

Building an Assessment Future With Purpose in Mind



Manitoba Association of
School Superintendents (MASS)
Position Paper

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Increasing the opportunities for learning in every classroom across Manitoba is an important MASS priority. Over the past decade this priority has been supported by provincial educational reforms such as *New Directions*, new K to Grade 12 curricula and support documents such as *Success for All Learners*. The latest Western Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCPC) document, *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind*, pulls together the current research in the areas of brain research, motivational theory and assessment. It then describes how, when applied skillfully to classroom practice, student learning can be improved. As a MECY resource document, *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind* compels MASS and policy makers to rethink, re-examine and align belief, vision, and assessment and evaluation practices to more closely reflect this philosophical direction. As Lorna Earl states, "Changing how classroom assessment operates in schools is not trivial. It requires concerted attention on the part of provincial, school and district leadership. It also requires many teachers to rethink their assessment practices and engage in new learning themselves" (Earl, p. 15).

MASS recognizes that this is the challenge educational leaders in Manitoba must face and work towards meeting if we are to truly make a difference in student learning. The purpose of this paper is to articulate the position of MASS with respect to assessment and evaluation and to provide a recommendation for future direction across the province's school divisions.

Assessment in education serves two purposes:

Assessment of learning provides a *summative* statement of what a child has learned or can do. This form of assessment usually occurs at the end of a unit of work and demonstrates whether curricular outcomes have been met. The purpose behind this form of assessment is to provide information to parents and the public, certifying competencies or ranking, and is most commonly used for reporting purposes.

The other form of assessment is assessment *for* learning where the design and practice is to promote student learning. Here assessment is *formative* and is used to provide information to teachers and students as they assess themselves and make decisions about the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

Indeed, assessment is formative only if the information fed back to the learner is used by the learner to make improvements. (Assessment *for* learning includes in our view assessment *as* learning, a third form of assessment described in the *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind* document. The self-monitoring processes that students use constitute the assessment *as* learning function.)

If the primary purpose of assessment is to support learning, the question must be asked: “what assessment practices best accomplish this?” As Sutton states, “The challenge is to find a method that illuminates rather than removes the uniqueness of the child, and provides ‘feed-forward’ as well as ‘feedback’, so that all the recipients of the information can take effective decisions about future action” (Sutton 1995).

Black and Wiliam’s (1998) groundbreaking study, “Inside the Black Box,” demonstrated that assessment *for* learning is a powerful process for enhancing learning. Their work involved over 250 studies from around the world. They concluded that when the intent of assessment was to promote learning, to inform classroom programming, to provide feedback to move learners forward, to activate students as instructional resources for each other, and to take responsibility for their own learning, student achievement improved. So herein lies the dilemma. Educational systems are responsible and accountable for reporting student progress, yet in teachers’ efforts to meet the requirements of *summative* assessment by fulfilling the obligations of reporting student progress, assessment *for* learning opportunities that illuminate the strengths and needs of the learner are often overlooked.

Studies in Testing, Motivation and Learning (2002) conducted by the Assessment Reform Group of Great Britain found that testing, drills, ranking and comparisons of student grades and scores did little to motivate the majority of students or improve achievement. From this survey of the research literature, Anne Davies (2003) summarized the key classroom assessment strategies teachers used to enhance learning. They included:

- Explaining and discussing the purpose for learning,
- Offering choice and guiding students towards responsibility,
- Providing opportunities for students to learn from each other,
- Providing specific, descriptive and positive feedback,
- Involving students in assessment and setting criteria and goals,
- Involving students in on-going self-assessment in relation to clear criteria and learning targets,
- Encouraging and valuing student effort.

Ironically, the pressure to cover curricula and make frequent summative reports is often at the expense of these key classroom assessment strategies teachers need to use to enhance learnings. The blocks of classroom time required to allow for goal setting, feedback and student practice can become secondary to the demands of frequent summative assessment requirements and the pressures to cover curricula. The issues of how frequently summative reports are required and what flexibility teachers have in covering curricula must be addressed if there is to be sufficient time spent on key classroom assessment strategies that target the specific learning needs of students.

The evidence is unequivocal: formative assessment improves student learning. Yet these practices are often overshadowed as teachers, schools and systems feel torn between sound educational practices, covering curricula and grading performance. There is confusion as to how to appropriately use both assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning practices to the best advantage.

When systems encourage and promote the development and full implementation of assessment *for* learning classroom strategies, student achievement improves. Amrein and Berliner (2002) studied 10 high schools (top, middle and bottom levels of achievement) where 256 teachers were trained to teach students to use self-assessment. They found a significant difference in all curricular areas in the level of achievement of those students involved in self-assessment.

