

An Unnecessary Burden on Our Teachers

The New Educational Assessment Regime in Manitoba

Executive Summary

- From 1994 to 1999, the Manitoba provincial government introduced standardized tests at the Grade 3, 6, 9, and 12 levels in all four core subject areas, Mathematics, Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies.
- When the government changed in 1999, it dramatically changed this assessment policy. Grade 3 examinations were abolished, while the administration of Grades 6 and 9 examinations was made optional for school divisions.
- The Grade 3 examinations were replaced with a subjective teacher-directed assessment in reading and numeracy conducted at the beginning of the school year.
- This style of assessment has proven to be extremely time-consuming and does not provide the government with objective data on student performance.
- Some school divisions, such as Winnipeg School Division #1, have taken the individual assessment process even further and have found themselves embroiled in labour strife as a result of opposition from teachers.
- In 2004, the government announced that it was eliminating the optional standards exams for Grades 6 and 9 and replacing them with assessments similar to those conducted at the Grade 3 level.
- A report commissioned by the provincial government has recommended that these assessments also be conducted at the Grades 7 and 8 levels.
- Since the curricula at these grade levels are more complex than the curriculum for Grade 3, these individual student assessments will likely prove to be even more burdensome.
- Valuable class time at the beginning of the school year is lost when teachers are forced to administer time-consuming and subjective assessments.
- The government should cancel its plans to implement subjective assessments at the middle level and instead reinstate objective year-end examinations in core subject areas.

Introduction

In 1994, Manitoba's provincial government announced that it intended to make a number of significant changes in educational policy. One of these changes was the decision to introduce standards tests at the Grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 levels in each of four core subject areas, Mathematics, Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies.ⁱ Several of these exams were phased in over the next five years and had the effect of making Manitoba's testing regime more comparable to those in other provinces.ⁱⁱ

However, with the election in 1999 of a new provincial government, that policy was cancelled and decisions taken to make significant changes in the manner of conducting educational assessment was conducted. The grade 3 exams were abolished and replaced with a non-standardized assessment that was to be conducted by individual teachers. In addition, while the Grades 6 and 9 exams were not abolished entirely, they were made optional for school divisions. Less than half, about two-fifths of school divisions chose to participate.ⁱⁱⁱ

Recently, the provincial government has announced that it intends to phase out the optional exams at the Grades 6 and 9 levels and replace them with assessments similar to those used at the Grade 3 level.^{iv} In a report commissioned by the Minister of Education, former Deputy Minister Ben Levin recommended that these assessments be conducted at Grade 7 level in mathematics and “school engagement” and at the Grade 8 level in reading and writing.^v

Do these significant changes improve accountability, enhance student learning, or impart useful information to students or parents? A close look at the methods used indicates that the answer on all three counts is in the negative.

The Grade 3 Assessment

The current Grade 3 assessment resulted from an election promise made by the NDP in the 1999 Manitoba provincial election. While the party promised to maintain the testing regime that then existed at the Grades 6, 9 and 12 levels, it also pledged to replace the Grade 3 exams with a teacher-directed comprehensive assessment conducted early in the school year.

Due to the prominence of this promise in its election platform, the new government decided to implement this new assessment within one year of being elected. Recommendations by officials in the Department of Education and from the Manitoba Teachers Society to delay the implementation of this new assessment program were ignored in favour of political expediency.^{vi}

The two main competencies evaluated by the Grade 3 assessments are reading and numeracy. Within these two areas, schools are expected to report to the Department of Education how many students are meeting and not meeting expectations in each of the following outcomes.

Grade Three Assessment Competencies^{vii}

| Numeracy | Reading |
|---|---|
| Sorts objects using one mathematical attribute; identifies attributes such as shape and size | <i>Reflection:</i> Ability to think about one’s own learning as a reader |
| Recalls addition and subtraction facts to 10 | <i>Oral Reading Skills and Strategies:</i> Ability to use a variety of strategies to read |
| Represents and compares numbers, using terms such as <i>even, odd, more, less, same as</i> , to 100 | <i>Reading Comprehension:</i> Ability to understand and draw conclusions from text |
| Understands place value to 100 | |
| Identifies, extends, and describes mathematical (repeating and growing) patterns | |
| Selects the appropriate standard unit (cm, m); estimates and measures length | |
| Solves and creates addition and subtraction story problems | |
| Reads and interprets graphs | |

These outcomes to be evaluated are similar to those covered on the previous Grade 3 examinations. The main difference lies in the fact that teachers are not required to use any common assessment tools when determining whether or not students have met the outcomes. While the Department of Education did release a booklet of assessment tools, it was up to teachers themselves to decide whether or not they would make use of them.^{viii} As a result, there is no longer any form of objective measurement taking place at the Grade 3 level in Manitoba.

