

Foundational Skills Assessment (FSA) Testing

In May, 4th and 7th graders will take the Foundation Skills Assessment, the FSA. These tests are a snapshot of students' achievement in reading comprehension, writing and numeracy. The combined results for all students can help judge what students know and to make improvements if necessary. The scores of individual students are less useful—if a student took the test on another day, her score could be either lower or higher.

The Ministry of Education considers these tests 'low stakes,' ones that provide information but do not punish or reward anyone. (In BC, the Ministry of Education permits parents to opt their children out of the FSA, as it does not count toward students' grades.) Each BC school's results will be published in the local newspapers as part of the Fraser Institute report—this makes these tests, in reality, more 'high stakes.' Abundant research suggests that high stakes tests do schools, teachers, and students more harm than good. Much of the harm comes from using a single source of data for judging the overall quality of schools.

Imagine there is one seventh grade teacher in a school. The school's community can identify the teacher, and if scores are low conclude s/he is not be doing a good job. Even though there are a host of reasons the scores may be low (a key predictor of test scores is the income of the school's families) this creates stress for the teacher. Research demonstrates that when the stakes are high, the quality of teaching and learning often goes down. Time is spent on practicing test items like those that will be on the FSA, so time is not spent on other important learning activities. So kids lose out and may experience stress—physicians consider high stakes testing a significant source of physical and psychological problems. And teachers lose out and may have their professional judgment squelched.

For more on high stakes testing and accountability, see <http://bctf.ca/publications/NewsMagArticle.aspx?id=7304>

Sandra Mathison, PhD
Professor of Education, UBC and McBride parent
sandra.mathison@ubc.ca