

TESTING CANADIAN K-12 STUDENTS

Regional Variability, Room for Improvement

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Testing Canadian K-12 Students— Regional Variability, Room for Improvement

A Cross-Canada Comparison of K-12 Provincial Assessment Programs

By Peter Cowley and Paige MacPherson

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Executive Summary

Provincial assessment programs are a facet of every K-12 education system in Canada, except in Saskatchewan. Each province has evolved its own unique system of student testing, some of which are more extensive and detailed than others. These student assessment programs are generally referred to (though not always accurately) as standardized tests. Uniform assessment allowing for external comparison, not to be confused with classroom testing administered by teachers, serves as an important tool for both improving individual student achievement and improving education systems overall. When province-wide student assessment data is made transparent for all stakeholders, it can serve as a vital tool for enabling school-by-school comparison, facilitating improvements. At its core, uniform assessment should provide fair, objective measurement of student achievement, testing all students at the same level with the same material.

An analysis of each province's provincial testing system reveals regional variability when it comes to whether all students are tested; what level of significance or consequence these tests carry for student test-takers—to what extent the tests affect grades or graduation—; at which grade level(s) assessments are administered; and whether the results are made transparent at a student level and school- and/or district-level for all education stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers and the tax-paying public.

Some provinces, such as Alberta, have longer-standing, more comprehensive systems of province-wide assessment. Improvements can be made but this province provides a solid framework from which other provincial governments can learn if they are looking to improve their student testing programs. The clear contrasting example is Saskatchewan, with no province-wide assessment programs whatsoever, but other provinces leave significant room for improvement, like Manitoba, where the government once sought to implement more provincial testing programs but a new government changed course, leaving the province with only grade 12 provincial exams.

Research demonstrates that uniform student testing allowing for external comparison is one key to improving student achievement—an important takeaway for Canadian provinces. Opposition to standardized testing has had a greater impact in some provinces, such as British Columbia, where provincial assessment programs have notably diminished over time, shifting from course-based exams with significant consequences for student test-takers, to literacy and numeracy assessments on which performance is inconsequential. In other provinces, however, provincial assessment programs are expanding, such as in Newfoundland & Labrador (though the starting point of the provincial testing program is weaker), where student assessments are being introduced in the elementary and middle grades.

In general, provincial assessments programs are an important pillar of many provincial education systems. In most cases, provincial assessment programs were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the longer-term impact of this disruption of student testing is yet to be seen. By incorporating more course-content-based exams, focusing on uniform testing that allows for external comparison, ensuring students have a stake in the tests they are taking, and ensuring testing is done throughout students' K-12 educational careers, provincial testing programs can be strengthened across Canada. Additionally, increasing the transparency of the results of these provincial assessments provides useful data at the individual, school, and provincial levels. Every province can learn from the best practices in other jurisdictions and strengthen their own provincial testing programs to both improve student achievement and provide useful data to improve the education system overall.

Introduction

Standardized testing—broadly, the process of having all students at the same level take the same test at the same time—is, to varying degrees, an important pillar of K-12 education systems across Canada. With the exception of Saskatchewan, every province administers centralized, province-wide assessment programs, often (not always accurately) called standardized tests. Testing all students on a fair, level playing field, provides critical information to students and parents, aiding students’ improvement. Province-wide testing provides important data about provincial education systems to policy makers and the public. Uniform achievement tests that allow for external comparison—not to be confused with classroom tests given by teachers and schools—are an important key to improving student achievement and facilitating school-level comparisons.

These testing programs have been a seemingly perpetual target of teachers’ unions in every region of Canada and, indeed in some provinces, such as British Columbia, province-wide testing has weakened. Yet in other provinces, such as Newfoundland & Labrador, provincial assessment programs are expanding. This study provides an overview of the importance of standardized testing and the types of provincial assessment conducted in Canada; and a summary of province-wide testing programs in every Canadian province. This summary assesses whether these programs administer the same test to all students, what level of significance the tests carry for students taking the tests, and whether the results are made transparent for all education stakeholders including the public. Ultimately, these parameters can help guide the improvement of province-wide student testing programs in Canada.

Defining standardized testing in Canada

Standardized testing programs in Canada broadly refer—in this study and in the popularized definition—to tests taken by all students at the same level within the same time frame, testing the same material (with some exceptions for some students). Provincial assessment programs in Canada seek to evaluate the academic achievement of students at selected stages in their school careers by means of standard tests completed under common conditions. These formal assessments are commonly, but not entirely accurately, referred to as standardized tests, and vary in form, grade level, significance and transparency from province to province. [1]

[1] The popular definition of standardized testing employed in this paper differs from the technical definition of standardized testing, which requires that test scores be standardized against a specific grade level or age population; that the results be reported on z-scaled scores (typically percentiles); and that the relative ranking of every student be compared to all other students who took the test. In Canada, standardized testing programs administered at the provincial level in K-12 schools do not meet this technical definition (Zwaagstra, 2022).

