Assessment in Saskatchewan: Examining Provincial Approaches to Contemporary Assessment Principles through School Division Administrative Policies

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Abstract

In Saskatchewan, school divisions have been largely tasked with creating classroom-based assessment policy as, until very recently, the province lacked a current, Ministry-produced guiding document. Using an inductive and qualitative approach to summative content analysis, informed by a policy analysis framework, this project focused on school division administrative policies (*n*=24) to ascertain their alignment with contemporary assessment principles. Three principles—standards-based assessment, reliability and validity, and fairness and equity—and six sub-principles—ongoing/continuous, transparent/(involves) stakeholders, (excludes) extraneous/arbitrary factors, triangulation, differentiation, and inclusion—served as the focus of analysis, with particular attention given to how clearly and consistently principles were addressed.

Keywords: provincial, contemporary assessment principles, administrative policies, policy analysis

Introduction

Approaches to classroom-based assessment have changed drastically in the last 20 years, from performance-based testing culture to student-centered practices that prioritize learning and link assessment, inextricably, to teaching, learning, and the curriculum (Birenbaum, 2016; Buckley-Walker & Lipscombe, 2021; Pellegrino & Wilson, 2015). Yet, many schools struggle to enact assessment culture, continuing to rely on tests and exams to evaluate student performance (Buhagiar, 2007). One potential barrier is low assessment literacy among teachers, described as the "understanding and appropriate use of assessment practices along with the knowledge of the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings in the measurement of students' learning" (Deluca & Klinger, 2010, pp. 419-20). As Koh et al. (2019) have pointed out, assessment literacy is deeply rooted in teachers' "views of learning and their conceptions of assessment, which are shaped by local cultural, social and political influences" (p. 3). Assessment training that aligns with theory, contemporary practices, and professional standards is critical for supporting assessment literacy, as is clarity and consistency pertaining to assessment principles and policies offered within specific contexts (Brookhart, 2015; Campbell, 2013; Xu & Brown, 2016). As Brown (2004) has explained, "many policies concerning assessment standards and procedures aim to connect teaching and learning to regulation and administration. Thus, the success or failure of such policies may hang on the conceptions and meanings that teachers give to [them]" (p. 301).

This project examined assessment principles addressed in assessment-specific administrative policies (APs) produced by school divisions (SDs) in Saskatchewan. All SDs in the province are required to have APs containing, "program policies, administrative organization, and general management" (*The School Division Administration Regulations*, 2017, p. 21). More specifically, APs include "a statement of

the policies adopted, approved or authorized by the board of education with respect to…the educational objectives, program development and provision of educational services in the school division" (p. 20). The Saskatchewan School Boards Association (2022) has identified student assessment as a component of the school operations section of administrative policies and procedures, stressing that its purpose is to "establish guidelines for reporting student progress to parents and guardians" (McDonough, 2005, p. 54). Resultantly, SDs should provide, "a systematic and articulated program to evaluate student progress" (McDonough, 2005, p. 54) within their APs. APs provide pertinent information about how individual SDs conceptualize and approach assessment. They are particularly important given that, for the last twenty or so years, the Ministry of Education has provided little by way of formal and contemporary guidance around classroom-based assessment policies and the principles[1] that undergird them. The province's assessment guide, *Student Evaluation: A Teacher Handbook,* served as the active assessment document in the province for over thirty years (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 1991). Given its age, and the fact that the document pre-dated the adoption of standards-based curricula, few SDs reference the handbook, relying instead upon their own contemporary research to construct division-specific assessment policies to guide school-based practices (Hébert & LeNouail, in press; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). This particular work aimed to document how assessment has been approached in Saskatchewan SDs in recent years. This study is timely given that the newly published handbook, *Supporting Student Assessment in Saskatchewan*, has been in development for quite some time, though school administrators were largely unsure of both its content and potential date of publication (Hébert & LeNouail, in press; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022b).[2]

Very little research on assessment in Saskatchewan exists. While researchers have examined how administrators use assessment data (Balicki, 2016; Hellsten et al., 2013) and discourses of wide-scale reading and writing assessments (Belisle, 2012), to date only one study has looked at how SDs in the province have approached classroom-based assessment (Hébert & LeNouail, in press), and none have explicitly targeted assessment policies developed by SDs. This work is vitally important considering not only the prominence these policies assume in guiding assessment across the province, but also the aforementioned concerns about assessment illiteracy and teachers, the absence of an updated provincial framework around assessment to ground these principles for the last twenty years, and, as will be ascertained in the literature review, potential ambiguity pertaining to assessment principles. It is also important given the role of classroom-based assessment and the accompanying professional authority granted to teachers to evaluate students' learning within the province. Saskatchewan does not participate in standardized common provincial examinations, with the exception of: grade twelve departmental exams given to students who are home schooled or enrolled in a course taught by a non-accredited teacher, externally-created language and mathematics assessments for pre-kindergarten to grade three students that are administered in house, and national and international assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022a). Clear and coherent classroom-based assessment policy is important in such contexts where educators are granted the autonomy to interpret and apply classroom-based assessment policy.

Our goal was to provide an account of AP alignment with contemporary assessment principles offered in the assessment literature. Conceptually, classroom-based assessment is "scattered" owing, at least in part, to its foundation in several related, though at times conflicting, areas: "measurement, student learning and motivation, and instruction" (McMillan, 2013, p. 3), or, classified a bit differently, "the study of individual differences (e.g., educational psychology, theories of learning, and motivation), the study of groups (e.g., social learning theory and sociology), and the study of measurement (e.g., validity and reliability theory and formative and summative assessment theory)" (Brookhart, 2004, pp. 429-430). It was beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of these conceptual framings

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[1] Tierney et al. (2011) note that while the terms *principle* and *policy* are often used synonymously in assessment literature, a clear distinction can be made. Principles refer to accepted "truths" or "generalizations" that "can be used as a basis for reasoning or conduct" while policies are specific courses of action put forth and enacted by an organization and/or individuals within an organization (p. 211). In this article, we used the term *principle* to refer to the approaches to assessment best practices outlined in the literature, and *policy*, to refer to the "courses of action" detailed in school division APs.

