

January 22, 2009

FSA Presentation to Delta Board of Education

Teachers have always been and will continue to be advocates for students. We feel it is our duty to speak up whenever we feel that learning conditions are not good enough to enable teachers to teach and students to learn. We also raise our voices when the government intentionally underfunds the public education system.

Why, then, this fuss about Foundation Skills Assessment tests? Three reasons drive this presentation:

1. Teachers do not believe that administering these tests help students learn and they do not help teachers teach.
2. What the Fraser Institute does with the data they receive and process through their own lens is a misuse of information by a right wing, for profit organization that teachers feel is trying to undermine the public education system and drive students into private schools.
3. Finally, once identified as a school that has challenges, the Ministry does not provide funding support to help those schools overcome their “problems.”

Last year, the DTA created a “Top Ten Reasons why Delta Teachers are Concerned about FSA Exams.” We will be running this as an ad again in the local papers in the next week. I would like to share with you the thoughts behind this list:

10. They are inaccurate.

Many students make a guessing game out of the multiple choice questions, in fact they are known behind the scenes as “multiple guess” questions”. Unlike paper and pencil tests, students who do their work on computers are vulnerable to others viewing their work. Also, although there are time limits on the tests, those who administer the tests may give students more time if they feel the students need it. How does this help standardize the results? When teachers assess they routinely allow students the time that they need to do their best work. Why should this assessment be any different? There are guidelines for time requirements for planning purposes but not “limits”. Allowing students the time they need to show what they know is good assessment practice.

9. They are impractical.

The reading section of the test has 43 -48 marks. There will be 35 – 40 multiple choice comprehension questions which means that the reading comprehension written response question will be worth 4 marks. The Numeracy section has 40 multiple choice questions and the two questions that require work to be shown are worth 8 marks in total. The long and short writing sections are worth 8 and 4 marks respectively. Elementary teachers do not routinely use multiple choice questions; certainly no elementary teacher would have the majority of the marks on the test be multiple choice! Multiple choice tests are an ineffective way to measure elementary student learning. *The information I am using*

comes from the Ministry of Education FSA Administration Instructions 2009 document which is available online.

8. The marks are invalid.

Last year, those who marked the tests were expected to assess the following written work in ten minutes: two open-ended math problems, one open-ended reading response, one short writing sample and one longer writing sample. Written work was marked by a single person unlike previous years where two teachers marked the same tests – like quality control. Having a single marker reduces the reliability of the results even further. In the long piece of writing, the prewriting activity consists of the teacher reading aloud the Writing Topic and Criteria (3 minutes) followed by the teacher directing students, step by step to use the Planning Page (5 minutes). Students then have 1 to 2 minutes to work independently on the Planning page after which they have 2 minutes to talk about their ideas with a partner. The Short Writing activity does not have the student sharing their ideas with a partner. Classroom prewriting activities are more involved and lengthy to ensure that students are fully prepared to begin writing. It is broadly understood within the profession and the Ministry that “best practice” with respect to writing instruction involves students in the whole writing process from first draft to final published form. I know that my first draft writing is nothing that I would like anyone to read let alone to assess! School districts are charged with ensuring their students’ written work is marked. Unlike last year, this year the Ministry is providing exemplars in all three of the written components – Reading, Writing & Numeracy.

7. The costs are downloaded.

Districts were provided with a certain amount of money to provide contracts to individuals to mark. Delta spent almost twice the amount that the Ministry provided which means that the district subsidized last year’s marking. This year, the Ministry has indicated it will increase this funding by 20% but the district will still end up subsidizing the tests. The money figures don’t begin to consider the time costs to district staff, the loss of instructional time and the loss of computer access time for students in elementary schools. Prior to the tests, district staff computer technicians were diverted to elementary schools to ensure that all computers were up and running for the FSAs which means that secondary school technology needs were not met. Many elementary computer labs were shut down two weeks before the exams and during the exams as well. Since the testing period has been extended an extra week – February 2 to 27, if schools keep computer labs closed, students will have no access to computers for 6 weeks! Also, Delta computer labs are one year older. The problems that ensued last year are likely to occur again because of the age factor of our computer labs. While some schools experienced few problems, some teachers commented to the DTA that they took their classes to the computer labs several times because of glitches that included not being able to log on to the system and students being dropped from the test part way into it. Two sections of the FSAs are done on the computer. Tests like these come with considerable administrative time by staff from the Resource Centre needed to organize them. This again took away from the service provided to classroom teachers.

