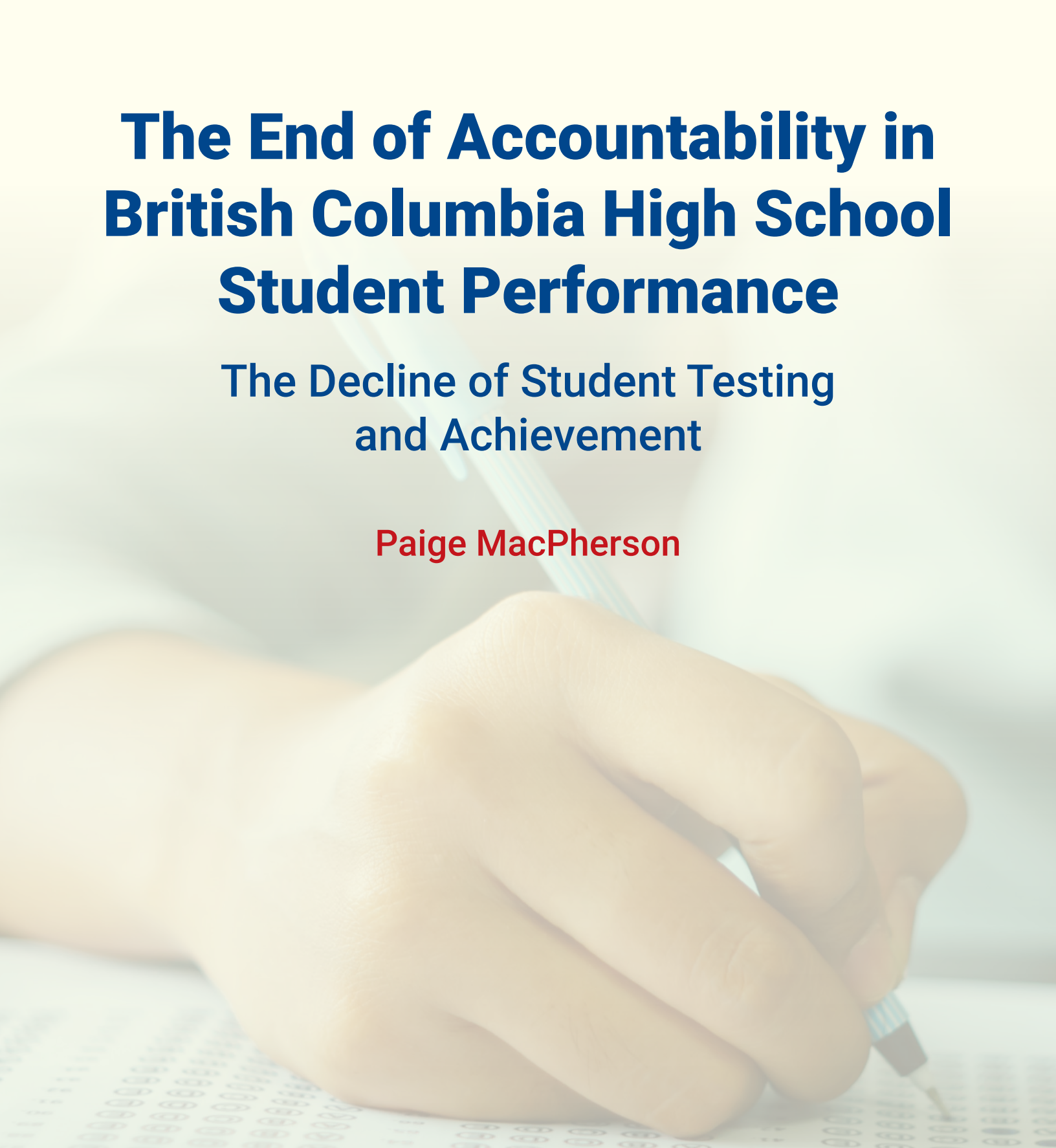
The End of Accountability in British Columbia High School Student Performance

The Decline of Student Testing and Achievement

Paige MacPherson



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The End of Accountability in British Columbia High School Student Performance

The Decline of Student Testing and Achievement

Paige MacPherson

FRASER INSTITUTE 50 YEARS

Contents

Executive Summary

- The British Columbia government has changed provincewide student testing in high schools so dramatically that it no longer produces quality provincewide student assessment data.
- Three significant changes have been introduced that weaken the results and usefulness of high school testing in BC:
  - The assessments no longer affect a student's grade for the related course.
  - Students are not required to pass the assessment to graduate.
  - The assessments no longer test course-specific knowledge but rather broader concepts and ideas.

