

Student Achievement Initiative

Background Information

May 16, 2012

Need for Improvement

Since 1996, Saskatchewan students have participated in national and international assessments to determine their performance in relation to other Canadian and international jurisdictions. The Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) is a national testing program conducted every three years to measure the reading, science, and mathematics skills of Grade 8 students in every province, as well as the Yukon. The Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) is conducted every three years by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and Statistics Canada to test the science, reading, and mathematical knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students in 65 participating countries.

The Ministry of Education and its stakeholders are concerned with the performance of Saskatchewan students on these assessments:

- Since the 1990s, while Saskatchewan students score similar to international standards, they score significantly below the Canadian average.
- The 2009 PISA results indicate Saskatchewan is ranked 7th among the provinces in reading and science and 6th among the provinces in mathematics. The following chart shows Saskatchewan's performance on PISA relative to the International and National context.



- The 2010 Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) results were released on November 28, 2011. Saskatchewan was one of only two provinces that achieved a significant improvement in reading from 2007 to 2010. In general, the scores of Grade 8 students reading are considerably higher in 2010 than in 2007. Nonetheless, Saskatchewan continues to score significantly below the Canadian average as noted in the following chart.

2007 and 2010 PCAP Results

	Combined Reading				Mathematics				Science			
	Canada Mean Score	SK Score	Rank Within Country	Relation To Canada	Canada Mean Score	SK Score	Rank Within Country	Relation To Canada	Canada Mean Score	SK Score	Rank Within Country	Relation To Canada
2007	500	471	7	SB	500	461	7	SB	500	480	6	SB
2010	500	491	4	SB	500	474	6 (tied)	SB	500	488	6	SB

NOTE: SB – Significantly Below

Assessment for Learning

In 2004, the provincial Assessment for Learning (AFL) program was initiated with the goal of improving learning and achievement for all Saskatchewan students. The AFL tests students' opportunity-to-learn and achievement outcomes. Tests are administered every second year in math, reading and writing.

- Math – every two years in Grades 5, 8, and 11
- Reading – every two years in Grades 4, 7, and 10
- Writing – every two years in Grades 5, 8, 11

Since the assessment is only administered every second year, a given student may be assessed only two or three times in the course of their schooling. While the AFL program has been useful in informing teacher practice and introducing school divisions to the value of provincial assessment programs, it does not meet Saskatchewan's current need for student assessment data. Among the shortcomings of the AFL program are:

- Students and parents do not receive individual student results. As result, teachers have difficulty translating results into individual improvement; parents do not know how their child is faring in comparison with the provincial results; and students may not take the testing seriously because "it doesn't count."
- The only way parents and the public receive school results is if school divisions choose to share them.

- The schedule of assessment does not support improvement and is not sufficiently frequent, comparable or consistent.
- It is difficult to assess improvement over time because the assessments were not designed for accountability purposes and are not comparable from year to year and school division to school division.
- The assessment information provided to school divisions provides multiple measures, which makes interpretation complicated and comparison difficult.

Saskatchewan is the last province in Canada to have a province-wide approach to student assessment.

What it Means for Students

The PISA and PCAP assessment rankings may place Saskatchewan students at a serious disadvantage for acceptance into post-secondary education programs of study, as well as employment opportunities. This concern is supported by the change being considered by some universities in how they may view student marks upon acceptance into post-secondary programs. For example, in November 2011 the University of Saskatchewan announced it would adjust its admission policy to level the playing field for Alberta students, recognizing that graduation marks from Alberta represented a higher level of achievement than those of other provinces.

The new approach to student achievement will impact all students in Saskatchewan. However, some of the specific initiatives taking place are:

Early years evaluations

Students in prekindergarten and kindergarten will be assessed to determine their readiness for school to ensure they are able to make the successful transition to Grade 1.

Grades 1-3 literacy and numeracy assessments

Building on the assessments currently taking place in school divisions around the province, literacy and numeracy assessments will be conducted in Grades 1 to 3 to help teachers meet the individual needs of students. These assessments will also assist with consistency, allowing students to be assessed in a similar manner regardless of where they are located in Saskatchewan.

Student/teacher learning environment surveys

From Grade 4 to Grade 12, students and teachers will complete surveys to gain a better understanding of the learning environment in Saskatchewan schools, as well as the obstacles and pressures students face in the education system. This will allow schools to plan actions to better support students.

What it means for Teachers/School Divisions

Teachers and schools divisions know the importance of student assessment in relation to improving student achievement. Student assessments are being done now at the classroom and school division level and through the existing provincial AFL program. However, provincial targets and measures are lacking, as well as reporting down to the student level and providing supports and tools for teachers and administrators so they can make the best use of the assessment information. The AFL was not designed for those purposes, but provides a strong foundation on which to build.

Over the last decade, school divisions have developed their own quality assessments in a variety of subjects and grade levels to gather information on student growth and needs. The ministry will develop partnerships with school divisions to help build on the work they have done by facilitating province wide access to these assessments for all school divisions.

As has been past practice, the ministry will be asking for teacher involvement in developing the new assessments. Teachers will be seconded from school divisions to support development of the assessment items.

While consistent, province-wide individual assessments are a primary part of the new focus on student achievement, they are not the entire focus. The focus remains on first identifying where the gaps in learning are for each student, and then working to provide the additional help to the teacher, the student and parents to help that student achieve greater success. In addition, the assessments will be based on the provincial curriculum and based on subject material taught in classrooms every day.