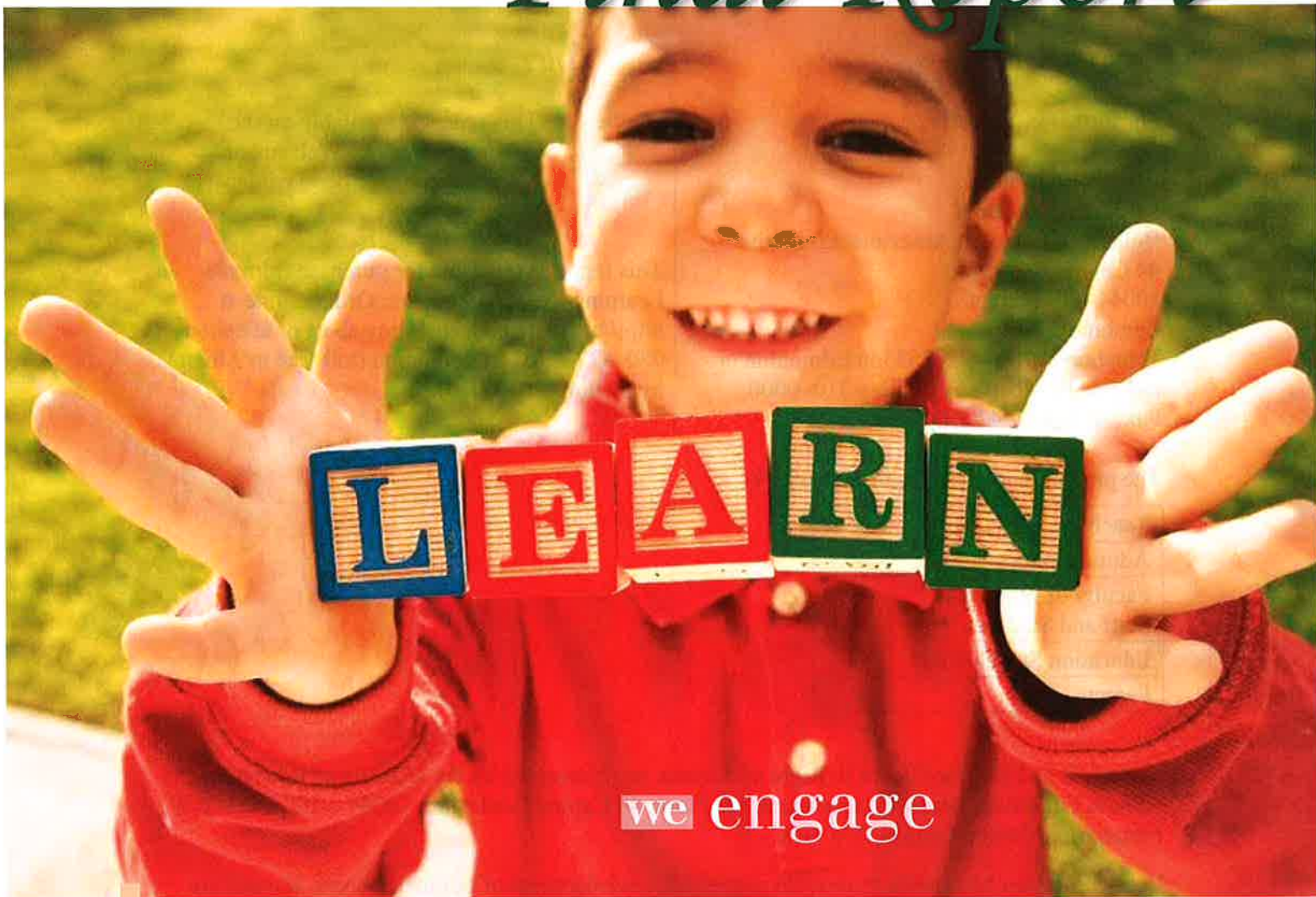


# The Alberta Student Assessment Study

# *Final Report*



we engage

Charles F. Webber, University of Calgary  
Nola Aitken, University of Lethbridge  
Judy Lupart, University of Alberta  
Shelleyann Scott, University of Calgary

**Government of Alberta**   
Education

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The Alberta Student Assessment Study research team extends its sincere gratitude to the many hundreds, indeed thousands, of individuals who accepted our invitation to participate in this study of student assessment in Alberta schools. Participants included representatives of all of the groups often involved in studies like this one—teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, ministry personnel, parents, school council members—and also to the elementary and secondary students in public, Catholic, charter, alternative, Hutterite, and home school settings in urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout Alberta. The honesty, integrity, and courage with which these individuals presented their views speak to the ongoing success of the Alberta education system as a major contributor to the civil society that we enjoy in this province and this country.

We acknowledge, also with gratitude, the funding for this study that was provided by Alberta Education. Further, it is important to note the academic freedom granted to the research team by Alberta Education and the Faculties of Education at the University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, and the University of Alberta. The academic freedom to report research findings, without risk, when and how researchers believe appropriate is the cornerstone of scholarly research and central to the credibility of research findings.

No francophone schools? or are we just included in a larger category. Typically, we are supposed to be named.

4% of interviewed families spoke French



## INTRODUCTION

This is the final report for a multi-stage study of student assessment in Alberta undertaken by a research team representing the University of Calgary, the University of Alberta, and the University of Lethbridge. The researchers will report on (a) optimal assessment theory, policies, and practice that will inform educational decision-making in Alberta; (b) educational leadership practices that support effective student assessment and reporting; and (c) professional development frameworks that enhance the capacity of Alberta educators in classroom assessment.

The study emerged from an initial request from Alberta Education personnel to the Deans of Education at the Universities of Calgary, Alberta, and Lethbridge. Alberta Education identified the study objectives, listed above, and offered to fund the cost of the research. Then, the Deans and Alberta Education agreed that the Deans would appoint research team members with the necessary expertise, and that the researchers would have academic freedom to design and conduct the study and to report freely the study findings. Subsequent to the appointment of the research team members, all educational stakeholders, including Alberta Education, were invited to participate in the study. The members of the research team undertook the research as part of their assigned university duties and received no personal payments.

This report consists of the following components. First, the context of the study is described. Then, a summary of selected literature is provided, followed by an explanation of the study methodology. Subsequently, study Stages One through Four will be described. The report concludes with a set of recommendations for each of the study foci.

## CONTEXT

Student assessment in many nations is an educational area replete with widely varying perspectives, and educational stakeholders in Alberta hold a full range of views about assessment policies and practices. The vast majority of student assessment is designed and conducted by classroom teachers. Therefore, the importance of the teacher's role in assessment is critical in student learning and achievement. Indeed, most decision making about students' educational programming is premised upon the information garnered by classroom teachers.

In addition to teacher-conducted student assessment, students in Alberta write standardized tests that are part of the provincial standardized testing program. That is, students in grades 3, 6, and 9 write Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs), designed to provide a general overview of how students are learning, to report on the degree to which students have achieved provincial standards, and to assist educational stakeholders "in monitoring and improving student learning" (Alberta Education, 2008a, p. 1). In addition, students in Grade 12 write Diploma Examinations in selected courses (Alberta Education, 2008b). Provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations are intended to support classroom teachers with information about programs and student strengths and weaknesses at the provincial level (Alberta Education, 2007a). Also, Alberta Education (2008c) states that its policy of Grade Level of Achievement Reporting—which requires teachers to describe the achievement in students from grades one through nine as

## DEFINITIONS

*Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)* has the goal of improving “student learning and performance by supporting initiatives that address unique needs and circumstances within school authorities.” This support includes “encouraging teachers, parents, and the community to work collaboratively to introduce innovative and creative initiatives based upon local needs and circumstances.” AISI includes the provision of “an AISI Clearinghouse of projects and promising practices, supporting documents for planning and implementation AISI projects, literature synopses, research reports, provincial reports, newsletters, and other publications related to school improvement, and workshop and conference information” (Alberta Education, 2009a).

*As learning* is the active involvement of students in assessing evidence of their learning to assist them in understanding what they need to know and improve upon to successfully meet their goals and learning outcomes.

*Assessment* is the ongoing process of gathering a variety of student assessment evidence to make decisions for improvement of student learning.

*Authentic assessment* is a process that consists of "Engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively. The tasks are either replicas of or analogous to the kinds of problems faced by adult citizens and consumers or professionals in the field" (Wiggins, 1993, p. 229).

*Criterion-referenced* tests are those in which questions are written according to specific predetermined criteria. A student knows what the standards are for passing and only competes against him or herself while completing the test.

*Diploma Examinations* are those that are based on “selected Grade 12 courses: English Language Arts 30–1, English Language Arts 30–2, Français 30, French Language Arts 30–1, Social Studies 30, Social Studies 33, Pure Mathematics 30, Applied Mathematics 30, Biology 30, Chemistry 30, Physics 30, and Science 30.” The Diploma Examination contributes 50 percent of a student’s final mark in each of these courses with the school-awarded mark contributing to the remaining 50 percent of each final course mark. The school-awarded mark provides for performance-based assessments, such as oral reports, class projects, and so on. When the external Diploma Examinations mark and the school marks are combined and weighted equally, the final mark is awarded for the Alberta High School Diploma (Alberta Education, 2008b)

*For learning* is a formative assessment, diagnostic in nature, done systematically throughout the year. Its main purpose is to monitor students' daily progress to provide meaningful conversation and feedback about ways for students to hit the clearly defined targets that the teacher has set with the students, and ways for the teacher to adjust teaching to meet the students’ needs based on the evidence of students’ progress.

## LITERATURE SUMMARY

The following is a brief literature review that addresses some of the issues that emerged in discussions of student assessment. It does not attempt to cover all of the information provided by the organizations cited above; those documents generally do a thorough job of explaining the perspectives of educational organizations in Alberta and of identifying possible uses and abuses of student assessment data. Indeed, the cited documents typically portray levels of sophistication and understanding of student assessment that counter much of what is reported below. Nonetheless, it was important to undertake this study with a clear understanding of what is expressed in contemporary theory and research about student assessment policies and practices.

It is important to note that the literature presented here is necessarily brief. Much more detailed reviews guided The Alberta Student Assessment Study and they are summarized in forthcoming edited collections, e.g., Webber and Lupart (in press); Scott, Webber, Aitken, and Lupart (in preparation); and Aitken, Webber, Lupart, and Scott (in preparation). These forthcoming publications collectively provide comprehensive Canadian and international perspectives on student assessment.

For the purpose of this abbreviated review, at least three main issues relevant to the Alberta education system have been identified as barriers to student assessment being perceived as a positive educational endeavor. The first issue identified by researchers is teachers' weak understanding of fair assessment practices, the second is teachers' perceptions of external accountability initiatives, and the third is the impact of inappropriate assessment of at-risk students. All three of these issues may contribute to prevailing negative perceptions of student assessment. This notion further contributes to teacher reluctance to fully engage in carrying out assessment that is integral to teaching and meaningful learning. Consequently, external assessment such as provincial standardized achievement tests may exacerbate the view that assessment is one of the most disliked and resisted components of teaching (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Burger & Krueger, 2003; Earl, 2003; Guskey, 2004; Stiggins, 2001).

Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Consequently, teachers too often omit important curricular outcomes and, in their place, test trivia instead of using items that reveal depth of understanding (Perkins, 1992; Popham, 2002). Finally, when teachers do not have time or effective assessment strategies, they generally resort to testing the way they themselves were assessed, too often ineffectively (Guskey, 2004; Stiggins, 1993).

On occasion, teachers unintentionally engage in unfair assessment practice. For example, when teachers award a student a zero for work not handed in on time, they fail to acknowledge that, first, the zero is not an accurate description of achievement or of students' understanding of content material, but instead behavior, and second, one zero averaged with other grades has a devastating effect on a student's overall grade, particularly if the work that was assigned a zero has been heavily weighted (Guskey, 2004; O'Connor, 2002; Reeves, 2004).

Some teachers also have misconceptions about weighting and the role of descriptive statistics in evaluation. The problem of weighting usually occurs when teachers have not considered it during the initial planning stage. Faced with a baffling array of marks, teachers make errors such as weighting less important components on an equal basis with important components. This is a common error and again misleads the student, parent, and receiving teacher about the student's actual achievement. A poor speller can very well be a solid and creative writer but, similar to aggregating achievement and effort, weighting spelling with writing equally can skew the final result inappropriately. Further problems have arisen with inappropriate use of the bell curve, which does not indicate students' depth of knowledge and understanding; it only provides information on the relative standing of students within a group (Guskey, 1996; Marzano, 2000, 2006; O'Connor, 2002; Reeves, 2002; Stiggins et al., 2004; Wiggins, 1993).

There is widespread agreement among teachers that grading and communicating results clearly, consistently, and sensitively are among the most difficult and uncomfortable parts of evaluation. This may be due to a lack of understanding about how to carry out assessment and lack of information about competing purposes of assessment (Earl, 2003; Earl & Katz, 2006; Elmore, 2005; Guskey, 2004; Hargreaves, Earl, Moor, & Manning, 2001; Marzano, 2000, 2006; O'Connor, 2002; Stiggins, 2001). Taking all of these issues into consideration, students' results may not be reliably interpreted or reported (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Marzano, 2000, 2006; Popham, 2002; Stiggins, 2001; Wright, 2000).

understanding required to fit these facts into a conceptual framework or “big picture” to make further connections and associations for logical applications into new disciplines. The Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation (2003) states this critical importance: “Evaluation of students is central to student learning in every school and classroom. Without evaluation, we do not know if learning has taken place, nor can we plan for future learning opportunities” (p. 1). Although some teachers use fair assessment practice as identified by the Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation (CRAME) (1993), many are not, likely due to lack of confidence and relevant skills.

Even though much of the focus of school improvement via the AISI projects is centered on classroom assessment practice, and although teachers’ professional development and staff development projects are supported by the work of the Alberta Assessment Consortium, there is still much work to be done. The Alberta Commission on Learning report (Alberta Education, 2003) left no doubt that effective assessment and evaluation practices are integral to the welfare of Alberta students. It is essential that stakeholders work collaboratively to continue to improve student achievement, teaching, learning, and assessment practice, and embrace assessment and accountability as significant processes for student success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Assessment and At-risk Students

Although students with obvious disabilities were generally excluded from public education for the first half of the twentieth century, all others were expected to meet some sort of “minimal standard.” As the public education systems grew and developed over the ensuing decades, it was gradually recognized that standard curriculum, standard achievement, and standard outcomes were not appropriate for a considerable portion of students attending schools (Ball 2004; Philpott, 2008). Thus, the immediate assessment-related agenda for schools is to differentiate teaching and assessment.

Expertise in assessment and instructional programming for students with challenging learning needs has developed over the past 30 years. Advocates for inclusion now put the onus on schools to ensure the successful learning of diverse students (Ball, 2004; Edgmon, Jablonski, & Lloyd, 2006; Hahn, 1989; Luykx, Lee, Mahotiere, Lester, Hart, & Deaktor, 2007; Neufeld, & Stevens, 1992; Philpott, 2008; Skrtic, 1996).

Regular classroom teachers are the front-line professionals who have the major responsibility for making inclusive teaching and assessment work (Lupart & Webber, 1996, 2002; Philpott, 2008; Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2007). Therefore, a coordinated, province-wide use of available research will facilitate best student assessment policies and practices. As well, critical gaps in our assessment knowledge base need to be identified and appropriate research conducted. Finally, government, university, school district, school, and community organizations need to align efforts and resources to achieve the learning success of the full continuum of student diversity in Canadian schools.