[2] On May 17, 2022, the Ministry of Education released a new assessment handbook, *Supporting Student Assessment in Saskatchewan* (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022b). Given the newness of this document, at the time of writing, none of the school division APs analyzed had been modified to reflect its content.

alongside their merits and limitations. Instead, we focused our analysis, in this text, on three overarching principles and six sub-principles, representative of those that appeared frequently in contemporary assessment literature[3]:

1. standards-based assessment (SBA)
    a. ongoing/continuous
    b. transparency/(involves) stakeholders
    c. (excludes) extraneous/arbitrary factors
2. reliability and validity
    d. triangulation
3. fairness and equity
    e. inclusion
    f. differentiation

To this end, this research attempted to respond to the following question: To what degree were Saskatchewan school division policies consistent and clear in their underlying principles for classroom assessment? The next section of the paper will provide an overview of the research around contemporary assessment principles before outlining data and methods and offering results and a discussion of the implications of these findings.

Contemporary Assessment Principles

Standards-Based Assessment

Since the late 1990s/early 2000s, a push has been made for SBA, or assessment that is grounded in a predetermined set of criteria (Guskey, 2009b), shifting focus away from the "inputs," or content knowledge of the curriculum toward the "outputs," or what students needed to know, understand, and be able to do (O'Connor, 2018). In many Canadian provinces, outputs have been articulated in curriculum documents in the form of grade-level outcomes, with educators reporting on attainment of these standards using proficiency scales, predetermined by either the province or individual SDs (Brookhart et al., 2016; DeLuca et al., 2017). Several grading practices support SBA, including ongoing or continuous grading, grading that is transparent and involves stakeholders, and grading that excludes extraneous or arbitrary factors.

When assessment is ongoing, it is administered regularly, providing students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of and progress toward a particular curriculum outcome (De Lisle, 2016; O'Connor, 2018). The focus is typically on trends in achievement over time rather than averaging student grades (Cooper, 2007). SBA is also intended to be transparent insofar as grading is criterion-referenced, and standards are made explicit to students and other stakeholders (e.g., parents/guardians, administrators, government officials, members of the general public, etc.), ultimately removing any guesswork from assessment (Brown et al., 2004; Simon et al., 2010). Yet, making standards available to stakeholders does not necessarily result in transparency; simply distributing curriculum documents to parents or assessment tools to students, for example, constitutes a superficially transparent assessment practice as stakeholders are not supported in deepening their understanding of either curricula or connections between criteria and outcomes (Tierney, 2013). Finally, for SBA, excluding extraneous and arbitrary factors in grading (e.g., grading based on behaviour and attendance) is important as their inclusion ultimately waters down standards and undermines SBA; extraneous and arbitrary factors do not adequately reflect a student's ability to meet a particular curriculum outcome (Guskey, 2009a; O'Connor, 2011). Consequently, concrete knowledge of curriculum outcomes is essential for supporting effective SBA, alongside an understanding of the assessment practices that align with this approach.

Reliability and Validity

In the literature on measurement, *validity* refers to the degree to which an assessment measures what it is intended to measure and *reliability*, to an assessment's ability to consistently measure what it pur-

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[3] For the purposes of this article, assessment principles have been grouped into these three categories. However, as will be suggested in the literature review, research does not always clearly distinguish between these principles, nor does categorization always occur in this way.

ports to measure over time (Gipps, 2012; Popham, 2005). Applied to classroom assessment, validity might simply refer to how effectively an assessment allows teachers to make accurate inferences about and ultimately support student learning, and reliability, to having enough information to make an accurate judgment about student understanding (Heritage, 2013; Kane & Wools, 2020). Davies (2020) has suggested enhancing reliability and validity by gathering and comparing data from multiple sources or triangulating assessment data. Adding both conversations and observations to the assessment process presents a richer and more comprehensive picture of student understanding than focusing exclusively on products, insofar as teachers are able to view learning "in action," bear witness to students' thinking, and ask clarifying questions.

Taking the argument a bit further, some have suggested that reliability and validity might be inappropriate when applied to classroom assessment, stressing that the very nature of this type of assessment and its attentiveness to learning processes pose challenges for reliability with respect to consistency over time (Parkes, 2013). With this in mind, Black and Wiliam (2012) have called for a re-framing of reliability, arguing that formative assessment in particular "is reliable to the extent that the assessment processes being used generate evidence that consistently leads to better, or better founded decisions" (p. 260). Similarly, Stobart (2012) has suggested that valid assessments meet the goal of improving learning, as the latter is the intended function of formative assessment. Alonzo (2020) has recommended doing away with reliability and validity altogether, instead applying trustworthiness as a central criterion, defined as "the extent to which classroom assessment can be relied upon for the various purposes for which it is intended" (p. 128), namely, shaping the educational process. Ultimately, varying approaches to reliability and validity represented in the literature are suggestive of the need to offer clear and specific definitions as they relate to classroom-based assessment, if required assessment practices.

Fairness and Equity

Fair assessments provide students with an "equal opportunity to demonstrate achievement" and also "yield[ ] scores that are comparably valid from one person or group to another," meaning that they are both "unbiased" and "indiscriminatory" (McMillan, 2007, p. 76). Two rather simple ways of fostering fairness in the classroom are disrupting teachers' authority and establishing an environment of respect and trust (Tierney, 2013). Formative assessments that engage students in their own learning also offer an example of a practice that could serve to enhance fairness in the classroom, though only when supported in a meaningful manner (Elwood & Lundy, 2010). That said, Tierney (2013) has cautioned that while fairness is a commonly cited assessment principle, it is rarely defined and often used in conjunction with other principles, thus blurring lines between them.

Equity as it pertains to assessment has historically been approached with an emphasis on equality or ensuring that all students are evaluated the same way. Yet, more contemporary framings take seriously the needs of individual learners, primarily by accommodating students with individualized learning plans, such as those with learning disabilities, as well as considering the cultural validity and linguistic diversity of assessments (Basterra et al., 2010; Solano-Flores, 2010; Tierney, 2013). In standards-based grading systems, inclusive grading often involves modifying standards for students and clearly articulating what grades mean in light of the modifications provided (Jung, 2009). More broadly, instruction and assessment could be differentiated to respond to the unique needs of individual students in the classroom. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) have offered four general principles of instructional differentiation, which include: content, or what a student will be learning; process, or how learning is undertaken; product, or what a student will summatively produce to demonstrate learning; and affect, or how a student is responding emotionally to the learning process and the learning environment. They also suggest that teachers could differentiate using three key approaches: responding to students' readiness, interests, and learning profile.