The Value of Standardized Testing

There is recognition by nearly every provincial government that province-wide programs of assessment are important, helping students to improve and the province to monitor its education system. If the tests are reliable and meaningful, they provide useful information, telling individual students, parents, and teachers if students are achieving the expected outcomes of the curriculum and can aid in plans for student improvement. Additionally, standardized testing provides critical data to school administrators and government policy makers on how well students are grasping the curriculum. When test data is made transparent, teachers and administrators can look at school-level data to determine best practices.

The quality of test data, both at the individual and school or provincial level, is improved by giving students a meaningful stake in their results, encouraging students to write standardized tests to the best of their abilities and giving an accurate picture of students' academic performance. Tests can carry more significance for student test-takers by having students' grades on the standardized tests count toward a percentage of their final course grade or making the successful passing of a uniform test required for students' graduation.

It is generally accepted that testing within the classroom is an integral part of day-to-day teaching and learning, enabling teachers to judge the effect of their instruction, make changes and promote the success of their students. In addition to classroom testing, there is legitimate value in measurements of student learning that cannot be generated within a single classroom, school, or district. Standardized assessment *with external comparisons* (as opposed to classroom-based assessment by teachers or schools) can improve student achievement and provide accountability to parents and taxpayers.

There are three types of standardized assessment with external comparisons that are administered in at least one Canadian province. These are [1] skills/achievement assessments; [2] curriculum-based external exit exam systems (provincial exams); [3] minimum competency testing. Note that these three assessments are used by school systems for different purposes.

[1] Skills assessments measure student development in basic skills and are most frequently administered in the elementary and middle years to measure reading, writing, and math skills. Results on these tests are not generally included in the students' grades but these assessments provide evidence of skills development to students, parents, teachers, and to all those involved in initiatives to improve schools.

[2] Curriculum-based exit exams are written by students usually at the end of grade 12. Success in these exams can may affect the likelihood that a student will be admitted to a post-secondary school. These are high stakes exams. As well, teachers use these annual exams to ensure that their lesson plans are properly aligned with these "final" examinations.

[3] Minimum competency exams are used to ensure that graduating students have acquired the basic skills and knowledge in a subject. In some jurisdictions, a student is required to pass one or more minimum competency exam in order to graduate from secondary school.

1 Skills/achievement assessments [2]

Skills/achievement assessments are typically a combination of reading, writing, math, and science within both elementary and secondary schools. These tests are currently in place in six provinces, including:

- Foundation Skills Assessments in British Columbia;
- Provincial Achievement Tests in Alberta;
- Grades 3, 6, and 9 Assessments in Ontario;
- Grades 4, 6, and 10 Provincial Assessments in New Brunswick for Anglophone students (and related assessments for Francophone students);
- Grades 3, 6, and 8 Provincial Assessments in Nova Scotia;
- Grades 3 and 6 Provincial Assessments in Prince Edward Island.

2 Curriculum-based external exit exam systems (provincial exams)

Provincial Exit Exams are assessments administered in the last one or two years of secondary school that end multi-year courses in a variety of academic disciplines. These exams in Canada include:

- Quebec’s Secondary IV (grade 10) and Secondary V (grade 11) exams;
- Alberta’s Diploma Exams (administered in grade 12, these tests account for 30% of students’ final course grade);
- Manitoba’s Grade 12 Provincial Tests in Language Arts and Mathematics (these tests account for 20% to 30% of students’ final course grades);
- Nova Scotia’s Grade 10 Exams in English and Mathematics (these exams account for 20% of students’ final course grades);
- Prince Edward Island’s Intermediate Mathematics Assessment (administered in grade 9, these tests account for 10% of students’ final course grades) and Secondary Mathematics Assessment (administered in grade 11, these tests account for 25% of students’ final course grades and replace the final exam);
- Newfoundland & Labrador’s Grade 12 Public Exams (these tests account for 40% of students’ final course grades).

[2] See tables 1–9 for sources of information in the following lists.

