

April 27, 2007

Foundation Skills Assessment

What is all the fuss about?

Many principals and superintendents have expressed concern that writing the FSA is an issue again in some school districts as we approach the administration dates. Last weekend, the FSA was discussed with trustees in a session at the BCSTA AGM. Frankly, the BCTF opposition to the FSA has all of us shaking our heads and wondering, what is this about? I thought it would be helpful to share some of my views as we approach the FSA week as it is important for each individual child, each school and district, and the system as a whole to take this snapshot of student achievement.

So...let's put this in context. Is the FSA the same as a large-scale, standardized, high-stakes test similar to that of our American and English counterparts? No!

- FSA is not administered to all students and is not administered repetitively as in places that test every year. It is administered only to grade 4 and 7 students. This takes a maximum 5 hours spread over a minimum of three days twice in each student's first 8 years of schooling. To put a fine point on it, that represents a time commitment in the order of 0.1% for each student.
- FSA is not standardized - it is criterion-referenced and connected to our BC curriculum. Actually, the FSA items are developed by BC teachers and are like the items teachers would use in regular classroom assessment. These assessments are not bought externally. They are made in BC.
- FSA is not high stakes, In fact it is a no stakes exam in terms of a student's report card marks or promotion from grade to grade. It does provide useful information about a student's achievement at a point in time.

What about the "weighing the pig" rhetoric? You have all heard it – repeatedly weighing the pig does not make it heavier, ergo repeated testing of a student does not improve learning – you know that message. But let's be clear – we are talking about two tests over 8 years. Should we not be interested in a student's Grade 7 achievement on the FSA if he/she was not meeting expectations in Grade 4? Have we made a difference? If not, what do we need to do differently so each child succeeds? These are questions we should not be afraid to ask.

The BCTF says that the FSA undermines classroom assessment. I wonder, "How?". Do teachers know more about individual students and their learning than FSA reveals? Absolutely! Classroom teachers who take a balanced approach to formative and summative assessment know a great deal about their students. The FSA does not affect this result but provides one additional piece of information that teachers and parents can use in the context of the full classroom assessment program. I advocate for this balanced, common-sense approach to assessment. I know parents who are not frightened by the misleading BCTF rhetoric welcome the FSA snapshot because it confirms what their teachers have reported to them or raises questions for discussion with their child's teacher.

What about the worry expressed on the BCTF website and in public statements that the FSA takes the joy out of teaching and makes teachers teach to the test? The FSA is based on BC curriculum. Teachers teaching the BC curriculum are preparing their students to be successful on the FSA. In any event, what else would BC teachers be teaching other than our top-notch curriculum? As far as "joy" goes, I know there are thousands of BC teachers experiencing the satisfaction of teaching all over the province. The FSA is at most a blip in the teaching activities of teachers in our province.

Are students anxious and worried when they are asked to write the FSA? Maybe a little, but I fear their worry is escalated by the actions and words of some teachers expressing views about FSA. When I taught, I prepared my students for a test and counselled them regarding successful approaches and attitudes they brought to the test. I encouraged them to do their best and did my best to make sure each student was confident and able to demonstrate his/her learning. Isn't that what we should expect teachers in grade 4 and 7 to do as they prepare their students for FSA? Why would we tolerate less?

I have been asked for clarification regarding who is required to write the FSA, who can be excused and who makes the decision. To be clear, the FSA is **not** an optional activity that students or parents can opt into or out of. It is a required educational activity in the same manner as instruction in the Language Arts curriculum is required. Page 15 of the FSA "Instructions for Principals and for teachers/invigilators" (<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment/fsa/>) outlines which students are included in the FSA. The authority for these directions is derived from Ministerial Orders.

The instructions state: "Parents may request the Principal to excuse a student in the event of a family emergency, a lengthy illness or other extenuating circumstance". This is the same policy framework that most principals would apply when considering a student's legitimacy to be absent from school. Parents should not expect that their child will be excused from participation because they write a letter of request motivated by the BCTF miscommunications about FSA.

The Principal is the person who ultimately makes the decision whether a student participates or not. The Principal is responsible for implementing the directions included in the FSA instructions provided by the Ministry. When the Principal decides that a student may be

excused, the parent must be informed prior to the date of FSA administration, and the Superintendent must be provided a list of names of all students excused.

In a practical world, what does a principal do when a parent is worried about harm the FSA will do to their child because of this controversy? I would simply show the parent an FSA test, explain the assessment program and the use of the results and bet that almost all parents will say something like, "What is all the fuss about then?" The FSA will not look unfamiliar as a test or outrageous in the expectations it sets for students. We know that the vast majority of students writing the FSA meet or exceed expectations. If a parent feels the student will not meet expectations, then there are far more important things to talk about with that parent and the child's teacher. From my point of view, evidence and information should be used to improve the achievement of each of our students, one at a time. Evidence-based instruction should be the norm in our classrooms.



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