## Validity and Reliability

The researchers used a mixed-method approach as this was perceived to “contribute to methodological rigor” (Patton, 2002, p. 68). Gay et al. (2006) defined validity as being

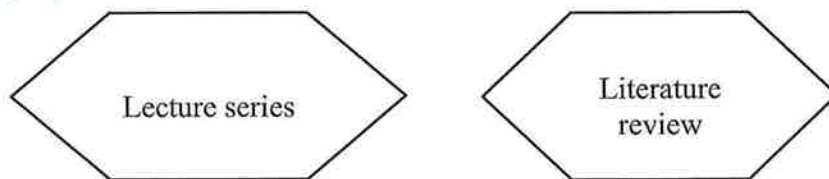
...the degree to which a test measures what it is intended to measure; a test is valid for a particular purpose for a particular group. In qualitative research, it is the degree to which qualitative data accurately gauge what the researcher is trying to measure. (p. 603)

Gay et al. (2006) defined reliability as “[t]he degree to which a test (or qualitative research data) consistently measures whatever it measures” (p. 601). Employing a mixed-method design using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies meant that the potential disadvantages inherent in one methodology could be overcome through the advantages of the other, thereby enabling a more complete understanding of the research problem (Cresswell, 2008). Mixed methods enabled a more comprehensive capture of both the breadth and depth implied by the broad nature of the research team’s mandate. Because each method revealed different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations were used to strive to capture the complete phenomenon. For example, focus groups, interviews and other qualitative methodologies were particularly useful in identifying issues and included the participants’ perspectives on these issues in some depth, but could not address the prevalence of the issues beyond the initial sample. Questionnaires, on the other hand, were excellent for establishing patterns across larger populations, but less suited to examining these issues in depth or to fully developing the implications for lived experience (Cohen, Minion, & Morrison, 2000). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were therefore necessary to fulfill the study mandate.

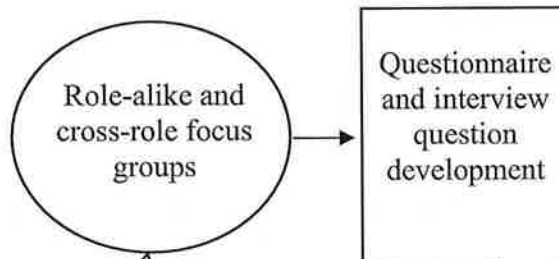
A mixed-methods approach was more likely to provide accurate, evidence-based conclusions and recommendations. The use of multiple methods to provide theoretical and methodological checks and balances is referred to as triangulation. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated “the use of multiple methods, or triangulation reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question ... [it] adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 5).” The “trustworthiness” of the conclusions established by “triangulation” was superior because they have been verified through “the use of multiple data sources” (Gay, et al., 2008, p. 88). In this study, triangulation was undertaken using early-stage focus group data from stakeholder groups and comparing them with the questionnaire and interview data that were collected from stakeholders in schools. This triangulation provided both reliability or replicability and validity checks by permitting the comparison of themes in the different data groups.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggested that the terms “validity” and “reliability” in qualitative research mean slightly different things and are obtained in different ways... “[v]alidity in qualitative research has to do with description and explanation and whether or not the explanation fits the description. In other words, is the explanation credible?” (p. 393). A process adopted in this study, that directly related to ensuring validity in the qualitative data analysis was the checks that research team members made on each other as they worked through the data analyses. Data processing approaches were devised together so that all members agreed and understood how to undertake it. Additionally, at each stage, interrater reliability checks were also

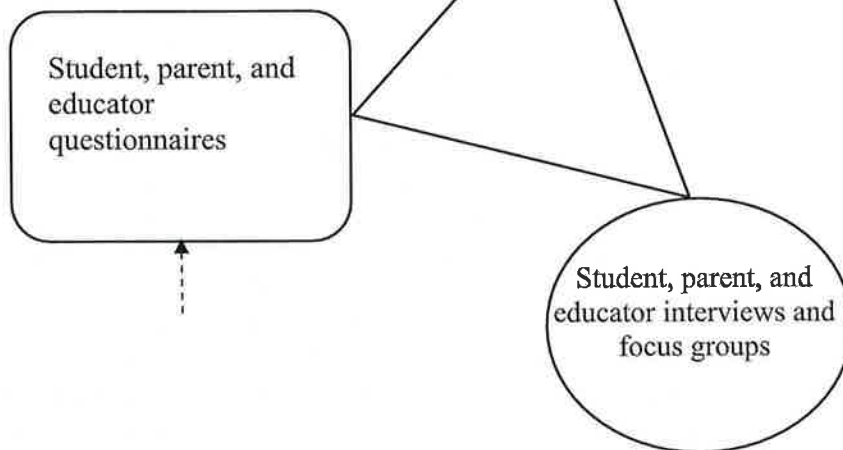
**Stage One**



**Stage Two**



**Stage Three**



**Stage Four**

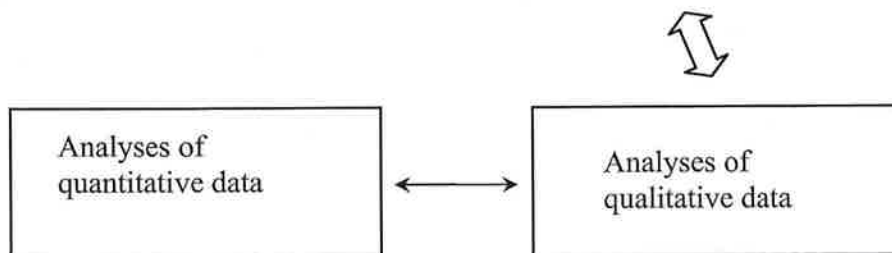


Figure 1. Alberta Student Assessment Study Stages.

Focus groups have the advantage of being relatively inexpensive to conduct and yet “often produce rich data that are cumulative and elaborative; they can be stimulating for respondents, aiding recall; and the format is flexible” (p. 652). Stage Two focus groups ( $N = 78$ )<sup>1</sup> were largely exploratory in nature, whereby participants were invited to discuss what they knew about assessment in Alberta schools. The exploratory focus groups were organized with representatives of the following organizations:

- Alberta Education ( $n = 28$ ) (personnel at three managerial levels)
- College of Alberta School Superintendents ( $n = 4$ )
- Alberta Teachers’ Association ( $n = 12$ )
- Alberta School Boards Association ( $n = 2$ ) (elected school board members)
- Alberta School Councils’ Association ( $n = 8$ ) (parents)
- Alberta Assessment Consortium ( $n = 12$ ) (representing teachers, principals, school board members, university faculty, and provincial government employees)
- University of Alberta, University of Calgary, and University of Lethbridge ( $n = 12$ )

Purposeful sampling was used to select participant organizations for the exploratory focus groups. “In purposeful sampling the goal is to select cases that are likely to be ‘information-rich’ with respect to the purposes of the study” (Gall, et al., 2007, p. 218). In other words the participant organizations were included in the study because they had a particular perspective and certain insights that would inform the research. Once invitations were accepted, individual focus group participants were selected by their organizations rather than by the researchers.

The researchers in this study acknowledged the complexities of participants’ views that were frequently influenced by their multiple roles as professionals, parents, and community members. Therefore, the focus groups with these groups were conducted in role-alike and in cross-role focus groups. Role-alike focus groups promoted the exploration of insights particular to each organization.

The focus groups encouraged participants to speak freely and to articulate their perspectives to the researchers and each other, understanding that many within the group would be of the same opinion. Cross-role focus groups facilitated a different dynamic. The disadvantage of these role-alike focus groups is as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated “the emerging group culture may interfere with individual expression, and the group may be dominated by one person; and ‘groupthink’ is a possible outcome” (p. 652). With these potential negative consequence in mind and prepared to facilitate focus group discussion accordingly, the researchers invited each major educational organization in Alberta to send two or three members to attend a larger cross-role focus group. The cross-role focus groups promoted dialogue and sharing of organizational perspectives.

The stakeholder focus groups were conducted face-to-face in stakeholders’ facilities or on university campuses to maximize both convenience to the participants and to ensure they felt comfortable in a familiar setting. At least one role-alike focus group was conducted with each stakeholder group. Three cross-role focus groups were conducted

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers are approximate.

The elementary students' questionnaire contained a significantly reduced number of questions and the wording of the questions was age-appropriate. The secondary student and educator questionnaires were closely aligned. The parent questionnaire contained items parallel to those in the secondary student and educator instruments; however, the section, which explored classroom practices, was omitted in the parent questionnaire. Each survey followed a similar format with demographic sections at the beginning (Section A), followed by rating scale items.

In the educator and secondary student questionnaires, Section B was a set of items which respondents rated using a Likert scale of *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and Don't Know*. In Section C respondents rated the importance of a list of assessment purposes using a Likert-style scale of *Very Important, Important, Of Little Importance, Unimportant, and Don't Know*. Section D focused on the frequency of use of a range of assessment practices. These items were rated using a frequency scale of *Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never, or Don't Know*.

The parent questionnaire followed a similar format to that of the educator and secondary student questionnaires; however, their survey did not include the section on frequency of assessment practices. The elementary student questionnaire was simplified with just nine opinion items (Section B) measured on an agree-through-disagree scale; in Sections C and D on the elementary student instrument, 11 and 4 items, respectively, gauged the frequency of use of selected assessment practices. The scales in the elementary questionnaire were included in both written and visual forms with smiley faces and hand signals for students who respond more to visual cues. Additionally, feedback from elementary students when the instrument was piloted indicated that completion of the survey was deemed to be “fun” and more engaging with the visual images.

Each questionnaire type was pilot tested with a small group of individuals who were representative of that stakeholder group. In other words, the elementary survey was pilot tested by a group of elementary students and the parent survey with a group of parents and so on with each version of the instrument. The research team reviewed feedback from the pilot testing and then completed the final versions of the instruments. A draft of the educator questionnaire was provided to participants in the cross-role focus groups and they provided feedback on question intent, clarity of wording, distribution of themes, and physical layout of the questionnaire. This feedback informed the next draft of the instrument. Additional feedback was obtained from small trials with academic colleagues and teachers, with further refinement made as a result. The questionnaires were developed into a scan-readable form with the view to reducing potential errors in data input processes and to increase the efficiency of data entry into SPSS 17 statistical analysis software.

Educator surveys were administered primarily during regular school-based staff meetings where the study goals were explained and voluntary participation invited. In some cases, educator surveys were handed out during staff meetings, completed privately, and subsequently returned to the research team. Student surveys were completed both during



**Sampling.** In Stage Three, the researchers employed cluster-sampling procedures. Gay, et al. (2006) stated that, using cluster sampling, “intact groups, not individuals, are randomly selected” (p. 106). Gall, et al. (2007) referred to cluster sampling as “selecting naturally occurring groups of individuals.” Cluster sampling is used “when it is more feasible to select groups of individuals” (p. 227). In this study it was deemed important to obtain data that were as demographically representative as possible. Therefore, the researchers determined that the clusters needed to represent a range of schooling designations such as public, private, Catholic, Hutterite, alternative, outreach, and charter schools. It also was important to include representation of schools in urban, suburban, and rural situations. The final criterion was to ensure coverage at all levels of the school system, for example, elementary, middle, junior high, and senior high levels. In total, there were 19 schools involved in this study, 20 when the home schooling demographic is included. The following table displays the distribution of school sampling clusters:

**Table 1  
Distribution of School Sampling Clusters**

School Level	Location	School Type					
		Public	Magnet	Separate	Alternative	Charter	Home
Elementary	Inner city		1	2			
	Suburban	1			1	1	
	Rural	1					
Middle/ Junior School	Inner city			1			
	Suburban					1	
	Rural	1					
Senior High School	Inner city				1		
	Suburban	1				1	
	Rural	1	1		1		
K-9	Suburban			1			
	Rural K-9	2					
K-12							1

**Table 2**  
**Total Number of Respondents in Each Role**

Group	Elementary Survey K-6						Secondary Survey 7-12				Special Ed.		
	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		10	11
(N = 2542)													
Educator (n = 195)	12	20	19	19	30	30	32	30	25	27	77	78	75
Parent (n = 799)	52				431				263			307	
Secondary Student (n = 916)								196 (21.4%)	213 (23.3%)	152 (16.6%)	102 (11.1%)	107 (11.7%)	137 (15.0%)
Elementary Student (n = 632)	0	0	0	35 (5.5%)	173 (27.4%)	202 (32.0%)	221 (35.0%)						

*Note: These data represent overlapping categories and summing data may result in greater than total sample numbers (N = 2542).*

Table 5 displays the role designations in the educator sample. These categories were overlapping, because, for example, some assistant or vice principals were also teaching classes and noted they had both roles. There were 176 teachers representing 90% of the total sample. Some educator respondents held a leadership role such as curriculum leader (10.3%), assistant/vice principal (4.6%), principal (4.6%), and/or central office personnel (0.5%).

**Table 5**  
**Respondents' Role Designations**

Educator	Role	
	Frequency	Percent of sample
Teacher	176	90.3%
Curriculum Leader	20	10.3%
Assistant/V Principal	9	4.6%
Principal	9	4.6%
Central Office	1	0.5%

*Note: These data represent overlapping categories and summing data may result in greater than total sample numbers.*

Table 6 represents an item in the survey designed specifically to collect information about the level of experience in administrative positions. There were two relatively equal categories, newer administrators with fewer than 5 years experience (3.6%) and those with 10–19 years of experience (3.1%). There were even numbers in the 5–9 and 20 plus years in an administrative role at 2.1% of the sample in each of these categories. Some of the curriculum leaders also indicated their years of experience in administration as well as those in the assistant/vice principal, principal, and central office administrative roles.

**Table 6**  
**Years of Experience in an Administrative Role**

Years of Experience in Administration		
	Frequency	Percent of sample
Fewer than 5 years	7	3.6%
5–9 years	4	2.1%
10–19 years	6	3.1%
20+ years	4	2.1%

*Note: These data represent overlapping categories and summing data may result in greater than total sample numbers.*

**Table 9**  
**Parent Level of Education**

<b>Parent's Highest Level of Education</b>		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of Sample</b>
Did not complete high school	38	4.8%
High school	188	23.5%
Trade/vocational qualification	209	26.2%
Undergraduate degree	236	29.5%
Graduate degree (master's or doctorate)	87	10.9%

Table 10 displayed the proportion of parent survey respondents who speak English, French, or other languages in the home. The majority of the sample (92.5%) speaks English in the home, while 4% speak French, and one person indicated that the home language is a First Nations language.

**Table 10**  
**Language Spoken at Home**

<b>Languages Spoken at Home</b>		
<b>Languages</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of Sample</b>
English	747	93.5%
French	32	4.0%
First Nations	1	0.1%
Other	136	17.0%

*Note: These data represent overlapping categories and summing data may result in greater than total sample numbers.*

Table 11 portrays parents' responses regarding having a child with special needs. Almost 76% indicated they did not have a child with special needs, while almost 10% reported having a child coded as special needs. Nearly 6% indicated they had a child with special needs who was not coded as such.

