

The Alberta Student Assessment Study

Executive Summary



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Teachers	✓
Administrators	✓
Faculty of Education Staff and Students	✓
Education Stakeholders	✓
Parents	✓

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The purposes of The Alberta Student Assessment Study (ASAS) were to report on optimal assessment theory, policies, and practice; educational leadership practices; and professional development. The study emerged from an initial request from Alberta Education personnel to the Deans of Education at the Universities of Calgary, Alberta, and Lethbridge. Alberta Education identified the study objectives and funded the research. The Deans appointed the research team members who had complete academic freedom to design and conduct the study, and to report findings freely. The study commenced July 1, 2007 and was completed March 31, 2009.

CONTEXT

Student assessment in many nations is an educational area replete with widely varying perspectives, and educational stakeholders in Alberta hold a full range of views about assessment policies and practices. The vast majority of student assessment is designed and conducted by classroom teachers. Therefore, the importance of the teacher's role in assessment is critical in student learning and achievement. Indeed, most decision making about students' educational programming is premised upon the information garnered by classroom teachers.

In addition to teacher-conducted student assessment, students in Alberta write standardized tests that are part of the provincial standardized testing program. That is, students in grades 3, 6, and 9 write Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs), designed to provide a general overview of how students are learning, to report on the degree to which students have achieved provincial standards, and to assist educational stakeholders "in monitoring and improving student learning" (Alberta Education, 2008a, p. 1). In addition, students in Grade 12 write Diploma Examinations in selected courses (Alberta Education, 2008b). Provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations are intended to support classroom teachers with information about programs and student strengths and weaknesses at the provincial level (Alberta Education, 2007a). Also, Alberta Education (2008c) states that its policy of Grade Level of Achievement Reporting—which requires teachers to describe the achievement in students from grades one through nine as "at," "above," or "below" grade level—will promote a clear understanding of the Alberta curriculum, recognize normal variations in student achievement, promote the use of a range of assessment techniques, be useful for decision-making purposes, and promote clear communication among students, parents, and teachers.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a mixed-methods approach, designed to maximize triangulation, which included stakeholder focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires. It encompassed the perspectives of students, teachers, parents, principals, vice and assistant principals, superintendents, and school board members. Organizations represented by study participants included (in alphabetical order) the Alberta Assessment Consortium, Alberta Education, the

Alberta School Councils' Association, the Alberta Teachers' Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, and the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge.

The first two stages of the study included two public lecture series, a comprehensive literature review, and both role-alike and cross-role focus groups with representatives of the stakeholder groups listed above. The literature review incorporated the scholarly work of national and international researchers in the field of student assessment. Stage Three encompassed the development of questionnaires and interview questions that were administered in selected schools across the province. In Stage Four qualitative data were coded by emergent themes and subthemes, while quantitative data were analyzed using a combination of SPSS and MS Excel.

Cluster sampling procedures were used to ensure representation of urban, suburban, and rural communities and of public, private, Catholic, Hutterite, alternative, outreach, home, and charter schools at the elementary, junior high, and senior high levels. In total, there were 19 schools involved in this study, 20 when the home schooling demographic was included.

In Stage One there were 54 registrants in the lecture series that featured 24 presenters and co-presenters. There were approximately 78 focus group participants involved in Stage Two. In Stage Three 692 individuals participated in individual and focus group interviews, and there were 2542 questionnaire respondents. Overall, 3390 individuals participated in the three stages of the Alberta Student Assessment Study.

FINDINGS

Six themes emerged from Stage Two focus groups: politics of assessment, teacher learning, decision making, communication and relationships, leadership, and fairness and equity. The *politics* theme encompassed issues related to policy and accountability at all organizational levels, stakeholder mistrust of each other, widespread confusion about student assessment, and a sense of professional responsibility to both the educational and wider communities. *Teacher learning* included four subthemes: (1) preservice education, (2) professional development, (3) mentoring, and (4) professional learning processes that involved student teachers, novice-to-experienced teachers, teacher leaders, school and district administrators, and other community members. The *decision making* theme related to assessment-related decision making at the classroom, school, district, and provincial levels. The school level involved resource allocation, staffing, and student placement. Classroom-related decision making included formative and summative judgments. An issue that permeated all levels was a perceived lack of clarity about the purpose of student assessment and data collection uses. The *communication and relationships* theme identified key stakeholders as teachers, parents, students, postsecondary institutions, and employers. The emotive dimension of student assessment emerged as a strong component of this theme, as did the need for more frequent, timely, and clear communication of student achievement. Within the *leadership* theme focus group participants noted the need for strong, responsible provincial leadership in establishing and maintaining high-quality educational programs. Participants also expressed a widespread need for greater use of assessment data for “instructional leadership” purposes by principals.