One might push notions of equity and fairness as they apply to assessment even further, considering systemic issues in the classroom that might be deemed oppressive (Gipps, 2012). For example, adopting an anti-oppressive lens, Kelly and Brandes (2008) have argued that equitable assessment practices ought to counter cultural imperialism, systemic violence, marginalization, and powerlessness as well as promote self-determination. Relatedly, Rasooli et al. (2019) have offered three "dimensions" of fair classroom assessment: 1) "classroom distributive justice," with attention to equity, equality, and need; 2)

"classroom procedural justice," which considers consistency, accuracy, bias suppression, correctability, ethicality, and voice; and 3) "classroom interactional justice," referring more specifically to respect, caring, adequate, truthful, and justified information, and timeliness (p. 597). Again here, we see a rather wide spectrum of approaches to equity, ranging from accommodating students and reducing bias in assessment to modifying pedagogical practices to reflect anti-oppressive education, speaking to the need for definitional clarity and specificity.

Data and Methods

Data: Assessment Policies

SD administrative policies (APs) served as the focus of this analysis, specifically, those that included assessment, and/or evaluation in the title of the document.[4] APs were accessible through SD websites, except for one AP[5] that, owing to a firewall, was located externally using a Google search. Altogether, 24 assessment APs were analyzed out of a possible 27 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022a).[6] APs ranged in length from one to eight pages. All but one contained a date of publication. Eight were rather current, having been updated in 2020 or 2021, with eight others updated in the last seven years, and five in the last ten years; two were over 14 years old (See Table 1). Many of the assessment APs contained background information and/or an introductory blurb, the purpose of the policy, definitions, guidelines, procedures, and references. All sections of the APs were included in analysis, with the exception of references and definitions, which were reported on separately for each principle.

Table 1
School Division APs

School Division	Name of Document	Date	Length	Source
Chinook School Division (Chinook)	AP 360: Student Assessment	October 26, 2021	2 pages	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1V8rOh9jw_IS2hp4Kn27OkpL_OvqcdMqedoB2BTAXZGU/edit#heading=h.6so20xbfoyc6
Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools (Christ the Teacher)	AP 360: Student Assessment and Evaluation	November 21, 2007	7 pages	https://christtheteacher.ca/ctt/download/360-student-assessment-and-evaluation/
Creighton School Division (Creighton)	AP 213: Student Assessment, Evaluation and Promotion	May 21, 2014	5 pages	https://creightonschooldivision.com/docs/policy/Student%20Assessment%20Evaluation%20and%20Promotion.pdf
School Division	Name of Document	Date	Length	Source
Good Spirit School Division (Good Spirit)	AP 281: Division Assessment Program: Guiding Principles	August 2008	2 pages	https://www.gssd.ca/download/389306

School Division	Name of Document	Date	Length	Source
Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools (Saskatoon Catholic)	AP HCB: Student Assessment and Reporting	December 2020	4 pages	https://gscsstorage.blob.core.windows.net/media/Default/medialib/hcb.e09c102552.PDF
Holy Family Roman Catholic Separate School Division #140 (Holy Family)	AP 5152: Student Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting	March 15, 2018	6 pages	https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZmGEHxKXXJPQjxQ0QCND4JfsEkuW_SYq/view
Holy Trinity Catholic Schools (Holy Trinity)	AP 360: Communicating Student Learning	June 2019	2 pages	https://22.files.edl.io/73fe/10/24/19/211824-3378791c-434b-4403-91d7-eeb779d15b16.pdf
Horizon School Division (Horizon)	AP 360: Student Evaluation	No Date	n.p.	https://22.files.edl.io/c5c7/03/20/23/230905-7bb97dc4-5590-4c14-ae74-ce7273c631c5.pdf
Light of Christ Catholic Schools (Light of Christ)	AP 210: Assessment	December 2015	2 pages	https://www.loccsd.ca/pdf/
Living Sky School Division 202 (Living Sky)	AP 4.06: Student Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting	July 6, 2015	2 pages	https://www.livingskysd.ca/documents/350981c5-0bbb-4bec-9a12-851e0a256b87/406StudentAssessmentEvaluationandReporting.pdf
Lloydminster Catholic School Division (Lloydminster Catholic)	AP 360: Student Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting	August 2020	6 pages	https://www.lcsd.ca/uploads/pdf/AP300s/AP360_Student_Assessment_Evaluation_and_Reporting.pdf
Lloydminster Public School Division (Lloydminster Public)	AP 360: Student Assessment for Schools	June 2019	8 pages	https://www.lpsd.ca/download/194563
School Division	**Name of Document**	**Date**	**Length**	**Source**
North East School Division (North East)	AP 414: Assessment and Reporting	September 2017	5 pages	https://www.nesd.ca/pdf/56128595/88341081/56128668#AP_414-Assessment_and_Reporting-rv092617.pdf
Northern Lights School Division No. 113 (Northern Lights)	AP 360: Student Assessment & Evaluation Criteria	October 2021	3 pages	https://22.files.edl.io/a7e9/10/26/21/155002-262c308e-59f3-429f-857d-c00bb8914eb9.pdf