3 Minimum competency testing

Minimum competency testing measures the most basic level of skill that a student should know in a given content area. These exams in Canada include:

- the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (administered to grade 10 students, the passing of this test is a requirement of graduation, though twice-failed students can alternatively obtain a course credit) and Grade 9 Math Assessment;
- New Brunswick’s Grade 9 English Language Proficiency Assessment (passing this test is a requirement of graduation for Anglophone students);
- British Columbia’s Grade 10 Numeracy and Literacy Assessments and Grade 12 Literacy Assessments (however, only participating in these assessments—not passing them—is a requirement for graduation).

Ministries of education in Canada employ standardized assessments with external comparison for two broad purposes: [1] to enable ministries to provide accountability measures to parents, educators, taxpayers, and policy makers; and [2] to improve teaching and learning throughout the education system (Ben Jaafar and Volante, 2008). To look at one specific example, there are numerous advantages to curriculum-based external exit exam systems, hereafter referred to as CBEEES.

To summarize John Bishop’s analysis (1998): CBEEES enhance student achievement by “producing signals of student accomplishment that have real consequences for the student”. Further, CBEEES “define achievement *relative* to an external standard, not relative to other students in the classroom or the school”. Analysis of the optimal setting of educational standards by Robert Costrell, cited by Bishop, found that centralized standard-setting, at national or sub-national levels, resulted in higher standards, achievement, and social welfare than decentralized standard-setting by teachers or schools. Organized by discipline, CBEEES focus responsibility for students and teachers (Bishop, 1998: 1).

There are several examples of standardized assessments with external comparisons in Canada. In Alberta, for example, the Provincial Achievement Tests in grades 6 and 9 are administered to:

determine if students are learning what they are expected to learn, report to Albertans how well students have achieved provincial standards at given points in their schooling; and assist schools, authorities and the province in monitoring and improving student learning (Alberta Ministry of Education, no date, *Provincial Achievement Tests*).

In Ontario, the arms-length Education Quality and Accountability Office administers standardized student assessments:

EQAO provides results to each student who writes an assessment. Its personalized reports help support individual student learning. The agency provides schools and school boards with detailed reports about their students' achievement, as well as contextual, attitudinal, and behavioural information from questionnaires, in an interactive online reporting tool. These data are used to improve school programming and classroom instruction. EQAO also reports the results of the provincial assessments publicly. This helps keep the public education system accountable to taxpayers," (EQAO, no date, *About EQAO*).

In British Columbia, the stated purpose of the Foundation Skills Assessments is:

to provide system level information on student performance; to provide districts and schools with information on student performance, and to support decision-making (interventions, planning, resource allocation, curriculum, policy, research) (BC Ministry of Education, no date, *Foundation Skills Assessment*).

An empirical analysis conducted by Bergbauer, Hanushek and Woessman in 2018 drew data from over two million students in 59 countries observed across six waves of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests between 2000 and 2015. Bergbauer, Hanushek and Woessman looked at four types of assessments in use by the schools from which the student results data were drawn to determine the effects on PISA test scores in reading, math, and science. Of the four types—standardized testing with external comparison, standardized testing without external comparison, internal testing, and internal teacher monitoring as identified by respondent school principals—standardized testing with external comparison appeared to be the most successful in improving student results as measured by the PISA assessments. The study's results suggest that accountability systems that use standardized tests to compare outcomes across schools and students produce better student outcomes. They also produce greater achievement results than systems relying on localized or subjective information that cannot be readily compared across schools and classrooms: "expanding standardized testing with external comparisons improves student achievement, whereas internal testing does not" (Bergbauer, Hanushek and Woessman, 2018: 28). The study found that the effects of standardized testing with external comparisons were most pronounced in low-performing jurisdictions.

Provincial Student Testing across Canada

The state of province-wide testing across the country shows considerable variety, though most provinces administer province-wide programs of uniform assessment in elementary, middle, and high-school grades. [3] **Tables 1–9** outline the provincial assessment programs in each province. The parameters include which tests are administered in which grades, whether these tests are mandatory for all students, what level of significance the tests carry for student test-takers, and whether the tests results are made public. Where applicable, any significant changes to provincial testing programs over time have been briefly noted, as have any relevant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Appropriate assessment arrangements are made for Francophone and minority-language students in each province; below specific details are given about differences between Francophone and Anglophone assessments in Quebec’s and New Brunswick’s provincial assessment programs.