**Table 11**  
**Parental Report of Having a Child with Special Needs**

<b>Child with Special Needs</b>		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of Sample</b>
I have a child who is coded special needs	76	9.5%
My child(ren) has(have) no special needs	606	75.8%
I have a child with special learning needs but not coded	46	5.8%



*Demographics of elementary student survey respondents.* Table 15 shows that more female elementary students (56.2%) than male students (40.5%) completed the elementary student survey.

**Table 15**  
**Gender Distribution for Elementary Students**

<b>Elementary Student Gender Distribution</b>		
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of sample</b>
Male	256	40.5%
Female	355	56.2%

The majority of elementary students reported speaking English at home, with 17.6% reporting speaking other languages. Fourteen students (2.2%) indicated they spoke French at home.

**Table 16**  
**Elementary Students' Languages Spoken at Home**

<b>Languages Spoken at Home</b>		
<b>Languages</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of Sample</b>
English	559	88.4%
French	14	2.2%
First Nations	1	0.2%
Other	111	17.6%

*Note: These data represent overlapping categories and summing data may result in greater than total sample numbers.*

Table 17 summarizes elementary students' reports about having special needs. Most elementary student survey respondents (78%) indicated they did not have special needs, while 14.1% were not certain if they did or did not have special needs. Just 6% stated they did have special needs.

**Table 17**  
**Elementary Students' with Special Needs**

<b>Do You Have Special Needs?</b>		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of Sample</b>
Yes	38	6.0%
No	493	78.0%
Don't know	89	14.1%

Table 18  
Distribution of Interview and Focus Group Participants

School Type	Participant Group							
	Principal	Assistant Principal	Teacher Elementary	Teacher Secondary	Student Elementary	Student Secondary	Parent	
Senior High	3	3		85		67	7	
Middle/Junior High	3	4	17	15	56	226	17	
Elementary K-12	6	3	43		103		22	
			2		7	3		
<b>Total (N = 692)</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>46</b>
		<b>22</b>		<b>163</b>		<b>462</b>		

schools were coded jointly with all researchers present. Having all members of the team present at the initial coding process enabled numerous opportunities to contest and discuss the data coding. Once agreement on the coding was achieved, the researchers divided up the remaining school data sets and continued the coding. All research team members worked in the same physical location so that they could confer with each other. Once all school data sets were coded, all coding documents were compiled into a master document that contained all of the coded interview data.

This initial master coding document was used for the next iteration of coding for themes and subthemes. Each member of the research team reviewed the composite coding document independently. Overlapping themes were identified and subsequently refined through a roundtable discussion. Subthemes were identified and sequenced into storyboards using a software program called *Inspiration*. For each coded theme and subtheme a separate storyboard was developed with an accompanying range of illustrative quotations. Within each storyboard, sets of different shaped text boxes were used to code data according to the role and school type that each interviewee represented (see the appendices for an illustration of the shapes assigned to the various participant roles, e.g., parents, high school principals, and elementary students). With at least three of the four researchers present in all coding sessions, the storyboard components were reexamined to explore relationships within the themes and subthemes. The final coded storyboards were used to create an outline for reporting the Stage Three findings. Then each researcher wrote sections of the Stage Three findings.

Next, the clustered quantitative items were examined and linked to the appropriate theme within each storyboard. The quantitative data were merged with the qualitative data. As they wrote the Stage Three findings, all researchers referred to the original coding and interview materials to ensure that quotations were complete and that inferences remained accurate by overtly considering the context of the conversation within the original interview document.

Once the research team members finished writing the Stage Three findings they undertook a further level of analysis. Referring to the original project proposal, they reviewed all of the study findings to address the three study foci: optimal theory and practice in assessment, leadership implications, and professional development. All of the research team members participated in a roundtable discussion using the study findings as a point of reference. A set of guiding principles, based on study findings, were developed for each of the study foci. Recommendations were drafted through an iterative process of consultation and deliberation involving all team members. Then the team members shared the writing of the principles and recommendations. The literature review was updated and all other sections of the report were compiled. A final editing was undertaken to ensure sequencing, similarity of voice, tenses, and formatting.

participation in focus groups. All participants could discontinue their participation at any time with impunity.

No individual, school, or district identifiers were included in the report to ensure that the participants were protected from identification. Any direct quotation that had identifying material either was excluded or was masked through changing gender and/or school identifiers.

## STUDY FINDINGS

This section of the report includes, first, a description of the Stage Two findings of The Alberta Student Assessment Study and, then, a summary of the results of the Stage Three individual and small group interviews, plus the results of surveys administered to a sample of Alberta teachers, principals, parents, secondary school students, and elementary school students. It is important to note that Stage Two findings shaped the design and implementation of Stages Three and Four of the study.

### Initial Focus Group and Interview Findings

Six themes emerged from a two-month series of focus groups conducted with representatives of Alberta Education, teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, and parent councils. The themes included a range of issues and perceptions; however, it must be noted that the majority of the stakeholders were able to offer balanced perspectives overtly identifying and articulating positive aspects as well as challenges within the themes. Some of the study participants were able to see the positive and negative contributions of the stakeholders involved in the Alberta educational context. Unfortunately, where this was not the case, there was no mistaking the high levels of concern, even anxiety and suspicion, held by some individuals.

The six themes are illustrated in Table 19.



## Politics of Assessment

This theme encompassed issues related to policy, accountability at all organizational levels, stakeholder mistrust of each other, widespread confusion about student assessment, and a sense of professional responsibility to both the educational and wider communities.

Discussions of student assessment in Alberta contained a strong emotional element, perhaps understandable considering the implicit expectations for accountability for all roles across the education system. Reported emotions ranged from the positive (“belief in teachers’ capacity to teach and assess well” and “confidence in the system”) to the negative (“concern” to “mistrust” to “paranoia”). Confidence in teacher professionalism was evident among several stakeholder groups. “Concerns” included parents’ expectations for information about their children’s academic progress. “Mistrust” was used to describe several phenomena, including employer use of data, perceived lack of confidence in teachers’ abilities to assess well, impact of school rankings published by organizations such as the Fraser Institute,<sup>1</sup> and other stakeholders’ agendas and perspectives, resulting in “mistrust at best but perhaps sabotage at worst.” “Paranoia” was evident, for example, in the attribution of “conspiracy theory perspectives.” One participant explained it this way:

*What I would like to see, that recognition there is nothing to be feared. The boogeyman under the table is of our own creation and is not necessary. It does a disservice to the development and maintenance of an excellent educational system.... If you fear the dust bunnies under the table you are doing yourself and your school a disservice and [also] the children you serve.*

A rationale for these views included the belief that “math phobia” was prevalent among many educators and hinders correct interpretation and appropriate use of the range of assessment data available in educational communities.

*Fear of anything quantitative—hear things like numbers are fine but you can’t measure everything—there are ways of assessing beauty, etc. We need not be afraid of measurement and assessing. Every time you cross the street you assess whether you have enough time to do that. This is how we make our way through the world and survive but there is this fear out there. We need through leadership and the universities to get people over this reluctance and fear...assessment is what we do. It helps us to make good decisions. Like our innate fear of snakes—even being bitten tells us something.*

Perceptions of educators’ inadequate assessment knowledge and expertise in assessment contributed to calls for accountability and mistrust of teacher judgments. For example, participants cited instances of poor assessment practices, such as using assessment as a behavior management strategy or a punishment, and teachers “cheating” in the administration of the provincial standardized tests, which reinforced negative perceptions of teacher professionalism and calls for increased accountability. Additionally, participants frequently described teachers

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<sup>1</sup> The Fraser Institute states that it is an independent non-partisan research and educational organization based in Canada.

theme indicated a strong and urgent need for more and more effective learning opportunities related to student assessment.

There was a clear polarization of views across all representative groups about teacher knowledge and expertise in good assessment practices. The desire for greater convergence of theory and practice was expressed. Research-based practice was valued and participants endorsed initiatives, such as AISI (Alberta Education, 2008a) and regional consortia, which promoted the development of teacher learning in this area.

Study participants noted the challenge of time, particularly the perceived need to focus on core elements of the provincial curriculum that were more likely to be included in the Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Examinations. Time concerns also included workload alleviation for teacher leaders to support others in developing their assessment literacy. As well, continual implementation of a range of mandated initiatives exacerbated educators' perceptions of scarcity of time.

TEMPS

Participants considered preservice teacher education programs inadequate and, in some instances, universities were thought to model inappropriate assessment processes. As a result, the need for professional development was seen as acute, particularly in the area of “statistical literacy,” sound assessment strategies, and deep understandings of quality assessment. Participants called for greater access to effective school-based professional development, rejecting “one-shot workshops,” and desiring more opportunities for collegial “rich conversations,” all on an ongoing basis. From the administrative perspective, participants raised questions about how to engage all teachers and to motivate those who resist professional learning.

## Decision Making

This theme related to assessment-related decision-making at the classroom, school, district, and provincial levels. The school level involved resource allocation, staffing, and student placement. Classroom-related decision-making included formative and summative judgments. An issue that permeated all levels was a perceived lack of clarity about the purpose and data collection uses.

Study participants consistently iterated concern about the perceived expansion of the purposes of provincial standardized testing—accountability, curriculum revision, resource allocation, targeting for professional development—a phenomenon they described as “mission creep.” An associated issue involved provincial standardized testing data not being returned to schools in a format that educators perceived as informing teaching and learning, thus reinforcing their perceptions of the tests’ lack of value within the educational process. Participants expressed the desire to be able to use assessment data to inform transitions from class-to-class, school-to-school, and school-to-external institution. Additionally, participants’ poor understanding of the plans for implementation and use of achievement test data, plus the wide perception that Grade Level of Achievement Reporting (GLAR) was implemented poorly, albeit in a highly charged atmosphere that made implementation and communication difficult, contributed to an apparent overall confusion surrounding student assessment.

There was some doubt that student achievement was being reported accurately. Parents identified deficiencies in reporting formats, citing problematic use of “educational jargon” and a lack of comparative information about their children and peer groups. Reporting was perceived to be too limited, not capturing students’ “social and emotional growth.” Further, representatives of several stakeholder groups, not only parents, noted that discrepancies were evident between what parents and teachers know about children’s achievement. Additionally, another cause for concern arose when teachers did not report the provincial standardized achievement tests’ preliminary results, particularly when data were used to rank schools. In turn, educators noted the delayed communication to schools of provincial standardized achievement results impeded the use of the data, for example, in assisting with student transitions between grades, across schools, to postsecondary institutions, and/or into the work force. However, teachers of grades 6 and 9 are required to mark multiple-choice items and to report results to parents before the end of the school year, which means teachers of those grades have that information immediately after students write provincial achievement tests.

Grade Level of Achievement Reporting emerged as a problematic initiative due in part to implementation challenges and a perceived lack of clarity about the purpose and intended use of GLAR data. For instance, Alberta Education participants described GLAR as a tool for enhancing communication among school personnel and parents; however, some teachers perceived the GLAR initiative as ambiguous and appeared to lack confidence in their ability to report categorically student achievement outside of the grades in which teachers, themselves, have experience. For this initiative to be implemented more successfully and effectively, then professional development will need to facilitate collegial dialogue across grade levels and subject areas.

### **Instructional Leadership**

Focus group participants noted the need for strong, responsible provincial leadership in establishing and maintaining high quality educational programs. They then stated the need for leadership at the provincial government level “to filter down to the other levels.” They acknowledged the quality of the Alberta education system, linking that with ongoing curriculum review, and “maintenance” of standards through provincial student assessment programs, providing “a bulwark against grade inflation” so that postsecondary institutions “know what 70% means which advantages the Alberta student.” It was reported that Deans of Science across the nation recognize “the competencies of students in what they bring to their first year of studies.”

Participants also expressed a widespread need for greater use of assessment data for “instructional leadership” purposes by principals. They indicated the need for stronger alignment among policy implementation, curriculum planning, and teacher practice, thus promoting improved teaching and learning. Further, it was acknowledged that Alberta teachers have demonstrated considerable capacity to adopt innovative teaching strategies but not innovative assessment practices. Therefore, a critical focal point for instructional leaders is in the area of improvement and enhancement of student assessment practices.

Even though evidence of this worrying phenomenon has existed for many years, little progress has been made to address it. This relative lack of progress in supporting at-risk children was noted in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL), refugee, and special-needs student populations: “Our assessment practices should be effective for all students, special needs, and ESL. We need to focus on them as well.”

Participants highlighted the need for greater acceptance among educators of the appropriateness of accommodating students’ different abilities to participate in assessment practices:

*Failure is not an option.... How much failure data do we have to have about a student before we intervene? What kind of compensation tools? We put a premium on things you can store in your head. If I need a tool to help with a task then I’m not as smart as another student. In terms of special education students we have to start examining those types of issues.*

Participants recommended that incremental achievement milestones for these students be emphasized as opposed to highlighting deficiencies evident in provincial standardized test results. They recommended establishing communication systems that better linked students’ achievement records to their current locations, a particularly important initiative in the context of highly mobile students. Also, study participants noted that provincial standardized assessment instruments too often use terms and concepts that are culturally inappropriate or foreign for many students.

One of the key stakeholder groups noted the complexity of assessment, resulting from the “different paradigms” held by society. Focus group participants identified four “paradigms,” with the first being the most obvious: assessment of knowledge. The second is the view that schools should prepare students for their places in society and to manifest “good citizenship.” The third paradigm is the perspective that schools should “prepare students for the world of work” with the requisite employability skills. The final paradigm subscribes to “developing the natural talents of students.” These diverse paradigm perspectives about what should be included in student assessment and how the assessment should be conducted create constraints in establishing productive dialogue that values and respects differing viewpoints.

### Stage Three Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

This section of the report details the findings of Stage Three in the Alberta Student Assessment Study. Survey data, plus the information gathered during individual and group interviews with educational stakeholders across the province. The following themes were drawn from the combined quantitative and qualitative data: priorities of assessment, teacher and classroom-based assessment, provincial assessment, grade level of achievement reporting, decision making, leadership, professional development and teacher knowledge, preservice preparation, communication and relationships, fairness and equity, and the politics of assessment.

The word “evaluate” in survey items led to other patterns of disagreement. For instance, parents assigned much higher levels of importance to these purposes than did educators:

- Evaluate teachers
- Evaluate schools
- Evaluate school districts
- Evaluate the provincial education system

There are at least two explanations for these differences between the views of educators and parents. One is that educators do not believe that the results of classroom-based assessment and provincial standardized testing are valid indicators of quality of teaching, good schools, or well functioning school districts. For instance, a Grade 9 teacher in a suburban school stated that assessment data should not be used to assess teaching or schools:

*[It is an] injustice to schools. We know certain schools are going to be lower for various reasons. Economics play a factor. Sometimes it can be the teaching and maybe leadership. It can be used in dangerous ways [that are] detrimental to a community and then the enrollment will drop.*

Parents, on the other hand, might believe that, if student assessment results merit use in decisions with lifelong implications being made about their children, then assessment results also may be valid for assessing the educational value of what their children experience in classrooms, schools, and school districts.

A second and similarly controversial explanation is that educators do not wish to be held accountable for how their students achieve in school. A suburban elementary teacher observed, “A big gap is accountability as a profession. We don’t hold our teachers accountable enough.”