  Because of this, the tests are significantly less consequential for students.
- In 2021/22, participation in the Grade 10 numeracy assessment was 22.3 percentage points lower than the 2015/16 Grade 10 Math exam; participation in the 2021/22 Grade 10 literacy assessment was 17.1 percentage points lower than the 2015/16 Grade 10 English exam; and participation in the 2021/22 Grade 12 literacy assessment was 14.2 percentage points lower than the 2015/16 Grade 12 English exam.
- While writing these assessments is "mandatory" for graduation, fewer students are writing them, and BC's graduation rate—96 percent—hasn't plummeted.
- This reduces confidence that the new assessments reliably measure student performance. As a result, the Fraser Institute will not publish its *Report Card on BC Secondary Schools,* which has been published since 1998, unless the government reinstates quality provincewide high school testing.
- Teachers, school administrators, and policymakers have lost quality provincewide data to guide school improvement.
- BC parents have lost a valuable tool in understanding how their child and their school are performing.

Introduction

Reliable, fair, and objective provincewide assessment of high school students is no longer administered in British Columbia. As a result, parents, teachers, principals, and policymakers no longer have reliable student assessment data to understand how BC high school students are doing in school, informing decision-making. While BC once led the country in its system of provincewide assessment, the provincial government replaced meaningful course content-based English and Math exams in grades 10 and English in grade 12, with more vague student assessments of skills, in literacy and numeracy. This reduction in testing started in 2015 when the province announced the end of the five provincewide exams previously administered in high school (CBC News, 2016). Significantly fewer students complete these new student assessments compared to the previous exams, despite the assessments technically being mandatory for graduation, according to the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2024). Yet as assessment participation has dramatically declined, graduation rates increased, indicating the weakness of this so-called requirement and the overall testing regime. With fewer students writing the assessments, the data on average student performance is markedly less reliable.

The Fraser Institute has been publishing the *Report Card on British Columbia Secondary Schools* since 1998, providing a detailed ranking of secondary schools in the province (Cowley, Easton, and Walker, 1998). These report cards have become valuable resources for all education stakeholders, including families, teachers, principals, school boards, and policymakers. The report cards highlighted strong school performance and areas for improvement and profiled the most improved schools—particularly schools facing challenging circumstances, providing best practices and learning opportunities for educators and administrators. The information in the report cards has also long been used by BC parents to inform school choice and hold schools accountable for student achievement outcomes.

Unfortunately, the province's changes to secondary school testing and the resulting unreliability and poor quality of the data, mean that the Fraser Institute can no longer produce the *Report Card on British Columbia Secondary Schools*, unless the provincial government reverses course on these changes.

The decline of standardized testing in BC is not in line with the preferences of parents with kids in K-12 schools. In a 2022 Leger poll commissioned for the Fraser Institute, 96 percent of parents in BC supported fair and objective assessment of students and 80 percent

of parents explicitly supported standardized testing to understand how their kids are doing in reading, writing, and math (MacPherson, 2022).

The timing of BC's decline in high school student testing is particularly troubling given the concurrent decline in student performance. As this study will detail, both provincial assessment data and, more reliably, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores—which assess 15-year-old students across the globe in math, reading, and science—show a significant decline in BC's student achievement from 2003 to 2022, the most recent year of data. This decline was already notable in 2018, showing the downward trend predates COVID-19 school closures.

Declining State of Provincewide Testing in British Columbia

British Columbia once led the country in the quality and reliability of its provincewide assessments. In 2014, The Conference Board of Canada highlighted Canada's top three performing provinces in education and skills, looking at reading, science, and math: BC, Ontario, and Alberta, with BC leading the country (The Conference Board of Canada, 2014). A key thread running through all three provinces at that time was a comprehensive system of provincewide testing through elementary and high school, which many other provinces lacked.[1]

Despite this comparative strength, in 2012, BC's Ministry of Education began consultations reviewing the province's graduation requirements. The resulting report recommended a review of the provincial exams in high schools and a reduced emphasis on written tests. One "big idea" in the report was the elimination of provincial exams, to be replaced with more "authentic" student assessments (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013: 32–140).