British Columbia

Though standardized testing has long been a pillar of British Columbia’s education system, the testing program has weakened considerably in recent years. Currently, British Columbia requires assessments, of varying significance, from grade 4 to grade 12. [4]

In the early 2000s, British Columbia had a slate of standardized assessments like Alberta. It included Foundation Skills Assessments (FSAs) measuring reading, writing, and math in grades 4, 7, and 10 as well as a range of roughly twenty curriculum-based external exit exams generally administered in grade 12. Since then, British Columbia’s testing regime has weakened to the point that there are now broader Foundation Skills Assessments in reading, writing, and math in grades 4 and 7, and literacy and numeracy assessments in grade 10. Grade 12 literacy assessments are being introduced. Though the completion of the grade 10 student assessments is mandatory for graduation, only about half of British Columbia’s grade 10 students completed them in 2019/20 (Emes and MacPherson, 2022).

Additionally, the BC Education Ministry has been lax about allowing parents to withdraw their children from the grade 4 and 7 Foundation Skills Assessments, in cases other than those where students are specifically exempted, sometimes compromising the generation of reliable school-level data (MacPherson, 2022). The BC Teachers’ Federation has advocated the elimination of FSAs since their introduction in 1999.

[3] In the territories, Yukon students subscribe to British Columbia’s assessment program, and both the Northwest Territories and Nunavut subscribe to Alberta’s assessment program.

[4] British Columbia did not administer a full slate of standardized testing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Provincial testing in British Columbia

| Grade level and name | Description | Significance for test-takers | Transparency of results |
|--|--|--|---|
| Grades 4 and 7; Foundation Skills Assessments (FSAs) | Assessments measure students' competency in reading, writing (literacy), and numeracy. All grades 4 and 7 students are required to participate. | FSAs do not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 10; Numeracy and Literacy Student Assessments | Assessments measure grade 10 students' competency in numeracy and literacy. All grade 10 students are required to participate. | Assessments do not contribute to students' final course grade, but participation is required for graduation. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 12; Literacy Student Assessment | Assessments measure grade 12 students' competency in reading and writing. Unless exempted, participation is mandatory for all grade 12 students. | Assessments do not contribute to students' final course grade, but participation is required for graduation. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |

Source: British Columbia Ministry of Education, no date, *Foundation Skills Assessment*.

Alberta

Alberta's standardized test program is among the most comprehensive in Canada, with provincial standardized tests in grade 6 and 9, and diploma exams in grade 12. [5]

In 2014, Alberta eliminated the grade 3 Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) focused on reading and math. The grade 3 PATs were replaced with broader, less focused Student Learning Assessments (SLAs) in grade 3, which are not mandatory and are administered digitally at the beginning of the school year. The SLAs do not contribute toward students' final course grades, results of these assessments are not made public, and they cannot be considered standardized tests. However, in 2019, the Alberta government announced that the Grade 3 Provincial Achievement Test would return "in the coming years"; this would return Alberta's standardized testing program to one of the most extensive in the country (French, 2019).

Prior to 2015, Alberta's Diploma Exams accounted for 50% of a student's final course grade. In 2015, this was changed to 30%. This change lowers the significance of these exams for students, though it remains significant.

[5] Alberta did not administer a full slate of standardized testing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2: Provincial testing in Alberta

| Grade level and name | Description | Significance for test-takers | Transparency of results |
|--|---|--|--|
| Grade 6 and 9: Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) | Tests assess whether students are achieving the expected outcomes of the Alberta curriculum. PATs are administered in English language arts, math, science, and social studies. All grade 6 and 9 students are expected to write. | PATs do not contribute toward final course grades. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 12: Diploma Exams | Diploma Exams evaluate students' competency in specific courses of the curriculum. They are administered in biology, chemistry, English language arts, Français, French language arts, mathematics, physics, and science. | Diploma exams account for 30% of a student's overall grade in that course. | Results are publicly reported by school and district for all schools except those operated by First Nations. |

Sources: Alberta Ministry of Education, no date, *Diploma Exams*; no date, *K to 12 Provincial Assessment* no date, *Provincial Achievement Tests*.

Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan currently administers no standardized tests to all students in a course or grade. Provincial exams are only administered to grade 12 students who are taught by non-accredited teachers in these courses, home-schooled students, and adults seeking course accreditation. [6] These tests are not required of all students and cannot be considered standardized tests. When administered, they are in English language arts, biology, chemistry, physics, workplace apprenticeship mathematics, foundations of mathematics, and pre-calculus. For students required to participate, the Grade 12 Provincial Exams account for 40% of students' final course grade. Saskatchewan's lack of any uniform achievement assessment sets the province apart from the rest of the country.

Manitoba

Despite past plans to implement a more complete program of testing, Manitoba only administers graduation exams in grade 12 and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, these grade 12 tests were halted for several semesters.

[6] During the COVID-19 pandemic, accreditation was granted to all teachers in Saskatchewan, making Grade 12 Provincial Exams optional even for students with non-accredited teachers during this time.

