

FOUNDATION SKILLS ASSESSMENT  
TEST FOR B.C. STUDENTS

**R. Lee:** Today I would like to introduce the following motion:

[Be it resolved that this House support the Foundation Skills Assessment as it provides valuable information on how well BC students are learning skills necessary to succeed in life.]

I hope members from both sides of the House will support this motion. What is the foundation skills assessment, FSA? FSA is a set of tests taken by grade four and grade seven students in B.C.'s public schools and funded independent schools. Starting today these tests take approximately four and a half hours to complete. That is an annual assessment of how students are performing in reading, writing and math. The reading comprehension and numeracy components consist of multiple choice questions and open-ended questions. The writing component consists of first drafts of two writing tasks.

Madam Speaker, the foundation skills assessment is an important tool that has helped us measure how students are doing in school since 2000. Schools and school districts need to know how well students are doing so that they can make plans for improving achievement. Teachers and parents would like to know how well students are performing in important skills and whether the students need support in a particular area to ensure they receive the best overall education possible.

Government and taxpayers are interested in how well the school system is doing and in ensuring that resources are directed where they are needed most. Based on the FSA results and other information provided by students, teachers, parents and principals, school planning councils would have the information necessary to set goals and direct the resource needed to aim for these goals.

The overall majority of B.C.'s parents, and aboriginal parents in particular, support the provincial assessment program because it provides a fair, clear way of seeing how their children are doing in the key areas of reading, writing and math. The foundation skills assessments are carefully constructed to connect directly to our B.C. curriculum, which is the product of thousands of B.C. teachers' efforts and is one of the finest and internationally recognized curriculum programs in the world.

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Teachers who cover the provincial curriculum will prepare their students for the FSA task. Teachers don't have to teach to the test if the provincial curriculum is covered in classes. The FSA gives a snapshot of the progress of B.C. students in reading, writing and math — key skills that all students need to have to succeed academically.

These tests do not come to us as students' marks in any way, so the students shouldn't suffer from any so-called test anxiety. It is part of their learning process. Foundation skills assessments are provided as an information service, and unlike the high

stakes system, no students, parents, teachers or school are negatively impacted by the information.

Last Friday I attended part of the BCCPAC meeting in Burnaby, and in one of the booths I found a display very interesting. It's a computer program which analyzes the FSA data-set to provide answers to questions like: are there any trends in student performance at

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the school, district and provincial levels? The availability of the foundations skills assessment data as well as performance-standard data allows B.C. districts and schools to have a student achievement focus that is reliable and valid. I believe that FSA results would be important information for district accountability contracts and for school long-term plans developed by school planning councils.

Over the last five years FSA results in British Columbia have indicated that our school system, our educational system, is doing an excellent job. Last year 79 percent of grade four students and 77 percent of grade seven students were meeting or exceeding expectations in reading. B.C.'s standard for meeting and exceeding expectations are among the highest in the world. We should encourage our students to write these FSA tests between today and May 19.

In 2003 the student achievement task force examined improvement systems around the world. They came to the conclusion that the amount of classroom and provincial assessment is at the right balance in this province. Systems with too much national, state or provincial assessment become test-dependent, and performance on tests drives the system. Systems with too little large-scale assessment lose the confidence of the public because of the absence of independent information about how well the system is doing.

Madam Speaker, I welcome the debate on this motion.

**J. Horgan:** I will only answer this debate briefly today because I'm very anxious, in the time remaining, that we hear from educators like my colleague from North Coast and my other colleague from Columbia River–Revelstoke. I'm only going to comment briefly on the motion and the content with respect to foundation skill assessment testing.

I'm of two minds on this. I am persuaded that performance measurement is potentially a useful tool if the information is collected in a coherent way, it's not random, and the questions on the test are legitimate. With respect to numeracy and literacy at grade four and grade seven, I believe that there could be some net benefits from that.

However, I am not persuaded that performance-measurement mania and the movement towards standardized testing at almost every level in our public school system is a net benefit to student outcomes. I do believe that testing is an important barometer

and an important snapshot, a period of observation on where a student is at a particular time, but I'm not convinced that standardized testing, certainly, and foundation skills assessment testing, specifically, is the educational tool that some have argued it is.

Indeed, we find that groups like the Fraser Institute take this data and use it — I would argue and many in the system argue — to negatively impact on morale and outcomes at schools by taking the data and arbitrarily comparing schools from one part of the province to another. I know my colleague from Peace River South.... Students in his district have a wildly different view of the world than mine on south Vancouver Island, because of geography, because of history and because of context.

