

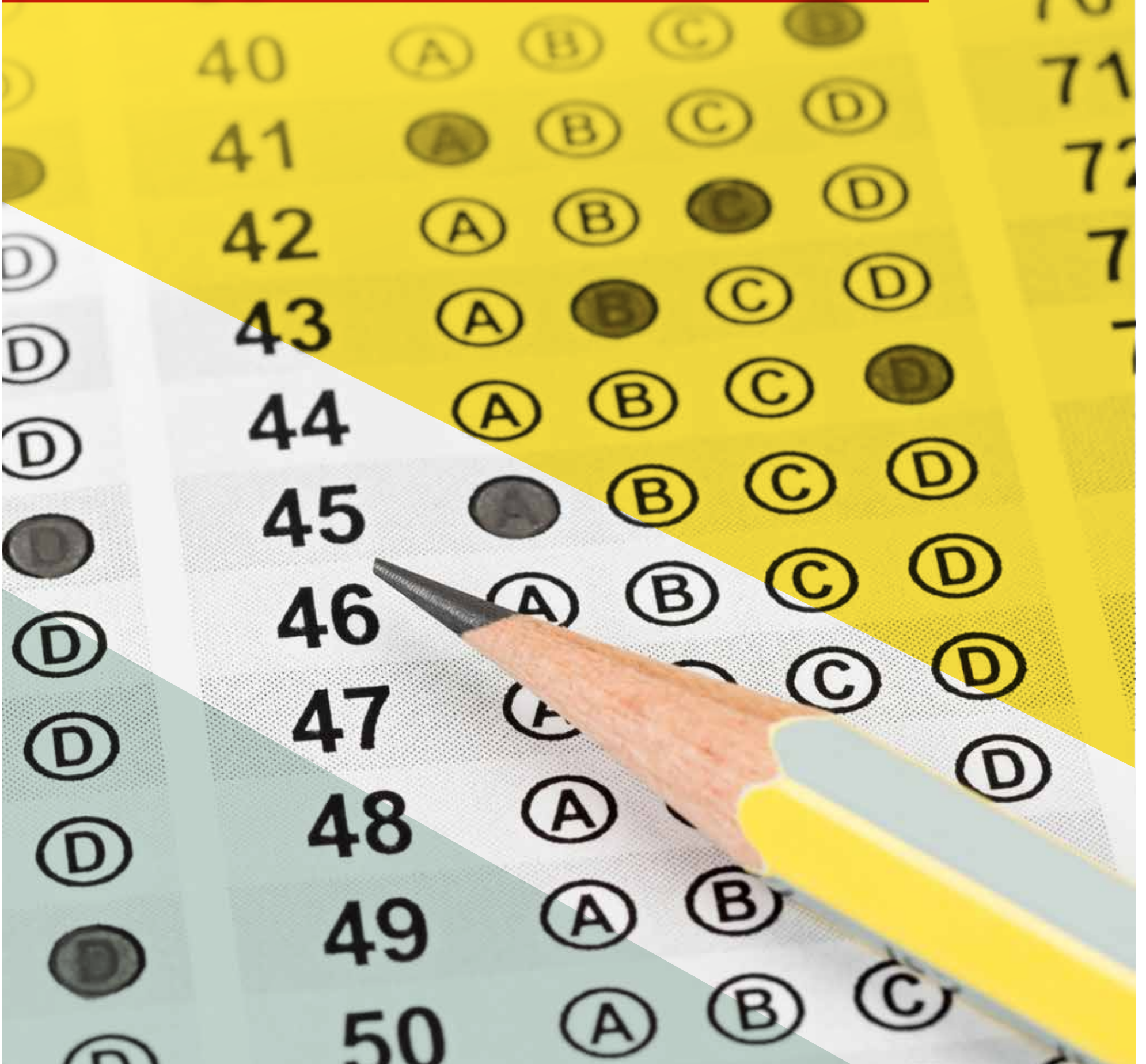
The Learning Team

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A publication for parents and teachers working together for children's education

TEST THIS!