They indicated the need for stronger alignment among policy implementation, curriculum planning, and teacher practice, thus promoting improved teaching and learning. The *fairness and equity* theme covered diverse issues such as problematic assessment practices related to students with special needs and those from cultures outside the mainstream and, additionally, the complexity of assessing for society's diverse expectations for all students.

In Stage Three, participants emphasized the purposes of assessment, which were to promote high standards, focus on provincial curriculum, promote improvement, inform students and parents, inform teachers, inform school district staff, and identify professional development needs of teachers. Themes that emerged in Stage Three included those from Stage Two, plus *teacher and classroom-based assessment, provincial assessment, and grade level of achievement reporting*.

Study findings from stages one through four were used to address the study purposes identified in the introduction:

- **Curricular Learning Outcomes.** In this section of the report curricular learning outcomes are considered in relation, first, to optimal classroom-based assessment and, second, to optimal provincial assessment. Similarly, principles and practices associated with performance standards and grade level of achievement reporting are presented.
- **Using External Tests for Decision Making.** Guidelines for optimal use of external test data are presented in relation to the student and teacher role and, also, by jurisdictional level.
- **Strengthening Assessment Leadership.** The guidelines for educational leaders that are presented in the ASAS final report address the study objective to describe how educational leaders can strengthen their professional practice in support of effective student assessment. This includes facilitating effective classroom assessment and facilitating accurate and meaningful reporting of assessment information.
- **Professional Development that Promotes Effective Classroom Assessment.** Prescriptive models for professional development reduce participant ownership and engagement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of professional development. Therefore, rather than identify specific models for professional development, the research team used the study findings to draft a set of principles for professional development and to present a set of guidelines for learning as educators move from preservice education through early, mid, and late career stages.

RECOMMENDATIONS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Assessment in Alberta will:

1. Recognize that public education is critical to the well-being of individual students and to society generally and that some form of monitoring such as the provincial standardized testing program is essential for the effectiveness of the Alberta education system.
2. Continue Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Examinations.
3. Make provincial assessment data publicly accessible.
4. Continue current performance standards which serve important benchmarking functions.

5. Recognize that all educators have a responsibility to report and explain provincial and classroom assessment results accurately and from a balanced perspective that emphasizes both the strengths and limitations of test results.
6. Require school- and district-based leaders to demonstrate assessment literacy within their instructional leadership practice across all subject areas.
7. Be guided by the *Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada* (Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation, 1993).
8. Require teachers to demonstrate detailed knowledge of the Program of Studies for the courses they teach.
9. Differentiate assessment to accommodate the ability, social, cultural, and linguistic needs of every student.
10. Incorporate student voice into all assessment practices.
11. Make assessment criteria explicit to students prior to all assessment.
12. Provide access for students, teachers, and parents to technological tools that enhance student assessment.
13. Report academic achievement, behaviour, and social-emotional development separately and accurately.
14. Use timed assessment sparingly and appropriately, only when pedagogically and practically appropriate.
15. Be an explicitly-taught, practice-oriented component of teacher education programs in Alberta.
16. Be included in the ongoing evaluation of the knowledge and expertise of teachers, principals, and school district personnel.
17. Focus on coherence among curriculum, teaching, assessment, and professional development.
18. Be characterized by educator ongoing participation in coordinated and coherent school and district-based professional development focusing on optimal student assessment.
19. Be supported by professional development that occurs within and across schools, plus within and across disciplines.
20. Use professional development knowledge held by colleagues within educational organizations and from outside organizations.
21. Emerge in part from the professional needs of school-based educators and, also, from school district and Alberta Education leaders.
22. Require systematic and rigorous evaluation of professional development in relation to how it impacts student learning.
23. Consider using more performance-based assessment tools that would address additional components of the Program of Studies, including non-core subjects.
24. Address assessment that is more appropriate and sensitive to the learning needs of students currently living in the margins of mainstream schools.
25. Be supported by evidence-based rather than opinion-based professional development.
26. Be led by principals and superintendents whose leadership preparation programs include a focus on assessment literacy.
27. Leave the use of Provincial Achievement Test results in the calculation of individual students' report card marks to the discretion of classroom teachers.

28. Be explained unambiguously, systematically, and in a widely accessible format by Alberta Education in terms of the purposes and intended uses of provincial standardized assessment data to counter misinformation and misunderstanding.
29. Be supported by an Alberta Education online database containing assessment tools, templates, and exemplars.
30. Include widespread use of assistive technology.
31. Include technology-mediated professional development that facilitates provincial, national, and international learning communities.
32. Inform student assessment policies and practices with ongoing research conducted in the province.