

# The Fundamental Error Underlying the B.C. Foundation Skills Assessment

by Anne Davies

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**Would you choose** a mutual fund based on a single day's performance? Would you decide the skill level of a baseball pitcher after watching one game, two-thirds of the way through a season? Logic tells you, "No." You wouldn't have enough information. Without enough information we can't make informed decisions or draw responsible conclusions.

This May, the BC Ministry of Education is planning to test thousands of children, calculate each student's performance, and in the fall send parents a report of their children's "foundational skill level". This test, given at Grades 4, 7, and 10, will take four hours or less and is supposed to tell parents how well students are able to read, write and do math. In other words, it will be a single look at a student's work part way through the school year. How can the minister of education afford to add this expenditure to an already overtaxed budget, especially when any conclusions drawn from it about students will be invalid? Do you think this has anything to do with politics? While that is up for you to decide, I can tell you the plan is not based on sound assessment practices.

It is a fact that large-scale assessments like the new Foundational Skills Assessment (FSA) are too limited and incomplete to give a valid report concerning an individual student's level of skill. To get a valid assessment of an individual student's learning, you need to gather evidence using a variety of classroom assessment techniques. As parents trying to make sense of how well our children are doing, it is important to understand the difference between these two types of assessment.

Large-scale assessments have two important purposes – to account for how well the system is operating and to identify trends to inform the development of curriculum and fine-tuning classroom instruction. Traditionally in British Columbia, large-scale assessment data has been collected from a randomly selected, statistically significant sample of students. The information from large-scale assessment has helped identify which areas of curriculum need more attention. When districts or the province have compared the results of subsequent assessments, they get feedback about how well the system is doing. By providing such critical information, large-scale assessments have filled an important role in the continual improvement of the educational system in this province. This is what the BC provincial learning assessment program does when it assesses statistically significant numbers of students across the province and gives valid reports about how students as a group are learning is a good use of time and money.

The purposes of classroom assessment are different from large-scale assessment. Classroom assessment helps the teacher know what kind of instruction their students need and communicates to the student's family what and how well each student is learning. When teachers assess students in their classrooms, they collect assessment data from three different sources: observing students as they work; reviewing the products students create; and talking

with students about their work. They do this over time, looking for patterns and trends. This process ensures reliability and validity. This is similar to a financial planner looking at several different factors over time to determine how well a mutual fund is performing or reviewing an athlete's performance statistics over an entire season.

Compared to the approach of classroom assessment, it is clear that the limited evidence about a particular student gathered in a few hours during a large-scale assessment, such as the FSA is not a valid way to assess or report on an individual student's learning. The report to parents, months later, can only be misleading.

Don't be fooled by the FSA's appearance of accountability and substance. When we educate our children we are investing in the future. We need to make responsible decisions based on valid information; we need to be at least as thoughtful about our assessment of our children's learning as we are about our financial investments. To do that we need valid information not the illusion of it. After all, our children and their learning also deserve care and attention.

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