Northwest School Division #203 (Northwest)	AP 360: Student Assessment and Evaluation	December 10, 2018	7 pages	http://www.nwsd.ca/About/AdminProcedures/Documents/300%20-%20Students/AP%20360%20STUDENT%20ASSESSMENT%20AND%20EVALUATION.pdf
Prairie South School Division #210 (Prairie South)	AP 360: Student Assessment	May 4, 2021	1 page	https://www.prairiesouth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Administrative-Procedure-360-20210504.pdf
Prairie Spirit School Division (Prairie Spirit)	AP 414: Assessment	Fall 2020	7 pages	https://www.spiritsd.ca/files/app/414%20Assessment.pdf
Prairie Valley School Division (Prairie Valley)	AP 2610: Student Assessment	September 2021	2 pages	https://www.pvsd.ca/Publication/AdminProcedures/Administration%20Procedures/Student%20Assessment.pdf
Prince Albert Catholic School Division (PA Catholic)	AP HK: Evaluation of Learning	February 8, 2021	3 pages	https://pacsd.ca/wp-content/uploads/HK-8Feb21.pdf
Regina Public Schools (Regina Public)	AP 316: Student Evaluation and Placement	February 2017	4 pages	https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TgI59TrP3TspLE9l1TPW2VNujwcQe_lp/view
Saskatchewan Rivers Public School Division No. 119 (Saskatchewan Rivers)	AP 315: Student Assessment, Evaluation and Promotion	May 12, 2014	4 pages	https://www.srsd119.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/AP_RL_AP315_Student_Assessment.pdf
School Division	**Name of Document**	**Date**	**Length**	**Source**
Saskatoon Public Schools (Saskatoon Public)	AP 360: Assessment and Evaluation of Students	April 2016	4 pages	https://www.spsd.sk.ca/division/adminproceduresmanual/Documents/AP%20360%20Assessment%20and%20Evaluation%20of%20Students%20apr%202016.pdf

South East Cornerstone Public School Division #209 (South East Cornerstone)	AP 360: Assessment and Reporting	June 2015	3 pages	https://22.files.edl.io/16ae/06/04/21/230210-77ab23a2-6dd1-4f9b-a9fe-7d4b87130d59.pdf
Sun West School Division (Sun West)	AP 370: Student Assessment	August 8, 2019	2 pages	https://www.sunwestsd.ca//assets/doc/ap-370-student-assessment-190808.pdf

In addition to assessment APs, several SDs had also produced assessment materials that included handbooks, guides, parent handbooks, and in one instance, an assessment process infographic (for the infographic, see Sunwest School Division, 2022). These documents were not included in our analysis for consistency purposes, as we were unable to ascertain the availability of such documents for all SDs.

Methods: Analysis

Policy attributes theory served as the theoretical framework for this particular study. Policy attributes theory provides a foundation for understanding the potential efficacy of a policy according to the presence of five attributes: specificity, consistency, authority, power, and stability (Desimone, 2002). We focused on two attributes, specificity and consistency, which refer to, respectively, "how extensive and detailed" or how clear, a policy is and "coherence among policies: the extent to which they contradict or reinforce one another" (Desimone, 2002, p. 439). Policies that are specific are "clear and detailed" while consistency entails the alignment of various elements or "components of the system" (Desimone et al., 2005, p. 7). The framework, developed by Porter (1994), has been used mainly to examine comprehensive school reform (Desimone, 2002; Patterson et al., 2013). We extended its application to better understand two attributes of SD APs.

We utilized an inductive and qualitative approach to summative content analysis, wherein researchers examine a text for the appearance of particular words (Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), focusing on their use in context rather than the number of times they appear in a document (Kondracki et al., 2002). In the preparation phase, we narrowed the unit of analysis to the 24 APs. Each of the two authors of the article began with an initial read through of the texts to both familiarize themselves with the content and become immersed in the data. For round one of analysis, coding centered exclusively on searching documents for terms representative of the overarching principles: SBA, reliable and valid, and fair and equitable. APs took the form of PDFs, Google documents, or text embedded in a SD website, meaning that data could easily be extracted. Microsoft Excel was used to gather and organize data, and to calculate frequencies. Search terms included "standards" for SBA, "fair," "valid," and "reliab" to capture both "reliable" and "reliability," and "equit," for "equitable" and "equity." For round two, analysis shifted to the sub-categories of the overarching assessment principles; the APs were searched for instances where "ongoing," "continuous," "stakeholder," "inclusive;" "extraneous" and "arbitrary" appeared; "transparen" was used for "transparent" and "transparency," "differentiat" for "differentiated," "differentiation," and "differentiate," and "triangulat" for "triangulate" and "triangulation." The third round of analysis required a more careful contextual narrowing of terms, specifically for SBA and inclusion. For the general principle SBA, as the standards upon which assessment is conducted in Saskatchewan are "outcomes," coupled with the fact that the "province" ("Saskatchewan") or "Ministry" [of Education] produced the curriculum, we extended our search to include these terms. For extraneous and arbitrary factors, we built off of descriptions provided of these terms in the APs and expanded the search to include "learning behaviours," "learner attributes," "non-academics," "student behaviours," and "student achievement" accordingly. Finally for inclusion, we looked for instances where the general terms "intervention," "modification," "adaptation," and "individual program," were used. In Saskatchewan, students who "require a significant level of support" are typically on inclusion and intervention plans or IIPs (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022c, para. 11), sometimes referred to as Personalized Program Plans (PPPs). For this reason, we also used searched for "IIP" and "PPP." (See Figure 1) For all three rounds of analysis, the authors agreed upon the search terms before engaging in the coding process
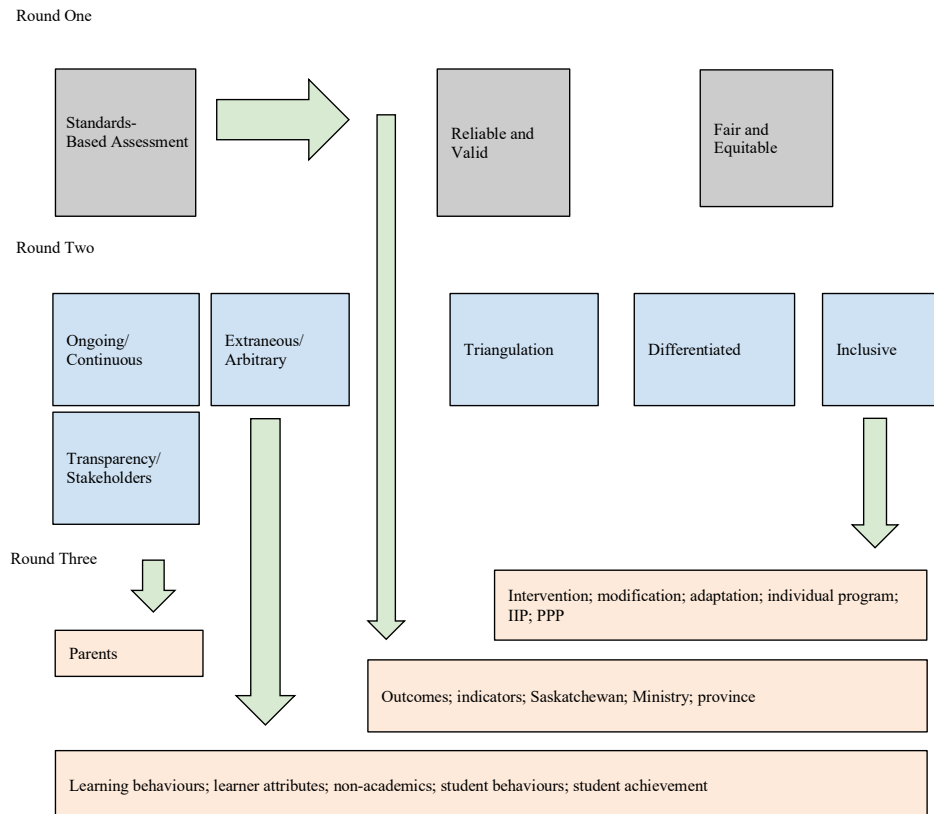
and proceeded to code the data individually; both authors coded all the data. Individually coded data was then reviewed by the other author. To enhance reliability, any inconsistencies were discussed until consensus could be reached. Finally, as this study focused on classroom-based assessment principles, terms were excluded from analysis if they appeared in the APs but were used outside of this context.