6. They are unhelpful.

When classroom teachers mark written assignments, they spend considerable time writing comments and suggestions to students to guide their writing. FSA tests are given

a mark, a number. This is not helpful to students. Written work is assessed based on four categories: Not Yet Within Expectations, Meets Expectations (Minimal to Moderate), Fully Meets Expectations and Exceeds Expectations. The multiple choice section is not helpful, either. Imagine receiving your student's elementary report card with only a letter grade, without any comments and with no ability to speak with the person who marked the work.

5. They reduce learning and instruction time.

Elementary students will experience online testing only twice during their elementary years. Teachers use valuable instructional time to have students practice doing multiple choice questions on the computer. With the addition of yet another program this year, Daily Physical Activity, there is even less time during the school day to teach the Prescribed Learning Outcomes which actually factor into report cards. The Ministry indicates that Grade 4 FSAs are based on what students learned from Grades 2 and 3. They believe that if a concept has been introduced in these grades and will be expanded upon or reviewed in Grade 4, this can be tested. The same applies for the Grade 7 FSAs where Grades 5 and 6 is where the test questions are derived. Many teachers commented that with FSA testing being moved to February, they had not yet reviewed or enhanced the concept and their students paid the price for it. When the test is administered half way through the school year, this is likely to happen!

4. They are incomplete.

This point is self explanatory. Your doctor wouldn't base a diagnosis on information gathered in a single test. He/she would be thorough in his/her investigation of your health issues. Teachers do the same when they assess and evaluate their students. Assessment is ongoing and evaluation is the sum total of what the student has learned to date.

3. They are unnecessary.

At the same time as FSAs are being administered, elementary teachers are working on their second report cards of the year. Information on report cards reflects what has been taught. Report cards are also a snapshot of a student's learning at a particular time in the school year but they are based on several months' worth of instruction, work and assessment.

2. They are unsupported by any funding.

The Ministry does not provide additional funding for schools that have many challenges. Instead, the Ministry expects Boards of Education to find the funds within budgets that fall far short of what is needed to maintain current levels of service within a school district let alone provide support to students.

1. They invite misuse.

The Fraser Institute, in spite of its claim that competition is good for schools, does not recognize the complexity of today's schools. It is a given that private schools that select students are going to be more successful than most public schools which the Fraser Institute seems to think is all right. Public schools educate all students regardless of their challenges and teachers wouldn't have it any other way.

Each September, teachers start the school year with a different group of students who are as different academically as they are physically and emotionally. This diversity is one of the greatest joys and the greatest challenge in teaching! One year, a class may contain many high-achieving students and the following year, the students come with many learning challenges. Teachers are already commenting on how they will be judged based on the FSA test results of students of the 2008 – 2009 school year.

If you haven't had an opportunity to go online to the Ministry of Education website and try some of the sample FSA questions, I urge you to do so. You will undoubtedly be using a more reliable computer than the students who will be doing the tests!

At a meeting earlier this evening, the DTA Executive Committee unanimously passed the following recommendations to the Board:

DTA Recommendations to Delta Board of Education

1. That the Board not direct teachers including teachers teaching on-call to administer FSA tests.
2. That school principals not speak with Grade 4 or Grade 7 teachers about FSA tests without a Staff Representative present.
3. That the Board honour parent requests that their children not write the FSA tests.
4. That the Board consider taking a motion to the BCSTA Annual General meeting recommending the FSA tests be administered randomly with neither schools nor students identified.
5. That the Board write a letter for distribution to the parents of grade 4 and 7 students addressing the issue of parent choice regarding student participation in the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) program for 2009, the letter state the Board expects all grade 4 and 7 students to participate in the FSA program, yet recognizes the rights of parents to determine whether or not participation in the FSA is in the best interest of their children.
6. That the Board write to the Minister of Education recommending that FSA tests be administered randomly with neither schools nor students identified.

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