



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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Instruction, assessment, and learning: From standardization to a focus on students

A position paper

from the

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The broad prime aim of the public school system should be to foster the growth and development of every individual, to the end that he/she will become and be a self-reliant, self-disciplined, participating member with a sense of social and environmental responsibility within a democratic, pluralistic society.

Members' Guide to the BCTF, Policy 9.A.01

Instruction, assessment, and learning: From standardization to a focus on students

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Introduction

A fundamental goal of teachers in our public schools in BC is to ensure all students of every age, through the principle of continuous learning, have an equal opportunity to develop their full capacity for artistic, cultural, emotional, intellectual, and physical growth.

BC public school teachers believe that the primary purpose of assessment is to support and promote students' learning. As teachers, we know it is important to use a variety of methods to assess students' progress and meet students' needs.

We promise to create an environment in which each learner can reach their greatest potential, each learning style is affirmed, and the achievements of each learner are measured and assessed accordingly.

BCTF Charter for Public Education, 2003

Classroom instruction and assessment practices must be congruent with a belief that learning happens when the individual child is central to, engaged in, and excited by learning. With this focus, and through a series of finely tuned and complex decisions, the teacher's responsibility is to make curricular, instructional, and assessment choices to foster the growth of the whole child. Learning is the exciting process of constructing meaning. Teachers are committed to making education a dynamic and joyous process because we know that such engagement produces lifelong learners.

Ongoing classroom assessment allows students to demonstrate, in a variety of ways, what they are learning and thereby informs teaching and learning. Teachers know that learning is a complex process, and that students learn in different ways and at different rates. We know that assessment is integral to the learning cycle.

The overreliance on the Foundation Skills Assessment tests as measures of achievement, coupled with the requirement that districts set ever higher rates of achievement on these tests, has resulted in the proliferation of both district- and school-wide assessments. These assessments are not always connected to the daily curriculum of the classroom and therefore often result in changes to instructional practice. Outcomes are narrowly focused, and not centred around the learning needs of the child.

The assessments that drive student learning and academic self concept are those used by teachers in classrooms. Without quality classroom assessment, instruction cannot work and school cannot be effective.

Richard J. Stiggin

Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing it right—Using it well. 1999

The proliferation of mandated, district-wide, and provincial testing has taken time away from teaching and learning and has had an effect on the “taught” curriculum, by both narrowing it and making it shallower. The workload on teachers has increased dramatically, adding stress to the job, and forcing some to choose to teach part-time in order to be able to comply with the requirements imposed on the system.

The misguided use of school district data has not improved the learning conditions of children nor increased the resources necessary for effective instruction to ensure success for our students. The so-called accountability or achievement agenda has not produced any tangible improvements for the education system as a whole nor for the children who attend our schools.

The administering of the Foundation Skills Assessment persists in detracting from our essential purpose of educating students.

Jane Thornthwaite

North Vancouver Board of Education chair, June 2009

The myth of accountability in education

According to David Weinberger (2007), “Accountability has gone horribly wrong. It has become accountabilism, the practice of eating sacrificial victims in an attempt to magically ward off evil.” Accountabilism suggests that there is a right and wrong answer to every question and flourishes where results can be measured exactly. Having spread to the education system, accountabilism is forcing students, and the schools they attend, to become things that can be measured precisely. Creativity, critical thinking, love of learning, safety, and sense of place do not lend themselves to precise measurement, therefore, they are not central goals of district accountability or achievement contracts.

Conceptually, “accountability” is about proving that people are doing what they ought and not doing what they shouldn’t. We hear about CEOs who have been less than honest and demand that they be “held accountable” for their behavior. When applied to education, accountability takes on a similarly sinister note. We need to prove that students are learning what they “should” according to a definition that is shaped by someone...with particular ends in mind.

Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington, 2009

Unfortunately, students and their parents pay the price. Students are forced to learn according to processes that can be easily measured, instead of ways that suit their individual learning needs. Schools resort to implementing standardized practices, and attempt to identify uniform “best practices” and scripted programs to prescribe and control instructional and assessment methods.

Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts.

Albert Einstein

British Columbians have expressed their opposition to the Fraser Institute rankings made possible by the census administration of the provincial Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA). Hugh Burke, headmaster of Meadowridge private school, which was ranked first by the Fraser Institute said, “We are not proud of our number-one ranking, because it is not a meaningful statistic. I would not choose an elementary school based on the Fraser Institute’s rankings.” The editor of the *Surrey Now* wrote in February 2008, “We agree with teachers and even trustees such as those in Delta who say the rankings, by definition, are harmful. Ranking systems are not only ineffective—they are a complete waste of money.” The rankings are counterproductive to encouraging excellence in education.

Educational reform in Canada should not just be about narrowing numerical gaps in easily measurable outcomes, but about striving to benefit and enrich the learning of all students and all aspects of every student in an inspired and inclusive social and educational vision of what the country still stands for today and must aspire to become tomorrow.

Andy Hargreaves, Boston College

Many schools in British Columbia are striving to achieve the vision articulated by Andy Hargreaves. They receive accolades for the work they do with their students. One school received a glowing e-mail after a visit from a participant at the International Cultural Studies & Education Corporation (ICSEC)* conference held in its area.

“Since my return to Wales, I have continued to talk about the work I saw happening in your classrooms. Each classroom had well over half of its students who were ESL and yet every student was engaged in their learning. Your teachers have developed inclusive structures that enable each child to be successful at their level of development. It was so exciting to see the research I have been reading about best classroom practice come to life in your school.”

Yet this school was publicly ranked at the bottom by the Fraser Institute. The effect on the students and parents was devastating. One parent told the principal that she didn’t want to leave the school. “I love my son’s teacher. I love the school. I feel so much a part of the community. But we are ranked at the bottom now. My family in China tells me we have to move. Our pride is now in question.”