Figure 1
Coding Scheme

Results and Discussion

Standards-Based Assessment

While none of the twenty-four assessment APs analyzed used the term *standards-based assessment*,

Round One

Standards-Based Assessment		Reliable and Valid	Fair and Equitable

Round Two

Ongoing/ Continuous	Extraneous/ Arbitrary	Triangulation	Differentiated	Inclusive

Transparency/ Stakeholders

Round Three

Parents

Intervention; modification; adaptation; individual program; IIP; PPP

Outcomes; indicators; Saskatchewan; Ministry; province

Learning behaviours; learner attributes; non-academics; student behaviours; student achievement

nineteen[7] included reference to curricular, provincial, Saskatchewan and/or Ministry outcomes.[8] For example, Lloydminster Catholic's (2020) AP indicated that teachers should "assist students [in] understand[ing] learning targets as defined by the outcomes outlined by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education Curriculum" (p. 1) and Regina Public's (2017), that students "shall have opportunities during their school careers to demonstrate their achievements where appropriate to the outcomes of the curricula" (p. 1). Yet the language used was rather inconsistent both across and within APs. To provide two examples of the latter, Northern Lights' (2021) AP referred to standards as "learning outcomes of each curricular subject," "provincial curricular outcomes," and "curriculum outcomes" (pp. 2-3) and Saskatchewan Rivers' (2014) as "provincial curriculum outcomes," "curricular outcomes," and the "provincial curriculum" (pp. 300-8-300-10). Standards-based assessment did not appear in the definition section of any of the APs, though other terms pertaining to SBA, including *content standards, criteria, criterion-referenced* or *standards-based tests*, *curriculum referenced*, *learning outcomes*, and *outcome,* were defined by four SDs.[9]

Ongoing or Continuous

Sixteen APs[10] adopted the language of *ongoing* or *continuous* to apply to assessment, often alongside other terms such as *systemic, planned, current, regular, timely, responsive, varied,* and *administered over time*. For example, Northern Lights' (2021) AP stipulated that the division "requires a planned program of continuous instruction and assessment for all students within its jurisdiction" (p. 1), Creighton's (2014) that "a planned program of ongoing assessment and regular evaluation is required for all students" (p. 1) and PA Catholic's (2021) that assessment and evaluation should consist of "planned, continuous activities" (p. 1). In two of these twelve APs,[11] ongoing/continuous assessment bled into another principle, used as part of the description of fairness and accuracy. Neither *ongoing* nor *continuous* was offered as a definition in any of the APs.

Transparency and Stakeholders

Six SDs included *transparency* as part of their APs. One SD, Good Spirit (2008), offered ensuring "all evaluative practices are transparent" (p. 2) as an element of honesty and openness. For two others, transparency was connected to the process of communicating assessment, establishing that the "channels of communication between teachers and parents or guardians concerning the development of the learner… [are] open, transparent, and honest" (North East, 2017, p. 1) and that "learning intentions…and instructional strategies are transparent for the learner and parents" (Holy Trinity, 2019, p. 1). In the remaining three APs,[12] transparency was connected with another assessment principle, namely, fairness and equity.

Seven SDs[13] referred to *stakeholders* explicitly in their APs. For example, engaging "all stakeholders in the attainment of the Saskatchewan curriculum" was at the heart of Chinook's (2012) assessment process, which involved "reporting student progress to parents and guardians" (p. 1). Similarly, Creighton (2014) and Saskatchewan Rivers (2014) indicated that "all stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure growth in students' integrity, responsibility, and academic achievement" (Creighton, p. 1; Saskatchewan Rivers, p. 300-8), and Northern Lights (2021) that the SD will "share appropriate division assessment data with educational stakeholders and respond to the data in a meaningful way" (p. 1). For two SDs,[14]

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[7] Chinook, Christ the Teacher, Creighton, Holy Family, Holy Trinity, Horizon, Light of Christ, Lloydminster Catholic, Lloydminster Public, North East, Northern Lights, Northwest, Prairie Spirit, PA Catholic, Regina Public, Saskatchewan Rivers, Saskatoon Catholic, Saskatoon Public, and South East Cornerstone.

[8] Good Spirit (2006) used *outcome* under the description of comprehensiveness, noting, "assessment and evaluation practices endorse a broad range of performance indicators (including process, context, and outcome indicators) to provide a holistic and balanced picture of system performance as well as student learning and experience" (p. 1). While it is likely that the AP is referring to the curriculum, hinted at in the language use here, given that the AP is not referring explicitly to either standards-based assessment or provincial curricular outcomes, it was not included as one of the 19 APs referencing SBA.

