



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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Standardized Testing Moratorium and Task Force

A brief to the

Minister of Education

from the

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

June 2009

President

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Standardized Testing Moratorium and Task Force Brief 2009

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<http://www.bctf.ca/BriefsAndPositionPapers.aspx>

The BC Teachers' Federation seeks to foster a constructive discussion on the issue of [standardized testing](#). To that end, the Federation urges the BC Ministry of Education to adopt a two-year moratorium on all standardized tests, including the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) and the Grade 10, 11, and 12 provincial examinations. The BCTF further calls for government to establish a Testing and Assessment Task Force to explore the issues and information about assessment and to make recommendations to government before the conclusion of the moratorium. This task force should have on it a majority of teachers selected by the BCTF on a representative basis.

This is not a call for an end to all testing. Classroom teachers will continue to use tests for diagnostic or instructional purposes, for formative as well as summative evaluation.

Why a moratorium?

The use of standardized tests has been a subject of professional, parental, and public discussion and debate. This has particularly been true of the Foundation Skills Assessment, but teachers in secondary schools are also concerned about negative impacts of Grade 10, 11, and 12 exams. A moratorium would clear the air for the kind of professional and public debate that should go on about important educational issues. A moratorium would signal a willingness to have these policies debated, in place of the imposition in the past that helped to create an environment that is not healthy for children or for the adults involved in the education of our children and youth. A moratorium would allow all parties the opportunity to identify policies and practices that would both address stakeholder objectives and reconcile our differences; it would also signal a desire for collaboration and engagement over the disrespectful climate of control and confrontation.

Why a Testing and Assessment Task Force?

The creation of a task force would create a venue for the education debate over testing and assessment that should be focused on developing understanding and consensus.

The BCTF believes that the many groups with an interest in public education should be included in the discussions facilitated by the task force. Voices from the classroom—a majority being representative teachers—should play a central role in formulating the questions and the recommendations. However, the task force should be open in its processes to hear the other voices on these issues, as well.

What are the issues that should be examined by the task force?

1. The drive to standardization that is a direct result of the census application of provincial tests

The census application of the tests and the promotion of high test scores as the objective of schooling leads to a competition for marks, and the identification of standard practice and standard curriculum. This competition then sacrifices curriculum breadth and depth, academic rigour, and the ability of the teacher to design instruction to meet individual students' needs.

Large scale testing compromises sound pedagogy....Although EQAO tests only contain a small subset of [curriculum] expectations, teachers do not know which ones will be assessed in any one year. Accordingly, they are forced to cover all expectations in breadth but do not have time to teach them in depth. (Hilda Watkins, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario)

2. The misuse of test results to create school rankings by the Fraser Institute

All the partners in education in BC—teachers, administrators, parents, and ministers of education—have condemned the way in which these results are used. The current structure of the Foundations Skills Assessment ensures that the Fraser Institute will be able to continue to use these results inappropriately. That can be stopped by moving to another structure for assessment—a random sample. A random-sample application can be designed to ensure that the objectives of the ministry are met. Such a sample would have to be able to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum and to identify subgroups, such as students with special needs or Aboriginal students, and determine whether or not the system is serving these students appropriately.

3. The need for assessment and evaluation processes that are appropriate for a particular objective.

An assessment that provides information to a teacher about what an individual student needs in order to develop understanding of a subject or topic is different from an assessment of how well an education system is performing according to general goals for education.

The researchers who make up the American Education Research Association point out that “in using the same test for multiple high-stakes purposes, policymakers are at odds with the professional standards of the testing and measurement community” (McDonnell, 2005, 45).

A moratorium and task force would provide the opportunity to clarify and support assessments for teaching and learning purposes while also identifying assessments for system evaluation that are appropriate for that purpose.

An examination of the value of a randomized assessment for system evaluation purposes should be examined by the task force, with recommendations on appropriateness.

4. An analysis of the educational value of existing provincial and local assessments

The existing provincial programs need to be analyzed in relationship to their educational value. Is the FSA being used in conflicting and competing ways that undermine any value it might have? Are the Grade 10, 11, and 12 exams having an impact on curricular flexibility and deep learning?

However, looking at provincial tests is only a part of the task. Local standardized exams are being used, often without a substantial assessment of their value and appropriateness. The task force should assess these assessments and develop recommendations on quality and appropriateness.

5. A look at other models of assessment and the success of Finland which operates without a standardized testing program

The success of Finland on international, randomized assessments rests in a system that depends not on standardized testing, but on a highly educated and supported community of teachers.

In contrast, a number of education systems that have been test-driven are much less successful. Protests against the heavy testing regimes are arising in many countries, including in Britain and the United States.

In Canada, the Alberta legislature passed a motion calling on government to stop the census testing of Grade 3 students on an equivalent to the BC FSA. The Ontario Teachers' Federation has also called for random assessments and using more than a single test result to evaluate schools.

6. Impact on the joy of learning

Ultimately, the main gift a teacher and a school can give to students is the joy of learning that will carry them throughout their life. Standardized testing produces a negative influence on this.

Standardized tests narrow the curriculum as teachers teach to the test, with implicit and explicit demands that students be prepared for the test rather than supported in exploring the world, whether a topic will be on a test or not.

The greatest educational motivator is intense interest in a topic that leads to exploration and depth of learning. In the test-driven classroom, intense exploration of interest is often lost by a demand to keep going through the curriculum and covering the topics the testmakers will likely have included on the standardized exam.

For the marginal student, the focus on preparing for the test becomes another blow to their attempts to get an education. Rather than building on their strengths and interests, the test-driven classroom focuses on someone else's choices.

These are some of the reasons education researcher Andy Hargreaves says that we are moving into a “post-standardization” world.

The BCTF believes that a broad and open discussion of testing and assessment during a moratorium could lead to better public policy, engage teachers in important discussions of educational practice, produce deeper understanding by parents of the learning process, and, most importantly, create more opportunities to motivate students toward deep learning.

McDonnell, L. (2005). “Assessment and Accountability from the Policymaker’s Perspective.” In Herman, J. and Haertel, E. *Uses and Misuses of Data for Educational Accountability and Improvement*. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.

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