It takes *more* than a simple test to assess student learning.



EDITOR'S NOTE

Beyond grades and standardized exams



Lisa Everitt
Editor
The Learning Team

I started my teaching career in the early 1990s in the Northwest Territories. My first job was in a small First Nations community that was in the process of establishing its first high school. Prior to that time, if students wanted to graduate from Grade 12, they had to go to Yellowknife or Inuvik for high school. There were several new teachers at the school the year I was hired, and it was an exciting and heady time for us all. As a new teacher, I learned so very much from that experience about teaching, learning and living in the community.

My students taught me every day about what it meant to be a teacher and how learning happened. In particular, in my first semester of teaching Grade 10 mathematics, I had a student who would come to my class every day, but she would not show me her work. Consequently, I was unable to formally assess her learning during that first semester. I tried to encourage her to show me her work, but she had decided that it was not safe for her to commit herself to feedback from me. However, she continued to attend school and diligently took notes and my assignments and exams. Her final grade was not very good — at that time, zeros were routinely given for incomplete work. Naturally, since I was the only mathematics teacher in the school, she enrolled in another class with me the following semester.

It was night and day.

... the potential of a student cannot always be measured by paper-and-pencil assignments or exams, no matter how well these are constructed.

In the second semester, this student was the superstar of the class, achieving honours marks and leading her peers in terms of grades. A switch had flipped. In reflecting on my experience, I came to understand that this student needed to know that she was safe to learn, and this meant making mistakes so I could give her feedback, either verbally in class or in writing through an assignment or exam. It is not easy to open yourself up to the advice or critique of another person. My experience with this student expanded my consideration of what assessment is all about. I learned that the potential of a student cannot always be measured by paper-and-pencil assignments or exams, no matter how well these are constructed. It reminded me to refrain from making quick judgments about whether a student had the potential to learn and whether that student could show their learning through assessment. I am indebted to this student — she helped me develop a broader conception of learning potential and how we might understand how students learn. I think she made me a better teacher.

I am so pleased to help bring you this edition of the *Learning Team*, focusing on assessment. The articles on these pages will help illustrate how assessment of student learning is a multifaceted venture between students and their teachers. In addition, I hope that this edition helps to illustrate the complexities of student assessment and expand ideas of what assessment is beyond grades or standardized exams.

Lisa Everitt is an executive staff officer with the Alberta Teachers' Association.

What is assessment?

The evaluation or estimation of the nature, quality, or ability of someone or something. — *Oxforddictionaries.com*

Teachers have many different assessments at their disposal when making a professional judgment about a student's progress and abilities.



Formative assessment

- An ongoing process that occurs through conversations with students, observations of students and evaluations of the products that students create, such as essays, stories, art-work, woodworking projects etc.
- Helps teachers during their everyday practice

Formative assessment is characterized by an abundance of specific, descriptive feedback that is provided while the learning is still taking place. Through the formative assessment process, teachers also gain valuable information to help with planning for instruction. When true formative assessment is at work, the lines become blurred between instruction and assessment.



Summative assessment

- A consolidation of formative assessments that tells parents and students where they are at with respect to the desired learning outcomes
- A report card is an example of a summative assessment

