

# FSA Examiner

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## What Does Fraser Institute's Report Card Really Tell Us About School Quality?

Fraser Institute's latest Report Card on British Columbia's Secondary Schools claims that "Parents can use the Report Card's indicator values, ratings, and rankings to compare schools when they choose an education provider for their children." There are two assumptions here. One is that most parents *do* have a choice which schools they send their children to and the other is that rankings are meaningful indicators of school quality. Even though the Fraser Institute has been publishing their report card on schools for many years now, they have failed to provide any empirical evidence that their rankings helped parents make school selections and that their school rankings are in fact indicators of quality of education.

Many aspects of schooling are important indicators of school quality but one that most people agree on is the quality of instruction in classrooms. There is extensive research on effective instructional practices and characteristics of effective teachers. For example, effective teachers plan their teaching carefully, use appropriate materials, make goals clear to students, check student work regularly, and teach material again if students have trouble. The Fraser Institute has no empirical evidence to suggest that schools with higher scores have higher concentration of such teachers. Their schools rankings, however, do tell us a lot about the student backgrounds.

Let's take a look at the relationship between the Vancouver Public School rankings and the parental education levels based on data from the Fraser Institute's own report. Parental education level is one of the indicators of the socio-economic status of the children attending the school. As you can see in the graph below, the relationship between parental education level and the school rank is very strongly associated (correlation 0.924). The higher the average parental education levels

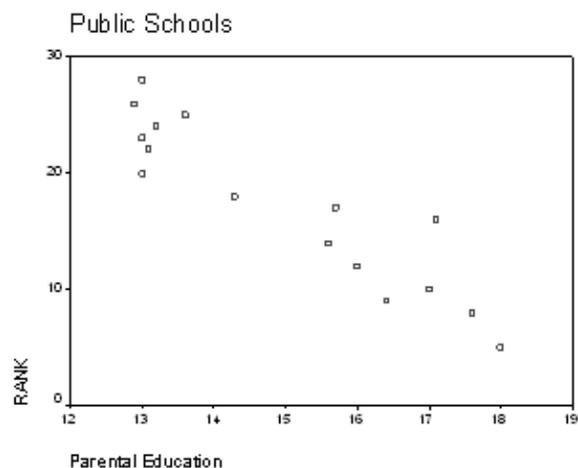
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the higher the school rank. Such a strong relationship between socio-economic status and the ranking demonstrates that the rankings are strong indicators of socio-economic status, but not necessarily good indicators of quality of education in these schools. In fact, this means that school rankings can be predicted with higher than 85% accuracy based solely on parental education levels.

What's problematic about the Fraser Institute's Report Card is *not* that they compile a set of indicators together to rank schools. What causes concern about their practice is the interpretations they make based on their own statistical manipulations. For example, in the most recent report, a list of schools that have shown "improvement" and those that are identified as "deteriorating" have been published. Unfortunately, one of the most important component of their rankings, the provincial assessment results, do not

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## FSA tests? Not my problem ... I don't teach Grade 4 or 7!

By Kerry Richardson

I have to admit, that was my attitude before I was assigned to teach a Grade 4 class a few years ago. In fact, I was happy not to have to think about it, and had never even looked at an FSA exam.

There are very good reasons why FSAs are every teacher's problem. In fact, they are every administrator's problem too, and it never fails to surprise me when I see how ardently many AOs embrace them. One would think they would recognize, and oppose the political manipulation that has been an integral part of the whole process.

I could write about a number of concerns about the tests themselves: they are not linked with our PLOs, the math skills required for the Grade 4 tests are everything BUT foundational, some students are truly damaged by their experiences with such testing, and so on. The Grade 10 FSAs have morphed into something else entirely, this year.

However, I would like to focus on the way the results are used to abuse public school teachers and public education in general.

Just think about this for a minute: if your FSA results improve, the results demonstrate that the Liberal agenda is working! Bigger classes, unlimited numbers of special needs students in your class, huge cuts in funding - they are working! Your tests results have proven it.

If your FSA results do not improve, the Fraser Institute is only too happy to start an exodus from one school to another by comparisons that are lent credibility, not only by the Province newspaper, but also by those administrators who treat the rankings with respect.

Public schools deserve to be lauded for their extraordinary efforts to keep students in school, for including and accommodating the widest variety of aptitudes, while

preparing the more academic students to go on to universities and technical schools. With FSA rankings, all of this is ignored and treated as meaningless - and if that isn't abusing the public education system, I don't know what is!

The misuse of the results is good reason to treat the FSAs with skepticism. Teachers are being manipulated by the results and we need to stand together and speak with a united voice.

The BCTF and the STA are working on ways to inform parents and the public about the misuse of FSAs, and there are things that you can do too. Support your Grades 4 and 7 teachers. Stand with them when they refuse to do practice tests or alter their instruction to teach to the tests. Keep yourself informed about FSAs and testing.

No matter what the results, no matter what grade you teach, FSAs can and will be used against you.

## A Parent's Right?

(Author's name withheld to protect the Innocent.)

Last year my daughter was in Grade 10 and, in spite of a medical condition that includes anxiety disorder, it was her school's expectation that she would write the Grade 10 FSA. I took the STA's *Unpermission form*, filled it out and gave it to my daughter to hand in.

Despite giving her my permission not to write, the administration in the school worked to pressure her to write. Despite their knowledge of her medical condition, she was forced to go to the basement room where the exam was to be held. The low ceilings and the large crowd increased her anxiety.

She got hold of a cell phone and called me. Luckily,

she was able to get one of the teachers to talk to me. I reiterated that I had given her permission to not write the test and I reminded the teacher of her medical condition. This led to an arrangement to send her back to the school, where she had to go face to face with an administrator who was determined to bully her into writing.

