

# EARLY YEARS SCREENING ASSESSMENTS IN CANADA



## Introduction

Universal screening is not a new concept; it has been utilized for many years in a variety of disciplines, including education. Brief assessments (screeners) have been used to identify children who may be gifted in an area of interest or who may be experiencing difficulties. Early childhood education (i.e., kindergarten to Grades 3 or 4) is an important period for children's development of social, emotional and behavioural, as well as early academic skills. If a child displays deficits in particular skills, this may result in negative outcomes in their future lives; therefore, early identification is critically important in order to provide the child with appropriate supports. "Assessing students in their early years provides essential information to teachers, schools, parents...about potential student learning issues and needs and ensures students at risk get the help they need early in their education."<sup>1</sup> The use of observations, portfolios and standard assessments are some of the methods educators may use to assess children's early learning development.

Among Canadian jurisdictions (provinces and territories), literacy (reading) appears to be the most common focus of assessment/screening in terms of academic readiness, although some jurisdictions also assess numeracy/mathematics. Assessment practices may vary by jurisdiction, school board and school. For example, jurisdictions may purchase specific screeners and/or provide lists of approved screening tools should school boards/schools choose to use them, and some school boards/schools may also use assessment instruments developed in-house. Many screening tools are available for educator use. Among the commercially available Canadian resources, the Early Development Instrument (EDI), developed by the Offord Centre, and the Early Years Evaluation-Teacher Assessment (EYE-TA) and Early Years Evaluation-Direct Assessment (EYE-DA), developed

by The Learning Bar, are in wide use. Nevertheless, in Canada, many children are not being screened using effective, evidence-based screening tools, since at this time, universal screening is not mandatory in most jurisdictions.

Currently, Alberta and New Brunswick are the only provinces/territories that have implemented or are in the process of implementing mandatory universal screening of children in their early years. (In July 2023, the Ontario Ministry of Education announced [via Policy/Program Memorandum 168<sup>2</sup>] the roll-out of mandatory screening but subsequently decided that the early reading screening tool would not be required for the 2023-2024 school year.<sup>3</sup>) In addition to providing educators with assessments that can help them evaluate and track children's progress in developing key skills, consistent use of screening tools can provide comparable data that can allow for the aggregation of students' results for improvement purposes at the school, school board and provincial levels and for reporting to various stakeholder groups. The following sections provide high-level overviews of early years screening approaches employed in the provinces of New Brunswick and Alberta.

## Early Years Screening in New Brunswick<sup>4</sup>

The New Brunswick Department of Education is structured into two distinct sectors, Anglophone and Francophone, with each sector operating independently within Department policy parameters. Early grades screening and progress monitoring is conducted somewhat differently for each language sector. For instance, the Anglophone Sector administers the EYE-DA in October of the year prior to students' entry into kindergarten. In addition to the EYE-DA, a mandatory early grades progress monitoring and formative assessment

<sup>1</sup> Alberta Education. (2024). Early Years Screening Assessments: Information about literacy and numeracy screening assessments for all students in Grades 1 to 3. Retrieved January 9, 2024 from: <https://www.alberta.ca/early-years-assessments#:~:text=Assessing%20students%20in%20their%20early,need%20early%20in%20their%20education>.

<sup>2</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education. (July 28, 2023). Policy/Program Memorandum 168. Retrieved January 9, 2024 from: <https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-168>.

<sup>3</sup> CBC News. (September 3, 2023). Early reading screening, sure – but give us more resources, say parents and teachers; Province was to roll out mandatory screening tool this year but pulled back. Retrieved January 9, 2024 from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/early-reading-screening-sure-but-give-us-more-resources-say-parents-and-teachers-1.6954565>.

<sup>4</sup> Information in this section was derived from: New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2024). Assessment and Evaluation (Anglophone Sector). Retrieved February 2, 2024 from: [https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/k12/content/anglophone\\_sector/assessment\\_evaluation.html#:~:text=Assessment%20and%20Evaluation%20\(Anglophone%20Sector\)&text=The%20responsibilities%20within%20Evaluation%20and,the%20educational%20system's%20general%20health,as%20well%20as%20communication%20with%20members%20of%20the%20Department's%20Assessment%20and%20Evaluation%20units](https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/k12/content/anglophone_sector/assessment_evaluation.html#:~:text=Assessment%20and%20Evaluation%20(Anglophone%20Sector)&text=The%20responsibilities%20within%20Evaluation%20and,the%20educational%20system's%20general%20health,as%20well%20as%20communication%20with%20members%20of%20the%20Department's%20Assessment%20and%20Evaluation%20units) (Anglophone and Francophone).

instrument (designed for all English-language students in kindergarten to Grade 2, as well as French Immersion students in Grades 1 to 3) was developed in-house with support from educational researchers. This assessment instrument was pilot tested in classrooms during the 2022-2023 school year. “The Early Grades Literacy Assessment (EGLA) supports teachers in evaluating and tracking the acquisition of the five foundational skills of reading: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. The structure and content of the EGLA has been aligned with the province’s new K-2 ELA Holistic Curriculum Framework and the current l’art du langage en immersion précoce 1e et 2e année.” The tool was designed to support educators in monitoring student reading progress. Because the EGLA is a standardized instrument, aggregation of student results at the school, school district and provincial levels is made possible for improvement and accountability reporting purposes. User feedback during the pilot year provided information to support enhancements to the assessment, which is being implemented in 2023-2024. Provincial literacy leaders, department specialists and educational researchers continue to be consulted on the development of the EGLA.