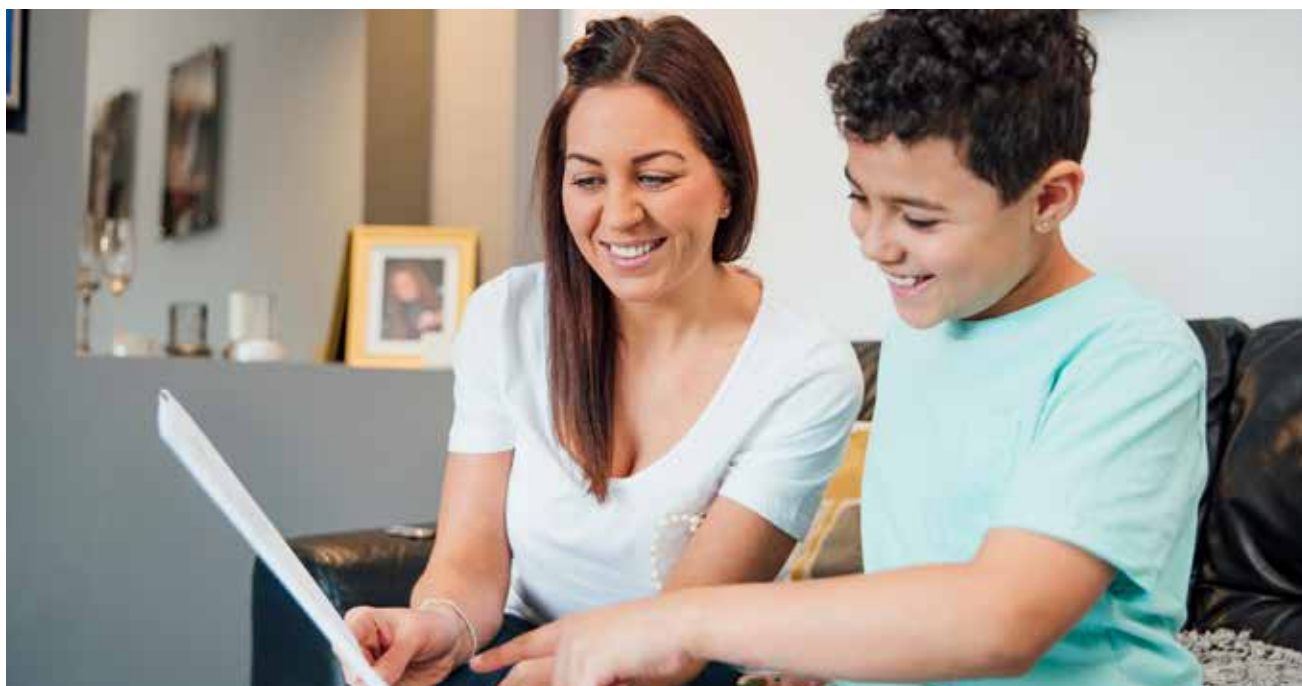


Standardized assessment

- A test administered to a large number of students under standardized conditions.

No single assessment, especially a standardized one, can replace the professional evaluation and judgment of a teacher.

ILLUSTRATIONS ERIN SOLANO



ISTOCK

More than a snapshot

Sherry Bennett
Executive Director, Alberta
Assessment Consortium

Can one snapshot possibly capture all that you know about your child?

Of course not!

A snapshot can capture a moment in time, but children are constantly changing.

classroom assessment. The mark your child receives on a test or assignment is just a snapshot of their performance at that moment in time. It can't possibly represent everything your child knows and can do, and it definitely does not represent their potential or their worth.

The best learning takes place within an environment where children feel confident and safe to take risks with their learning, and where mistakes are opportunities to learn and grow.

You would need a photo album to represent the highlights of your child over the years. And even then, your treasured collection is only a sample of all that you know about your child.

It's the same thing with

Your child is unique! You know that as a parent, and yet sometimes we want assessments to compare students with each other. Try to resist that urge! Rather than asking for the class average (as if there ever was

an average class or an average student), ask how your child is doing in relation to the goals of the curriculum. Look for improvement in key skills that last throughout the entire year and will continue throughout their schooling and their life.

Perhaps most important, be sure that a child never sees a mark they receive on a "snapshot" of learning as an evaluation of their worth. Well-meaning family members sometimes want to reward top report card marks. Instead, help them look for ways to celebrate learning rather than celebrating marks.

