

March 31, 2006

So what about the **Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA)**? Why is it controversial? Is it bad for kids? Is it a high stakes test? What is the FSA used for?

Each year we hear concerns expressed about the FSA. The BCTF has instructed its members not to participate in item development. Some teachers do not encourage students to take the FSA seriously or use the data resulting from the FSA to guide instruction. We have heard parents are concerned about the time taken to write the FSA and the stress the test introduced for their children. Some members of post-secondary faculties have been critical of the FSA expressing concern about ranking schools or classrooms. Yet we believe the FSA provides important information about the system that allows for adjustments to instruction and curriculum that will improve student performance.

In May, nearly 90,000 Grade 4 and 7 students will write the FSA in reading, writing and numeracy. In August, these students will get their individual results and in September, school, district and provincial results will be released.

What is the FSA?

- It is a "made in BC" large scale assessment tool.
- It is designed by BC teachers who have knowledge and experience in BC classrooms.
- The FSA is directly linked to the BC curriculum – almost all the questions relate directly to Grade four or seven learning outcomes. Some questions are more broadly skill based.
- The FSA has links to the BC Performance Standards.
- The FSA is a tool to help schools identify areas of focus.

What the FSA is not.

- It is not an individual diagnostic test. Although, considered with other classroom assessment, it may help to fill out the picture about individual students.
- It is not a high stakes exam – students do not have to "pass" it and the results are not reported on the report card.
- It is not a test you need to cram for – students covering the usual learning outcomes will be prepared to write this test.
- It is not a standardized test developed commercially and purchased from somewhere else.

How long does the FSA take?

- The FSA takes about ten hours of class time, for students, out of the eight years in K-7.
- The FSA tests usually take no more than one hour each.
- Some teachers take additional time to help their students practice using the bubble sheet format used for recording answers.

What are the results – How do our students do on the FSA?

The "snapshot" metaphor is often used with the FSA. The results give information about student performance on a particular day in the school year. Like most snapshots, the FSA results generally give a clear picture of a specific point in time. And, a series of photos, taken over several years, gives an idea of how things are changing.

Percent of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectation

Grade 4	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Reading Comprehension	78	80	77	80	79
Writing	91	94	94	91	93
Numeracy	84	85	87	88	87
Grade 7					
Reading Comprehension	76	76	77	80	77
Writing	81	84	79	90	90
Numeracy	81	82	84	83	83

These results tell us that more than three-quarters of our students consistently meet or exceed expectations in three key areas of learning. They tell us that results are stable over time (and that is expected at the provincial level). BC has a very high performing system and it is maintaining that level of achievement.

The results tell us a deeper inquiry is needed to find out how we can do even better in helping all students achieve their fullest potential. We can disaggregate the FSA results in many ways to more fully inform improvement efforts. Refer to the Foundation Skills Assessment, 2000/01 to 2004/05, Provincial Result Report.

www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reports/pdfs/fsa/prov.pdf

- **Look at the performance of different groups of students:** Grade fours and grade sevens, boys and girls, Aboriginal students, students in ESL programs and others. Analyzing the differences between these groups allows us to focus our improvement efforts and align resources where they are best needed.
- **Consider participation rates:** It is important to have as many students as possible write the FSA to get a complete picture. Did you know that we have some schools with very high participation rates and large proportions of students meeting and exceeding expectations?

- **Look at trends over time:** How do the changes in achievement inform the instructional practice in schools?
- **What about the distribution graphs?** These are powerful pictures that tell you about student achievement at a glance.

The FSA results are numerical and present the opportunity for rankings of districts, schools and even classrooms. We do not support rankings but we do encourage you to inform yourselves of best practice by comparing results. Dare to compare.

I recently had a conversation with a superintendent from a large district. We noticed that one of the schools in the district that was most vulnerable, had among the highest FSA results and the highest participation rates. The superintendent was not surprised and could tell me, in some detail, about the programs that were supporting that performance and what teachers were doing that was successful. We can all learn from those types of comparisons.

So if the FSA is so benign and used to support improved achievement, why is it drawing fire? I am as puzzled as you are. It may be because of over-reliance on the FSA results as a source of data and information in some districts. It is only one source and we have taken the view that teachers at the

school and district level should use several sources as they plan for instruction and improving student achievement. Several districts and schools are developing other sources of data locally.

BC is recognized as an Education Leader

The attention and recognition the BC public education system receives is often invisible to those in the field. We regularly host delegations from all over the world. They come because they have noticed the performance levels of British Columbia and they want to know what we are doing that leads to that success. You know that Finland, Alberta and British Columbia regularly perform at the very top of public systems throughout the world. British Columbia stands out among this group because of its broad diversity and richness of population and culture. BC is heterogeneous in its composition.

Last week we hosted a delegation from Germany. Soon we will host another from the Czech Republic. In April, a large delegation from Jiangsu, People's Republic of China will visit to learn how our system is structured and twin with several South Island schools.

The delegations are very interested in the answer to the question, "Why are your students doing so well?" Our response is that we have teachers who are among the best in the world, a quality curriculum and a focus on student achievement. Combine these with effective assessment and system performance monitoring and we have a recipe for success.

Our visitors are puzzled by some recent data showing a lack of public confidence in such a high performing system. Some follow media reports and do not understand the criticism of the system they see in the news. Of course, this puzzles us too!

Education week – Recognition of Achievements in Education

At the outset of Education Week, eight individuals were recognized for their contributions to education.

- **Marie Bourgeois** – Bourgeois, board chair for school district 93 (Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique), was invested as a member of the Order of Canada on Sept. 9, 2005, in the category of voluntary service.
- **Charlie Coleman** – Coleman, principal at Khowhemun elementary school in Duncan, is one of four finalists for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's Outstanding Young Educator Award.
- **Wendy Herbert** – Herbert, superintendent of the Gulf Islands school district, is a recipient of the B.C. School Superintendents Association's Distinguished Service Award.
- **Donald Hutchinson** – Hutchinson, a teacher at Montgomery middle school in Coquitlam, has received a Physical Education Teacher of the Year Award from the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.
- **Ariane Ouellette** – Ouellette, a Grade 12 student at L'école Victor Brodeur in Victoria, was one of 109 finalists from 23 countries who took part in the 2006 Dictée des Amériques, the world's largest French-language spelling and grammar competition.
- **Carla Peace** – Peace, president of the parent advisory council for G.W. Carlson primary school in Fort Nelson, is the recipient of the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Council's George Matthews Award for excellence in parent leadership.
- **Nick Prince** – Prince, whose children inspired him to go back to school, is the first adult to complete his Grade 12



graduation requirements at the Canucks Family Education Centre.

- **Rick Thomson** – Thomson, a school bus driver in Armstrong, has been recognized by the B.C. School Bus Drivers' Association and his community for his efforts to attend to the victims of two car crashes on the same day last spring.

We have many outstanding contributors to our education system. We need to find new ways to acknowledge their contributions throughout the year, not just during Education Week. We are hopeful that a recognition system for teachers and others can be established and communicated to you in the near future.