It seemed to me that the guidelines surrounding the FSAs allow parents to decide whether their child would write. What happened to my right to decide?

*Note:*

*"In instances where a parent withdraws a student from participation (e.g., via a letter to the school principal), the school concerned is obligated to mark that student as 'absent' and not as 'excused' on the student's answer forms."*

*From the ministry's Participation Guidelines  
www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment/fsa/04\_participation.pdf*

## What is success?

### *Musings and Provocative Questions from the Pro-D Chairperson*

By Mary Cooper

How does one ensure 'success for all students'? Does it mean that each student will be provided with the necessary opportunities and support to achieve his or her full potential? Does it mean that each student will be provided with a well-rounded, comprehensive education that will enable him or her to develop a broad set of skills and knowledge with which to become a successful adult? Well, according to J. Holloway (ASCD/Nov/03), success for students means raising the scores of all students on standardized tests in reading comprehension while at the same time narrowing the percentage point difference between students of different ethnicity. HmMMM..... Wellllll.....What do you think?

So, I suppose that we should examine some information about standardized tests. First, standardized tests are not 'news' and have been used in schools for many years. Also, they have **not** been without blemish. Deficiencies and problems with standardized tests are historical. Their construction, bias, reliability, validity, ability to reflect real differences among people, fairness, assumptions about how to measure particular abilities, and failure to provide useful information about how a student learns are just a few (see *What's Wrong With Standardized Tests* 'www.fairtest.org'). Traditionally, they have been implemented to provide information about individual student's levels of achievement in order to assess progress, and to determine whether the students are ready to move on to the next level, next unit, etc. As a secondary goal, they assist teachers in planning appropriately for particular students. Shouldn't this be our primary focus? Yet, as mentioned above, their value in this regard is marginal. Now, consider the idea of using standardized test scores as tools to measure student success on a large scale – school-wide, district-wide, province-wide..... HmMMM ..... Wellllll..... What do you think,?

So, back to the question – 'how does one ensure success for all students?' Should one take steps to raise the students' scores on standardized tests, and use this as data to demonstrate student success - school-wide, district-wide, province-wide? Perhaps, **practice tests** would be helpful! HmMMM... Wellllll..... What do you think?

NOTE -J. Holloway (ASCD/Nov/03) pointed out that, **fortunately**, many school districts have begun to pay more attention to test results and administrators are now using these data to plan professional development to improve classroom practice. He stated that using performance data allows educators (who?) to focus their valuable and limited professional development resources on the specific learning needs of students. HmMMM.... What do you think?

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lend themselves for examining school improvements over time due to a lack of strict comparability between assessments across subjects or across years.

I do believe in the possibility of improvement in schools, and certainly the role of assessment in such efforts. However, judgments cannot be made regarding improvement without valid evidence to support them. Assessments can indeed be used for school improvement but this is often impossible without meaningful interventions that support the needed change and provision of resources.



## What can we do with the FSA brochure?

By Sarb Lalli

It has been a few weeks now since the BCTF's latest brochure *Professional Concerns about the FSA* arrived in our schools. Teachers are probably wondering what we should do with the brochure.

Clearly, we have an obligation as professionals to make parents aware of our concerns with the FSA tests. Therefore, we need to hand out the brochures to parents; however, it is not that simple.

Here is some advice:

1. Educate and involve as many of your colleagues on staff so you are not alone.
2. Hand out the brochures to parents during parent/teacher meetings in the context of discussing their child's progress, at PAC meetings, or before or after school. Do not hand them out during the course of the instructional day.
3. Do not encourage them to, or discourage them from opting out of the FSA tests. Simply inform them of their rights and the process for opting out. Although some administrative officers may phone parents or visit their homes to convince them to include their children in the FSA testing, we should not do any of that.

4. If you have a students about whom you have particular concerns with respect to writing the FSA, but who are not identified as special needs or ESL students, it is completely appropriate for you to speak to their parents about the issue. If the parents share your concerns, they can approach the administrator about being excused from the test.

5. If parents ask questions, you should answer them factually by referring to the brochure. You and your colleagues should make sure that you have read the brochure thoroughly before handing it out. I suggest you have your own highlighted copy that you can quickly refer to if you are asked a question. Before handing the brochures out, you could role play questions and answers with your colleagues.

If they have questions that are not answered by the brochure, tell them that you will find out the answer, and get back to them.

If you run into any problems, just call the STA office.



Some links and resources on testing:

### [Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada](#)

This report was developed and endorsed by a broad collection of education organizations in Canada, including the Canadian School Boards Association, the Canadian Teachers' Federation and representatives of Provincial and Territorial Ministries and Departments of Education. Our own Barbara Holmes, Director of Research, Communication and Safe schools, was a member of the Working Group.

The document includes sections on Classroom Assessment, as well as Assessments Produced External to the Classroom. In the latter section, teachers (called "users" in the document) are advised to "[p]rovide students or, where applicable, their parents/guardians with information to help them decide whether to participate in the assessment when participation is optional."

You can read or print the document online at:  
<http://www.bctf.ca/education/assessment/FairStudentAssessment.pdf>

"Fairtest: The National Center for Fair and Open Testing" is an

American advocacy organization dedicated to exposing and reversing some of the worst excesses of the "No Child Left Behind" program. A plethora of links and resources are available at [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org)

*Testing, Motivation and Learning* is a publication produced by the UK organization, "Assessment Reform Group," and published by the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

*Passing the Test: The False Promises of Standardized Testing* is a new (2004) publication of the central office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and is edited by Marita Moll. [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca)