

SUPPORTING

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

IN SASKATCHEWAN



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Introduction

Many innovative summative and formative provincial student assessment initiatives have been implemented across Canada over the past few years. In recent articles, I have described e-assessment programs and the value of large-scale assessments in Ontario (*e-assessment Supports School and School System Improvement in Ontario*)¹ and British Columbia (*Reimagining Assessment in British Columbia*).² The purpose of this article is to provide information about a recent innovational Saskatchewan resource that is meant to support educators in conducting classroom assessment.

To state the obvious, assessing and evaluating student learning progress has always been an integral part of teaching. Over the years, Saskatchewan has implemented various forms of large-scale provincial assessment, but the Ministry of Education has continuously emphasized supporting formative and summative classroom assessment. Recently, the province introduced a new, innovative approach and resources to support student assessment, which is the focus of this article.

A Little Context

For decades, Saskatchewan has administered provincial examinations to Grade 12 students, who are taught by non-accredited teachers³ or are homeschooled, and adults seeking to attain a Grade 12 standing by completion of required credits. To address the calls for information about the relative success of the education system (public accountability), in the early 1990's, the Department of Education, Training and Employment (as the Ministry was called at that time) implemented a Provincial Learning Assessment program (PLAP), designed to provide reliable information to the Department and education stakeholders about students' knowledge and skills in reading and writing. The annual assessments were administered to samples of students in Grades 5, 8, and 11.

The province has designed and implemented several other innovative programs over the years. For instance, at around the same time, the Department initiated a Curriculum Evaluation Program, a unique program to evaluate the effectiveness of provincial curriculum with regard to relevancy, appropriateness of content, level of knowledge and skills required of students, and supporting resource materials. The purposes for evaluating the curriculum were to improve curriculum and instruction. Curriculum was viewed in the broadest possible context, including the document itself, the resource materials used by teachers, the instructional strategies used to give life to the curriculum, and how students and teachers perceived the curriculum. The Learning Assessment and Curriculum Evaluation Programs, described above, were discontinued during the late 1990's and early 2000's.

Following conceptual work with teachers and other sector leadership stakeholders, and following pilot years in 2003 and 2004, the Assessment for Learning (AFL) program was implemented and ran from 2005 to 2012, involving participation from all school divisions. The program assessed students in a selected elementary, middle and secondary grade level, cycling through mathematics and language arts in different years. Its goal was to improve learning and achievement for all students in Saskatchewan schools. The rich set of data, gathered via this program, supported school divisions in system-level planning and providing professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators.

Evaluation in Education: The Report of the Minister's Advisory Committee on Evaluation and Monitoring (1989) recommended that "continuing education and professional development opportunities be provided for all teachers to support improvement of their capabilities in the evaluation of student

¹ e-Assessment Supports School and System Improvement in Ontario:

<https://rmjassessment.com/2023/03/21/e-assessment-supports-school-and-system-improvement-in-ontario/>

² Reimagining Assessment in British Columbia:

<https://rmjassessment.com/2023/10/12/reimagining-assessment-in-british-columbia/>

³ "A non-accredited teacher is a teacher who holds a valid Saskatchewan teaching certificate, but who does not meet the requirements for accreditation established by the Ministry and set out in the Ministry's policy statement on accreditation" (*The Education Regulations, 2019*).

achievement and progress and in the diagnosis of student learning needs.” (p. 12)⁴ As part of the action plan, the Committee recommended that the Ministry revise an existing student evaluation handbook and incorporate its use into in-service activities. The resulting resource, *Student Evaluation: A Teacher Handbook* (1991),⁵ provided a step-by-step process to refine educators’ student evaluation practices, including a variety of ready-to-use templates. Professional staff of the Assessment and Evaluation Branch of the Ministry provided in-service training opportunities (train-the-trainer model) within school divisions over the course of several months. All of the programs mentioned above were designed in collaboration with all stakeholder groups, including the teachers’ federations.

Currently, the Assessment Unit, Student Achievement and Supports Branch, provides support and oversight of student assessment from early childhood education to the secondary-school level.

The New Resource

According to Hebert and LeNouail (2023), “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.”⁶ As was previously mentioned, *Student Evaluation: A Teacher Handbook* had been the province’s principal assessment guide for more than 30 years, and given that it was dated (e.g., it pre-dated the

adoption of standards-based curriculum) a new assessment resource was needed. *Supporting Student Assessment in Saskatchewan* (SSAIS)⁷ and companion documents, was meant to serve that purpose. SSAIS includes a document containing an overview and four modules, a toolkit, implementation supports, as well as editable tools and templates. Together, they provide guiding principles for classroom assessment and research-based effective classroom assessment practices, reflecting the concept of continuous improvement and aligns with the province’s First Nations and Métis PreK to Grade 12 education policy.⁸

The resource provides a framework for effective classroom assessment by including:

- definitions of assessment and evaluation in the context of the classroom and describes the purposes and means of assessment *for, as and of learning*;
- descriptions of four guiding principles: Engaging and Empowering the Learner, Supporting Responsive Instruction and Inspiring Learning, Using Culturally Inclusive and Affirming Assessment Practices, and Clearly Informing Stakeholders;
- articulation of four dimensions that support student assessment: Intellectual, Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual; and
- descriptions of four essential assessment-related questions: Where am I Now? Where am I Going? How am I Doing? Where to Next?