The BC government announced in 2015 that the province's grade 10 and 12 five provincial high school exams would be replaced with student assessments in numeracy and literacy in grade 10 and literacy in grade 12, in the coming school year (CBC News, 2016). The assessments did not roll out for several more years, as detailed below. The province's elementary-level tests, called Foundation Skills Assessments, administered in grades four and seven, remained in place.

As noted by MacPherson and Emes (2024), BC previously administered course-based exams for grades 10 and 12 to assess specific content knowledge, which were graded using a percentage out of 100. Students were required to complete these exams to graduate, and the marks received on these exams contributed to students' final course marks, thereby impacting graduation, particularly in grade 12. In other words, these exams were meaningful to students—how well they did on the exams had a meaningful impact on their school career.

In 2017/18, BC shifted to student assessments in numeracy in grade 10, and a grade 10 literacy assessment was introduced in 2019/20. In 2021/22, a grade 12 literacy assessment

1 Per Zwaagstra (2022), Ontario's provincewide assessments do not assess content knowledge and are less rigorous than Alberta's provincewide assessments and the previous provincewide assessment regime in BC.

was introduced. These replaced the course-based exams, and no longer employed percentage grades, but rather used assessment terminology including "emerging" and "proficient." While students are required to complete (not pass) these assessments to graduate, participation in all three student assessments has declined (detailed below) while the graduation rate has increased from 95 percent in 2015/16 to 96 percent in 2021/22 (MacPherson and Emes, 2024).

In 2021/22, 82.9 percent of grade 10 students wrote the grade 10 literacy assessment. Participation in BC's grade 10 literacy assessment in all schools was 17.1 percentage points lower compared to the 2015/16 grade 10 English exams.

In 2021/22, 77.7 percent of grade 10 students wrote the grade 10 numeracy assessment. Participation was 22.3 percentage points lower than the grade 10 math exams of 2015/16.

In 2021/22, 85.8 percent of grade 12 students wrote the grade 12 literacy assessment, and participation was 14.2 percentage points lower than the grade 12 English exams of 2015/16 (Emes and MacPherson, 2024). In each case this represents a notable decline in participation.

If these student assessments are genuinely required to graduate, the declining participation rates paired with the increasing (and very high) graduation rate suggests something does not add up. At best, this indicates a weakened program of provincewide testing in BC.

The Shift Away from Content Knowledge in Curricula and Testing

Weakening provincewide assessment regimes is not universal across Canada, but it is not unique to BC. This trend is part of a broader movement away from the emphasis on specific course content and testing content knowledge. Research by Zwaagstra (2022) demonstrated that many provinces are moving away from the testing of specific course content knowledge and toward the assessment of "higher-order" learning. Zwaagstra found that as of 2022, standardized testing is being administered in fewer subjects at fewer grade levels in Canada than twenty years prior, and tests are more likely to focus on generic skills such as literacy and numeracy (as in BC) rather than specific content knowledge like historical facts. Several provinces decreased the weight of provincial tests in terms of impact on students' final grades.

In practice, this makes provincial assessments vague and hard to measure, providing significantly less valuable assessment data to parents and education stakeholders. It also

provides less incentive for teachers to emphasize specific content knowledge in their lessons—an unfortunate outcome given the importance of content-rich teaching in student success.

This trend is consistent with the shift in K-12 curricula across Canada which have moved away from an emphasis on facts and toward broader concepts. The takeaway is that children should be proficient in broad skills such as "literacy" and "numeracy," but not tested on specific math or reading content. This approach is wrong-headed, because as noted by Zwaagstra (2022), research by John Hattie and Gregory Yates (2014), memorizing facts helps reduce cognitive load, making it possible for students to move onto higher-order learning. For example, knowing facts about the history and context through which Adolf Hitler rose to power is instructive for students contemplating the rise of fascism in other countries today. Hitler, like all historical figures, did not exist in a vacuum, and knowing facts is necessary to developing understanding and then critically thinking about these historical and current events. Further research by Zwaagstra (2024) illustrates a marked decline in content knowledge required by the K-12 history curricula in both BC and Ontario, where in both cases, students are required to know very little about Canadian history by the time they graduate, despite subject-specific content knowledge being of great importance to both critical thinking and reading comprehension.