Table 3: Provincial testing in Manitoba

| Grade level and name | Description | Significance for test-takers | Transparency of results |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grade 12: Provincial Tests in Language Arts and Mathematics | Provincial Tests are administered in English language arts; Français langue première, langue et communication; Français langue seconde—Immersion langue et communication. In addition, final exams are administered in applied mathematics, essential mathematics, and pre-calculus mathematics. These exams are based on course content and assess if students are achieving the expected outcomes of the provincial curriculum. | Provincial Tests count toward 30% of students' final course grades in language arts, applied mathematics and pre-calculus mathematics, and 20% of students' final course grade for essential mathematics. | District-level results are made public. |

Source: Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, no date, *Assessment and Evaluation*.

In 1995, the government of Manitoba had plans to implement a more comprehensive slate of standardized tests in mathematics, English or French language arts, science, and social studies in grades 3, 6, 9, and 12. The Progressive Conservative government of the time began introducing these exams in mathematics and English Language Arts. However, these exams—and plans for additional tests—were eliminated in 1999 by the newly elected NDP government, which abolished the standardized exams in grades 3, 6, and 9 (Levin, 2005).

Ontario

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), an organization arms-length from the provincial government, oversees all aspects of K-12 province-wide testing in Ontario. Ontario's system of standardized testing remains comprehensive compared to other provinces.

In 2021, the Ontario government removed streaming from its math curriculum. Students prior to this year could choose to take either an academic or an applied math course, and their grade 9 mathematics assessment would match the course in which they enrolled. Beginning in the 2021/22 school year, EQAO shifted the grade 9 mathematics assessment online, and based it on the new Ontario math curriculum, reflecting the change. The shift to online testing may be rolled out further by the Ontario government and EQAO office.

Table 4: Provincial testing in Ontario

| Grade level and name | Description | Significance for test-takers | Transparency of results |
|---|---|--|---|
| Grade 3: Reading, Writing and Math Assessment, Primary Division | This standards-referenced student assessment measures students' competency in reading, writing, and math based on the expectations of the Ontario curriculum. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 6: Reading, Writing and Math Assessment, Junior Division | This standards-referenced student assessment measures students' competency in reading, writing, and math based on the expectations of the Ontario curriculum. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 9: Assessment of Mathematics | Assessment measures students' competency, based on the expectations of the Ontario curriculum by the end of a grade 9 math course. | Teachers and schools can choose to use the results of this assessment to count toward a students' final grade, but there is no requirement to do so. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 10: Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test | The Literacy Test measures whether students are meeting the minimum standard for literacy by the end of grade 9. | Students must pass this literacy test to graduate from high school. [1] Students are permitted to re-write the test or, if failed twice, pass a literacy course. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |

Note: [1] The graduation requirement for passing the literacy test was waived during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ontario did not administer a full slate of student exams during the pandemic.

Sources: EQAO, no date, *Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Primary Division (Grades 1–3)*; no date, *Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Junior Division (Grades 4–6)*; no date, *Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics Framework*; no date, *Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) Framework*.

Quebec

In Quebec the province-wide standardized tests overseen by the Ministry of Education are called the “épreuves uniques”. These are exit exams in a variety of courses administered in grade 10 (Secondary IV) and grade 11 (Secondary V), the last two years of high school. [7] Additionally, all grade 6 students are required to write exams in English or French Language Arts and Mathematics. Quebec’s province-wide assessment is long-standing and stable. Within the list of “unique exams” the ministry occasionally changes the cohort of courses that will be examined.

[7] In Quebec, secondary school commences in grade 11, with the exception of a select few English independent schools, and students move on to Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEP), typically a two-year college program bridging the gap between high school and university. This paper assesses the standardized tests in Quebec from Kindergarten to grade 11 (Secondary V) schools and does not account for CEGEP programs.

Table 5: Provincial testing in Quebec

| Grade level and name | Description | Significance for test-takers | Transparency of results |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Grade 4: Elementary 4 Exams | Exam is administered in French language arts (Français, langue d'enseignement). Only French students write this exam. | Exams count toward 20% of students' final course grades. [1] | Results are not made public. |
| Grade 6: Elementary 6 Exams | Exams measure students' competency in English language arts for English students, French language arts (Français, langue d'enseignement) for French students, and mathematics for all students. [2] All grade 6 students in Quebec are required to write. | Exams count toward 20% of students' final course grades. | Results are not made public. |
| Grade 9: Secondary II Exam | Exams are administered in Français, langue d'enseignement. Only French students write this exam. | Students' grade on the exam counts toward 20% of that student's final course grade. | Results are not made public. |
| Grade 10: Secondary IV Exams | Exams measure students' competency, based on curriculum expectations, in mathematics, science and technology, and applied science and technology. An additional Secondary IV exam on the history of Quebec and Canada will be added in 2023. All grade 10 students are required to write. | Students' grade on the exam counts toward 50% of that student's final course grade. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 11: Secondary V Exams | Exams measure students' competency, based on curriculum expectations, in English language arts, French as a second language (core and enriched programs), Français, langue d'enseignement (in French only), English as a second language (core and enriched programs). All grade 11 students are required to write. | Students' grade on the exam counts toward 50% of that student's final course grade. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |

Notes: [1] Quebec did not administer a full slate of student assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Grades 4 and 6 Elementary Exams and Grade 9 Secondary II Exams typically count toward 20% of students' final course grades, but that was reduced to 10% during the 2021/22 school year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. [2] Correspondence via e-mail with Hélène Paradis, Conseillère stratégique, Direction de la sanction des études, Québec Ministère de l'Éducation, March 9, 2022.

Sources: Québec Ministère de l'Éducation, no date, *Guide à l'intention des parents: Épreuves obligatoires: Français, langue d'enseignement, 2^e année du secondaire*; no date, *Guide à l'intention des parents: Épreuves obligatoires: Français, langue d'enseignement, 4^e année du primaire*; no date, *Guide à l'intention des parents: Épreuve unique: Français, langue d'enseignement, 5^e année du secondaire*; no date, *Guide à l'intention des parents: Épreuves obligatoires: Français, langue d'enseignement, 6^e année du primaire*; no date, *Guide for Parents: Compulsory examination: Mathematics Elementary 6*; no date, *Guide for Parents: Information about the compulsory Elementary 6 English Language Arts examination*; no date, *Guide for Parents: Uniform Examination: English Language Arts, Secondary V*; no date, *Guide for Parents: Uniform Examination: History of Québec and Canada, Secondary IV*.

New Brunswick

Standardized testing in the Atlantic provinces varies. New Brunswick is Canada's only officially bilingual province, which shapes its education system overall, and its programs of student assessment in that the French and English assessment requirements are different.

For testing of New Brunswick's Anglophone students, see table 6. These students are additionally offered a French Second Language Oral Proficiency Assessment, conducted for a random sample of students in grade 6 and grade 10 in alternating years. The province previously administered a Grade 2 reading assessment for Anglophone students, which was a provincial assessment of literacy. This assessment was eliminated and may be replaced.

Francophone students

Francophone students in New Brunswick complete a different set of assessments:

- Grade 2 Reading Assessment;
- Grade 3 Reading Assessment and Grade 3 Math Assessment;
- Grade 4 Writing Assessment;
- Grade 6 Math Assessment;
- Grade 7 Reading and Writing Assessment;
- Grade 8 Math Assessment and Grade 8 Science Assessment.

None of the above assessments for Francophone students contribute to students' final grades, report cards, graduation, or academic progression. All Francophone students, other than those officially exempted, are required to take these assessments. The New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is currently field-testing an assessment with grade 10 Francophone students called the *test de compétence en lecture et écriture* (TCLÉ), a reading and writing proficiency assessment. The department plans to make this assessment a graduation requirement. Students would be required to pass the test to graduate, and students will be permitted to re-take the test in grades 11 and 12 if needed.

For Francophone student assessments, individual student results are given to parents in a report, while schools receive school-level data, districts receive district-level data, and aggregate provincial data are made public. [8]

New Brunswick's only test with strong significance for students is the Grade 9 English Language Proficiency Assessment, which is only administered to Anglophone students.

[8] Correspondence via e-mail with Inga Boehler, Director, Assessment, Analysis and Design Services, New Brunswick Education and Early Childhood Development; Michel A. LeBlanc, Direction de la mesure et de l'évaluation, Nouveau Brunswick Ministère de l'Éducation et du Développement de la petite enfance, March 4, 2022.

Table 6: Provincial testing in New Brunswick (Anglophone students)

| Grade level and name | Description | Significance for test-takers | Transparency of results |
|--|---|---|---|
| Grade 4: Provincial Assessment | Assessments measure students' competency in English reading for all Anglophone students, French reading for French Immersion students, and math and science for both English and French Immersion students. [1] All grade 4 students are required to write. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 6: Provincial Assessment | Assessments measure students' competency in English reading for all Anglophone students, French reading for post-Intensive French and Immersion students, and math and science offered in English and French. All grade 6 students are required to write. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 9: English Language Proficiency Assessment | Assessment measures students' reading comprehension skills based on curriculum expectations by the end of grade 8. Students who do not pass this assessment in grade 9 must re-write it in grades 11 and 12. All students are required to write. | Students must pass this assessment to graduate high school. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |
| Grade 10: Provincial Assessment | Assessments measure students' competency in French reading, math, and science, with a short survey on literacy. All New Brunswick students are required to write. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school and district. |

Note: [1] Some, but not all, provincial assessments in New Brunswick were halted during the COVID-19 pandemic: the math and science portion of the Grades 4, 6, and 10 Provincial Assessments was removed.