⁴ Saskatchewan Education. (1989, January). *Evaluation in Education: Report of the Minister’s Advisory Committee on Evaluation and Monitoring*. Regina, Saskatchewan.

⁵ Saskatchewan Education. (1991, December). *Student Evaluation: A Teacher Handbook*. Regina, Saskatchewan.

⁶ Hebert, C., & LeNouail, K. (2023, May). Assessment in Saskatchewan: Examining Provincial Approaches to Contemporary Assessment Principles through School Division Administrative Policies (Abstract). *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* (No. 202). Retrieved October 27, 2023: <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjeap/article/view/75529>

⁷ Government of Saskatchewan. (2022). *Supporting Student Assessment in Saskatchewan*. Retrieved October 29, 2023: https://www.edonline.sk.ca/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=2869_1&content_id=_721378_1&mode=reset

⁸ Government of Saskatchewan. (2018). *Inspiring Success: First Nations and Métis PreK-12 Education Policy Framework*. Retrieved October 30, 2023: <https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/90278>

The resource, toolkit and editable tools:

www.edonline.sk.ca/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=2869_1&content_id=818742_1

Saskatchewan Supporting Student Assessment Model



A series of modules is provided as educator supports to elaborate on the four guiding principles of assessment in the province. “Each module focuses on a guiding principle, examines current research that supports effective assessment practices, and describes how each principle is independent of each other, yet interdependent. In addition, practical tools and templates are provided, including key resources to support teachers in implementing effective and culturally inclusive and affirming assessment practices in their classroom.”⁹ Implementation supports for all four modules have been developed in collaboration with education sector partners.¹⁰ The modules provide outlines for professional development sessions of various lengths of time, PowerPoint presentations with speaking notes, various handouts and resources, and suggested interactive activities. School divisions determine themselves how they will use the supports for their own implementation of SSAIS.

The resource has been well received by teachers, education sector leaders and academics alike. For example, Léanne Marchand, Curriculum Coordinator of Chinook School Division writes, “The SSAIS document summarizes best practices in assessment and provides context and purpose for those best practices in a way that can be implemented in professional learning, and in the classroom with students to improve both teaching and learning...it provides an excellent resource to support PD that can impact practice...”¹¹ Dr. Marc Spooner, Director, Centre for Educational Research, Collaboration, and Development, University of Regina writes, “The good news for parents, students, teachers and anyone else who cares deeply about student learning and achievement in Saskatchewan, is that the Ministry of Education has recently produced a thorough guide to assist and support student assessment. It is a stellar resource and it would be the envy of any educational district in North America. *Supporting Student Achievement in Saskatchewan*, is a province-leading, research-supported, comprehensive, and holistic approach to student assessment...moreover, it reaffirms the teacher as a professional, and that students are best served through teacher-led assessments that are for learning, as part of the learning, and of the learning.”¹²

Conclusion

Although Saskatchewan administers large-scale student assessments in the form of Grade 12 credentialing exams, participates in national and selected international studies and is giving consideration to implementing learning assessments as part of the Provincial Education Plan, it continues to promote classroom-based assessment. The initiative, *Supporting Student Assessment in Saskatchewan*, is an innovative approach that emphasizes continuous improvement and assists educators to conduct culturally inclusive, valid, reliable and effective assessment and evaluation in the classroom in order to promote success for all students.

⁹ Government of Saskatchewan. (2022). *Supporting Student Assessment in Saskatchewan*. (p. 16).

¹⁰ Access: https://www.edonline.sk.ca/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id= 2869_1&content_id= 818742_1

¹¹ Feedback on SSAIS provided via e-mail by Chinook School Division.

¹² Spooner, M. (2022, September). Sask. Students already do all the testing they need. *Regina Leader-Post*.

About the Author

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Dr. Jones has extensive experience in the fields of large-scale educational assessment and program evaluation. He has worked in the assessment and evaluation field for more than 35 years. Prior to founding RMJ Assessment, he held senior leadership positions with the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) in Ontario, as well as the Saskatchewan and British Columbia Ministries of Education. In these roles, he was responsible for initiatives related to student, program and curriculum evaluation; education quality indicators; school and school board improvement planning; school accreditation; and provincial, national and international testing.

Dr. Jones began his career as an educator at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels. Subsequently, he was a researcher and senior manager for an American-based multi-national corporation delivering consulting services in the Middle East.

Feel free to reach out to Rick at richard.jones@rmjassessment.com (or via [LinkedIn](#)) to inquire about best practices in large-scale assessment and/or program evaluation.

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