Others no doubt will offer explanations for the differences between the views of parents and educators. However, the differences are observable and they speak to the range of perceptions held about some assessment purposes. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that there is such commonality in the importance ascribed to the purposes of assessment included in Table 20, with the exception of using assessment results to evaluate teachers, schools, school districts, and the provincial education system.

Item	Educator			Student <sup>2</sup>			Parent		
	% V/I	% L/U	% DK	% V/I	% L/U	% DK	% V/I	% L/U	% DK
<b>How important is each assessment purpose?</b>									
<b><i>Inform Teachers</i></b>									
To inform teachers	97.4%	1.6%	0.0%	79.9%	10.5%	9.6%	93.8%	4.3%	2.0%
To inform decision making about individual students									
To identify students with special needs	93.3%	5.2%	1.0%	77.5%	10.2%	12.2%	90.6%	5.1%	4.3%
To identify students in need									
<b><i>Inform School District Staff</i></b>									
To inform school district staff	78.5%	18.2%	2.1%				82.0%	13.7%	4.3%
To identify schools in need	81.5%	16.0%	2.1%				89.1%	6.4%	4.6%
To identify schools that need support				81.1%	10.2%	8.7%			
To identify staffing needs	71.8%	23.2%	4.6%	70.2%	18.6%	11.3%	84.3%	9.0%	6.7%
To inform decision making about teachers				77.6%	11.9%	10.5%			
To inform decision making about schools				76.2%	13.1%	10.7%			
<b><i>Inform the Public</i></b>									
To inform the public	49.2%	46.1%	4.1%				61.8%	32.9%	5.2%
<b><i>Identify Professional Development Needs of Teachers</i></b>									
To identify professional development needs	88.7%	10.3%	0.5%						
To identify teacher's learning needs				71.4%	17.7%	10.9%			
To increase teachers' assessment knowledge and skills				77.8%	11.2%	11.0%			
To identify professional development needs							88.2%	6.5%	5.3%
<b><i>Evaluate Teachers</i></b>									
To evaluate teachers	66.2%	33.0%	0.5%				88.5%	9.2%	2.4%



## Teacher and Classroom-based Assessment

Over the past few decades the purposes and approaches to teacher and classroom-based assessment have shifted dramatically. In Alberta the direction for change has been influenced by province-wide initiatives such as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS), documents such as the *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind* (2006) and the *ATA Magazine* Volume 89, Issue 3, plus organizations such as the Alberta Assessment Consortium.

Some change, whether top-down or bottom-up, can be unsettling. An elementary principal expressed her thoughts about changes in district expectations for student assessment:

*It's easier to do the old style of assessment and feel like you are doing your job than it is now. It almost puts you to the point of stressed because you now understand the depth of what you need to be doing to give the kids. ... Kids need to demonstrate what they know in different ways. ... Of all the changes that have come down the pike, this assessment piece is the one that will have the biggest impact on student learning and that's why I'm so passionate about it. It's not like whole language thing that came and went and left kids who can't read.*

The following excerpt from an interview with a principal from a charter school added further insight as to how educators are viewing current changes in student assessment:

*Student assessment can help students to learn, [but] right now it doesn't. It's one of our biggest weaknesses. The confusion of assessment 'for' and 'of' learning and confusing of formative and evaluative components is a challenge. Historically teachers and students have focused on the evaluative not the formative. As we shift that focus it can become a better tool for helping students learn. The more we put students in the assessment design, and development and self-assessment, it motivates the students. The more we have it as authentic, the more helpful to students' learning. More mature students get it. Even if you just put a number on the test they will go through the answers....So it's a question of how can we change assessment so we get most students there? Also this approach helps to direct our teaching.*

This section of the research report summarizes the analyses of quantitative and qualitative data provided by educators, parents, and students in their responses to surveys, focus group dialogue, and individual interviews. Results have been organized according to six subtopics including contested assessment-related practices, multiple measures and methods, student feedback and motivation, curricular alignment, consistency and coherence, and ongoing improvement. Even though participant respondents gave numerous critical comments about current teacher/classroom-based assessment practice, the data generally suggest that many of the elements associated with effective student assessment have been or are currently being implemented.

complained that “too much copying notes means students can’t integrate or synthesize” and they “don’t like copying from the board or [from] PowerPoint slides.” Other secondary students commented they had “too many tests” and they “don’t like teachers using the same tests for years.” An elementary student raised a concern about having “too many tests in one week, for example, nine tests” and another offered that they had to do “lots of practice tests for PATs.” In regard to the latter, parents were also afraid that “PATs cause pressure” and that “PATs cause teaching to the test.” Whether assessment is contested or not, there was strong support for the use of multiple assessment measures and methods, and this is described in the next section.

**Multiple measures and methods.** Accepting that top-down and bottom-up change initiatives have influenced teacher and classroom-based assessment generally, the researchers were interested in gauging the general level of trust held for current practice. As shown in Table 21, educator and parent responses to the survey item *I trust the results of teacher-made assessments* was quite positive with 85.6% of educators and 79.7% of parents showing agreement or strong agreement. Perhaps indicative of this trust, one parent declared, “Assessment is just a normal part of life.” In response to a similar survey item *I trust the tests teachers make*, students indicated 75.3% agreement or strong agreement, although 1 in 5 students do not. In this section we explore the types of measures typically used by teachers in the classroom.

**Table 21**  
**Teacher Tests and Trust**

Item	Educator			Student <sup>3</sup>			Parent		
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
I trust the results of teacher-made assessments	85.6%	10.3%	4.1%				79.7%	12.8%	7.5%
I trust the tests teachers make				75.3%	19.5%	5.3%			

*Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don’t know. Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item. SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don’t Know.*

Table 22 provides a summary of educator, secondary and elementary student responses to the survey item, *How often is each assessment tool or practice used?* Interesting discrepancies emerged among the responses. Elementary students had fewer choices in comparison to secondary students and responses clustered most highly around individual and group work, homework, worksheets, and artwork. Secondary students’ response for

<sup>3</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

Table 22  
Assessment Tool or Practice Frequency

Item	Educator			Secondary Student (Grades 7 through 12)			Elementary Student (Grades 4 through 6)		
	% A/O	% R/N	% DK	% A/O	% R/N	% DK	% A/S	% N	% DK
How often is each assessment tool or practice used?									
Teacher-constructed multiple-choice tests	51.1%	47.9%	1.1%	91.8%	6.8%	1.4%	80.7%	10.4%	8.9%
Commercially-produced assessments	39.7%	57.7%	2.6%						
Publisher's tests				15.6%	41.8%	42.7%			
Portfolios	58.4%	40.5%	1.1%	17.7%	64.6%	17.6%			
Collections of student work							89.1%	2.7%	8.2%
Self-evaluation	73.2%	25.8%	1.1%						
Self-assessment				46.9%	47.7%	5.4%			
Oral presentations	67.0%	31.9%	1.0%	58.7%	37.7%	3.7%	83.8%	8.1%	8.1%
Assess according to a school or district mark distribution guideline	29.8%	59.6%	10.6%						
Compare to a set of standards				53.9%	19.1%	27.0%			
Group projects	64.2%	34.7%	1.1%	78.4%	19.5%	2.1%			
Group work							95.2%	3.8%	1.0%
Timed tests	31.1%	66.8%	2.1%	44.3%	51.2%	4.5%	66.3%	27.3%	6.4%
Individual projects	82.5%	15.9%	1.6%	83.7%	14.6%	1.7%			
Individual work							97.1%	1.0%	1.9%
Observe students at work	91.6%	8.4%	0.0%	37.7%	43.8%	18.5%			
Anecdotal records	66.8%	31.1%	2.1%						
Homework assignments	66.0%	33.0%	1.0%	90.8%	6.8%	2.4%			
Homework							96.8%	2.4%	0.8%
Compare informally to students from previous years	19.4%	73.8%	6.8%	30.7%	49.3%	19.9%			
Negotiate with students about assessment tasks	40.8%	53.4%	5.8%	43.4%	38.7%	18.0%			
Tasks relevant to real-world situations	85.3%	11.6%	3.2%	47.6%	43.2%	9.3%			
Reflective journals	52.4%	46.6%	1.0%						
Student journals				28.6%	65.3%	6.2%			

Qualitative data generally confirmed survey findings. As one elementary principal noted, “Students should be able to demonstrate learning in different ways,” and an elementary assistant principal expressed, “wanting to give a choice to the class for assessment.” Accordingly a variety of assessment approaches in the classroom would be expected. Elementary and secondary teachers and principals all reported the use of a variety of assessment measures including: rubrics, self-reflections, technology mediated assignments, checklists, projects, peer assessment, peer teaching, oral presentations, classes marking their own quizzes, multiple-choice, short-answer, observation, performance assessment, stories, paragraphs, lots of writing, homework, and exemplars. The most often cited strategy was using rubrics. The following quotation from an alternative high school teacher sheds some light on how teachers perceive of and use multiple assessment measures:

*We try to address the individual learning needs. If a student wants to do something different e.g., podcast, MP3, writing assignment, they could do that. We have the technologies in place to do different kinds of assessments like that right now. ... Our high school next door, I use the assessments/tests they do, but sometimes we give them to students in a different way. My students in Social Studies last year, everyone passed, and they aren't there every day.*

Comments offered by students and parents were in agreement with the notion of multiple assessment measures, and individual students expressed a preference for specific approaches such as open book exams, multiple-choice tests, and self-assessment in physical education.

Interview and focus group participants also offered some comments concerning assessment methods. An elementary assistant principal, for example, spoke to the need for “multiple chances for assignment completion.” One elementary student said he “liked constructing test [items] and [his] teacher selects some to use, and another mentioned his desire to have “access to study materials at home, [like] texts.” A secondary student offered that he “liked group work but not the group marks.” Other home-schooled secondary students “liked the flexibility and independence [of self assessment].” By far the most preferred strategy, and the most often mentioned, was to incorporate technology into general classroom practice. Classroom technology use included SmartBoards and “handhelds,” as one elementary teacher noted. Similarly an elementary student declared he wanted “technology access to do the work,” e.g., computers, SmartBoards, iMacs, but another secondary student was concerned that “not all kids have access to the internet.” Secondary teachers were keen on having access to more computer-adapted assessment, possibly in the format of a provincial standardized test item bank. As described in the following section, an important feature in teacher and classroom assessment is the feedback provided to students and motivation.

***Student feedback and motivation.*** Interview data included several comments regarding the nature of student feedback, preferences for feedback, and how feedback influences student motivation. An excerpt from an interview with an elementary assistant principal refers to the notion of assessment for learning (AFL) and the link to feedback:

Table 23  
Teacher/Classroom-based Assessment

Item	Educator			Student <sup>4</sup>			Parent		
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
<b>Teacher/Classroom-based Assessment Questions</b>									
There is a match across what is taught, what students need to learn, and how students are assessed.	73.8%	21.5%	4.6%	57.3%	15.0%	27.6%	57.2%	18.8%	24.0%
Regular attendance improves student achievement.				73.9%	16.1%	10.1%	95.6%	3.4%	1.0%
Teachers collaborate to review student assessment data.	90.3%	9.2%	0.5%						

Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know. Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item.  
SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know

<sup>4</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

In addition to curriculum alignment, participants felt there was a need for assessment clarity and coherence.

**Consistency and coherence.** For teacher and classroom-based assessment, the need for consistency and coherence was seen to be particularly important. An elementary teacher talked about the importance of linking student input and curriculum assessment:

*In my practice, the inclusion of student input from the development to the implementation and the end product—in the rubric—most of their assessments are generated where I do a part and they do a part. Then we get together and discuss it and come up with an end result—what are the benefits. They really understand what is expected. I understand the curriculum really well and the students understand it and they do it really well. They are able to describe what they did well and the expectations—the students are able to see why they got the mark they got and feel it is fair—students are more aware of the curriculum and I am as well. There have been times when I have looked at the curriculum and thought, “Oh I don’t have to do that or, oh dear, I do have to do that,” so I am looking at the curriculum document and it is a more day-to-day consciousness and that transfers onto the students and the parents.*

Although comments in this regard were mainly from educators, a secondary student did express that he wanted “assessment consistency in the same department.” In light of the fact that most secondary schools have multiple teachers for different subject areas, one teacher spoke of the importance to “seek consistency in common course finals, outlines, formative assessment, and weightings.” The need for consistency is further highlighted in the following excerpt:

*In my role and the district role we are trying hard to eliminate the educational lottery in assessment by streamlining our processes, such as common finals, common formative assessments, common course outlines, and weightings of each of the components determined on outcomes rather than behaviors. We are reflecting more what students know as opposed to what their behaviors are. Students feel it is fair for them.*

This degree of effort and commitment may in fact be necessary, as another secondary teacher put it “good assessment is onerous.” Perceptions were that this kind of coherence was achieved through “dialogue among colleagues” and a secondary principal felt the process contributed strongly to “teacher understanding.” There is evidence from the quantitative data to support these perceptions. In response to the survey item, *Teachers collaborate to review student assessment*, an impressive 90.3% of educators indicated they agreed or strongly agreed as shown in Table 23.

**Ongoing improvement.** Beyond the plethora of specific strategies described previously to advance teacher and classroom-based assessment, a number of generic strategies to promote ongoing improvement was evident in the research data. Relating to the practice of purposeful planning, one senior high school teacher shared her strategy of backward



*teachers. Huge curriculum sets kids up for failure. It happened with Math 30 Pure and will happen with Social 30 as well. ... We're not so time-focused and result-oriented. Rather than a detention, we work with student to get the work done, work through problems. We send positive and correct messages.*

Closely related to this is the issue of homework. One senior high school student complained of having “too much homework” and an elementary student divulged, “Incomplete homework must be completed during breaks at school.” One of the ways that schools have responded to homework issues and thereby likely contributed to ongoing improvement is to implement homework clubs right in the school. Students at elementary and secondary levels reported having access to this kind of support. Another factor associated with improving student achievement is attendance. Survey results for the item *Regular attendance improves student achievement* had 73.9% students and a resounding 95.6% of parents indicating that they agreed or strongly agreed (see Table 23).

In summary, there appears to be widespread acknowledgement of a transformation in teacher and classroom-based assessment, and despite ample evidence of change being implemented in Alberta schools, some criticism and perhaps confusion about contemporary classroom assessment remains. Several examples of contested assessment practice were noted. Confusion as to the focus on learning versus behavior and inappropriate test preparation, as well as some classroom assessment practices being perceived as reward and punishment were most often cited. Several specific strategies were tied to good classroom assessment practice including the use of multiple measures and methods, attention to student feedback and motivation, curricular alignment, and striving for consistency and coherence. In addition some generic approaches for ongoing improvement in teacher and classroom-based assessment practice were noted. Quantitative data affirm a general trust of teacher-based assessment and the use of multiple measures in classroom assessment, although some discrepancies in participant perceptions were evident for the latter. Only moderate agreement was indicated for the perceived match between what is taught, what students need to learn, and how students are assessed.

## **Provincial Assessment**

There are two forms of provincial standardized assessments in Alberta, the Provincial Achievement Tests and the Diploma Examinations. The Provincial Achievement Tests' purpose is to help educators maintain standards, to monitor student achievement over time, and to assist in improving the quality of education for elementary and junior high school students. These tests are not for certification purposes, however, and all Alberta students, with few exceptions such as students with identified severe special needs, are required to take these tests (Alberta Education, 2008a). Unlike the Provincial Achievement Tests, the main purpose of the Provincial Diploma Examinations Program is to certify the academic achievement of graduating students by awarding an Alberta High School Diploma, a Certificate of Achievement, or a High School Equivalency Diploma (Alberta Education, 2008b). Nevertheless, the examinations also assist

educators than the general public. A middle-school principal agreed that it was important for educators also because provincial assessment was used for curriculum monitoring. An elementary vice/assistant principal agreed “the PATs provide good benchmarks for all teachers in Alberta.”

The qualitative data were mixed about the provincial assessment’s impact on educators’ instruction; some educators reported that the impact on instruction was both positive and negative. The elementary educators who reported that provincial assessment had a positive impact on instruction based their views on the quality of the provincial achievement test questions and data analysis. The test questions were seen as “excellent” and “educative,” and subsequently influenced educators’ instruction. As an example, elementary educators noted the test questions’ variety and complexity, requiring students to use higher level thinking skills such as in solving problems that were new to the students, and applying information in a new situation. Another elementary educator noted that the tests influence educators to follow the curriculum and engage in good instruction: “What it boils down to is that the PATs make administrators and teachers responsible for teaching the curriculum.” The educator continued and reaffirmed the test question quality by describing the way the concepts are put in unfamiliar situations for students to then transfer their knowledge to solve problems. Other educators used the results to improve teaching and learning, for example, an assistant/vice principal said that at her school “the teachers analyze the PATs and talk about it as a division rather than ‘it’s you and your kids.’”

Elementary educators reported that the provincial achievement tests lead to teaching toward the test. Since the test is based on the curriculum this was seen as a positive practice. Two junior high educators reported that Alberta Education’s provincial assessment program was important because it set standards, promoted good practice, and provided curricular outcomes that gave continuity to teaching and program consistency, and that “the provincial achievement tests provide good benchmarks for all teachers in Alberta to know where they are at....” A high school educator said, “

*I hated diplomas until I heard the guy who is the person who okays the diploma exams. I [now know] the amount of effort and thought and research that goes into them.... If we all created our exams to this level we would be doing a great job.*

Secondary vice/assistant principals noted the usefulness of the diploma examination results because they led to a review by the teachers in the department. Senior high educators also reported that this was positive because it led to reflection, particularly where there were differences between the teacher marks and the diploma marks. Another high school educator said that the diploma examination improved his instruction after viewing the diploma examination results:

*Five years ago I had an English 30-2 class where marks were 10% lower than the provincial average. In [another province] there were no departmental exams. No formalized feedback to compare how students were doing to others. At that time I thought I was leaving the land of authentic assessment to the land of standardized*

The elementary educators perceived the provincial assessment was judgmental of teachers in that the results reflected the quality of teaching of those teaching “in the PAT years.” However, an elementary principal said that because the PATs drive the teaching, the PATs were the responsibility of all the school, not just Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers.

The quantitative data provided positive support about the provincial assessment program’s impact on instruction. Slightly more than half of the educators and approximately 66% of the parents reported that provincial standardized tests are useful for improving instruction (see Table 24).

**Table 24**  
**Provincial Standardized Tests are Useful for Improving Instruction**

Item	Educator			Student <sup>5</sup>			Parent		
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
Provincial standardized tests are useful for improving instruction.	53.6%	44.3%	2.1%				65.9%	22.8%	11.3%

*Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don’t know. Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item. SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don’t Know*

There was little mention of the impact that provincial assessment program had on classroom assessment, but senior high educators appreciated the part that the diploma examinations played in affirming credibility to their classroom grades and how the diplomas gave their class exams credibility. For example, a senior high principal said:

*At the same time [as I was an administrator] I taught in between diploma exams, and in my First Nations school the tests gave me credibility, and people couldn’t say that we gave high marks for kids just showing up. Despite problems with the tool, it gave us the same credibility and we didn’t have to defend ourselves any more.*

Senior high students supported this view because they believed that the diploma examinations encouraged educators to mark more accurately. One senior high student stated:

*I find it is better in Grade 12 because they mark tests like a Diploma, but grades 10 and 11 teachers are able to mark how they want—and so it is less accurate.*

<sup>5</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

An elementary educator said that the provincial standardized tests are meant to be viewed just as a snapshot, but another elementary educator reported that she didn't like multiple-choice exams. In support, another elementary educator said, "The multiple-choice test asks a lot for kids in Grade 3—it's a long time to concentrate."

Senior high educators noted the issue with cultural relevance in low socio-economic schools because of high numbers of diverse students. An elementary educator agreed, "Culturally, there is definitely issues, just going to achievement tests, there are issues with our student population with cultural relevance of assessment."

One senior high educator was concerned that one year the diploma marks were scaled. To assist students in some ways with reading and answering the questions on the Diploma Exams, another senior high educator suggested that high school students should have access to a class on how to write tests.

Although the qualitative data showed that educators and students expressed some concerns over the provincial assessments, the quantitative data indicated that 55.8% of the students and 56.3% of the parents trusted the results, but about the same percentage (53.9%) of the teachers in the study reported that they *did not trust* the results of the provincial standardized tests. Given that the trust of students and parents in teacher-made tests was high, one interpretation of Table 25 is that students and parents understood the lower weighting of provincial standardized tests relative to teacher-made assessment in overall decision making about educational programming and student placements.

**Table 25**  
**Provincial Standardized Tests' Results are Trustworthy**

Item	Educator			Student <sup>6</sup>			Parent		
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
I trust the results of provincial standardized tests.	33.2%	53.9%	13.0%	55.8%	32.3%	12.0%	56.3%	34.2%	9.5%

*Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know.*

*Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item.*

*SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know*

**Accountability and standards.** This segment addressing accountability and standards covers two topics: accountability and objectivity, and parent perceptions. According to the qualitative data, many educators from elementary, middle school, and senior high school made positive statements about the role the provincial standardized testing program plays

<sup>6</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

in accountability and establishing standards in the education system. Educators felt that provincial assessment was a good accountability measure and benchmark provider for Alberta educators. According to the educators, the provincial standardized tests provided consistency in the Diploma marking and made valid inferences from the student test results. Students, too, liked the consistency of the Diploma Examination program, particularly because “there was no bias in the marking since it wasn’t your teacher marking the exams.” Parents’ perceptions were also positive about the role the provincial standardized testing has in accountability. However, in contradiction, the quantitative data showed that about 60% of the educators reported that provincial standardized testing negatively affected parent confidence in the education system, while only 38% of the parents thought that it negatively affected parent confidence in the system.

Some educators would like to see a different balance in the testing program because of the perceived “high stakes” Diploma Examination that students take in the senior high school. Educators also would like richer assessment tools, such as performance-based assessments used in provincial standardized testing.

Elementary/middle school educators reported that, as far as accountability and objectivity were concerned, the provincial standardized tests were useful. One elementary educator said, “It’s a valid piece of data,” and another elementary educator said, “The PATs are an accountability measure for teachers.” Administrators supported this view and an elementary assistant principal said that the provincial standardized tests were good benchmarks for all teachers in Alberta. A secondary assistant/vice principal agreed saying, “I certainly think the Diplomas are a good accountability piece and they can measure how we’re doing provincially.” An elementary principal supported the provincial standardized testing program for its accountability role as well. She said,

*I am still a fan of standardized testing. There’s not one of us who doesn’t want to be accountable, or see those kinds of assessments as tools in the accountability process, [but] it’s too high stakes, and it needs to be balanced better. Those kinds of assessment tools in the assessment process are not rich enough.*

Parents said that there should be “some sort of standardized test” in the education system and that the Diploma Examinations serve adequately as a standardized measure for admission to postsecondary education institutions. Additionally, the provincial standardized testing was useful for school boards because the school boards need the provincial standardized assessments to check for trend data in their school districts. The parents thought that the provincial standardized tests were valuable because “the PATs take out some of the subjectivity out of assessment.” Another parent agreed that provincial standardized testing takes out the subjectivity because when classroom teachers mark student work, the grade is influenced by the child’s personality. The parent asked, “Who doesn’t have personality affecting marks? That’s how it has always been. They [teachers] base it on, ‘she’s a good kid.’ The PATs take out the personality.” Finally, if the provincial standardized testing seemed overdone to some, one group of parents suggested that a random sample of students be tested.

The qualitative data showed that some teachers felt that ranking had a positive effect. One elementary educator thought it positive to compare her school with other schools and cities to see how it rated, and an elementary principal said that the results were useful when judging schools. Another elementary school educator thought it positive to use the provincial achievement test results to compare student success and schools. Administrators in schools also felt positive about ranking, because of the positive effect it had when the school ranked highly. An elementary assistant/vice principal stated, “As long as achievement tests [results] are good then parents are happy.” When considering the parents’ attitudes towards ranking, one senior high educator said, “Parents love the rankings, statistics, and use it as an indicator.” In providing a rationale for ranking, one secondary principal said, “Rankings are a result of no previous accountability.”

One parent showed interest in comparing her child’s school results with those of other schools. Another parent agreed and said:

*It would be nice to see the comparison. Are rural schools doing as well as city schools? Are teachers teaching as well as teachers in other schools? I know they say that it is nerve wracking for kids but they should keep them [provincial tests] because all of your life you will need to do things you aren't excited about. It's a life skill.*

Almost twice as many parents (75.7%) as teachers (39.4%) said that provincial standardized tests are useful for ranking schools. This result was similar to the results for the statement, *Provincial standardized tests are useful for selecting schools*. Again about twice as many parents (55.4%) than teachers (26.4%) agreed that the provincial standardized tests were useful for *selecting* schools. Students were in close agreement with the parents and 47.1% said that the provincial standardized tests were useful for school selection. Not surprisingly, they reported a similar opinion about using the test results for school comparison; more than half the students (55%) said that the provincial standardized tests were useful for *comparing* schools.



*board and told them about what I was doing and what I was going to change for a few years. Then it clicked. If you look at participation rates it is a whole different thing, our rates are very high. If you look at how many percentages of students who are graduating from Pure Math 30, our stats look exceptional. It is a response to no accountability.*

An elementary/middle school assistant/vice principal reported that she did not like the publication of the provincial standardized test results: “Publishing it in the paper is quite annoying. We’re more interested in how the kids are learning, how the school is going.” A senior high educator who thought that the Fraser Institute reporting was partially helpful, said, “The Fraser Institute can be helpful. However, the way results are reported, I especially find it difficult for the elementary schools. It just is not helpful.” A middle-school principal agreed by saying that rankings may not be useful; nonetheless, he continued to say: “Human nature is a combination of fear and motivation so maybe it serves some purpose.”

One of the issues that came through clearly was the perception that ranking on the whole was unfair, particularly, as one elementary/middle-school principal stated, for schools with a low or high socio-economic status. “It’s an injustice to schools. We know certain schools are going to be lower for various reasons—economics play a factor.” Another middle-school educator cautioned that there are various reasons the provincial results might be low at a school. It is not only the socio-economic factor. It could be “the teaching and maybe leadership. [Provincial standardized test results] can be used in a dangerous way. [It’s] detrimental to a community and then the enrollment will drop.” An elementary assistant/vice principal from a different school agreed and said she didn’t like ranking, as did a senior high educator for similar reasons. An elementary principal agreed and said, “There needs to be a better way than comparing schools in terms of SES [socio-economic status]. It’s demoralizing for lower SES schools.” An observation that one elementary teacher made and reported was that “the PATs have changed from monitoring learning, to ranking of schools.” She continued to elaborate that the information should be used instead to improve teaching and learning.

Parents said that ranking was not a positive thing because private schools can discourage weaker students from registering in them so that the school can maintain a higher ranking in the public reports. Not surprisingly, parents in lower socio-economic status schools said they didn’t like the Fraser Report because the lower SES schools ranked low and the parents felt that that did not necessarily reflect the quality of the school, and that it was unfair. One parent said, “If you are able to explain the items and they [students] understand, they can knock it [the provincial standardized test] out of the ball park....

One group of parents in agreement about the negative effects of ranking schools said:

*It’s not fair for [using] provincial testing to grade a school, to say that’s a good school or a bad school. It depends upon language and cultural barriers. ... I don’t like how they rank them in the newspaper. It’s like a reflection of that whole community. ... It’s not positive. It affects all the kids who go to that school. That can*

**Table 29**  
**Provincial Standardized Tests are Useful for Ranking Students**

Item	Educator			Student <sup>10</sup>			Parent		
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
Provincial standardized tests are useful for ranking students.	34.9%	64.1%	1.0%						

*Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know. Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item. SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know*

**Affective/emotive responses.** Emotive responses, at various levels of intensity, emerged regularly throughout the interviews with parents, students and educators. The qualitative data indicated that the emotive responses from administrators, educators, students, and parents occurred in a continuum of intensity and time. Elementary educators involved with the Provincial Achievement Tests felt pressure from administrators, and noted the trickle-down effect on students, teachers, and parents. A secondary principal reported that some students had few concerns while there were other students with many concerns with the Diploma Examinations. She said that there was “a continuum of students [from those] who are OK with exams to those who freak out.”

The emotional continuum regarding provincial standardized assessment appeared to begin as early as elementary school. An elementary student felt the pressure throughout the year: “I think everyone is worried because the whole year you are preparing for the test and it makes it seem like a big thing.” A senior high teacher concurred and said “they *always* focused on Dips [Diploma Examinations].”

At the middle-school level, one teacher reported:

*Oh, they are stressed, especially in Grade 9 because we talk about their [course] selection in high school and what pathway they can take, and some don't stress, but others, especially the high achievers, do get stressed about their high school options.*

The senior high student experience was no exception as far as the test pressure issue over a timeframe was concerned. According to a group of senior high students, they had been preparing for the Diploma Examination for the whole year, and noted that a Diploma Examination preparation course was helpful:

<sup>10</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

On the other hand, an elementary teacher reported that the provincial standardized tests stress the parents as well:

*Parents are stressed about them. There are books going home to prepare their child for the PATs so that they can study for the exams. It is a major focus from March to June, a heavy emphasis on the PATs.*

An elementary assistant/vice principal agreed and said:

*The attitude of teachers is a huge piece. If teachers are nervous about it, then students are. Just another way of assessing.... [In our school] it is a deliberate attempt to spread that responsibility, so it is not just the Grade 3, 6, and 9 teachers who have all the pressure with the PATs.*

In support of the statement that teacher attitude is a factor in student stress, a group of middle-school teachers said:

*Teachers take it far too personally. [We] try to temper our teachers in terms of PATs outcomes. It helps to see where we are [and] where we are going. If students do poorly, [we] need to have that discussion about what went wrong.*

At the senior high level, a group of alternative high school students reported, that there was “far too much pressure on students. You see kids freaking out before exams, throwing up in toilets before exams. You are 18 years old and that is not good for your mental well being or for your health.” Other students from another senior high school said that teachers bully and threaten students with diploma failure. However, a secondary school assistant principal countered and said that there was “a lot of self-induced anxiety at the Grade 12 level.” A group of senior high students agreed that the stress comes from teachers, parents, and the students themselves.

Although many students, teachers, and parents had reservations about provincial standardized testing, not all comments were negative. Some parents thought that the “Grade 3 PATs were OK.” Specifically, one parent said:

*PATs [involve] teaching to the test. Depending upon who the teacher is, and not specifically here, is that really an accurate snapshot of how kids are doing if taught to the test? [It is] a lot of pressure the year they are in PATs.*

Elementary/middle school students said the PATs sound a lot harder than what they are and another student at the elementary/middle school grade level said, “PATs make me feel professional.” Another student said, “Teachers make us feel good about PATs.” Secondary students said that their parents “think PATs are educational and good.”

Some elementary teachers said that it was “Good to have achievement tests.” An elementary assistant/vice principal reported that the school staff understood the purpose of the provincial standardized testing program: “We talk about PATs in the fall with the executive team but there’s not a lot of pressure there. I try to lower the stress level for the

**Table 30**  
**Provincial Standardized Testing's Effect on Student and Teacher Emotions**

Item	Educator			Student <sup>11</sup>			Parent		
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
Provincial standardized testing negatively affects student emotions.	87.6%	8.8%	3.6%	63.0%	21.2%	15.8%	46.0%	35.4%	18.6%
Provincial standardized testing negatively affects teacher emotions.	80.9%	14.4%	4.6%	38.0%	34.4%	27.6%	37.4%	30.8%	31.8%
Provincial testing positively affects teacher emotions.	14.4%	78.5%	7.2%	33.1%	36.0%	30.8%	30.3%	35.8%	33.9%
Provincial testing positively affects student emotions.	11.9%	82.0%	6.2%	33.8%	48.3%	17.9%	33.8%	44.8%	21.4%

*Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know. Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item. SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know*

**Rumours and misunderstandings.** Rumours and misunderstandings arose during the educator and parent interviews. The rumours and misunderstandings centered around two topics, questionable practices and confusion.

Some of the questionable practices such as misrepresenting student results occurred because educators did not want to feel embarrassed about students' poor provincial standardized test results. An elementary educator explained it this way: "Teachers cheat on the PATS because they take these assessments personally." Another elementary educator said, "Some schools, not ours, advise students to stay home on the day of PATs." A parent supported this statement when she said, "Weaker kids are told to stay home." Another parent concurred: "Some schools excuse a lot of kids. It does skew the results if they don't participate."

<sup>11</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

The qualitative data showed that teachers were concerned about being evaluated on their students' provincial standardized test results and thought that if these were poor then teachers would be transferred. The quantitative data (Table 31) showed that there was strong disagreement between the educators and the students and parents about the value of using provincial standardized testing for evaluating teachers. Only about 21% of the educators agreed that provincial standardized tests were useful for evaluating teachers, although about 59% of the parents and students agreed that provincial standardized tests were useful for evaluating teachers.

**Table 31**  
**Provincial Standardized Tests Utility for Evaluating Teachers**

Item	Educator			Student <sup>12</sup>			Parent		
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
Provincial standardized tests are useful for evaluating teachers.	20.7%	78.2%	1.0%	58.2%	25.2%	16.6%	59.8%	30.5%	9.6%

*Note:* Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know. Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item. SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know

**Gatekeeping.** There was no item on the survey about the issue of the Diploma Examinations serving as a “gatekeeper” for university entrance. However, because the topic arose from the parents, student, and educator interviews several times, it was included in this report in a separate section. Educators and parents saw the Diploma Examinations as useful devices for university gatekeeping purposes. Students, on the other hand, were concerned about gatekeeping because it negatively affected course selection, created pressure, led to test anxiety, and caused fear of failing the Diploma Examinations, and failing to qualify for university entrance.

Many educators and parents agreed that there was a need to have examinations for gatekeeping for purposes of university entrance and stated that the Diploma Examination weighting of 50% served that purpose well. Further, they said that the students' Diploma Examination experiences also prepared them for writing examinations once they gained entrance to university. For example, one principal said, “The Diploma Exam tests how they [students] are that day. I see my role as preparing them for writing exams. It's the same skill they need to know if they go to postsecondary.”

<sup>12</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

## Grade Level of Achievement

Grade Level of Achievement (GLA) reporting involves teachers providing Alberta Education with their judgments of their students' achievement in meeting the Program of Studies outcomes in grades 1 through 9 language arts and mathematics. GLA data are intended to provide all levels of the education system with student performance information that will help decision-makers at the school, jurisdiction, and provincial levels evaluate the impact of education programs. This information is intended to be particularly useful in examining performance of groups of students in relation to a range of factors, such as gender, student mobility, English as a Second Language [ESL], and special learning needs. As additional data are collected each year, provincial trends can be monitored for different groups of students and this could result in local and/or provincial programs, initiatives and/or policies aimed at helping students to be more successful. Alberta Education will not use GLA data to evaluate jurisdiction, school, or teacher performance, except potentially in rare cases when a Ministerial review is undertaken under Section 43 of the *School Act* (Alberta Education, 2008).

Educators were concerned when GLA reporting was first introduced since many educators and parents did not understand its purpose or why it was included for accountability purposes. Some of those concerns were expressed during The Alberta Student Assessment Study interviews. According to an elementary vice principal talking about Grade Level of Achievement, "Initially GLA was met with trepidation." Some senior high educators reported that at the beginning, the GLA reporting was "difficult for teachers to get their heads around." An elementary assistant principal said that the teachers' association was not supportive of the GLA reporting and said, "[The provincial teachers' association staff member] has been very negative on the introduction of Grade Level of Achievement." Another elementary assistant/vice principal agreed and said, "[provincial teachers' association] newsletters have been very negative."

As educators became more familiar, with experience and through professional development (PD), with the purpose of GLA reporting, there was a subsequent shift in perception, curriculum focus, and assessment practice. A middle-school principal said that there was "a need to focus PD on GLA which also focuses on the curriculum." Some senior high educators said that GLA is focusing teachers on the curriculum. An elementary principal said that in her school the GLA has "shifted thinking about what is best in marking kids to be accountable to the public." An elementary vice principal reported that GLA was just more information to help. Several educators agreed that once understood, the GLA was no longer a concern. An elementary assistant principal summed it up by saying, "GLA is a 'non-issue.'"

Elementary/middle school students said that GLA should be reported on the report card for parent communication. Another group of elementary/middle school students talked about the consistency the GLA brings to evaluation when students move from school to school and noted, "All schools do things differently so it's difficult when you switch."

Although Grade Level of Achievement reporting initially was met with trepidation and was difficult to understand, the quantitative data indicated that this is no longer the case. Seventy-seven percent of educators and students agreed that it was easy to determine the grade level at which students performed. Parents were in close agreement as well with almost 73% in



**Table 33**  
**Achievement Reporting and Student Mobility**

Item	Educator			Student <sup>14</sup>			Parent		
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
Accurate reporting of student achievement is difficult when students move from one school to another.	76.4%	19.9%	3.7%	52.1% (SS)	13.2% (SS)	34.6% (SS)	56.2%	21.0%	22.8%
				70.9% (ES)	29.1% (ES)				

*Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know.*

*Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item.*

*SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know*

Grade Level of Achievement Reporting is designed to help determine how well different programs are working for different groups of students, and to provide information to various stakeholders for evaluating the impact of education programs. This information was expected to be helpful for monitoring provincial trends for various groups of students and those with high mobility rates. Both educators and parents agreed that the GLA reporting was useful for monitoring student progress and tracking student history across schools (see Table 34).

<sup>14</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

**Table 35**  
**Achievement Reporting as Encouragement to Learn**

Item	Educator			Student <sup>16</sup>			Parent		
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
Reporting students' performance at, above, or below grade level will be useful for encouraging student learning.	65.8%	27.5%	6.7%						

*Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know. Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item. SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know*

The quantitative data showed that educators, students, and parents generally agreed about the usefulness of the GLA reporting. In addition, the Grade Level of Achievement Reporting rated as a positive element in education except for one item where the educators were not highly in favor. This one item that was rated low by educators was *Reporting students' performance at, above, or below grade level will be useful for evaluating teaching*. On this item, 41.2% of the educators agreed, but over three quarters (77.4%) of the parents agreed that it was useful for evaluating teaching. However, as indicated in the opening paragraph of this section, Alberta Education will not use GLA data to evaluate jurisdiction, school or teacher performance unless a Ministerial review is undertaken.

<sup>16</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

Importantly, school administrators stated that they use assessment data of all kinds—classroom, provincial, and specialist—to share decision-making. For example, one elementary assistant principal described how he and his colleagues invited parents to participate in decisions about students because "we are in partnership in programming." As well, he outlined using assessment data when teachers, parents, and program specialists met to make decisions about individual students, as did a secondary school assistant principal:

*Every semester before we enroll students in new courses, there's an examination of their program and we all profile before the students come in. Look at IPPs, multiple intelligence tests. We look at their scores from previous assessments. Talk to their other teachers, especially if it is considered that the student is not able to do the course. We would also involve the parents in that situation as well.*

An elementary school principal and a teacher in the same school outlined how educators in their building sought as much assessment data as they could to inform classroom instructional practices and to assist with significant decisions such as the formation of reading groups, ability grouping, and even grade retention and promotion. Similarly, a senior high school teacher explained that teachers in her school used the results of Grade 9 Provincial Achievement Tests to place students in Grade 10, although she observed that placements based on Grade 9 achievement test results were not always appropriate.

The examples of decisions informed by student assessment data that study participants provided to the research team demonstrate the powerful potential of good assessment, if decision makers know the strengths and limitations of various forms of student assessment. Used improperly, virtually any assessment possibly can harm the very individuals it is designed to help. Used responsibly, assessment data constitutes one of the most valuable tools available to educators and policy makers. As described in the next section, educational leaders have a responsibility to develop the skills and knowledge needed to establish fair and accurate student assessment practices in schools, districts, and the province.

## Leadership

Participants in The Alberta Student Assessment Study recognized the pivotal and complex role of educational leaders, particularly focusing on school principals and vice/assistant principals, in establishing accurate and fair assessment practices in classrooms. As outlined below, participants described how important it is for principals to operate with a strong assessment knowledge base and with the support of the members of their school communities. In addition, study participants recognized that school leaders need to make hard decisions to promote high quality assessment that supports best teaching practices. They also noted how school leaders must guide and support teachers' professional learning. Importantly, the role of student leadership emerged as a construct encountered too rarely in the educational literature.

Table 37  
Principals and Assessment Leadership

Item	Educator			Student <sup>18</sup>			Parent		
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
	SA/A	D/SD	DK	SA/A	D/SD	DK	SA/A	D/SD	DK
Principals and vice/assistant principals ensure that students are assessed fairly.	71.1%	21.1%	7.7%	59.3%	21.6%	19.1%			
Principals and vice/assistant principals know a lot about student assessment.	77.8%	12.9%	9.3%				56.0%	16.3%	27.7%
Principals and vice/assistant principals encourage teachers to expand their assessment practices.	92.8%	7.2%	0.0%						
Principals and vice/assistant principals help teachers learn more about student assessment.	76.0%	20.8%	3.1%						

Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know.

Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item.

SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know

<sup>18</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

principal. He noted that principals in the school typically stayed for about two years and then transferred to other communities within the city and said that he was "not sure if he (the current principal) has the support of his staff." He expressed his deep sadness that his daughter's school, one with which his family had generational ties, suffered from such a perceived level of leadership instability. A mother of a child in the same school stated that principal's support base was weak because he had "not enough training about how to work with school councils" or sufficient "training in management and budgets." At the senior high school level, a teacher repeated a rumor in his school district that "some schools closed their shop programs to get more academic students" so they could raise their students' achievement average. Clearly, the general credibility of some school leaders within their educational communities affects their capacity to provide effective leadership in assessment practices.

**Hard decisions.** Study participants, who represented schools and school districts of all kinds, focused collectively on the importance of ensuring that principals possess the capacity to make hard decisions about the kinds of assessment practices that are acceptable. They talked about the need for school leaders to be able to initiate conversations about student assessment and to establish standards for acceptable assessment practices throughout their schools. They also linked decision-making about student assessment to the overall quality of instruction. For example, two elementary school teachers perceived their principal's ability to promote dialogue about student assessment as important support for their work in classrooms. One of them described the principal's support as including the arrangement of "times for us to talk about PAT (Provincial Achievement Tests) results and to set up goals for improvement." This positive perception of principal support was similar to that of a teacher who expressed his gratitude for having the principal of his rural high school prompt the teaching staff to focus more on student learning and "not so much on teaching." School administrators themselves articulated their belief that assessment leadership must be one of their priorities. An assistant principal in a senior high school, where there was widespread pride in their collective growth in learning about desirable student assessment practices, attributed teachers' professional learning to the school principal. At the elementary level, a principal emphasized his conviction that leading assessment was one of her professional obligations as an instructional leader. A teacher in a suburban junior high school described how "the principal at this school emphasizes thinking about curriculum but also (about) using a variety of assessment strategies. We do have discussions about it in staff meetings and PD sessions."

School leaders have a responsibility to establish acceptable assessment practices, according to those study participants who engaged in focus group and interview conversations. A principal of a large urban senior high school emphasized how it takes "courage to note the ways that change is needed in teacher practice." A holder of a doctoral degree, he said that he is motivated by asking himself and his colleagues, "Do you want your daughter or son taught in this way?" A teacher in the same senior high school described her belief that the "principal needs to make sure the teachers assume responsibility for failing students." This demanding perspective was echoed by a teacher in a rural senior high school who observed that, "He's pissed people off along the way" but "he's tenacious with his commitment to do what is right for kids!" An assistant principal in the same rural school said that her principal

teachers need to be assessed more frequently on the kinds of assessment they do in the classroom."

**Leading professional learning.** The nearly 93% agreement of educators with the statement that *Principals and vice/assistant principals encourage teachers to expand their assessment practices*, highlighted earlier in this report, is extremely high. However, the details of how "encouragement," is manifested are complex and multidimensional, as evidenced in the previous section, *Hard Decisions*. In fact, the high level of detail that characterized interview and focus group conversations suggested that the challenges associated with leading professional learning about student assessment, when they appear, can be highly stressful for all concerned. Nonetheless, as an elementary principal observed, "Teachers have to be on board to make assessment of PD sustainable" and study participants perceived that attention to leading professional learning was particularly important. A more detailed description of what study respondents said about leading professional learning is provided in the following section, titled *Professional Development and Teacher Knowledge*, and in the study recommendations. However, this component of the leadership section will address the advice about professional learning that study participants suggested school leaders consider carefully.

The first suggestion was provided by an urban middle-school principal who suggested that school leaders, who wish to focus on professional learning that relates to student assessment, seek first to "work with the willing." That is, he opined that greater success, in the form of teacher learning and actual improvements in classroom practice, occurs when educators participate voluntarily in professional learning. Second, the same individual stated that it was important to match learning initiatives with organizational needs and individual teacher goals because, "If you connect initiatives to their own sense of wanting to do something you have a better chance of success."

A senior high school teacher claimed that he and his colleagues felt empowered when their principal modelled learning about assessment. Other educators, in both elementary and secondary schools, highlighted other forms of support for professional learning about student assessment that they believed benefited them. These supports included "timetabling so that core area teachers can collaborate on a regular basis," structuring opportunities for "colleagues to observe in the classroom even though it is a bit artificial," and "taking teams of teachers (even entire staffs in small schools) to conferences focusing on student assessment." Study participants suggested that principals "do not have to be experts in curriculum or assessment" themselves but, rather, provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate, provide funding, offer a framework for professional development, bring in outside expertise, and appoint "learning coaches" from within the school. An elementary teacher emphasized the importance of providing time, funds to study, and opportunities to see what is being done in other school boards.