The importance of content knowledge and the memorization of facts holds true in math. As noted by University of Winnipeg math professor Anna Stokke (2015), Canadian curricula have shifted away from direct instruction techniques including the focus on content knowledge and the memorization of facts in math, at the same time as most provinces experienced a steady decline in math scores. Yet Stokke notes, drawing on research in the science of learning, that committing math facts to long-term memory allows students to recall them quickly, freeing up space in their working memory, and then enabling them to learn new concepts.

Fraser Institute Cannot Publish the *Report Card on British Columbia Secondary Schools* Until Government Reinstates Quality Provincewide Tests in High Schools

The Fraser Institute has been publishing the *Report Card on British Columbia Secondary Schools* since 1998, providing a detailed ranking of secondary schools in the province (Cowley, Easton and Walker, 1998). Parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers have relied on the school rankings in the report card, along with the data showing each school's trend over time, to make informed decisions about school choice and performance. Readers have come to see the inspiring stories of school improvement profiled within the report cards, especially in the cases of schools facing challenging circumstances such as a high proportion of students with exceptional needs, or students who are learning English or French as a second or third language. Schools with similar profiles in similar regions have learned from the best practices offered by these schools with strong performance or notable improvements over time.

Unfortunately, due to the province's changes to secondary school assessments and the resulting poor quality of the data, the Fraser Institute can no longer produce the *Report Card on British Columbia Secondary Schools*, unless the British Columbia government reverses course on its changes to student assessment in BC high schools and reinstates high-quality, reliable provincewide tests which are meaningful for students. In other words, tests that students have a reason to actually complete and pass.

BC's high school student performance data has far-reaching impacts and uses to stakeholders across the educational spectrum. The Fraser Institute's *Report Card on British Columbia Secondary Schools* has served as an important tool for parents, educators, and policymakers, but this data is also published by other organizations and media outlets, serving as an important tool for public information about BC's schools and students. Without this data, BC has lost the ability to empirically measure student achievement in high schools.

Parental Support for Standardized Testing in British Columbia

The decline of standardized testing in BC is not in line with the preferences of parents with kids in K-12 schools. In a 2022 Leger poll commissioned by the Fraser Institute, 96 percent of parents in BC supported fair and objective assessment of students (MacPherson, 2022). When asked: *Thinking of your children in school, how important is knowing how your child is doing in the core subjects of reading, writing, and math, relative to other students by a fair and objective measure?* Ninety-six percent of BC parents with kids in K-12 schools said it was important or very important. BC and Ontario parents expressed the highest levels of support of any province/region. Eight in 10 BC parents also expressed specific support for standardized testing. When asked: *Thinking of your children in school, do you support or oppose your children taking standardized tests to understand how they and their school are doing in the core subjects of reading, writing, and math?* Eighty percent of BC parents with kids in K-12 schools said they support or strongly support standardized testing.

Standardized testing—in this case, meaningful tests that all students at the same level take at the same time—serves as an important accountability tool for students, teachers, schools, and governments. Education is the second-largest line item in BC's 2024/25 provincial budget (British Columbia Ministry of Finance, 2024). It is critical to ensure these tax dollars are well spent. The most important outcome of K-12 education is student learning and achievement. Standardized testing is imperfect, but it is the most fair and objective way to measure all students on a level playing field. Paired with more subjective in-class assessments, standardized testing helps analyze the return on investment of education tax dollars.

Declining Student Achievement in British Columbia

The inability to produce the *Report Card on British Columbia Secondary Schools*, due to a lack of reliable student testing data, comes at a time when BC high school students' achievement has dropped significantly versus previous decades. This is evident in both the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests and provincewide assessment scores.

PISA Scores

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) PISA test is often referred to as the "gold standard" of international student tests worldwide. While it does not test students on specific content knowledge connected to their elementary or secondary school courses or curriculum—as provincewide tests and exams ideally do—it is a test of student skills in math, science, and reading. PISA tests 15-year-olds in countries across the globe and provides useful comparison of both Canada versus other countries, and Canadian provinces versus one another or the Canadian average. As the state of provincewide testing declines in BC, the value of the PISA test in the province increases, as it is one of the last remaining objective measures of high school student success in BC. Overall, Canada performs relatively well on PISA tests (Allison, 2022a), and historically, BC has been a strong performer relative to other provinces. However, BC's PISA test scores are steadily declining and in 2022, the most recent year of data, BC's math scores fell below the Canadian average (OECD, 2023).[2]

This paper looks at PISA results in the years 2003, 2012, and 2022 to offer an analysis of student performance over two decades. However, it is critical to note that PISA scores both on average in Canada, and in BC specifically, declined before students were hit with COVID-19 school closures. From 2006 to 2018, Canada's PISA reading score declined by seven points, PISA science score declined by 17 points, and PISA math score declined by 15 points. Over the same period, BC's PISA reading score declined by 17 points, PISA science score declined by 22 points, and PISA math score declined by 18 points. BC's decline in PISA math scores from 2003 to 2018 fell 34 points, which was the third-worst decline in Canada—predating the pandemic (Allison, 2022b).

