

Foundation Skills Assessment — The Battle Over Testing

On December 9 and 10, 2008, the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) held a province-wide vote of its membership on the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA). Public school teachers were asked by their union to vote on the following question:

Do you agree with the 2008 AGM decision that unless the Ministry of Education changes to a random sampling with neither schools nor student identified, teachers exercise their professional autonomy and not prepare for, administer, or mark the provincial FSAs?

On December 11, 2008, the BCTF announced that 85 per cent of the 22,397 ballots cast were in favour of taking the above-referenced action against the FSA.

BCTF President Irene Lanzinger stated:

"With this vote, teachers across the province spoke very clearly...The FSAs drain much-needed time and resources away from teaching and learning. This particular standardized test is unfair, does not help students learn, and is not an accurate measure of student progress."¹

She further stated:

"It's time for us to stand up and say we're not going to do it rather than relying on parents. It's time for us to take that struggle on."²

What is the FSA?

The Foundation Skills Assessment is an annual province-wide assessment of British Columbia students' academic skills in reading comprehension, writing, and numeracy. The main purpose of the FSA is to help the province, school districts, schools and school planning councils evaluate how well students are achieving basic skills, and make plans to improve student achievement. The tests, which are linked to the provincial curriculum and provincial performance standards, are designed and developed by BC educators.

¹ BCTF News Release. "BC Teachers vote to oppose Foundation Skills Assessment." December 11, 2008

² "Teachers support boycott of FSA." The Report Card, Janet Steffenhagen, December 11, 2008, <http://communities.canada.com/vancouver/blogs/reportcard/archive/2008/12/11.aspx>.

Background

The FSA was introduced in BC in 2000. During the first three years, it tested the performance of students in grades 4, 7 and 10. The New Graduation Program added provincial exams to grade 10 students and therefore eliminated the need for the FSA for these students. Since 2004, the FSA has only been administered to students in grades 4 and 7.

The FSA as it exists today was based largely on a decision by the provincial government in the late 1990s to report the results of the FSA at the provincial, district, school and individual level.

An "Assessment Working Group," comprised of representatives from key stakeholder groups including the BCTF, was tasked with making recommendations to the then-Deputy Minister as to the "contextualization, interpretation and communication of results of the annual assessment."³ The Assessment Working Group made recommendations, including templates for communications home to parents, as to the student's results and how they are to be interpreted.

Legislative Requirements and FSA

The administration and supervision of tests is the nature of work normally performed by teachers. The assessment and evaluation of students is a core duty of teachers, as this represents an integral part of the learning process.

In April 2002, the Labour Relations Board (LRB) issued a decision⁴ concluding that supervising FSA tests is work which teachers are obligated to perform and ordered the BCTF to suspend its direction to members not to supervise the test.

On pages 5 and 6 of the award, the LRB stated:

... it is clearly within the authority of the Ministry of Education to set this test as a provincial student learning assessment under the Ministry order. The Ministerial Order also allows school boards to designate teachers as the individuals responsible for supervising the FSA test."

At the time of this decision, section 17(1) of the *School Act* defined teachers' responsibilities and section 17(2) required teachers to perform the duties set out in the Regulations:

Teachers' responsibilities

17 (1) A teacher's responsibilities include designing, supervising and assessing educational programs and providing instruction to individual students and groups of students.

(2) Teachers must perform the duties set out in the regulations.

Duties of teachers

4. (1) The duties of a teacher include the following:

³ Report to Dr. Ungerleider (May 28, 1999)

⁴ [2002] B.C.L.R.B.D. No. 123

(a) providing teaching and other educational services, including advice and instructional assistance, to the students assigned to the teacher, as required or assigned by the board or the minister;

(g) evaluating the student's intellectual development, human and social development and career development and evaluating educational programs as required by the board or the minister.

The Student Learning Assessment Order, Ministerial Order No. M60/94 (Ministerial Order), specifically deals with the evaluation of students and a teacher's responsibility to conduct assessments in a manner consistent with the instructions and protocols issued by the Ministry and outlined in this order. The following key sections outline the responsibilities of a teacher:

- Section 1 of the Ministerial Order defines "assessments" to include provincial assessments sent to a school board by the Minister for the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of educational programs by, among other things, measuring individual student performance.
- Section 2(b) of the Ministerial Order requires a school board to ensure that the students taking part in such assessments are supervised by "a teacher, administrative officer or other persons designated...."
- Section 3 of the Ministerial Order provides that the individuals designated to supervise the assessment do so according to the Ministry of Education assessment protocols, instructions and invigilation procedures.

A teacher's participation is not limited to the supervision of the FSA tests, but includes full administration of the tests in accordance with the instructions received by the teacher.

Subsequent to the 2002 LRB decision, the Student Learning Assessment Order was amended as follows:

3. ...a teacher, administrative officer or other person designated by the minister or board must...
 - (b) ensure that assessments are administered and completed, and that the data collected from assessments are transmitted to the minister, in accordance with the assessment protocols, instructions and invigilation procedures sent to the board or francophone education authority by the minister with each assessment.

Continuing Opposition: An Evolving Approach

2007-2008 School Year

In the spring of 2007, the BCTF prepared brochures regarding the FSA and asked that teachers distribute these to parents. These communications recommended to parents that they withdraw their children from FSA tests and also included information that the teachers consider FSA testing to be harmful to students. The BCTF took the position that FSA has a negative effect on students' motivation and learning, and that it takes time away from teaching and learning.

The BCTF membership passed the following motion demonstrating their general opposition to the FSA:

That the BCTF work with locals to collect from all teachers, signed Statements of Principle on Assessment that express our professional belief in fair, effective and reliable evaluation and our opposition to both the Foundation Skills Assessment and the proliferation of mandated standardized tests.

2008-2009 School Year

The 2008-09 school year has seen a slight change in the BCTF position. Although the BCTF continue to oppose the FSA, they are now advocating for administration of FSA tests on a random-sample basis.

In a “postcard”⁵ to Minister of Education Shirley Bond, the BCTF states:

- FSA tests do not help students learn, or teachers teach.
- FSA tests take valuable time away from richer and more meaningful learning.
- FSA tests take valuable resources away from the classroom.
- Results are misused to rank schools and promote privatization.
- Classroom teachers are the best judges of student learning.
- Please administer FSA tests on a random-sample basis.

Labour Relations Implications

The reality is that whatever personal opinions school trustees, district staff, the BCTF, and teachers may hold with respect to the FSA (or any other educational initiative for that matter), the FSA is an initiative of the Ministry of Education and is grounded in the *School Act* and Regulations. As public school employers, we are obliged to ensure that the FSA proceeds as intended without disruption to the workplace.

We will continue to work with school districts to manage the employment implications of the ongoing BCTF opposition campaign to FSA.

⁵ BCTF website: <http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Issues/FSA/FSA-Postcard.pdf>