

Standardized Assessment: Hindering Opportunities for All Students

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Calls for provincewide assessments are, at best, passé. Paige MacPherson's May 12 article calling for regular provincewide student testing is more a reflection of a political ideology than any empirical research. The reality is that Saskatchewan's assessment practices demonstrate a collective commitment to equity, professionalism and student well-being, clearly not a problem for Saskatchewan families.

MacPherson is correct in that we are currently witnessing a resurgence of standardized testing in a number of Canadian provinces. However, there is no direct evidence that such provincewide assessments improve student achievement. On the contrary, recent research conducted by renowned educational leader Andy Hargreaves highlights that the assessments as developed by Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office fail to address important learning objectives and overemphasize facts and concepts that are "easily memorized but quickly forgotten."

Saskatchewan's policy and practice of teacher accreditation is effective in assessing and reporting student achievement. The Ministry of Education's Accreditation Policy, recently renewed in consultation with educational stakeholders such as the League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association and the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation grants accreditation privileges to Grade 12 teachers who teach courses within the provincial curriculum framework.

Teachers wishing to become accredited must provide evidence of academic expertise and experience teaching a particular discipline before attending a series of rigorous and extensive professional learning seminars. Further, all accredited teachers must renew every five years. The accreditation process acknowledges teachers' commitment to their students, their pedagogical practice and their profession. Saskatchewan families can be confident that accreditation practices effectively address key outcomes as well as the Ministry of Education's Broad Areas of Learning as identified in the curriculum.

Let us be clear. Large-scale assessments, including provincewide assessments, are a holdover from our colonial past. They reflect a cultural bias and serve to sift and sort students. In contrast to Canada's current trend, as pointed out by MacPherson, countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Wales and Finland, known for their high ranking in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment, are pulling away from large-scale assessments due to numerous negative impacts, including narrowing of the curriculum, failing to meet the requirements of students with exceptional needs, lowering teacher morale and retention, and significantly escalating levels of anxiety and even suicide among adolescents (Hargreaves, 2020)¹.

In contrast, Saskatchewan's educators are committed to ensuring equitable, culturally appropriate and authentic assessment measures that foster improved educational opportunities for all students as evidenced in the principles of the province's *Inspiring Success: First Nations and Métis PreK-12 Education Policy Framework*. Two of the policy's imperatives recognize, one, the importance of affirming cultural identity and transforming teacher practice and two, listening to and responding to student voice. Specifically, the *Inspiring Success* framework represents the belief that culturally affirming educational practices can serve as a tool for reconciliation and can effectively address barriers for Indigenous students. Considering that current research demonstrates significant barriers are created for Indigenous

students when large-scale assessments are used as the sole method of reporting student achievement, our province is on the right track.

Saskatchewan teachers' professional accreditation practices, endorsed by research and policy directives, nurture students' development and well-being in that they support teaching and learning as well as ensure equity for all students. A conviction that is most certainly necessary today.

1. *Journal of Educational Change* (2020) 21:393–420 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-020-09380-5>