2 BC's math scores fell below the Canadian average by one point.

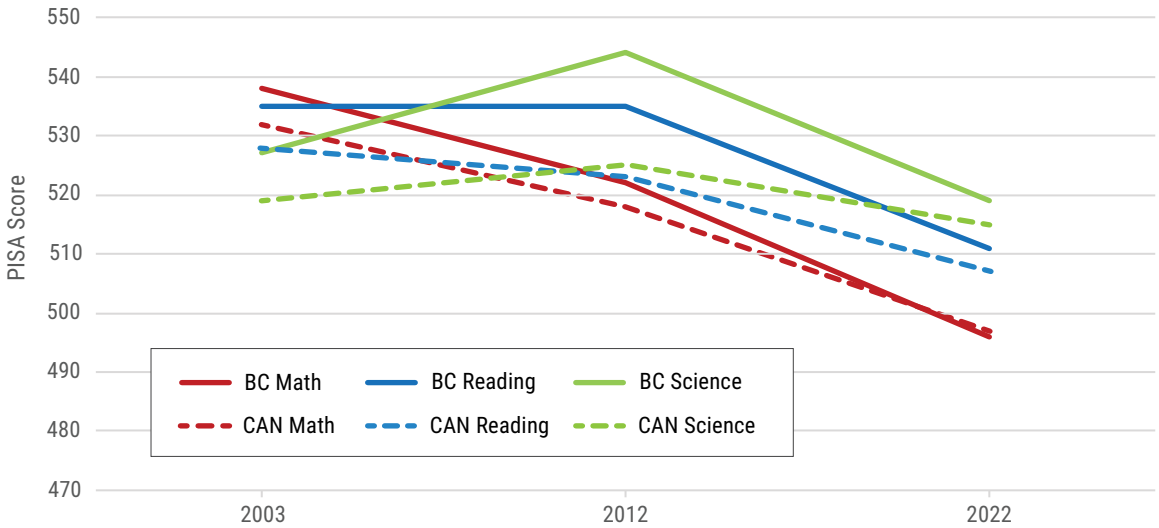
As shown in table 1 and figure 1, in 2003—just two decades ago—BC outperformed the Canadian average in math, reading, and science. Over the next two decades, BC experienced a steady decline in math scores, leading up to the most recent year of PISA data, 2022, when the province fell below the Canadian average. The decline in PISA test scores was consistent over this period across the provinces, lowering the national average.

Table 1: PISA Overall Results—BC vs. Canadian Average

		2003	2012	2022
BC	Math	538	522	496
	Reading	535	535	511
	Science	527	544	519
CAN	Math	532	518	497
	Reading	528	523	507
	Science	519	525	515

Source: OECD, 2022.

Figure 1: PISA Results in Math, Reading, and Science—BC vs. Canadian Average



Source: OECD, 2022.