And what about large-scale assessments? Perhaps your child's school uses some of these tests. In a recent webinar, Dylan Wiliam, an advocate for effective classroom assessment, recently posed this question: "Why rely on an

out-of-focus photo taken by a complete stranger?"

Large-scale assessments can provide helpful information to the teacher, but don't let these test results occupy too much space in the photo album!

The best learning takes place within an environment where children feel confident and safe to take risks with their learning, and where mistakes are opportunities to learn and grow. When parents and teachers work together to create such environments, our children are truly set for success — in school and in life.

Sherry Bennett is executive director of the Alberta Assessment Consortium, an organization that advocates for sound assessment practices and contributes to the building of assessment literacy through research and inquiry.



PHOTOS CORY HARE

Indigenous ways are part of daily life at Piitoayis Family School. Here, a class practises the school song in preparation for an upcoming performance.

Focus on values sets Calgary school apart

Cory Hare
Managing Editor, *The Learning Team*

When Calgary resident Lindie Vanderspuy was seeking a school for her children, she focused on values rather than test scores.

This led her to Piitoayis Family School, which is housed in a classic sandstone building that's been sitting just beyond the shadow of Calgary's downtown for more than a century. Judging by standardized tests, Piitoayis is currently one of the lowest performing elementary schools in the province, but after an exhaustive search for the right school for her two children, Vanderspuy determined that Piitoayis provides an education that is as close as it gets to ideal.

"I specifically sent [my children] there because of the different approach," she says. "That is what drew me in."

An alternative school within the Calgary Board of Education, Piitoayis (pronounced "bee-doe-yis") teaches the Alberta curriculum through Indigenous perspectives and experiences. Its daily focus is on four core values created in consultation with local Blackfoot Elders, including Saa'kokoto Randy Bottle and Iikiinayookaa Marlene Yellowhorn, the school's principal. Translated into English, these values stand for

1. spirituality (ceremony);
2. kindness to others;
3. be aware of your environment, be observant; and
4. be able to take on tasks independently.

These values inform everything that takes place in the school. They are deeply philosophical and represent an Indigenous perspective on what good learning is, says learning leader Theresa McDonnell.

"These values have been around a really long time, and they've allowed people to persevere and to continue to be a strong community despite a lot of challenges."

In keeping with the first value, each day at Piitoayis begins with a smudging ceremony, which helps reset stu-

What's in a name?
Piitoayis is pronounced "bee-doe-yis" and is Blackfoot for "eagle lodge."

dents, most of whom endure long bus rides from various parts of the city. Most of the school's 200 students are of Indigenous heritage, but even within this cross-section there is a lot of diversity of backgrounds and needs, McDonnell says.

While teaching the Alberta curriculum, the school's teachers work hard to incorporate Indigenous values and knowledge. For example, when students learn about

"We try to give power and privilege to Indigenous perspectives wherever possible so that students have a strong sense of pride and identity and belonging to this land that doesn't waver."

— Theresa McDonnell, Learning Leader

the five senses that are recognized by Western society, they also learn about the sixth sense (gut feeling) that is recognized in Indigenous culture.

Throughout the school, student-created posters and maps stress the importance of respecting the earth — or Na'a — and juxtapose the location of modern establishments like the local Co-op in relation to the traditional territories of the Indigenous peoples who've lived in the area for centuries.

Multiple perspectives

In Heather Craig's grades 3–4 class, students are preparing for a field trip to Women's Buffalo Jump near Okotoks. They are learning about Okotoks from the perspective of Western geography but are also learning the traditional Blackfoot story *Napi and the Rock*.

"They connect to that, the idea of being out on the

land and these lessons that you can learn from Napi, the trickster," Craig says.

While the school's teachers produce conventional report cards, as is the practice in any other school, they remain heavily focused on the four values posted just inside the school's entrance.

"How students are progressing in those values is something that we consider all the time in feedback that we give to parents," Craig says.

