
http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/perf_stands/
- School Planning Councils.
<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/>
- Graduation Portfolios.
http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/graduation/port_folio/resources.htm

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