Reflective Paper: *Student Assessment and Accountability*

The main functions of student assessment are to inform on the teaching process and on the success of student learning. At the classroom level this is appropriate but when considered at the school, district or provincial level, student assessment has a far greater connotation. Since the development and widespread application of standardized assessments and international rankings, student assessment has taken teacher accountability to an entirely new level.

Teachers are, and of course they must be; held accountable for student learning. This should include ongoing feedback and communication with students and their parents around learning successes and challenges. Student learning data should be coming from a wide variety of assessment strategies, tools and scenarios. Teachers are responsible for interventions and supports for students and for modified or individual programming when required for diverse learning needs. School leaders are responsible for teacher success like superintendents are responsible for school success and graduation rates. Similar supports for teachers, as those that they offer their students; are required for ongoing improvement and professional development. This can also be said of school leaders. When accountability is discussed at higher and higher levels, student assessment takes on greater meaning and more critical value than what the average teacher is or generally needs to be concerned about. What needs to be a part of that discussion, is a conversation around the supports and structures in place that ensure teachers and school leaders are adequately equipped to meet these new measures of accountability.

Assessment. At the individual level we may have speech and language or sensory assessments completed to inform early learning interventions. Beyond this we have behavioral, cognitive and psychological assessments. At the classroom level we have formative and summative and at the district or provincial level we have high stakes standardized assessment.
What does it all mean? A simple Wikipedia search comes up with multiple references with educational assessment on top of health, nursing, psychiatric, psychological, risk, tax and vulnerability (Assessment, n.d.). “Educational assessment is the process of documenting, usually in measurable terms, knowledge, skill, attitudes, and beliefs. Assessment can focus on the individual learner, the learning community, the institution, or the educational system as a whole” (Educational assessment, n.d.). Where assessment and accountability connect at the highest levels, there is often a disconnect in terms of supports provided in order to meet lofty goals which are often simply stated as increased student achievement.

Accountability may be defined merely as answerability or blameworthiness. “In leadership roles, accountability is the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for actions, products, decisions, and policies” (Accountability, n.d.). As accountability measures change and expectations increase, what supports are in place so that this answerability can be legitimately asked? Leithwood and Earl (2000) outline five questions as a response to new measures of accountability: “What level of accountability is to be provided? Who is expected to provide the account? To whom is the account owed? What is to be accounted for? And what are the consequences of providing an account?” (p. 2). We are all accountable for student learning but when specific and measureable goals are developed such as ‘80% of students will be at proficiency’; how are we supporting these goals?

A teacher is a classroom leader as the administrator is for the school and superintendent for the district. Do any of us in these levels of education truly see the Minister of Education as a leader for the province? The teacher is accountable for their students and to their parents and the school administrator. The administrator for their staff, students and parents; and to the superintendent. The superintendent is accountable for their schools and all elements within. In
Alberta, they are accountable to the board. The board to the ballot box as would be the Minister. If the base goal of education is improved student achievement, and the only provincial way of measuring this is through large scale, high stakes standardized assessment; then are we really measuring for student achievement, or for another term in office?

When it comes to educational achievement comparisons at the international level with TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA, Torrance (2006) notes issues with reliability and validity, translation concerns and sampling problems. When we are discussing assessment and accountability, we are really talking about comparison. At the provincial level, how relevant are these same concerns with our own large scale assessments which are currently under review (Mertz, 2014)? The first rounds of Student Learner Assessments have not gone well. Implementation schedules have dramatically slowed and plans to do away with Provincial Achievement Tests have now been put on hold as well (Mertz, 2013; Nolais, 2014). Schools and teachers are now finding themselves responsible and accountable to both assessments.