All partners in education in BC, teachers, administrators, parents, and ministers of education have condemned the way in which the FSA results are used by the Fraser Institute to rank schools—the current census administration of the FSA ensures that the Fraser Institute will be able to continue to use these results inappropriately. It will only be stopped by moving to another structure of administration of the test such as a random sample. A random sample would provide the ministry with sufficient analysis of the system and prevent the misuse of data to create harmful ranking tables.

*International Cultural Studies & Education Corporation (ICSEC) was formed in 1995 with the mission to train and educate students to become responsible and well-rounded individuals that shall lead and contribute to the country’s positive growth.

Providing learning opportunities and success for every student

If students were identical, equality of educational opportunity would consist of providing each student with exactly the same educational program. However, every student is unique. Providing equal opportunities, sometimes called equity, is an important challenge and one which must be successfully addressed if all children are to learn to their maximum potential.

The teachers in BC are committed to success for every student within a strong and stable public education system. A significant measure of the strength of our public education system is the extent to which it provides equity for all of our students. We use a social justice lens to help ensure all students are equitably treated in our schools. We believe passionately that the public education system must be inclusive, and must provide all students with:

- access to all learning opportunities
- advocacy skills for themselves and others
- an understanding that they are in command of their lives and can act for themselves and in concert with others.

Provincial education goals should be directed towards ensuring:

1. *for each student the opportunity for successful participation and for the enhancement of his/her self-esteem regardless of aptitude or background;*
2. *equal opportunity for all regardless of age, learning disabilities or abilities or interests and aspirations;*
3. *protection from discrimination on the basis of place of birth, place of residence, gender age, race, religion, socio-economic status, disability of sexual orientation; ...*

Members' Guide to the BCTF, Policy 9.A.07

Teachers are concerned, however, when accountability models from business and industry are applied to the education of children. As teachers in the public education system, we are committed to educating all the children who come through the doors of our schools. This is antithetical to business and industrial models of accountability which aim at culling, sorting, and channeling less productive or “defective” components or models. Our goal is to keep all students in schools and learning to the best of their individual ability, not to eliminate those who do not “measure up.” BC teachers believe a system of *responsibility* should identify:

- who is responsible for what
- the resources needed to meet established goals
- measures that are actually useful to promote student learning.

Focusing on responsibility has an intended consequence of making improvements to the learning of children in our schools.

The most often cited goal motivating the professional work of teachers is intrinsic—helping students learn and seeing them achieve.

Kenneth Leithwood, University of Toronto

Unintended consequences of testing and standardization

Students sitting in rows, No. 2 soft pencils in their hands, bubble sheets face up and test booklets

face down, clock ticking toward the start time; this is the image of the standardized test. Most understand the stresses associated with writing formal or large-scale assessments. Often missed are the unintended consequences of the proliferation of testing in schools.

The stress on rewards and punishments based on test scores forces schools to consider the data generated as evaluative rather than as useful for informing instruction. The result is a system that appears co-ordinated, but results in a number of unintended—although not unpredictable—negative consequences.”

Dr. Dan Laitsch, Simon Fraser University

Recently, the executive of the BC Science Provincial Specialist Association surveyed its members about the effects of the Science 10 provincial exam. The vast majority of responses indicated a significant decrease, or entire deletion of lab activities in Science 10 classrooms. There was a corresponding increase in direct instruction through lecture in order to cover the approximately 100 learning outcomes and hundreds of scientific terms which may turn up on the Grade 10 exam. Group work was limited, field trips rare, and exploring local issues or topics almost non-existent. As a result, given the experience of Science 10, students are now turning away from senior science courses. The science teachers of BC are just the latest group to experience first-hand some of the unintended consequences of provincial testing.

Standards-based testing measures the students’ status on curriculum expectations of which there are far too many—several hundred per grade in language and mathematics...teachers do not know which ones will be assessed in any one year. Accordingly, they are forced to cover all expectations in breadth but do not have time to teach them in depth.

Hilda Watkins, ETFO Voice, February 2009, p.35

The testing agenda is driving a move towards standardization within the school system as a whole. No area is being left untouched. For example, teacher-librarians are being encouraged to level their collections. Subject teachers are being encouraged to use common texts. Some other examples of the unintended consequences of standardization are:

- limiting creative approaches to teaching
- lacking in-depth study on an issue
- narrowing curricular choices to match test questions
- replacing academic rigor by “teaching to the test”
- avoiding teaching grades where there is a provincial or imposed test to avoid being complicit in harming students
- reducing job satisfaction; the joy of teaching and watching students learn is disappearing
- eroding professional autonomy
- leaving students unchallenged with few outlets for inquiry
- lessening of students’ enjoyment in learning
- decreasing students’ sense of self worth.

Teachers support the principles of the provincial curriculum—that students learn in different ways and at different rates, that students should be actively engaged in their learning, and that learning is both an individual and group process—yet find they must abandon these learning and

teaching principles in order to “cover the topic” so the students can pass the test. These are unintended outcomes no educator supports.

Conclusion

Teachers are committed to ensuring the best possible education for every child. It is because of this commitment that we are so concerned about the current practices in, and direction of, the public education system. If teachers are being pressured to act in ways that are harmful to children, causing children undue stress, short-changing them on exciting educational opportunities, labeling them as failures because of their language, class, or gender then we need to change what we are doing. Educational policy and practice must shift away from standardization and return to focusing on student’s individual learning needs.

Assessment systems should be designed after there is clarity and agreement on the curriculum so that curriculum drives assessment rather than assessment driving curriculum.

Member’s Guide to the BCTF, Policy 9.A.17.2

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