Many of the outcomes listed above, like the “ability to think about one’s own learning as a reader are already quite subjective and leaving it up to individual teachers to devise and implement their own assessment tools for these outcomes increases the level of subjectivity significantly. On a provincial level, the data is virtually useless for planning since there is no way to ensure a reasonable level of objectivity in the assessment data collected.

In addition, the Grade 3 assessment is considerably more time-consuming than the previously administered year-end examinations. Approximately two-thirds of Grade 3 teachers require over two hours per student to conduct just the numeracy component of the assessment.^{ix} Thus, a teacher with a class of 25 would spend over 50 hours assessing the numeracy skills of an entire class. This estimate does not even include the reading component which, while somewhat less-consuming, is still significant.

What makes this loss of class time even more problematic is the fact that these assessments are conducted at the beginning of the school year. Since schools are required to report their results to the Department of Education by December, teachers lose a lot of valuable teaching time early in the school year—at a time when teachers are busy establishing a sense of classroom routine.

To make matters worse, a number of school divisions have made the assessment process even more time-consuming than necessary by requiring teachers to perform individual assessments on each student for all of the prescribed outcomes being evaluated.^x Winnipeg School Division #1, the largest in the province, has embarked upon an even more extensive assessment process that provides a clear picture of what can happen when teachers are forced to conduct extensive individual assessments on each student.

The Comprehensive Assessment Program in Winnipeg School Division #1

Winnipeg School Division #1’s Comprehensive Assessment Program (CAP) is similar to the current Grade 3 assessments in reading and numeracy. The main difference is that CAP is considerably broader in scope. It includes all K-6 students and covers a broad range of areas: English Language Arts, Mathematics, Basic Movement Skills, and Social/Emotional Behaviour.^{xi} Teachers are expected to spend a significant amount of time at the beginning of the school year in the individual assessment of each student in several different subject areas.

The Winnipeg Teachers Association (WTA) has long expressed concerns about how CAP has led to the loss of valuable class time. In 2003, the WTA had planned to publish a four-page insert in the *Winnipeg Free Press* that critiqued CAP and its negative effect on teaching time. Shortly before its publication, Winnipeg School Division #1 threatened the union’s executive members with severe disciplinary action and the brochure was withdrawn. The WTA then appealed the matter to the Manitoba Labour Board and accused the school division of muzzling freedom of speech.^{xii} The Labour Board recently ruled in the WTA’s favour.^{xiii}

The CAP system provides a good example of what can happen when individualized assessment is taken too far. While no one can dispute the importance of ensuring that all students are assessed by teachers on a regular basis, one must be mindful of the amount of class time that is taken up by the process. In contrast to year-end standardized examinations, which were conducted and administered by third parties, teacher-directed assessments like those mandated by the province and Winnipeg School Division #1 are subjective and absorb valuable teaching time early in the school year.

Replacing the Grades 6 and 9 Examinations

In 2004, the provincial government announced that it was eliminating the optional standardized exams in Grades 6 and 9 and replacing them with assessments similar to those conducted in Grade 3. The report, which was commissioned by the provincial government, recommended that Grade 7 students be assessed on their mathematics and “school engagement,” while Grade 8 students would be assessed on reading and writing skills.^{xiv}

Unfortunately, the assessments would be subjective rather than objective and would likely require even more class time to complete than the Grade 3 assessments. Since the curriculum outcomes are more complex at the Grades 7 and 8 levels, it is reasonable to assume that if teachers are

required to individually assess each student, they are poised to lose a substantial amount of classroom teaching time.

It is of particular concern that teachers will have to spend their time measuring something as nebulous as “school engagement” when they could be teaching their classes and working with students. To make matters even worse, the report even recommends that more than one teacher be involved in assessing several of the outcomes for each student.^{xv} This would have the effect of making the assessment process even more cumbersome and time-consuming.

Conclusion

When it comes to educational assessment policy, the Manitoba government has been moving in the wrong direction. In an era where student achievement is of paramount importance, it is disconcerting to see the provincial government move away from objective province-wide testing at the end of the school year toward subjective and time-consuming assessments at the beginning of the school year. Considering the amount of classroom time already lost as a result of the Grade 3 reading and numeracy assessments, it would be unwise for the government to use the same methodology at higher grades, where the assessment process will be even more time-consuming.

The CAP program in Winnipeg School Division #1 provides a clear case study of the labour tensions that are inevitable when teachers are asked to sacrifice valuable classroom teaching time in order to conduct numerous individual student assessments. While the provincial government has not mandated a program as extensive as CAP, it appears to be gradually moving in that direction by increasing the number of grade level teachers who will have to perform these assessments.

The provincial government should not expand the Grade 3 assessment program into the middle grade levels. It should instead reinstate objective province-wide testing at the end of the school year. A final exam that is closely matched with curriculum outcomes is far less intrusive of teaching time than requiring teachers to use subjective tools to individually assess students at the beginning of the year.

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Endnotes

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