The exams should be looked at in context, as a snapshot in time, and in that sense I would see some inherent value in them. However, when the data is used for things like accountability contracts and the accountability agenda, I get very concerned about that. I want to register that on the floor today.

With that, in the interests of getting to other speakers, I'll give the floor to the next member.

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**D. Hayer:** I am enthusiastically supporting this motion by my colleague from Burnaby North because, if nothing else, the foundation skills assessment tests answer the parents' age-old question: how is my child doing in school? Isn't that why we send our children to school: to get a good education and to be sure they are learning at the appropriate pace? This is what foundation skill assessment tests are all about: demonstrating clearly how much a student has grasped, understood and absorbed during their learning curve.

If we don't test our students, how will we ever know if they are learning or if in fact our education system is working successfully? I find it disturbing that BCTF and its president are saying that FSA testing can be harmful to students. How can a test be harmful? All the FSA testing is doing is demonstrating how much a child has absorbed from the instructions given over the years, particularly in the foundation skills: reading, writing and mathematics.

If through this testing, it is found that a student hasn't grasped what he or she has been taught, then we have a basis upon which to improve that child's learning process. Without the FSA testing, we might not know that a student is not learning at the age-appropriate level and that we can therefore set up an assistant to help them. That is helpful, not harmful.

I believe our students — as do as parents — need to know how well our children are doing in school, and the foundation skills assessment tests are designed to do just that, on a level playing field. I haven't had any constituents tell me that they don't support FSA

testing, and all the teachers I know and I've had the opportunity to meet with — they are all doing excellent job, by the way — say they support it too.

We have exceptional teachers in our province, so I don't understand why it is that the BCTF seems to be worried that a very few of its members' abilities might be questioned by this testing. If there are a few who are not teaching up to standard, then the FSA testing could even assist the BCTF to help those teachers who may need some extra assistance to bring their teaching methods back up to where they once were.

Therefore, as a member of this House and as a parent, I completely support this motion. Foundation skills assessment testing is a vital, valuable and fair way to judge a student's skill level.

Before I close, all this talk about students and parents has reminded me that this weekend is Mother's Day, and I urge all children, regardless of their age, and including all members of this House, to celebrate

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this weekend with your mother. Please let her know how special she is, and while you're at it, don't forget that coming up next month is Father's Day.

Parents play such a special role for our children and in forming the person you grew up to be. So I want to wish all parents the very best, and especially all of our mothers. This weekend have a happy Mother's Day.

**G. Coons:** I rise to speak to this motion. I do want to reinforce that the BCTF consists of teachers from every corner of the province who deal with students every day. The BCTF represents a strong core of teachers who care and have strong feelings about students.

Teachers believe that every child matters and can learn. Teachers' joy in teaching comes from meeting the needs of every student and fostering the love of learning. The FSA tests do not help teachers do this important job. In fact, teachers believe that these tests may have negative effects on teaching and learning.

I have concerns about the FSA. I'm not opposed to large-scale testing at all, such as the FSA. They can provide important information. They can give us information on how well the provincially prescribed curriculum is working; what areas might need support in terms of learning resources or teacher in-service; and what we might need, more or less, when the curriculum is revised.

Some believe FSAs are valuable. They well might be — it depends on how they're used — as long as they are inclusive and not being divisive.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Large-scale assessments such as FSAs are not very accurate for individual results and do undermine classroom assessments. Teachers use classroom assessment information to adjust instruction, to plan further instruction, to evaluate student progress and to report to parents. Teachers do not simply assess students so they can have a remark on a report card. The main purpose is to support student learning, not to measure it. It is effective classroom instruction that can help a student learn, not large-scale assessments.

What's the impact of large-scale testing such as FSAs? Teachers in B.C. are now seeing some negative effects, and they're documented by researchers. We in this House need to tread carefully, as there's good reason to worry. Published research found strong evidence of a negative effect on testing on a student's motivation to learn.

Even more worrying is that researchers found that the negative effects of large-scale testing were greatest for low achievers. Two studies showed that after the introduction of national tests in England, low-achieving students had lower self-esteem than higher-achieving students. Before the tests were introduced, there was no correlation between the two.

What the ministry and some people may see as a simple collection of data for accountability purposes may have a negative effect on students and the learning environment in their classrooms, especially in rural regions of the province. I come from a region where the EDI — the early development instrument done by Clyde Hertzman — in the north coast, central coast, Haida Gwaii, Queen Charlottes, Bulkley Valley, Stikine, Nass Valley indicates that the students there are in vital need of resources and are very challenged in the school setting.

The Deputy Minister of Education just recently in his update said that approximately 20 percent of all preschoolers need some form of intervention prior to entering kindergarten, and EDI indicators suggest that many of our most vulnerable learners live in rural areas.