Some curricular outcomes reflect Western thinking that doesn't mesh well with Indigenous ways. In such instances, students are exposed to multiple perspectives and learn to respect them all, McDonnell says.

"We try to give power and privilege to Indigenous perspectives wherever possible so that students have a strong sense of pride and identity and belonging to this land that doesn't waver," McDonnell says.

The underlying message is that Indigenous knowledge and perspectives are valued and relevant today, and are important for charting a positive future for society, rather than being relegated to history.

"We want to make sure that we instill those values in our students so that they can be more resilient and they know who they are because, by the time they get to junior high, they're going to be in a school where there's a ton of different perspectives," McDonnell says. "Our hope is that they won't feel lost or [like they're] one person in a huge school when they know who they are."

For Vanderspuy, although she is Caucasian, the Indigenous perspective provides a more holistic approach that fits her family's sensibilities. Yes, her children are learning math, language and science, but it's the school's values that make it special.

"My kids come home with those teachings of, I need to respect others, I need to respect the earth, I need to be kind, I need to do things on my own, I need to master," she says. "I hear this from my seven-and five-year-old, which I think is beautiful."



A mural created by students at Piitoayis Family School shows their connection to their home on the Elbow River.

The deceitful nature of rankings

Within education circles, ranking schools based on standardized test results is largely dismissed because it doesn't account for a wide range of factors that have been proven to affect student performance, such as socioeconomic background, gender, family breakdown, or their level of comfort with the language being used.

Teachers at Piitoayis Family School prepare their students for provincial achievement tests in much the same way as teachers in any other school, says learning leader Theresa McDonnell. However, the school has a very diverse

and complex population of students who face a number of challenges at home, such as poverty.

For parent Lindie Vanderspuy, who has a background in early childhood development and trauma recovery, tests have a role to play but their value is limited.

"I think they're valuable in giving us some information and some guidance, but I do not think that they are the spotlight to show us the way," she says. "I definitely don't think that is the measurement to use to determine success in life."

Tests miss the human factor

Nancy Ball
Principal, Beacon Hill Public School, Fort McMurray

What is special about my school that isn't captured by standardized tests?

Standardized tests cannot measure my school's special sense of community. During my two years at Beacon Hill Public School, I have witnessed members of our school community pull together to support each other. During the wildfires of May 2016, two-thirds of the homes in Beacon Hill were destroyed. When our school reopened its doors in September 2017, it became a home base, a gathering place.

Standardized tests cannot measure the human factor, nor do they measure students learning to become leaders in their own right. Perseverance, thoughtfulness and compassion are traits we admire in both children and adults, but ones that are not measured in standardized tests. Our school community has persevered through collective trauma, and now our students are paying back the compassion and thoughtfulness shown to them. Contributing to our community grows active citizens, proud leaders of tomorrow.

Assessment is continuous

Shawn Ram
Divisional learning coach, Northland School Division

A teacher has access to an amazing assortment of assessments to assist in determining the growth and achievement of a student.

Recently there has been a significant amount of talk about standardized tests and, although they have their uses and functions, I personally do not consider them the best measure of a student's abilities. My current position of divisional learning coach allows me to work with students on skills and objectives they are seeing for the first time (construction, fabrication, foods, robotics, coding and more), but that requires the integration of attributes they have already covered.

During my times with students, I predominantly use formative assessment, which occurs through observing, consulting and directing students as they apply their skills and knowledge. When using formative assessment, I do not teach redundant elements, allowing me to focus on individual learning needs. For example, in construction, I can assess how a student is making cuts to ensure that joints will match appropriately.

While programming, students and I can assess the outcomes and effectiveness of a program while putting the program together, not just at the end. This is not unique to my role — formative assessment is vital for all my colleagues who are teaching literacy and numeracy and working on land-based learning. Formative assessment is the most versatile and commonly used assessment, as it is the most effective and the most student-centred in its approach.