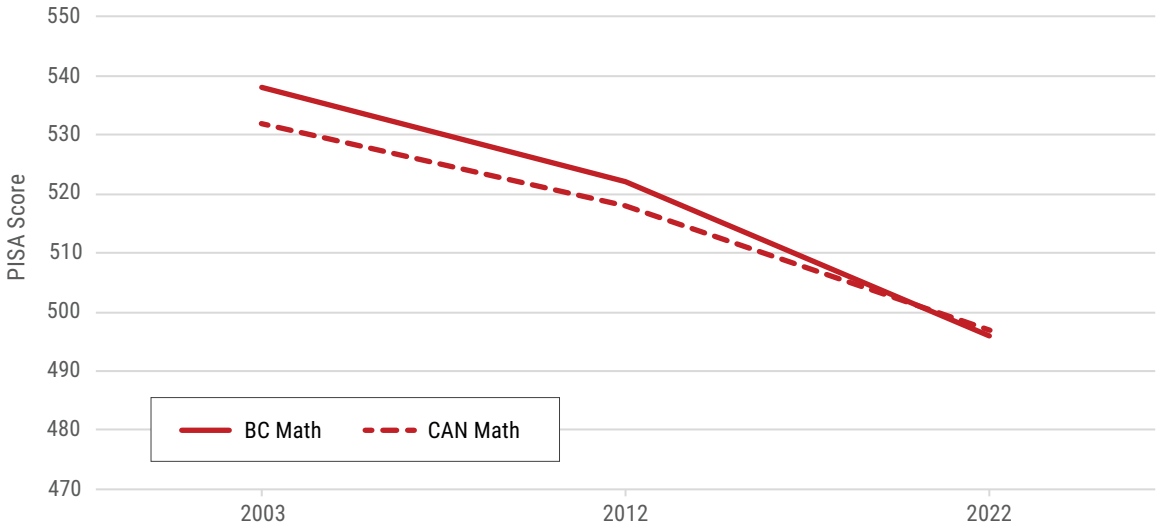
Table 2 and figure 2 look at BC's PISA math scores versus the Canadian average. BC's PISA math scores dropped from 538 in 2003 to 496 in 2022, a drop of 42 points. PISA characterizes a 20-point drop as one year of lost learning. In other words, in just two decades, BC 15-year-olds have fallen behind by about two years of lost learning.

Table 2: PISA Math Results—BC vs. Canadian Average

		2003	2012	2022
BC	Math	538	522	496
CAN	Math	532	518	497

Source: OECD, 2022.

Figure 2: PISA Math Results—BC vs. Canadian Average



Source: OECD, 2022.

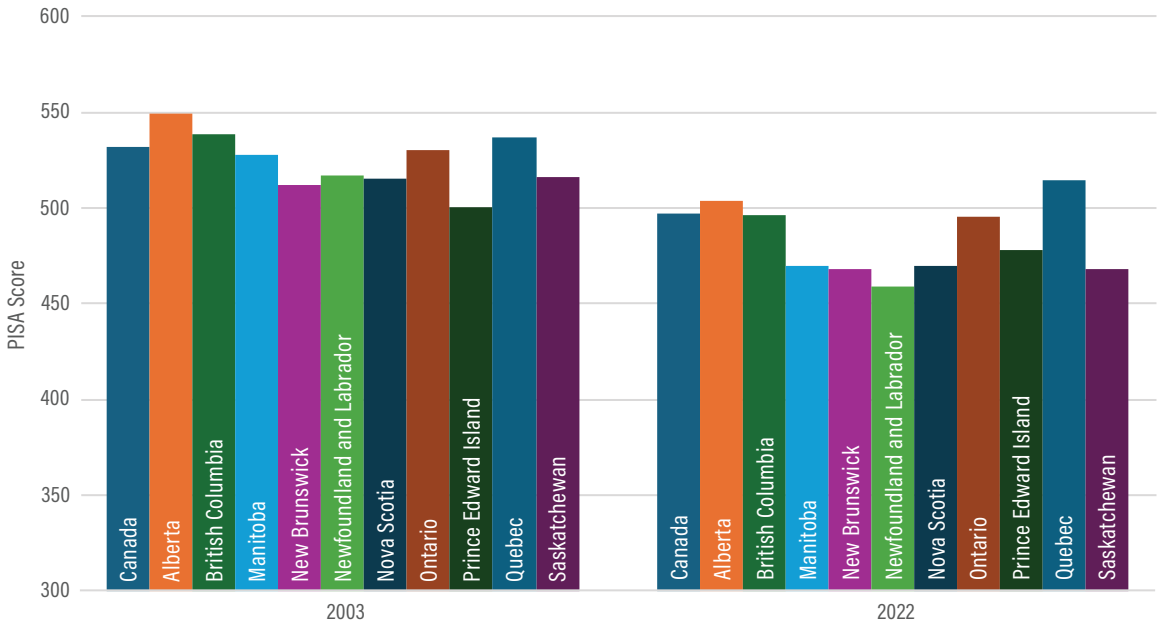
In 2003, BC was the second-strongest performer in math, after Alberta. In 2022, Quebec took the top Canadian spot, while BC fell below the Canadian average, outperformed by Alberta, Quebec, and only one point ahead of Ontario, which BC led by eight points in 2003. Table 3 and figure 3 detail this decline.