[9] Christ the Teacher, Lloydminster Catholic, Lloydminster Public, and Prairie Spirit.

[10] Chinook, Christ the Teacher, Creighton, Holy Family, Holy Trinity, Horizon, Light of Christ, Living Sky, North East, Northern Lights, Northwest, PA Catholic, Prairie Spirit, Regina Public, Saskatchewan Rivers, and South East Cornerstone.

[11] Holy Family and Christ the Teacher.

[12] Horizon, Light of Christ, and Northwest.

[13] Chinook, Creighton, North East, Northern Lights, Northwest, Saskatchewan Rivers, and Saskatoon Catholic.

[14] North East and Northwest.

stakeholders appeared in the APs in relation to policies for students who required additional support. For instance, Northwest (2018) affirmed that "The pyramid of interventions [for students with intensive needs] must be articulated to all school stakeholders including students, teachers, and parents" (p. 6). None of the APs provided definitions for either transparency or stakeholders. Only two SD APs[15] employed the language of both transparency and stakeholders.

All 24 APs did include the term *parent*, typically in a statement about the importance of communicating policies and procedures to parents and/or keeping them informed about student progress. For example, Holy Family's (2018) AP stipulated that "reporting student progress to students and their parent(s)/guardian(s) is a vital practice related to the education of individual students" (p. 5) and Holy Trinity's (2019), that "responsive, clear, and descriptive communication provides parents with information about their child's learning, as well as an increased ability to support their child" (p. 1).

Extraneous and Arbitrary Factors

Thirteen of the SD APs called attention to *extraneous and arbitrary factors*, though only two used these terms, described as "effort, participation, attitude, work habits, attendance, and behavior," factors "not to be used to determine a student's grade" (Christ the Teacher, 2007, p. 6; Holy Family, 2018, p. 4). Three other SDs[16] referred to this same list of factors as *learner attributes,* with a fourth adopting the language of learner attributes without clarifying its meaning, pairing attributes with "students' progress…[and] effort" as "information about students' achievement," that should be "communicate[d]…separately" (Lloydminster Public, 2019, p. 4). Eight SDs[17] identified factors that should be communicated apart from achievement as *learning behaviours*, *student achievement, student behaviours*, or *non-academics.* For example, Sun West (2019) claimed, "learning behaviours will be reported separately from the learning outcomes" (p. 1) and Northern Lights (2021) that "factors affecting student achievement which are not related to curricular outcomes (e.g., attendance, behavior, attitudes, completion of homework, effort) should be separated out from the evaluation of achievement of the curricular outcome" (p. 3).[18] Definitions were not provided for any of these terms in the APs.

Reliable and Valid Assessments

Eleven APs mentioned reliability and validity. Five SDs[19] were rather vague with their use of the terms, including them as part of a general statement regarding how the division approached assessment, or grouping them with other assessment practices. For instance, Light of Christ (2015) wrote, "it is the role of all educators to ensure that assessment, evaluation, and reporting are valid and reliable" (p. 1). For Good Spirit (2008), validity was identified as an assessment procedure alongside authenticity, described as follows: "all activities are designed to facilitate authentic assessment (ie. connected to curriculum objectives, non-biased, performance based). The information gathered in an assessment meets the needs of intended users - students, teachers, administrators and the Ministry" (p. 1). What constituted valid assessment according to this policy was not entirely clear.

For two SDs, reliability and/or validity were discussed as they related specifically to testing. Regina Public (2017), speaking of division-level assessments, noted "assessment instruments are to be valid for their intended uses. They must have sufficient reliability for their intended uses" (p. 3), while Christ the Teacher (2007) cautioned, "arbitrary high stakes evaluation, evaluation that upholds the 'element of surprise' and evaluation that is not based upon a reasonable body of evidence are not appropriate

ways to achieve valid evaluation" (p. 6). Reliability and validity were also taken up in the description of assessment of learning or summative assessment for three other SDs.[20] For example, Lloydminster Public's (2019) AP stipulated that assessment of learning "tasks and instruments" should be "reviewed

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[15] North East and Northwest.

[16] Light of Christ, Lloydminster Catholic, and Northwest.

[17] Northern Lights, North East, Prairie Spirit, Saskatchewan Rivers, Sunwest, Saskatoon Catholic, Saskatoon Public, and South East Cornerstone

[18] As we limited our search to arbitrary or extraneous factors, punitive or distorted grading practices, such as late marks, bonus marks, and zeros, were not addressed, though they did appear in 10 APs: Christ the Teacher's, Holy Family's, Light of Christ's, Lloydminster Catholic's, Lloydminster Public's, North East's, Northwest's, Prairie Spirit's, Saskatchewan Rivers', and South East Cornerstone's.

[19] Chinook, Good Spirit, Light of Christ, Living Sky, and Saskatoon Catholic.

[20] Lloydminster Catholic, Lloydminster Public, and North East.

on an ongoing basis for validity and reliability" (p. 4), adding "tasks and instruments must be valid and reliable and clearly linked to identified learning" (p. 3).

One SD used *reliability* and *validity* alongside triangulation; Northwest (2018) noted that, for assessment for learning in particular, "evidence of student achievement for evaluation is collected over time from three different sources - observations, conversations, and student products" and that "using multiple sources of evidence increases the reliability and validity of the evaluation of student learning" (p. 3). Only two of the eleven APs that took up reliability and validity[21] included definitions.

Triangulation

Triangulation was identified as a component of only three SDs' assessment procedures. Northwest's (2018) AP incorporated triangulation into the assessment for learning process, explaining, "evidence of student achievement for evaluation is [to be] collected over time from three different sources – observations, conversations, and student products (Triangulation of data sources)" (n.p.). Prairie Spirit's (2020) AP included triangulation as one of the roles of the teacher, and Lloydminster Public's (2019) stressed that teachers "will triangulate assessment information" (n.p). Three SDs, Christ the Teacher, Lloydminster Public and Prairie Spirit, included triangulation as definitions in their APs, though Christ the Teacher did not take up triangulation as part of their assessment procedures.