Recently developed and inadequately field tested assessments can claim little or no validity or reliability. A growing population of English language learning students across the province from multiple countries guarantees translation issues, not to mention the immense impact of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Sampling problems exist, as the importance placed on these assessments varies from one school or district to the next; with some divisions encouraging approved exemptions and others condemning it. Not surprisingly, there is a Facebook community entitled ‘Provincial Achievement Tests are Optional’ (n.d.). One has to wonder if a teacher started it. Cheng and Couture (2000) note that many “Other studies point to standardized tests’ narrowness of content, their lack of match with curricula and instruction, their neglect of higher-order thinking skills, and the limited relevance and meaningfulness of their multiple-
choice formats.” Further distancing themselves from truly relevant assessment and understanding of the individual; provincial movements to digital assessments have created their own host of problems for staff and students, making these high stakes tests even more flawed (Kozicka, 2015).

From academic domains of learning to physical and social, emotional wellness; teachers roles are increasingly complex. As students change, curriculum changes and new teaching strategies develop incorporating emerging technologies; it begs to be asked, are teachers adequately prepared in university programs? Once in the field, how much access is there to high quality and relevant professional development? There are teachers’ conventions and regional consortia designed to support teacher professional development but what is or should be born right at the school or district level for direct support is missing in many cases. Extensive opportunities exist for larger conferences and conventions but looming budget cuts make this all but impossible for the classroom teacher (CBC News, 2015). School divisions need to address the supports required for the many roles, complex changes and duties that teachers are expected to implement or accomplish.

Administrators must be effective instructional leaders in order to lead their teachers through this fast paced change. Teacher supervision and evaluation (assessment and accountability) should be seen as one of the school leader’s most crucial roles. In past times this was measured by how many complaints one received and little more. Today there are courses and programs with rigorous strategies guiding teacher evaluation. Do I feel validated after my evaluation from someone who cannot turn on a Smart Board; or hasn’t taught in my grade since before the curriculum change from 10 or more years ago? Districts are responsible and accountable for providing these supports for their school leaders. Discussion around top heavy
boards is always on a teacher’s mind when wondering ‘what have they done for me lately?’. School districts need internal programs which support and grow their initiatives in order for them to be successful. There are always star leaders, teachers and schools who can make it work or push the envelope and go their own path to facilitate amazing change. We have students like that too. But what about the whole class, the whole staff and the whole district? Effective programs need to be developed and resources need to be dedicated in order to provide supports at all levels of the organization if accountability measures are to be considered relevant.

The school division I am employed with would be characterized by many as top heavy. Working in division office, there was a time when I felt guilty about being one of the newest hires. Now I am so far replaced from that position (only a couple years later) that I am no longer concerned about it at all. Further reflection upon such roles as mine reveals that it is relatively easy to see that when appropriately applied, a central office leadership position can influence and support a far broader sample of teachers and students than the individual classroom teacher might. Within my school division, each school has three embedded and supported coaching roles in instruction, inclusion and technology. Along with this there is a guaranteed minimum 3 day per week social worker position at every site. All of these roles are supported and guided by their respective department leads at the district level. Without these structures, many of the undertaken district or provincial initiatives would have seen limited success. As it stands, all initiatives that are engaged in are met with the highest level of support and coordination at the district ensures that all schools have equitable implementation supports.

In my district, the goal of increased student achievement as related to assessment and accountability has been built upon for years. In depth work with high yield teaching strategies and effective instructional practices was the basis for AISI projects for nearly 10 years (AISI,
n.d.). These led to the development of a teacher and leader established 12 point framework for Excellent Learning Environments (figure 1).

![12 Components of ELEs](image)

**Figure 1.** 12 Components of ELEs. This figure illustrates the 12 components designated for Excellent Learning Environments.

All elements of these components are integrated with technology, inclusive learning and teaching supports. A divisionally adopted calendar (Calendar, 2015) with bi-weekly opportunities for a tiered response to intervention allows for time and collaboration between school based staff and district level supports. If we expect our teachers and leaders to be accountable for our lofty goals and do not provide structural supports such as those listed, the opportunities for all staff and all students to be successful is far more difficult to attain.

Seeing education through a lens of globalized marketization can easily place students as products required as future resources in order to keep the machine running smoothly. From this lens it does make sense to have large scale standardized assessment. But if our province truly wishes to create engaged thinkers as ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit, then this is clearly the wrong path (Alberta Education, 2011).