## Professional Development and Teacher Knowledge

In any educational system, establishing, maintaining, and enhancing teacher knowledge is key to ensuring optimal practice. This section reports the main issues that emerged from the study data in relation to teacher knowledge and professional development. Specifically, four subthemes emerged: needs, formats, challenges, and outcomes.

The subtheme “needs” encompasses teacher knowledge and practice, and the perspectives related to partnerships teachers had or would have liked to have with various stakeholders. “Formats” of professional development is presented from two perspectives, professional development internal to the school and external professional development. The subtheme “challenges” covers a wide range of different aspects, such as the confusion about assessment that interviewees reported, and negative emotions that too often arise when discussing assessment. It also includes a discussion of missed opportunities for professional learning, perceptions of a lack of accountability within the educational system, concerns with time, and the ineffectiveness of one-shot professional development. Finally, the “outcomes” of professional development are presented as they relate to increasing teachers’ knowledge and skills and their levels of openness.

Educators in this study definitely were interested in the topic of professional development. They readily discussed what professional development programs they had undertaken, what had been effective for them, and what was largely ineffective, and they could articulate why. Teachers held assessment topics as professional development priorities. They generally wanted more professional development, particularly that which is explicit and practical. Much of the professional development that was available was not perceived as effective for one reason or another, and this frustrated teachers when they engaged but came away without attaining or refining their knowledge, skills and resources about assessment. The range of professional development topics discussed in this study was considerable as were the providers. Teachers demonstrated considerable awareness of their professional development needs and were keen to access ongoing learning opportunities. This was a strong indicator of the sense of professionalism within the educational community. The opinion of teachers about the quality of the professional development on assessment was highly variable, dependent upon their personal experiences. Professional development remains a contentious area for Alberta teachers.

**Needs.** Teachers desire to engage in professional development focused on improving their knowledge and skills about optimal assessment and this was an overwhelming theme throughout the interviews. Many appreciated the professional development opportunities that had been made available to them; however, there was clearly a need for more targeted professional development and greater access to expertise and knowledge specifically about how to undertake sound assessment. A veteran teacher described his professional development experiences:

*Professional development is fabulous. I am learning so much. It is amazing to me. There are so many supports in place in terms of curriculum. Curriculum documents and people are available here much more so than in [another province]. I have the opportunity to go to resource meetings and they give you really great ideas about how to motivate students.*

**Table 38**  
**Teacher Knowledge about Assessment**

Item	Educator			Student <sup>19</sup>			Parent		
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
	SA/A	D/SD	DK	SA/A	D/SD	DK	SA/A	D/SD	DK
Teachers know a lot about student assessment.	83.3%	14.1%	2.6%	62.9% (SS) 97.9% (ES)	15.8% (SS) 2.1% (ES)	21.4%	63.3%	15.6%	21.1%

*Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know. Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item. SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know*

Within the qualitative data there was a range of views expressed about the level of teacher knowledge. The continuum encompassed statements that indicated that teacher knowledge about assessment was increasing as a result of professional development, e.g., “[I] keep current with best practices. Attend workshops, inservices, keep up with the literature in the field. Lots of it is available.” An elementary teacher stated, “feedback can only be as good as the test and test making is a highly developed skill and I don't think a lot of teachers have that skill.” At the other end of the continuum there were teachers and school leaders who indicated that there were gaps in teacher knowledge. For example, secondary teachers stated:

*“We really don't know how to assess. We're lost about how to assess many of our students.”*  
*“Assessment isn't a new fad that we will drop off. It's the way things should always have been done. It's a clearing up of bad practices that we shouldn't be doing. It makes us better teachers and focus on the right things.”*  
*“Teachers should know more about making assessment objective.”*

A less experienced secondary teacher indicated that “there is a lot of support which aided me to develop my understanding and improve the gap from university education.” A colleague indicated a desire to “hear how to do student assessment from teachers in the alternative stream” because these teachers appeared to be more flexible with their assessment practices. Causes for concern included statements that “People need to know the Program of Studies,” and “Some teachers didn't know where their curriculum guide/Program of Studies was.”

<sup>19</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.



*[It] takes reflection on practice and being able to have open mind, and see what others are doing, see how you are doing in comparison to your peers, so ranking again for educators can have a benefit that way.*

He indicated that reducing teacher isolation was a positive step towards more consistent and sound assessment practice.

Elementary teachers indicated that there have been changes to assessment practices over time as a result of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects:

*When we did AISI a few years ago, we built rubrics and did a lot of writing with rubrics and exemplars. ... Last year as part of the AISI we talked about how assessment is something we wanted to explore more.*

Another upper elementary teacher reported:

*There is still a lot of work to be done. It is personal experience but I know what is going on in my school as well as other elementary teachers and we are working on this [assessment] and trying to change things.*

She continued by reflecting on her experience as a parent and how there appeared to be issues in the high school setting around assessment practices:

*I know there are things happening that should not be happening. The grading, the recording, it is not based on what they [the students] know but on how they [the students] play the game, and I question if the assessments are actually assessing the curriculum outcomes or is it just the same test that has been used over the years and it is also a power thing [with the teacher who says], "If you don't listen to me then ...." It is almost a one chance sort of thing and then they are on to the next thing rather than going back over things and relearning.*

Secondary teachers also indicated they were engaging with assessment issues and challenges. One stated:

*Curriculum guides should be user friendly. You can get what you need out of them but you have to work at it. Teachers know where they are on their shelves but don't use them.*

Another teacher reported the value of increased transparency by "sharing the marks book. That's been a big thing. Waiting to open these up in front of each other it kind of decreases that fear." This same teacher reported that the principal had encouraged all staff, particularly those in similar disciplines to work together to increase consistency in assessment practice and to explore why there may be significant differences in marking across teachers within the same discipline.

One teacher cautioned that collaborative teams needed to have enough structure so that professional development activities were purposeful and yet not too prescriptive:

*In our school we have tried to develop professional learning communities (PLC) both within and across schools and that has been a fairly good start. But perhaps it was a bit too prescriptive at the start, where we started to look at formative assessment relative to inquiry. Then over time they [the administration team] worked out if they backed off and let the PLCs work on their own focus for assessment...Initially it was not very productive, but now, because of the freedom, it has been more productive.*

Working with colleagues can also support the learning of the professional development facilitator. An elementary assistant principal stated:

*Now I'm a learning coach. It is a great opportunity. There are frustrations but it is great to work with teachers. You're there to support but you learn from them and from the conferences you get to go to.*

Another administrator indicated that all the teachers “present when they return from a conference” so that it increased information sharing in the school. A secondary assistant principal stated that she shared her “graduate program information about assessment with staff” so that there was research-based information coming into the school to inform their professional development.

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS I) projects frequently focused on improving assessment. Leaders supported the AIS I projects and stated that this initiative had enabled teachers to work together to improve their practice:

*The best thing is AIS I, providing teachers the opportunities to come together with the support of outside experts for teachers to reflect upon their assessment practices and make the changes they want and need to make based upon the students they are teaching.*

*More needs to be supported. AIS I is a gift because it allows us to buy time to work together. You can't do it otherwise. You need to resource it, so if more is wanted, it needs to be resourced.*

*I think most of what you find is if you provide the resource and support, there are teachers who are curious about their practice. Teachers are people who want to do the best job they can and all they need is support, inspiration, resources, and leadership to do the work.*

The other advantage identified by an administrator was that teachers shaped many of the AIS I projects themselves and so it has the advantage of being more of a bottom-up approach, “Our next AIS I project is assessment. It's really healthy. There is a groundswell coming from teachers [who] are saying we need and want this.”

Some educators indicated more personal orientations to professional growth with one elementary teacher stating she “learned about assessment on the job.” A number of interviewees indicated that becoming parents themselves made assessment more personal and more important to get it right for other people’s children: “Becoming a parent was a defining moment in my teaching career.”

A number of external-to-the-school activities were cited in the interviews as excellent professional development. For example, both secondary and elementary teachers reported marking the Diploma and Provincial Achievement Tests this way:

*The best PD.*

*Marking in Edmonton, every single core teacher should be given the opportunity to mark exams. That works. It reinforces what you do and opens you up to ideas you might not have thought of. [You develop an] understanding of the process, and how to teach it... all that sharing with colleagues.*

*I've been on the marking floor in Edmonton. It's a careful, fair, judicious process, an excellent professional development opportunity.*

Teachers’ comments indicated that marking provincial standardized tests and examinations enabled them to understand better the behind-the-scenes construction of assessment instruments, to see how carefully this was done, and understand the training that went into ensuring marker consistency. Many of these teachers wished that similar approaches to consistency were adopted in schools for teacher-based assessments and said they would welcome professional development processes that enabled teachers to work together to this end.

A surprisingly pervasive perception emerged in this study related to technology, its use in the classroom, and its potential to support the assessment and reporting of outcomes. A secondary principal referring to reporting software currently available indicated that “in the future perhaps we can use technology to link learning and curriculum outcomes better.” He reported that this development was already underway and that he was awaiting these developments.

Secondary teachers reported how technology supported their professional development through Internet resources, “The district has a website for teachers to post their assessment ideas” and we “bring in ideas for discussion from webcasts.” These teachers indicated that these technology-mediated mechanisms enabled greater sharing of materials and increased access to experts and information.

Although many educators reported wanting greater collegial collaboration within their schools for professional development purposes, there were also outside agencies and activities that were perceived as useful. For example, the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) was cited numerous times in interviews as a powerful professional development resource. An elementary assistant principal reported, “AAC is working well with strong formative and summative assessment practices, tapping research. Yearly conferences have been instrumental in engaging schools.”

Interviewees reported confusion about student assessment. For example, assessment terminology presented real challenges because they created misconceptions and confusion among school-based educators. An elementary assistant principal stated that AFL [assessment for learning] needed clarification. A secondary teacher stated “what we have now is teachers assessing areas where they don't have expertise.” There appeared to be some differences in opinion about teachers' expertise in the high school compared with the elementary context: “Elementary teachers believe that high school teachers have a limited understanding of teaching and assessment for, and of, learning.”

Confusion was reported as introduced by speakers at the conferences. One elementary teacher indicated that she had become confused about the purposes of the provincial exams as a result of a conference presentation when a “speaker from Finland said we were strange that we focus on teaching to the test when they don't do those tests and they focus on learning and it really made you think.” The disallowing of Alberta Education personnel from making presentations explaining achievement testing, some aspects of diploma examinations, and the provincial Accountability Pillar at provincial teachers' association-sponsored conventions and specialist council events means that important opportunities to reduce confusion among educators are precluded.

Educators expressed a range of negative emotions related to the topic of professional development about student assessment. One secondary assistant principal described a principal-led professional development day when teachers had been encouraged to investigate why there were large differences in the marks assigned to students by teachers within the same department. He encouraged them to explore ways to increase the consistency of marking and grading but the assistant principal reported:

*It is new. It is making people uncomfortable about their practices and teachers are no different to students. They come up with excuses why they can't do it. That is part of the evolution you have to go through. There are people who are angry and when ... there are people in the staff room who don't make eye contact and these are during conversations about assessment and holding the group [teachers] accountable for assessment. They [teachers] have all those skills and deflecting actions that kids have and with some they have that stone look on their face, not smiling, a stony look on their face, and you know they are not enjoying it or on the same page.*

Some teachers reported experiencing fear of new innovations, for example, when faced with new technology, “A lot of times it is fear. I was terrified about *SmartBoards* but in two minutes I got it.” Some teachers expressed a level of defensiveness about working with curriculum leaders or administrators to improve their assessment practices. As one secondary teacher stated, “I think too if someone says my assessment is bad teaching practice, I'd be defensive. If someone said ‘no that's bad’ then I'd probably start crying. I'd be shocked and wonder why they think that.”

and skills about assessment. They shared the professional development frameworks used in their schools and districts. The frameworks demonstrated teacher involvement in collaborative activities focused on improving student outcomes and using a range of assessment tools, e.g., both provincial standardized tests and examinations and teacher-made assessment tools, to inform decision making and professional development activities.

One school administrative team described how its members had developed a school professional development framework designed to increase the quality of teachers' assessment knowledge and practices. The theoretical underpinnings of the framework had been informed through the administrators' university graduate degree programs. The administrators related how they encouraged teachers to work together in teams to discuss and share assessment ideas and resources, and also to cross teams within the school to broaden discussions. This was not an isolated situation as a teacher had indicated that there had been a shift in her school from "teacher centered assessment to student-centered assessment."

Study participants indicated that there was a need for teachers to "keep an open mind, to see what others are doing" so they can "reflect on their practice" and make appropriate changes to their assessment practices. One teacher said, "We want young graduates to have capacity to question and support, while educational leaders and senior staff need to have the capacity to be open to questioning of their taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs about assessment." However, participants indicated though that openness was not necessarily comfortable for all educators and that change tended to "make people uncomfortable about their practices." A teacher stated:

*[The] first thing you need to do is to look at your practice yourself and look at what you are assessing and why. Once you do that then you need to challenge long held beliefs. Then you are ready to look at alternatives. [You] need a philosophical grounding, look at your pedagogy, and then you are more open to change and improvement.*

Educators also said they wanted more cross-district or cross-school professional development because they felt that this would expose them to broader conversations, different approaches to assessing students, and more opportunities to develop and share assessment resources and tools. One teacher stated she wanted more "external PD because it is good to interact in other systems for comparisons and so we don't become parochial." This was particularly important to teachers who were the only one of their type or discipline in the school, e.g., special education teachers, option teachers, or language teachers.

## Preservice Education

The original design of The Alberta Student Assessment Study did not include a focus on teacher preparation in Alberta. Rather, preservice education did not emerge until the research team began conducting focus groups and interviews in Stages Two and Three of the study. A large amount of initially unsolicited information about preservice education emerged and this led the researchers to

It was noted that students currently in elementary and secondary schools may be experiencing better assessment practices because of ongoing professional development in schools and districts. As a result, study participants suggested, graduating students may be concerned when they enroll in Alberta universities where outdated assessment practices still exist. For example, one teacher commented:

*I worry that as we get better at doing these things at the secondary level I'm not sure the postsecondary level is keeping up. We do good assessment and are getting better. They [students] go to the university which is stuck with bell curves and multiple-choice exams.*

A lack of confidence with student assessment was common among early-career teachers. One thought that her lack of confidence was due to a lack of preparation about assessment and also from her teaching assignment at the junior high level when her preservice focus was at the elementary level:

*I didn't feel overly prepared for assessment, specifically, from my university training. I had a good practicum teacher and he helped me a lot. [At university] I did not go through how to develop a rubric. They talk about why you would use them but not how to do them. I was elementary prepared and now I am teaching junior high but I have good partners here in the school.*

New teacher education graduates are perceived as more knowledgeable about student assessment than in the past. Specific comments related to an increased understanding of “assessment for and of learning.” There were numerous positive comments about graduates from a specific university’s teacher education program because of the perceived advantages the program presented, such as “hands-on practicum time.” The desirability of this program was attributed to the overt teaching of assessment strategies, such as “rubrics and how to make them.”

Consistent and strong concerns were raised about one Alberta university’s teacher education program because graduates from this program were thought to be “inadequately prepare[d] ... for assessment.” Numerous classroom teachers, principals, and superintendents said that they are cautious about hiring or working with the graduates of this program because they are more likely to struggle due to their lack of knowledge and skills in assessment. The consensus was that study participants “liked the focus on reflective practice but [there was] no lesson planning or the technical part of it all.” Graduates from this program themselves stated that there was a lack of “consistency across [instructional groups] and educational theory was lacking.” Much preferred by educational leaders are “graduates from programs that have a hands-on practical focus.”