Fair and Equitable Assessments

Fifteen[22] of the APs referred explicitly to fairness and/or equity, though with quite a bit of variation in the language used. Terms included: *accurate, fair, and equitable*; *common and equitable*; *equity and fairness*; *fair and equitable; fair, transparent, and equitable*; *fair*; *fair, accurate, and just; fair and accurate; fair and just; fair and flexible*; *fair, objective*, [and] *reflect[s] sound professional judgment*; *fair, transparent and equitable*; *fair, transparent, curriculum-based, and accountable* and *honest, fair, and... consistent*. For three SDs,[23] the terms were used indeterminately, appearing as part of a general statement or guiding principle around assessment. For example, Living Sky (2015) positioned "ensur[ing] accurate, fair, and equitable school level student evaluation procedures, consistent with Division procedures and the Ministry of Education, are developed and maintained" (p. 1) as a responsibility of the principal; yet, the AP provided no additional information regarding what fair and equitable school-level evaluation procedures might entail or how the principal might meet these goals.

Five[24] SDs offered more descriptive accounts of either the intent of fairness and/or equity, or how the principle might apply to assessment practices. For instance, Saskatoon Public's (2016) "commitment to good practice" included a "response to diversity," which specified the purpose of equitable assessment practices: "equitable assessments give all students a fair opportunity to be successful regardless of their gender, socioeconomic, cultural, academic or linguistic background" (p. 4). And Northwest (2018) and Light of Christ (2015) wrote, "teachers must use practices and procedures that… are fair, transparent, and equitable for all students" and, in the sentence that follows, that "support all students, including those with intensive educational needs, those who are learning the language of instruction (English or French), and those who are First Nation, Métis, or Inuit" (Light of Christ, p. 1; Northwest, p. 1), suggesting, perhaps, an approach to equity that attempts to address the needs of diverse learners in the classroom.[25]

Once again blurring boundaries between assessment principles, in four[26] APs, fairness and/or equity were taken up in the context of standard-based assessment, with SDs stressing the importance of identifying clear assessment targets, using multiple strategies for assessment, and/or ensuring that assessment practices are not punitive. For example, Lloydminster Public (2019) argued that fair and flexible assessments should "[be] purposefully designed in ways that…are respectful of student diversity,"

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[21] Christ the Teacher and Lloydminster Public.

[22] Chinook's, Christ the Teacher's, Creighton's, Good Spirit's, Holy Family's Horizon's, Light of Christ's Living Sky's, Lloydminster Public's, Northwest's, PA Catholic's, Saskatchewan Rivers', Saskatoon Catholic's, Saskatoon Public's, and Sun West's.

[23] Chinook, Horizon, and Living Sky.

[24] Good Spirit, Light of Christ, Northwest, PA Catholic, and Saskatoon Public.

[25] This language appears to be taken directly from Ontario's (2010) Growing Success document. All seven of the fundamental principles that are listed in Ontario's assessment document appear in both Northwest's and Light of Christ's APs.

[26] Christ the Teacher's, Holy Family's, Lloydminster Public's, and Saskatoon Catholic's.

"provide[ ] [students with] options in how they demonstrate their learning," and "motivate and challenge students" (p. 2).

Finally, three APs addressed equity and/or fairness in a way that might be interpreted as incongruous with contemporary conceptions of the terms. Using the language of "common and equitable" both Creighton (2014) and Saskatchewan Rivers (2014) named school administrators as responsible for "ensur[ing] common and equitable grading practices that follow Division policies" (Creighton, p. 3; Saskatchewan Rivers, 300-9). Similarly, Sun West's (2019) AP directed teachers "to use a variety of assessment practices that are fair, objective, and reflect sound professional judgment" (p. 1). While *common* and *objective* might suggest a desire to eliminate bias through the use of shared practices, a potential danger exists in assuming that assessment practices could be objective and/or unbiased without a necessary acknowledgement of how inequity operates in classroom spaces. The language also hints at standardization which might serve to undermine differentiation. None of the twenty-four APs included definitions of equity or fairness.

Inclusion

Sixteen[27] APs provided policies around inclusion or supporting students with additional needs. Nine[28] SDs wrote of supports offered for students using the language of *modifications*, *adaptations*, *interventions*, and/or *individual programs*. For instance, South East Cornerstone's (2015) AP stipulated that in order to support learning, teachers must "keep a record of adaptations" and "report the marks for the students who receive adaptations on the report card" (p. 3). Seven[29] SDs referred to IIPs or PPPs in their APs; while Lloydminster Public's AP simply acknowledged the existence of IIPs, six others connected them more intentionally to assessment policies. For example, PA Catholic's (2021) AP stated, "for students on Inclusion and Intervention Plans (IIP's) with significant variations in curriculum objectives, evaluation may be reported in an alternate format" (p. 2).[30] None of the APs included definitions of these terms.

Differentiation

Only four SDs referred to differentiation in their APs. Two linked differentiation to formative assessment, arguing that this type of assessment "can provide differentiation and, thus, improve student achievement" (Chinook, 2021, p. 2) and "will engage and address the learning needs and strengths of individual students and will support purposeful differentiation of instruction" (North East, 2017, p. 2). The third and fourth[31] spoke of differentiation in relation to intervention protocols. None of the SDs offered differentiation as a definition in their APs.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to examine how SD APs in Saskatchewan addressed contemporary assessment practices, focusing specifically on three overarching assessment principles and six sub-principles. In this section, we speak briefly to two central findings regarding first, consistency in the use of the assessment principles and how they were taken up, and second, clarity (or specificity) within the APs with respect to the meaning of the terms.

Analysis of the APs revealed some consistency across SDs regarding assessment principles. Quantitatively, six of nine of the principles/sub-principles examined appeared in more than half of the APs, including transparency/stakeholders (24), standards-based assessment (19), assessment as an ongoing/continuous practice (16), inclusion (16), fairness and equity (15), and extraneous and arbitrary factors (13). Reliability and validity were taken up in eleven of the APs, followed by differentiation (4) and

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[27] Christ the Teacher's, Creighton's, Holy Family's, Horizon's, Living Sky's, Lloydminster Catholic's, Lloydminster Public's, North East's, Northern Lights', Northwest's, PA Catholic's, Prairie Spirit,'s Regina Public's, Saskatchewan Rivers', Saskatoon Catholic's, and South East Cornerstone's.