A note about standardized testing

Teachers are opposed to standardized testing, including achievement testing, when the test is not appropriate to the educational needs of the student and when the results are misused. Standardized tests are developed by people or organizations outside the classroom and administered to a large number of students under standardized conditions. Standardized tests generally stand alone and are administered as single assessments. Examples of standardized tests are the Provincial Achievement Tests and commercial tests such as the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS).

The use of standardized tests should be limited to the purposes for which the tests have been designed. Typically, standardized test results should not be

combined with results from curriculum assessments because each is designed to measure different aspects of student achievement. As well, the results from a single standardized test should not be used to determine a student's final grade or program placement.

Standardized tests become high-stakes tests when the results are used to evaluate students, teachers and schools, or to determine educational funding. When the results of standardized and achievement tests are used in these ways, valuable classroom instructional time may be spent teaching to the test and training students to read multiple-choice tests and complete computer answer sheets. These activities intrude on the instructional process.



ISTOCK

PAT stress is real

Cory Hare
Managing Editor, *The Learning Team*

My daughter was in Grade 6 last year and it was brutal. Brutal because, here in Alberta, Grade 6 students are subject to the Provincial Achievement Test. This standardized test assesses students in four core subjects: language arts, math, science and social studies. According to Alberta Education, the tests help determine if students are learning what is expected, which lets Albertans know how the system is doing and helps education officials improve learning.

Although the tests occur in January, May and June, for my daughter, my wife and me it seemed like the tests dominated the entire school year. Throughout the year, my wife and I received a lot of emails — to me it felt like a continuous deluge — from the teacher or principal stressing the importance of the next PAT study session, practice exam or actual exam. Our daughter was receiving the same message in her class on an almost daily basis: make sure you study at home, attend extra study sessions after school, be ready to write the next test, etc.

All year long she lugged these demands around as if they were a backpack full of psychology textbooks. The strain was obvious.

The school year was characterized by an underlying baseline of tension. This erupted in periodic blow-ups and flip-outs, to borrow technical terms from the psychology world. The climax of this drama came one particular evening, the night before the kid was to write the social studies PAT. She was stressed out because she felt like she wasn't properly prepared. As we tried to soothe her and talk her off this proverbial ledge, she only spiraled further into despair.

"I'm going to fail!" she wailed, practically hysterical with anxiety. "And my teacher's going to lose her job!"

We soothed her as best we could, encouraged her to simply do her best and stressed that the teacher would be fine and that the test didn't really "count."

Normally, I would have said this without really believing it. Like many or most parents these days, I

grew up with tests and view them as a normal part of the educational experience. I dealt with them; my kid can deal with them — that's the attitude of many, and it would have been mine if I didn't work for the ATA. Since I came on board here five years ago, I've been exposed, seemingly for the first time, to a broader perspective on the value of standardized tests.

One of the cautions I hear about standardized tests is that they place a great deal of stress on young students. While I see merit in preparing students for the real-world requirement to perform under pressure, what I saw last year was indeed too much: too much pressure at too young an age.

While I see merit in preparing students for the real-world requirement to perform under pressure, what I saw last year was indeed too much: too much pressure at too young an age.

After the kid's meltdown, things went quiet on the PAT front. I later learned that this was because she had, in fact, done very poorly on the social studies portion of the PAT. The anxiety was so great while writing the test that it severely hampered her ability to function. When the results came back, she was afraid to show them to me.

"I thought you would be mad," she said.

"I'm not mad," I said. "I don't care about that test."

It was true that I didn't care about her result on the test, but I did feel a growing well of anger, toward the teacher, the principal and the school division. I thought about how much of their time and energy had gone into "preparing" kids for this one test. I thought about the amount of stress this had placed on this one particular kid. I wondered how many of my daughter's classmates had endured similar meltdowns. I also wondered what other productive learning could have taken place if that time had been used differently.

Cory Hare is the managing editor of The Learning Team.

The
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