School administrators play a key role in systems which encourage and promote the implementation of assessment for learning classroom strategies. Assessment-literate administrators promote student success by advocating and sustaining a collaborative school culture and instructional programming which focus on improving student learning and the professional growth of staff. Effective school environments provide opportunities for teachers to work daily with one another to examine students' work, review data, and make the necessary adjustments to instruction in order to meet the needs of students (Sparks, 2005). When staff work together, school capacity is increased which leads to improved student achievement. Administrative leadership is a necessary component in building school capacity to develop balanced assessment practices (Fullan, 2006).

The evidence is compelling. The instructional decisions that have the greatest impact on student learning are made day to day in the classroom

by teachers who are skilled in assessment *for* learning practices. Assessment for learning practices can lead to powerful key ideas about student learning such as differentiated instruction as teachers teach to the understanding of 'big ideas' in curricula (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998).

With student achievement as the target, the following Principles of Assessment have been developed to guide divisions in developing and implementing sound assessment practice.

Principles of Assessment



The following compilation of principles, proposed by MASS, has been adapted from The Assessment Reform Group (2002), Stiggins (2001), and *Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada* (1993):

- Assessment recognizes all educational achievement. All learners are able to achieve their best in all learning activities.
- Assessment actively involves students in the assessment process. Self-assessment and self-reflection are an important part of this process and assist students in determining the next steps in their learning. Teachers assist students in building their capacity to take charge of their own learning.
- Assessment promotes the understanding of goal setting. It is important for learners to understand what it is they are trying to achieve. Learners must have a role to play in deciding the learning goals and the criteria for assessing their progress. Educators should communicate with their students about assessment in language that is familiar to them as well as providing examples of how students can meet the criteria for progress.
- Assessment helps learners know how to improve their learning. Students need information and direction in order to guide them in developing a plan for what comes next in their learning. Feedback to students should be descriptive and clear, identifying both areas of strength and improvement, and be frequent and immediate. Students also require numerous and varied opportunities to improve upon their learning.
- Assessment should foster rather than discourage motivation. Assessment used to build student success and self-confidence

-- with its focus on achievement and progress rather than failure -- fosters motivation. Motivation can be enhanced by implementing assessment strategies that provide choice, descriptive feedback and opportunities for student direction.

- Assessment must be sensitive and constructive. Feedback must be fair and appropriate to the developmental needs of the learner. Educators should be aware of the impact of their feedback on students' self-confidence and motivation. In order for assessment to be constructive, the focus must be on the learning rather than the learner.
- Assessment is a critical professional skill. This skill is required to plan for assessment, observe student learning, interpret the evidence of learning and then provide feedback to the learners. Continuous professional development is necessary in assisting educators with developing these skills. Teachers should use assessment information to revise and guide their teaching in order to improve student learning.
- Assessment is central to everyday classroom practice. Assessment should be ongoing and fluid and involve both the teacher and the learner in reflection, dialogue and decision-making. It should focus on the "how" of learning as well as the "what" of learning and provide many opportunities for practice.
- Assessment is an integral part of effective planning. The planning process should provide opportunities for both the learner and the teacher to gather and use information about progress towards developing learning goals. Assessment should also be flexible in order to respond to a variety of ideas emerging from observations and discussions about student learning as students progress through their educational experiences.

The impact of implementing these principles has been well documented. As Amrein and Berliner (2002) reported and Rick Stiggins (2004) states,

Effective classroom assessment on student achievement had demonstrated remarkable gains ... on student scores on assessments of learning. Students have demonstrated that assessment for learning rivals one-on-one tutoring in its effectiveness and that the use of assessment particularly benefits the achievement of low performing students. The latter finding has direct implications for districts seeking to reduce achievement gaps between minorities and other students (p.27).

Looking to the future and the potential to enhance assessment strategies that improve opportunities for learning in every classroom across Manitoba, MASS has determined that provincial and school division leaders should make every effort to find the appropriate balance between assessment of learning and assessment for learning in their policies and practices.

Recommendation

MASS respectfully requests:

That provincial, school and division leaders use the foregoing research-based principles to develop policies to guide classroom practice and educators' professional judgment.

Adoption of these principles by school divisions will require the following actions to support teachers' development of the necessary knowledge and skill in assessment practices, particularly in the area of assessment for learning:

- re-examining assessment policies and practices;
- ensuring that assessment *for* learning practices that support student learning and the assessment *of* learning practices are not in conflict;
- examining the impact of grading practices to ensure that they are aligned with the principles of assessment;
- informing parents and community members of assessment practices and their impact on improving student learning.

MASS believes that implementing the guiding Principles of Assessment through local policy and the provision of professional development opportunities for teaching staff will enhance the quality of learning opportunities in every classroom in Manitoba. The challenge will be to shift, systematically and strategically, the emphasis away from the predominant use of assessment of learning practices toward employing more classroom assessment for learning strategies as the driving force in the successful learning life of every student in Manitoba. Balance is within reach.

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