[28] Christ the Teacher, Creighton, Horizon, Holy Family, Northern Lights, Prairie Spirit, Saskatchewan Rivers, Saskatoon Catholic, and South East Cornerstone.

[29] Living Sky, Lloydminster Catholic, Lloydminster Public, North East, Northwest, PA Catholic, and Regina Public.

[30] One school division, Chinook, used the language of inclusion to describe the type of learning environment provided by the division, but did not offer it as part of a particular assessment policy. Given the lack of explicit reference to assessment, this AP was excluded from the count.

[31] Creighton and Saskatchewan Rivers.

triangulation (3). This suggests that across the province, SDs seem to be aligned with respect to the importance of two-thirds of these assessment principles to assessment practice. Concerning, however, was vast variation in how terminology was employed and how principles were imagined together; for ongoing or continuous assessment, transparency and stakeholders, and fairness and equity, principles were grouped differently and/or used in conjunction with other assessment principles, all contributing to a general lack of cohesion across SDs. For standards-based assessment, that the majority of APs analyzed took up curricular/provincial/Saskatchewan or Ministry outcomes in their APs was indicative of consistency, though the absence of these terms from five APs was troubling given that the curriculum serves as the basis for what students should know, understand, and be able to do in the province. Relatedly, who constituted a stakeholder ranged, depending on the AP, referring generally to educational stakeholders or to some combination of parents and guardians, students, teachers, and/or administrators (though, as analysis demonstrated, *parents* was referenced in all APs). We also saw inconsistency in the language used to describe extraneous and arbitrary factors (e.g., learner attributes, learning behaviours, student achievement, student behaviours, or non-academics), the specific factors included (e.g., behaviours, participation, attendance, work habits, etc.), and whether and how these factors would be reported (e.g., communicated separately, or not used to determine a student's grade).

Reading across documents, inconsistency with respect to how assessment principles were taken up makes it challenging to report on Saskatchewan SDs' approaches to and commitments around assessment in any cohesive sense. As we argued elsewhere, the absence of a province-wide assessment policy and grading scale has led to vast differences in how assessment is approached within school divisions (Hébert & LeNouail, in press). A close reading of SD APs confirmed that these differences also exist at the policy level. Internal inconsistencies could also present challenges for localized implementation, potentially contributing to or exacerbating assessment illiteracy; understanding and employing assessment practices appropriately within the classroom hinges on principles being presented within policy in a congruous manner.

Assessment principles and their application to practice were also unclear or unspecific within the APs. Without explicit reference to SBA, it was not apparent whether SDs were adopting this approach beyond alignment with the curriculum. Similarly, the connection between ongoing and continuous assessment and SBA was not made evident. While SDs might engage in the contemporary practice of continually assessing student progress toward particular outcomes (hinted at in South East Cornerstone's, North East's and Living Sky's language of continuous and current, for example, or in Light of Christ's and Regina Public's requirement that students be provided with "multiple opportunities" (Light of Christ, 2007, p. 1) to be assessed), ongoing and continuous might simply refer to assessing students numerous times over the course of a semester, a practice that is not necessarily aligned with SBA. Regarding reliability and validity, and fair and equitable assessments, little work was done to clarify how these principles applied to assessment practices within the SDs. For fair and equitable assessment, for example, one might ask what it means to "respond to diversity" (Saskatoon Public, 2016, p. 4) or "support all students" in the classroom (Northwest, 2018, p. 1) in any practical sense. Finally, out of nine assessment principles/ sub-principles, definitions were provided for only four, and in very few APs, once again contributing to a lack of clarity.

As the literature review demonstrated, a shift to classroom-based assessment embedded in assessment culture means that assessment principles extend beyond testing to apply to teacher-based judgments about student learning. Clarity and specificity around the meaning of said principles is necessary if policies are to be appropriately interpreted and enacted, especially when, as the literature review highlighted, many assessment principles could have multiple meanings. In the case of Saskatchewan, failure of SDs to provide definitions of most of the assessment principles within their APs, to explain their significance in context, and to expand upon how they apply to practice left far too much up to individual interpretation. In this regard, definitional ambiguity of assessment principles are further exacerbated by the APs.

A number of limitations were present in this study. First, summative content analysis restricts analysis to the appearance of particular terms while excluding instances where principles are implied but not named. Consequently, counts of principles/sub-principles in APs may be lower than if another, more

expansive method was employed.[32] Broadening terminology in the second and third rounds of analysis was an attempt to address this concern, and to adequately capture the principles in context. Second, other SD-produced assessment materials were excluded from analysis, as were documents produced by the Ministry of Education, resulting in a rather narrow range of data. That said, we would argue that the limited availability of SD-produced assessment materials divisions highlighted a broader lack of consistency regarding SD-produced policy documents and clarity/specificity pertaining to how to locate these policies; APs are important as they serve as the only publicly available document across SDs that outline division approaches to assessment. And, as noted, the *Student Evaluation: A Teacher Handbook* document was not included in this analysis for perceived irrelevance; its age and earlier research suggested that few SDs referenced it, and consequently, would not have used it as a basis for their APs.

A detailed provincial guiding document around assessment would, ideally, alleviate some of these issues, providing consistency across SDs by grounding assessment practices in specific principles, while also clarifying their meaning. Ontario's (2010) *Growing Success,* for example, identifies the importance of provincial policy document for establishing and maintaining consistency and clarity around assessment. The Ministry writes:

> The document is intended to ensure that policy is clear, consistent, and well aligned across panels and across school boards and schools, and that every system benefits from the same high-quality process for assessing, evaluating and reporting achievement. (p. 2).

Our hope is that, moving forward, the new *Supporting Student Assessment in Saskatchewan* (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022b) handbook might serve to cohere assessment policies, supporting SDs as they work, again, to revise their APs.

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[32] To provide two such examples, for triangulation, two school division APs (North East's and Saskatoon Public's) covered its three elements— products, conversations, and observations—without naming the process. For differentiation, two SD APs (Light of Christ's and Northwest's) did not use the term but suggested its importance by identifying ways teachers could respond to students. In both cases, these APs were excluded from counts.

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