

April 13, 2007

In many school districts, rich and useful discussions have been occurring that inquire into the meaning of student achievement data. The term “drilling down” has become widely used as we seek to understand how the data informs school improvement plans and district Accountability Contracts. These discussions have resulted in plans focused on groups of students. For example, we have focused our attention on the analysis of grade level results and the results of sub-groups such as boys, girls, students of Aboriginal ancestry, ESL students and students with special needs. Although this analysis has provided some insight into the student achievement puzzle, it does not tell the story that is needed in order to determine interventions for individual students. Although we want to improve learning for all students, the needs of each student will vary. This thinking has led us to a greater focus on the individual student.

The focus of our questions is now shifting to the individual student. The questions are more powerful as they move us toward strategies that will help us focus on the needs of individual students. A teacher or school-based team should look for evidence of student learning that will help us answer the following questions:

- First, are there particular groups of students who are at risk because they are not showing success right now? To answer this question, look at broad-spectrum assessments such as early reading information, district assessments, FSA, Grade 10 provincial exams.
 - Secondly, who specifically, are the struggling students within those particular groups? Consider broad-spectrum assessments, but focus on school-based, situated assessments.
 - Thirdly, with what specifically are they struggling? Why are they struggling? As well as an item analysis of test information, consider classroom work with reference to Performance Standards and teachers’ knowledge about each student.
- Finally, what intervention strategy will be implemented and monitored for each student? How will we know if the strategy is successful to increase student learning? What will we do next if the student continues to struggle?

This is really a reframing and refinement of the “DuFour questions” that you have heard me speak about previously. You will recall these compelling questions to be:

What is it we want all students to learn?

1. How will we know when each student has mastered the essential learning?
2. How will we respond when a student experiences initial difficulty in learning?
3. How will we deepen the learning for students who have already mastered essential knowledge and skills?

From “On Common Ground”, 2005

The focus on the individual learner extends to our professional staff as well. Every school has teachers at a variety of stages of career growth. Some teachers are very new in their career, while others have had years of opportunities to try many instructional strategies, reflect on their success, and refine their strategies to promote greater student learning. We have principals and superintendents at a variety of stages of career growth.

In the coming years, the Ministry of Education will demonstrate an increased focus on building the capacity in each classroom, school and district in order to increase the number of students who are successfully achieving grade level learning outcomes and transition to the next level.

You have heard me talk of a ‘plateau’ in our student results. I believe that it is critical that we find ways to focus our questions and interventions on the needs of individual learners so that we can continue to improve the life chances for our students, one student at a time.

Following is an example of how School District No. 61 (Greater Victoria) is using a focus on individual results to improve the success of students one student at a time. Thank you to Superintendent John Gaipman for providing this illustration.

Stay Connected Program Esquimalt High School

The Stay Connected Program at Esquimalt High School is one of the approaches that has arisen from the Greater Victoria School District's Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement. The first goal of this Enhancement Agreement is: *"To increase Aboriginal students' sense of place, of caring and of belonging in the public school system."*

The Stay Connected Program at Esquimalt High School began in the fall of 2005 in an effort to increase the school success of our senior First Nations students. The following strategies and structures have been designed from the standpoint that students respond to a sense of belonging in and being connected to their school.

Our First Nations staff meets weekly with the Principal to discuss our students and their learning needs. Out of these discussions a plan evolved to specifically keep connected, with our school, a number of First Nations students who were indicating that they were considering leaving school. These were students who had already been involved in resource room support as well as in self paced and adapted programs. We decided to try something very different and developed a program that we called the "Stay Connected Program".

The Stay Connected Program is based on the model of the Medicine Wheel. The program teaches through all four components of the Medicine Wheel: Mental; Physical; Emotional; and Spiritual. The ultimate goal of this program is to keep the students connected with us by increasing their self esteem and by teaching skills in a cultural environment to help the students

become confident and caring adults. The students complete tasks that fall under each area of the Medicine Wheel. They choose tasks that suit their needs and their strengths. We work with both traditional and contemporary knowledge. An essential part of the program is utilizing the skills and wisdom of our elders and community members.