Sources: New Brunswick Education and Early Childhood Development, no date, *Assessment and Evaluation – Anglophone Sector*; no date, *Information Bulletin for Parents and Guardians: Grade 4 Provincial Assessment*; no date, *Information Bulletin for Parents and Guardians: Grade 6 Provincial Assessment*; no date, *English Language Proficiency Assessment and Reassessment: Test Specifications*; no date, *Information Bulletin for Parents and Guardians: Grade 10 Provincial Assessment*.

Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia administers student assessments in grades 3, 6, and 8 and course-based student exams with greater significance for test-takers in grade 10. [9] Though Nova Scotia administers a slate of assessments throughout the Primary-12 years, the assessments carrying any significance for test-takers occur only in grade 10.

Table 7: Provincial testing in Nova Scotia

| Grade level and name | Description | Significance for test-takers | Transparency of results |
|---|---|---|--|
| Grade 3: Literacy and Mathematics Assessment | Assessment is written by all grade 3 English students in Nova Scotia, and measures their competency in reading, writing and math. French Immersion students write only the mathematics portion. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school. |
| Grade 6: Reading, Writing, and Mathematics Assessment | Assessment is written by all grade 6 English students, and measures competency in reading, writing and math based on the expectations of the grade 5 curriculum. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school. |
| Grade 8: Reading, Writing and Mathematics Assessment | Assessment measures competency in reading, writing, and math based on the expectations of the grade 8 curriculum. [1] All grade 8 English students are expected to write. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school. |
| Grade 10: Examinations in English 10 and Math 10 | Examinations measure students' competency in English and math based on the expectations of grade 10 curriculum. All grade 10 students are expected to write. | These exam results contribute 20% to students' final course grade. | Results are publicly reported by school. |

Note: [1] In grades 3, 6, and 8, Francophone students in Nova Scotia write French versions equivalent to the assessments written by English students.

Sources: Nova Scotia Education and Early Childhood Development, no date, *Literacy and Mathematics/Mathématiques in Grade 3 Questions*; no date, *Nova Scotia Assessments*; no date, *Nova Scotia Examinations*; no date, *Reading, Writing, and Mathematics/Mathématiques in Grade 6 Questions*; no date, *Reading, Writing, and Mathematics/Mathématiques in Grade 8 Questions*.

[9] Nova Scotia cancelled all provincial assessments and exams during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prince Edward Island

Prince Edward Island administers student assessments in literacy and mathematics in grades 3 and 6, and progressively more significant assessments in grades 9 and 12. [10]

Table 8: Provincial testing in Prince Edward Island

| Grade Level and Name | Description | Significance for test-takers | Transparency of results |
|---|---|--|--|
| Grade 3: Primary Literacy Assessment and Primary Mathematics Assessment | Assessments measure students' competency in literacy and mathematics by the end of grade 3, based on curriculum expectations. All grade 3 students are expected to participate. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. | Results are publicly reported by school. |
| Grade 6: Elementary Literacy Assessment and Elementary Mathematics Assessment | Assessments measure students' competency in literacy and mathematics by the end of grade 6, based on curriculum expectations. French Immersion students participate in the Literacy Assessment at the end of grade 5. All grade 6 students are expected to participate, though some exemptions are granted. | Assessment does not contribute to students' final grades or report cards. [1] | Results are publicly reported by school. |
| Grade 9: Intermediate Mathematics Assessment | Assessments measure students' competency in mathematics, based on curriculum expectations, at the end of grade 9. All grade 9 students are expected to participate, excluding those exempted. | The assessment is worth 10% of students' final course grade. | Results are publicly reported by school. |
| Grade 11: Secondary Mathematics Assessment | Assessment measures students' competency in math at the end of the semester (January and June) for grade 11 students enrolled in specific math courses. | The assessment is worth 25% of students' final course grade and replaces the final exam. | Results are publicly reported by school. |

Note: [1] Correspondence via e-mail with Dr. Tamara Hubley-Little, Director of English Education, Programs and Services, Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, Government of Prince Edward Island, March 7, 2022.