Table 3: PISA Math Results—All Provinces and Canadian Average

	2003	2022
Canada	532	497
Alberta	549	504
British Columbia	538	496
Manitoba	528	470
New Brunswick	512	468
Newfoundland and Labrador	517	459
Nova Scotia	515	470
Ontario	530	495
Prince Edward Island	500	478
Quebec	537	514
Saskatchewan	516	468

Source: OECD, 2022.

Figure 3: PISA Math Results—All Provinces and Canadian Average



Source: OECD, 2022.

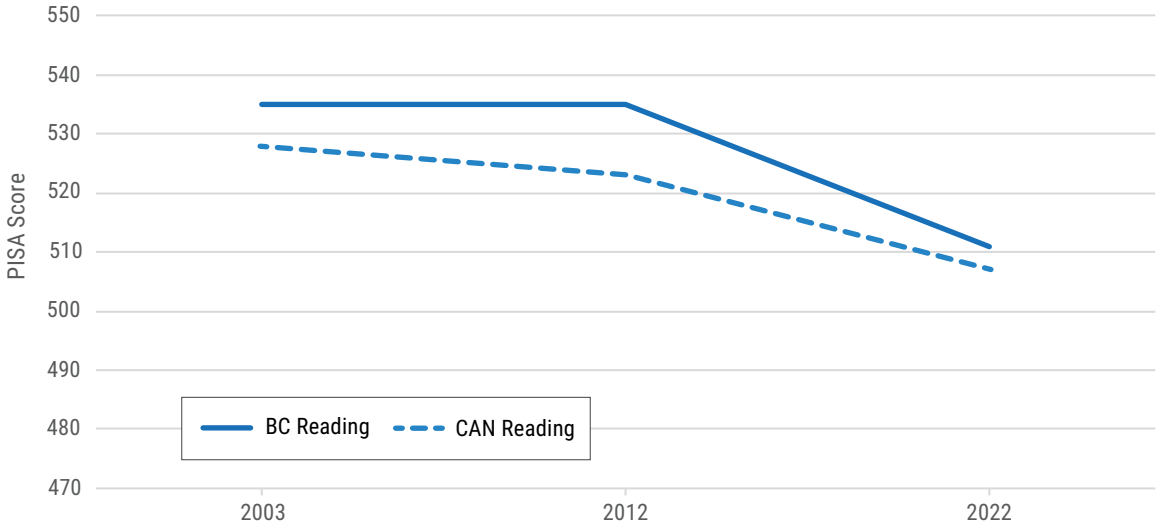
In PISA reading scores, as shown in table 4 and figure 4, BC exceeded the Canadian average in 2003, 2012, and in 2022, but the gap between the Canadian average score and the BC score narrowed slightly. BC's reading scores dropped from 535 in 2003 to 511 in 2022. Per PISA's characterization of a 20-point drop representing about one year of lost learning, in about 20 years, BC 15-year-olds have fallen more than one year behind in reading skills.

Table 4: PISA Reading Results—BC vs. Canadian Average

		2003	2012	2022
BC	Reading	535	535	511
CAN	Reading	528	523	507

Source: OECD, 2022.

Figure 4: PISA Reading Results—BC vs. Canadian Average



Source: OECD, 2022.

In science, BC's 2012 PISA scores increased versus 2003, with improvement looking promising, but by 2022, these gains were eliminated and the results dropped below the 2003 scores, resulting in an overall decline over these two decades.