Because the program is based on what the students need, it is flexible and develops with the students. In this, our second year, we have expanded our outdoor skills component.

The program is showing success. The student results first and foremost are being demonstrated by a large majority of the students involved attending regularly and remaining in school. Most importantly, the students report feeling cared about by their teachers, their school and as a result, empowered to participate in their education to the degree where they spoke publicly to the Greater Victoria School District Board of School Trustees about their pride in their achievements and their appreciation of what the program has done for them.

FSA – Is it really that controversial?

It is starting again – the controversy about assessment and data (information about student learning) focused on the Foundation Skills Assessment program (FSA). I find the BCTF assertion that the FSA is harmful to students hard to swallow. Testing and assessment is part of every classroom learning situation. If the FSA is harmful, then so must be the pop quiz, assignment, weekly review test, unit test, term test and final exam – all common elements that we as teachers use to adjust individual instruction as discussed earlier in this article. FSA's are curriculum based. If you're teaching the curriculum, it's not narrow, it's not limiting, it is the richness of our curriculum.

FSA provides relevant group and individual data. No doubt it has its limitations in that it does not provide a complete picture of student learning – every teacher’s assessment is critical to completing that picture. But FSA provides important information. Inform your parents of the facts about FSA. FSA is not an optional activity.

Following is a thoughtful view expressed by a columnist in the “Vancouver 24 hours” publication (www.24hrs.ca).

Don’t use the kids (Vancouver 24 hours)

By ERIN AIRTON

Every once in a while a public sector union does something so over the top that I can’t help but react.

Yesterday, Kid No. 1 arrived home from school with a flyer in her backpack proclaiming “FSA testing can be harmful to students”. The material, put together by the B.C. Teachers’ Federation, was highly critical of the standardized testing that takes place in B.C. schools in grades 4 and 7.

We then spent a very enjoyable hour explaining the concept of sensationalistic literature to a nine year old in a way that maintained respect for her fantastic teacher, while at the same time exploring the mysteries of baseline research, curriculum development and the need to benchmark general student achievement over a period of time.

Lovely.

The B.C. Teachers’ Federation, which put together this alarming piece of propaganda, is perfectly within its rights to politically engage around the issue. The BCTF can take out newspaper ads (which it has) and the leadership can discuss, debate and decry the measurement of student progress on talk radio and in newspaper articles.

There are many avenues of advocacy and activism open to the union without the group needing to stoop to employing our children as their messengers.

Teachers have a sacred trust with students and parents. We hand over our most precious treasure and expect that they will be taught the curriculum prescribed by the province in

a way that best suits their learning style. We hope they will learn “the rules” and will emerge from the public system with a democratic and broad-based education.

We do not want them caught up in the middle of a political fight between the union and the government. It is just not appropriate to insert children into a policy discussion of this nature.

And in cases where the parents disagree with the BCTF, it puts children in the position of feeling uncertain about two very important sets of people in their lives.

Our family has had an amazing experience in Vancouver public schools, which is why I find this action so profoundly disturbing. I know the teachers we have worked with put kids first. They want them to be successful and support them at every turn. Some teachers feel compelled to go along with their union, rather than rock the boat.

Personally, I support the Foundation Skills Assessment. I think it provides valuable data about the state of the education system in B.C. with year over year information. But until the BCTF ceases this inappropriate and, frankly, bullying tactic, it is difficult to debate the guts of the issue at all.

I hope the BCTF will see the error of this ill-considered action and circulate a formal apology to parents of students who received the material.

Next week the Legislature resumes sitting, and we expect to be involved in Estimates debates. In addition, we expect Bills 20, 21 and 22 to return to the House for consideration and debate. We will keep you informed as they progress through the various stages of consideration.

Have a good weekend and enjoy the NHL playoffs. Games like Wednesday interfere with our sleep patterns, so hopefully the Canucks will triumph within regulation time!



Emery Dosdall, Ed D
Deputy Minister of Education