B.C. teachers, in response to FSA, have experienced pressure to teach to the test — ignore important aspects of the curriculum, teach in less interesting ways and spend more time on test practice. They've indicated that they've seen students who suffer from test anxiety — they value tests more than learning, and they lose their motivation.

Another concern I have is how the tests are being used. We have a ranking of schools and a reporting of results and improvements. Don't get me wrong. Comparisons are not bad, but comparing schools with other schools, as the media and especially the Fraser Institute have done, does not help and can cause harm.

I have a press release from the Prince Rupert school district that says: "Lies, damned lies and statistics." They've been pummelled in the school district by the Fraser report, because of such things as the FSA.

In conclusion, I would like to say that testing such as FSAs may have a valuable concept in the education system as long as it is not used to rank students and schools and is not used inappropriately.

**H. Bloy:** Thank you for the opportunity to talk. Noting the time, I'll keep it as short as I can.

I fully support this motion. The previous speaker talked about the great teachers we have in British Columbia, and I agree with him 100 percent. Most of the other stuff he had to say I didn't agree with. In fact, B.C. is seen as a leader, improving student achievements through tests like the FSA.

What is the BCTF afraid of? Why are they boycotting this? Maybe it's carried out in a letter to the *Victoria Times Colonist* paper last week from a professor at the University of Victoria, Paul MacRae. I'll just read just a bit of it: "University of Victoria students finished their exams last week in English, a subject I've had the privilege of teaching at UVic since last fall. Many first-year students will not do as well as they should because coming into university, their literacy skills were — and here, one searches for the right word — let's say, underdeveloped."

The whole letter is available on the Internet, but I just wanted to say that I support this motion. Testing is very important. It's part of the curriculum that's taught in British Columbia, so why would anybody be opposed to it? Only if they're not teaching the curriculum.

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**N. Macdonald:** I'll try to keep my points as concise as possible. As a principal I administered the FSA test.

There are just a couple of points I'd like to share with the mover of the motion.

It is one tool. It is, however, a small part of a range of tools that are used constantly in the classroom. The problem comes primarily when the data is used to reach conclusions that are just inappropriate for the data that is gathered. I'll give you a few examples. There are many, but I'll try to use one that the member for Burnaby North would be familiar with.

The member has a master's in applied mathematics and, I know, worked as a research mathematician, so I'll give an example from the math FSA tests. It goes like this. This is from the foundation test for grade four: "What fraction of the letters in the word Vancouver are consonants?" Then it gives a series of fractions that the students can choose from. Part of that question is related not only to mathematics but also to English, so the student would also have to know what the word "consonant" means to be able to answer it. The whole test is like that.

The second test, which is on numeracy, is this: "There are 55 grade four students. It costs \$3 for each student to go to the park. If four students pay, the fifth student is free. How many students will get in free?" While they are testing numeracy, they are also testing English. It is what it is: a very narrow test, testing one particular aspect. Now, it is still valid to do that — and all the tests are the same — but you have to make sure you do not reach conclusions that have nothing to do with the thing you're testing. That's the problem.

The problem comes if the results are misused. The member for Surrey-Tynehead sort of exemplified that in that he thought you could reach conclusions on a school or the school system or a teacher based upon a particular test, and you can't. The example of the Fraser Institute — the Fraser Institute misuses data all of the time. I can give you an example from the former minister Christy Clark, who made a decision on funding based upon a result from FSA literacy tests that were so limited that if you knew how the test was administered and what it actually meant, you would see that the conclusion the minister reached was ridiculous. There is no problem with the FSA test. It is simply if it is misused.

The final thing is: when you do things like that, you can distort how a school organizes itself, because there will be pressure to improve in those tests. You can do things to improve in the test which are educationally destructive. That's the danger.

I'll just leave it. Thank you for the opportunity. I appreciate the opportunity to raise, and I want to give an opportunity to my colleague here to finish off.

**D. MacKay:** I will be really brief. I just want to say that I do support the FSA testing. I want to give you an economic reason for supporting the FSA testing. I have three grandchildren going through the school system right now. Whenever they come home with report cards, it costs Papa money, because they get such good report cards.

The FSA testing that they do today is not reflective. I don't see how my grandchildren are doing in school, but I do believe that whatever we do in our lives, we have to be measured on what we're doing. All of us in this chamber are measured on our performance here. Our children going through the school system have to be measured to make sure that they're meeting the provincial curriculum. I think it's important that we continue to do that.

Mr. Speaker, noting the hour, I would move adjournment of debate.

D. MacKay moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.