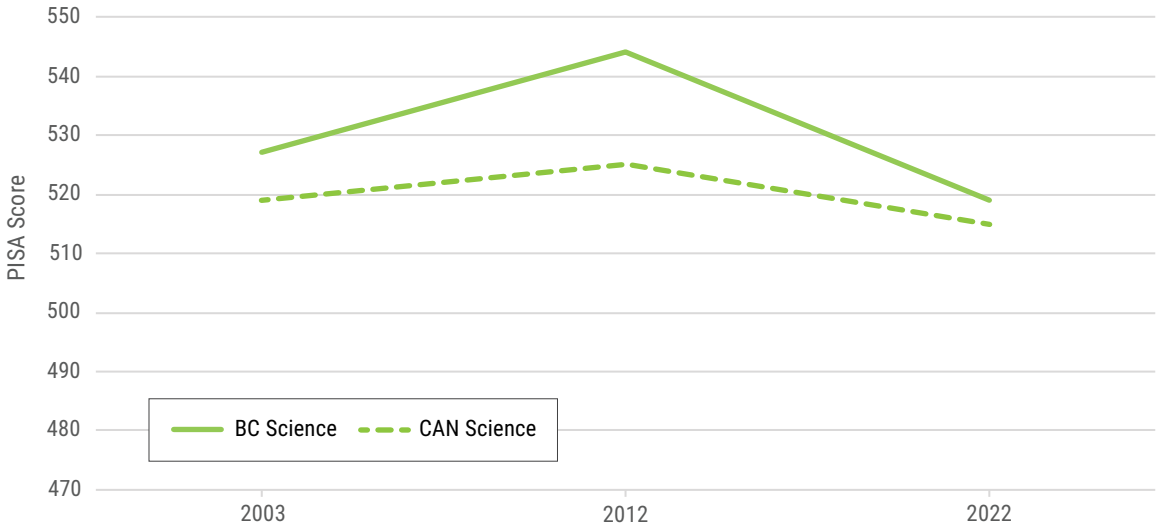
In science, as shown in figure 5 and table 5, BC exceeds the Canadian average in 2003, 2012, and 2022. But like the trend in reading scores, the gap narrows overall from 2003 to 2022. In 2012, BC was 19 points ahead of the Canadian average in PISA science scores. Ten years later in 2022, BC exceeded the Canadian average by only four points. The improvements BC students made from 2003 to 2012 in PISA science scores were lost by 2022.

Table 5: PISA Science Results—BC vs. Canadian Average

		2003	2012	2022
BC	Science	527	544	519
CAN	Science	519	525	515

Source: OECD, 2022.

Figure 5: PISA Science Results—BC vs. Canadian Average



Source: OECD, 2022.

In summary, BC's student performance has declined, both overall in the province and relative to the Canadian average. BC's PISA test scores in math are the most concerning, as BC has fallen below the Canadian average. BC's strong performance on the national stage has been diminished, and BC PISA test scores have declined across the board.

Provincewide Assessment Scores

BC secondary student scores on provincewide assessments—for what they are worth—complement the PISA test results.

In grade 10, BC conducts a literacy and numeracy assessment, and in grade 12, another literacy assessment. These assessments do not test for specific course content knowledge, as the previously mandatory course-based exams in grade 10 and 12 once did. Students are not required to pass or even complete these assessments—rather, they need to fill them out to some extent, to satisfy the "requirement" to graduate. As noted, despite this so-called requirement, participation in these student assessments is low.

Comparing the 2021/22 BC grade 10 literacy assessment results with the 2015/16 English/Language Arts exams, proficiency on the 2021/22 grade 10 literacy assessment was 4.1 percentage points lower than the 2015/16 exams (MacPherson and Emes, 2024). About three quarters of grade 10 students were proficient in literacy in 2021/22.

On the grade 12 literacy assessments in 2021/22, proficiency improved by 2.0 percentage points versus the 2015/16 English/Language Arts exams. Eight in 10 grade 12 students are considered proficient in literacy.

The BC student numeracy assessment in grade 10 is not a math course-based exam as was the previous mandatory exam for grade 10 students. Rather, this is a broad assessment of numeracy skills. In 2015/16, six in 10 of BC grade 10 students were proficient in math. In 2021/22, less than half of BC grade 10 students are proficient in numeracy.

These results must be taken with skepticism because as noted, fewer students are writing these tests, which makes their average results less reliable. Still, the trends in these assessment scores are similar to the PISA test results.

Conclusion

The British Columbia government has changed provincewide student testing in high schools so dramatically that the province no longer produces quality student assessment data. As such, the Fraser Institute is no longer able to produce the *Report Card on British Columbia Secondary Schools*, which has been in publication since 1998. This comes at a time when BC high school student achievement has declined significantly, as illustrated by student test results in both the international PISA test of 15-year-olds and BC's provincewide student assessments. In both cases, student success in the core subjects has declined, especially in math, with a downward trend since 2003. The result of the province weakening its testing regime to the point that the Fraser Institute can no longer produce its secondary school report card, is that parents of BC high school students no longer have a clear idea of how their children are doing in school, by fair and objective measure, and teachers, school administrators, and policymakers no longer have quality data to guide policy decisions and school improvement. This will remain the case unless the provincial government reverses course on its changes to high school student testing.

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About the Author

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