Teachers enter their results into ESS Connect. ESS Connect is a component of PowerSchool, a K-12 student information system that allows for the transfer and tracking of student data from grade to grade as students and educators work through the 82 reading skills monitored via the EGLA. The assessment is a formative classroom tool, intended to be used on an ongoing basis. Since this is the first year of implementation, the Department is focused on monitoring data to ensure the proper use of the assessment tool and systems, augmenting resources developed to help teachers use the tools appropriately, and supporting educators to integrate early years screening into their daily classroom practice.

The Francophone Sector does not administer a French-Language version of the EGLA. Instead, the Learning Bar’s EYE-DA is the early years screening tool used for kindergarten readiness, and EYE-TA is used to monitor student progress once the student is in kindergarten. A pre-evaluation of EYE-TA is

administered annually to kindergarten students during the period mid-October to early December; post evaluations are administered during the month of May. Screeners are only used in kindergarten; provincial reading assessments are administered in Grades 2 and 3.

Apart from the mandatory screening tools, there are no other Department-approved early years assessment instruments that school boards may opt to use.

## Early Years Screening in Alberta<sup>5</sup>

In 2022-2023, universal literacy (reading) and numeracy screening for children in Grades 1 to 3 became mandatory in Alberta. The initial assessments for Grades 2 and 3 are conducted at the beginning of the school year and for Grade 1 in January. Educators are required to re-assess all students, identified as being at-risk, at the end of the school year in order to monitor their progress. “Assessing students in their early years provides essential information to teachers, schools, parents and Alberta Education about potential student learning issues and needs and ensures students at-risk get the help they need early in their education.” In addition to using the assessment information to support student learning, schools and school boards are required to share group-level results with their stakeholders. “This approach helps the province, school authorities and schools track successes and continuously improve the quality of education for students. It also supports a transparent, accountable and responsive education system.”

### Literacy

The early reading literacy screeners, used in Alberta, are the English Letter Name-Sound (LeNS) assessment and the Castles and Coltheart Reading Test 3 (CC3). A set of literacy intervention lesson plans, aligned to these screeners, is available as an educator resource. (The Ministry engaged a consultant from the University of Ottawa to adapt the reading instruments for use in French.) Other commercially available, Ministry-approved literacy assessments are as follows:

<sup>5</sup> Information in this section was derived from the following sources: Alberta Education (June, 2023). Alberta Education Approved Literacy and Numeracy Assessments Grades 1-3. Retrieved January 9, 2024 from: [https://www.alberta.ca/system/files/custom\\_downloaded\\_images/edc-approved-literacy-and-numeracy-assessments-grades-1-3.pdf](https://www.alberta.ca/system/files/custom_downloaded_images/edc-approved-literacy-and-numeracy-assessments-grades-1-3.pdf) and Alberta Education (2024). Early Years Screening Assessments. Retrieved January 9, 2024 from: <https://www.alberta.ca/early-years-assessments#:~:text=In%202022%2F23%20literacy%20and,on%20New.LearnAlberta.ca>.

- Acadience Reading K-6
- The Test of Silent Reading Efficiency and Comprehension® (TOSREC)
- The Test of Word Reading Efficiency–Second Edition (TOWRE-2)
- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test®–Third Edition (WIAT-III)
- Wide Range Achievement Test–Fifth Edition (WRAT5™): The WRAT5™

## Numeracy

Alberta Education provides school authorities with Provincial Numeracy Screening Assessments for Grades 1 to 3. These screening assessments were developed by academics with the Department of Cognitive Science, Carleton University Centre for Applied Cognitive Research. These instruments, available in English and French, include a collection of tasks designed to help educators identify and address gaps in their students' underlying knowledge of the basic number system and operations. A set of numeracy intervention activities for each grade level is available as an educator resource. Other commercially available, Ministry-approved numeracy assessments are as follows:

- Canadian Achievement Test 4 (CAT•4)
- KeyMath™ 3 Diagnostic Assessment: Canadian Edition (KeyMath™ 3 DA)
- Number Sense Screener™ (NSS™) Set, K–1, Research Edition
- Test of Early Mathematics Ability–Third Edition (TEMA-3)
- Wide Range Achievement Test–Fifth Edition (WRAT5™)

School authorities that choose to use the provincially provided screeners have the advantage that teachers can access an Alberta-developed custom portal to upload their students' data. The province's data team psychometrically analyzes the data and generates reports that are provided for individual students, classes, schools, and school authorities. (At this time, the Ministry does not report overall provincial results.)

## Conclusion

The use of mandatory, universal early years screening assessments is relatively new in Canada, and at this time only New Brunswick and Alberta have implemented screening initiatives. Currently, New Brunswick educators enter the results of their assessment interactions with students directly into an online platform (although some collect information on paper and enter the data later) for progress tracking and reporting purposes. As part of its modernization project, the province of Alberta plans to work with its technology partner, Vretta, to introduce digital technology for data collection, analysis and reporting, thereby making the provincial early years screening processes more effective and efficient. A future article will elaborate on developments in the use of digital technology for early years screening and progress monitoring of students.

## About the Author

Dr. Jones has extensive experience in the fields of large-scale educational assessment and program evaluation and 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.

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