Sources: Prince Edward Island Education and Lifelong Learning, no date, *Elementary Literacy Assessment*; no date, *Elementary Mathematics Assessment*; no date, *Intermediate Mathematics Assessment*; no date, *Primary Literacy Assessment*; no date, *Provincial Assessments*.

[10] Prince Edward Island suspended its Student Assessment program during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government of Prince Edward Island commissioned an external review of its then-decade-old standardized testing program which, like programs in other provinces, had been criticized by the teachers' union. In 2019, the review concluded that the province's standardized testing program should continue in its current form (with some minor tweaks) but recommended increasing public transparency of all aspects of the testing program, and recommended the province reintroduce a literacy assessment in grade 9 or 10 (*CBC News*, 2019).

Newfoundland & Labrador

Newfoundland & Labrador administers student exams in grade 12, and the grades on these exams count toward a substantial 40% of students' final course grade. [11] Further, Newfoundland & Labrador is in the process of expanding its student assessment program to include elementary and middle school grades—a positive step forward planned for 2022. However, the initial plans for this program include administering mathematics and reading assessments in alternating years, which makes it more difficult to establish a quality time line of reliable student performance data. Administering both reading and mathematics assessments each year in grades 3, 6, and 9 could aid with student improvement and provide clearer data.

Table 9: Provincial testing in Newfoundland & Labrador

| Grade Level and Name | Description | Significance for test-takers | Transparency of results |
|------------------------|---|---|--|
| Grade 12: Public Exams | Exit exams in grade 12 measure students' competency in curriculum outcomes in biology, chemistry, earth systems, English, Français, mathematics (advanced and academic), physics, and social studies. These exams are written by all grade 12 students. | Students' grades on these exams count toward 40% of students' final course grade. | Results are made public at the provincial, district and school levels. [1] |

Note: 1] Prior to 2018/19. Correspondence via e-mail with Jennifer Smith, Director of Research, Newfoundland & Labrador Department of Education, March 8, 2022.

Source: Newfoundland & Labrador Ministry of Education (no date), *Public Exam Information*.

[11] Newfoundland & Labrador's Grade 12 Public Exams were canceled for the 2019/20, 2020/21, and 2021/22 school years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and are currently under significant review by the province, which is considering alternative assessments. (Correspondence via e-mail with Jennifer Smith, Director of Research, Newfoundland & Labrador Department of Education, March 15, 2022.)

Room for Improvement

Province-wide assessment programs across Canada show room for improvement in several ways. In general, the aim should be to strengthen provincial testing programs by offering regular, uniform, common testing at multiple grade levels. Making the results of these tests transparent to individual students and, at school and district levels, to the public, allows for meaningful educational improvements to be made. Increasing the significance of these assessments for the students writing the tests—making them count toward a greater percentage of final grades—may produce more meaningful results.

In British Columbia, for example, returning to course-based exit exams that affect students' grades would give more meaningful results than retaining minimum-competency literacy and numeracy assessments. In Saskatchewan, a universal program of common assessments with school- and district-level comparisons would bring the province into line with other jurisdictions. In Manitoba, the lack of uniform student assessment in the elementary and middle school years sets it, too, apart from much of the country. Implementing even a scaled-down testing program in these years would provide students and families with valuable information and provide the provincial government with valuable data. Quebec could improve the transparency of its standardized testing program by publishing the results of the Grade 6 Elementary Exams. In Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, introducing more exams based on course content with increased significance for students' grades could bring these provinces in line with neighbouring Prince Edward Island.

Provincial governments can learn from the best practices in other jurisdictions to improve their own provincial testing programs. Alberta's long-standing, relatively comprehensive assessment program may serve as a model for other provinces looking to improve their student testing programs.

Conclusion

Each province has evolved its own unique system of student testing, some of which are more extensive and detailed than others. Saskatchewan is a clear outlier in that no system of province-wide testing exists. Research demonstrates that standardized testing with external comparison is an important key to improving student achievement. Provincial assessments programs are holding as an important pillar of many provincial education systems. In many cases, governments halted standardized testing during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the longer-term impact of this disruption on testing programs are yet to be seen. While some provinces are weakening their standardized testing, others are expanding their programs. In every province, there is opportunity to improve provincial testing, by incorporating more exams based on course content, focusing on uniform testing with external comparison, increasing the significance for student test-takers, and ensuring testing is done throughout students' K-12 educational careers. Every province can learn from the best practices in other jurisdictions and strengthen their own provincial testing programs to both improve student achievement and provide useful data to improve the education system overall.

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