***Need for a practical focus.*** Virtually all teachers and administrators involved in the study advocated strongly for programs that were “more practice driven.” They observed that in at least one provincial teacher education program there was “lot of talk of the philosophies of assessment but not the practicalities.” A curriculum leader said there was a “technical void [among] student teachers I have had [from one teacher education program].” Another

Another teacher, who graduated from one of the provincial preservice programs, noted that she learned “about rubrics, multiple choice, checklists but didn't learn about report cards or how to do formative and summative assessment.”

Another important point that emerged from teachers’ discussions of what needed to be included into preservice programs was that student teachers must understand the concept of shared responsibility in schools. This shared responsibility was for the work that every teacher did with students, regardless of the grade level, and for their contributions to each child’s or adolescent’s progress. Interview and focus group dialogue indicated that there was a “need for new teachers to understand they are contributing to the entire school program and the exams are not just about teachers in Grade 12.”

***Instructor and content preferences.*** Study participants concurred that practicum time in schools is crucial in the development of novice teachers’ development of knowledge, expertise, and professionalism. One teacher commented that one provincial university’s preservice program “was absolutely excellent. [It] focuses on practical application and experience rather than a theory focus. We did a brief theory and practice course, [and] came out with a good background on assessment.”

The credibility of professors hinged not only on their knowledge, but also on whether or not they had actual teaching experience in schools. Professors who did not have any teaching experience were deemed to be far less credible than their counterparts with school-based experience. The research team heard that, “University instructors should have some teaching experience,” and “The instructor had a lot of experience [in assessment practices].”

Another aspect which emerged from the discussions about preservice preparation was that the universities and their “professors should model good assessment in preservice programs.” Participants observed that modelling was a powerful influence on the development of new teachers’ knowledge of sound assessment processes. One university, which still uses a “bell curve,” was criticized. Some new teachers indicated they rarely received feedback from their professors and “never heard the word ‘rubric’ used.”

Teachers, both those in mainstream and alternative school programs, advocated strongly for student teachers to be taught about “alternative education, home schooling, outreach education” due to increasingly diverse school populations across the province. In addition, they emphasized the need for student teachers to understand the learning needs of students who have not experienced success in mainstream education and to be open to developing more effective instructional and assessment strategies. A senior high school student stated:

*[Make] education relevant because education is one of the most fundamental [and] greatest things on the planet .... It is really a weird thing because everyone is different and there is too much pressure on kids in school today to decide what they are going to do with their lives.*

*The teachers here talk to you. [They] make a plan for you and are really understanding, not like [regular high school] where they give deadlines and are rude and nagging instead of helping you.*

For educators, parents and students alike the report card is the main source of communication about how an individual student is progressing as a learner. This form of communication has been used in schools for decades and since most people, including educators and parents have been on the receiving end of report card feedback as former students, this tradition is held in high regard. As one elementary assistant principal noted, the “report card is still the primary form of communication.” Report cards and their content likely will continue to be seen as a mainstay tradition in schools, although possible format options are being considered. For instance, an elementary assistant principal pointed out that his school was considering “moving to an electronic report card in the future.” Also, a teacher from a high school provided insight into what such a system might entail and the possible benefits that this format offers:

*What we do now is more effective and efficient for our students. They have constant access to their assessment records instead of the report cards that we used to send home...XXX is our marks system that allows student information to go in there, their schedules, timetables, attendance, and grade books. At any time students and parents have Internet access and their access codes. I can go onto XXX and pull up attendance records. This system allows me to work around my schedule and be effective. Students are accountable for monitoring their own assessment. It's almost eliminated the report card stress. We are expected to hand out a printed handout at least once a semester but I choose to print once-a-month reports that we then talk about. It's up to us to step up and be professional .... Principals can go online and see who has marks prepared. It's a big brother system and a positive one. The only challenge is training the parents to use the Internet. The kids know but [we need to] train parents that they can check that out. Before it was our privied [privileged] information.*

Study participants from different schools and districts reported various approaches to report card dissemination. In some instances, there is a move to district-wide report cards, whereas schools in some districts have the option of designing their own report cards. As for frequency, one senior high teacher talked about six reports a year going home to parents and students, whereas an elementary teacher described an annual system of three report cards and three interim report cards. Younger students reported that “parents like the interim report for improvement” and that “interim reports told me to pull up my socks.”

Qualitative results from interviews revealed that students and parents held some critical views about report cards. One parent felt that report cards were not clear and lacking in detail, and elementary students alleged, “report cards were too general” and said that they preferred a percentage as opposed to word descriptors such as “excellent.” One senior high student expressed his “dislike of standard comments on the report card” and, likewise, one elementary student thought report cards “should have separate comments for different students, maybe handwritten.” Standard comments, it would appear, have a down side, as one elementary grade student reported “the teacher had put in comments from other students



Table 39  
Communication and Relationships

Item	Educator				Student <sup>20</sup>				Parent			
	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK	% SA/A	% D/SD	% DK
Parents receive sufficient information about their children's progress from teachers.	87.6%	11.9%	0.5%	80.0%(SS) 96.0%(ES)	13.7%(SS) 4.0%(ES)	6.4%(SS)	83.8%	15.6%	0.6%			
Students should be told how their work compares with standards of achievement.	83.0%	13.4%	3.6%	38.3% SS	53.8 (SS)	7.9%(SS)						
Students should be told how their work compares with other students.	39.7%	55.7%	4.6%	56.5% ES	43.5%(ES)		54.7%	40.7%	4.6%			
Report cards are easy to understand.	83.4%	15.0%	1.6%	93.2%(ES)	6.8%(ES)		92.3%	7.1%	0.6%			
Individual student achievement is recognized adequately in schools.	70.1%	22.2%	7.7%	60.0%	24.6%	15.3%	66.3%	20.7%	13.0%			
Teachers regularly discuss with students ways of improving their grades.	95.3%	4.1%	0.5%									
Teachers regularly discuss with individual students ways of improving their achievement.							64.6%	23.4%	12.0%			
School staff facilitate parent understanding of student assessment.	81.3%	14.6%	4.2%	52.1%	32.1%	15.9%	67.3%	23.8%	8.9%			
Students' emotional development is reported by teachers.	54.9%	37.8%	7.3%				40.3%	43.3%	16.5%			
Students' emotional development is assessed.							46.7%	38.7%	14.6%			

*Note: Data for the items were clustered according to positive, negative, and don't know. Percents were calculated using the total number of responses for each item. SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree, D/SD = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, DK = Don't Know*

<sup>20</sup> Unless noted, responses are from secondary students (SS) in grades 7 through 12. When responses to an individual item are available from elementary students (ES) in grades 4 through 6 and from secondary students then that is noted in the table.

elementary assistant principals, in particular, telephone communication for the purpose of monitoring students appeared to be a common strategy. Collectively they noted that “the secretary phones if a student is absent” and that a telephone call typically was made to a student’s home if homework was not completed. Parents, it was reported, often will initiate communication by telephoning the assistant principal directly.

An elementary teacher commented on the importance placed on “constant communication with parents.” Specific concerns around monitoring achievement were suggested by secondary administrators. A senior high assistant principal commented that “traditionally a student’s grade was a surprise revealed two or three times a year” and a senior high principal offered that his colleagues are “challenged by communicating the changes to assessment.” Similarly, one elementary teacher declared that she didn’t “think parents are involved in the assessment process enough.”

Survey results indicate that all participant groups generally are satisfied with feedback on student progress. As indicated in Table 39, 87.6% of educators, 80.0% of secondary students, a resounding 96.0% of elementary students, and 83.8% of parents were in agreement or strong agreement with the statement *Parents receive sufficient information about their children’s progress from teachers*. Also positive but not to the same degree, responses to the item *Individual student achievement is recognized adequately in schools*, revealed 70.1% of educators, 60.0% of secondary students, and 66.3% of parents were in agreement or strong agreement.

Efforts to avoid breakdowns in monitoring student progress were described. A secondary teacher observed that it was part of the regular week at an alternative high school to review individual student progress. Specifically, he stated:

*Individually we talk about all our students every Friday at a Student Needs Meeting. So if our students are doing poorly, failing a lot of tests, not handing in work, then we flag them. We have meetings [with] students, principal, and parents [so] everyone knows what they need to do to be successful here.*

Further to this, a secondary assistant principal volunteered that “teachers are responsible for all the students so information about individual students must be shared with other educators associated with the student.” An assistant principal of a K–9 school articulated his perception of how best to monitor student progress:

*Being clear about what your outcomes and goals are, you can develop assessment practices that will measure those. Results are easily shared and understood by students, parents and teachers .... It has taken time for parents to buy in. They are used to seeing a percent or a letter grade indicating how a child is performing and very often they would compare to their other children or peers so it took time for them to appreciate what is a different system. We no longer give one whole score, instead it is specific outcomes.*

moving to the classroom level and that recognition is given for a greater variety of achievements including student effort and improvement. One elementary level assistant principal described this new direction as “within classroom celebration of learning” and, implicit with this, is the possibility for students who will never be on an honour role to be recognized for their efforts.

**Miscommunication.** Sometimes the monitoring of student progress can be perceived as going awry. Interview data revealed several instances of this happening, for students and parents especially. Students expressed their frustration with a number of school practices. An elementary student remarked there was an “unclear connection between assignments and report card marks” and another complained it is “not always fair because the teacher said I was doing good and I got a C.” Elementary students also expressed a dislike of certain monitoring routines to which they were subjected. One student stated he “hates how the teachers scare you with the discipline sheets and say they will dock marks on your report card” and another talked about the school agenda going home and consequences for not returning it; “If you don’t bring it back you are docked marks: 1 is a warning, 2 is a 10-minute time out, 3 is a 20-minute time out, 4 is a half day, and 5 is you go to the office and there is a phone call to your parents.” Approximately 70% of elementary students agreed that report card marks change because of good/naughty behavior (see Table 41).

Senior high students conveyed similar concerns. As one student commented, “Teachers don’t phone home unless it is bad news” and another felt that “reputation follows the student regardless of ongoing behavior.” Indeed, phone calls home were often viewed negatively as one parent maintained, “All I hear is negative about my child and that makes me feel negative about the teacher.” Another senior high student complained, “Any contact that the school makes with your parents is negative. There is no positive.” A senior high teacher declared, “Parents won’t answer the phone when a teacher calls. If the teacher leaves a positive message, [then] parents phone right back. They are tired of hearing negatives about their child.” These qualitative data reinforced the survey item in which nearly 81% of secondary students agreed that behavior in class affects the grades they get (see Table 40).

Specific points were made concerning miscommunications and achievement. One senior high assistant principal asserted, “Parents need to be aware of new directions in assessment that are emerging.” However, misunderstandings can occur. For example, a senior high school teacher remarked, “Parents frequently try to take the point system and put a percent to it and that’s difficult because those points or numbers don’t relate to percentage and they don’t understand that.” An elementary assistant principal volunteered, “It’s also a change in thinking for parents who reflect on what was done when they were in school. Older kids also are having a tough time about not getting percentages.” As one parent who had heard other parents convey negative sentiments about the Grade 3, 6, and 9 Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) commented, “How do we communicate to parents that PATs are not a big deal?” Students also expressed their qualms. For example, one senior high student was unhappy about missed opportunities

## Fairness and Equity

School assessment policies and practices can have detrimental consequences within the educational system, and although any undue hardship is fully unintended, some students who typically are struggling to fit into existing structures may experience challenges that need to be addressed. The quantitative and qualitative data associated with classroom assessment and children with special needs led to this section titled Fairness and Equity which is presented in three parts: fairness and discrimination, challenging policy and practice, and transforming schools and classrooms. The first section, fairness and discrimination, presents findings indicating that there are several cultural, home and school factors that may warrant a major transformation within our educational systems.

***Fairness and discrimination.*** No one would deny that all students should have the right to an education that is appropriate to their learning needs. Both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered during this study indicate that there are issues associated with student assessment that may undermine fair and equitable practice, particularly for those students who are coded as having exceptional learning needs, children who come from cultural minority backgrounds, children who come from low socio-economic or at-risk home environments, and other students who may not fit within the general school mainstream.

Although both quantitative and qualitative data were collected on perceived need for adjustments in assessment to reflect gender differences from all participant groups, it was generally apparent that no such adjustment was deemed necessary. For example, the survey data summarized in Table 40 include responses to the item *Student' gender affects the grades they get*, and the summary of responses in Table 41 to the item *Adjust grades based on student gender*, indicate that educators, parents and students were in strong agreement that no effects for gender were perceived. However, qualitative data suggest that frequently gender was linked with behavior in that boys were perceived to be more likely to be disruptive and less compliant, which in turn influenced the grades that teachers assigned to boys. The linkage between gender and behavior was reinforced by the item in Table 40 in which 80.6% of students reported that behavior in class affects student grades.

For all other areas however, it seems apparent that the way that current school assessment practices are configured, educators, parents, and students alike have strong perceptions that change and even major transformation of current practices are in order.

The qualitative data indicate that there are mixed expectations with respect to children with special needs. There was the perception that expectations for special needs students were too low in general, and that students who were gifted were not sufficiently challenged. Quantitative survey responses affirm this latter perception. In response to the item *Schools do a good job of assessing gifted students*, only 52.8% of teachers, 49.2% of students, and 25.2% of parents responded that they agreed or strongly agreed. A parent participant expressed her frustration with having to fight to get her child coded in order for him to receive the extra support. A principal of a low socio-economic community school further expressed another element of frustration:

*Is not that the teachers and parents didn't care about their students; it's such an uneven playing field. I'm ashamed of a society that victimizes its least capable, and I'm ashamed to have to participate in that, I'm ashamed that, in a province where people are as well educated as they are, we can't find other ways and we still participate in this [testing]. It's a sound byte, the quick fix and that's what people relate to.*

Cultural diversity within the school population was seen to be enriching and a challenge. Younger students expressed their very positive impressions of liking the experience of studying alongside students from a variety of cultures and learning to respect one another in their school. However, elementary teachers were concerned that assessment practices do not take into account student culture and, therefore, it was felt that they might not have an accurate picture of what students with cultural differences really could do. In agreement, another elementary teacher stated that, "ESL students deserve the fairness that everyone else has." Another elementary teacher saw a lack of understanding concerning aboriginal students' awareness of the relationship between attendance and achievement as a significant cultural factor and concern. Other issues relating to First Nations students were expressed by an assistant high school principal:

*[I] don't think they are [being assessed fairly]. They have a very different culture and, how they have been socialized with a very different style of learning, they may be very bright but it may not show up in traditional methods of assessment. It's why they are dropping out.*

It is of interest to note that almost 60% of educators perceived that students' cultural background affected the grades these students got, even though this was not a strong perception for students and parents as indicated in Table 40.

Home factors were cited as important influences on student assessment and achievement, and several senior high teachers expressed particular concerns. For example, it was noted that, for many of the students who were attending alternative high schools, the home situation was often considered to be dysfunctional. As one teacher stated "They are not all throwaway kids but families have thrown them away." One teacher noted that approximately 1/8 of her students have children themselves and have a history of difficult living conditions. Another teacher reported that students in an alternative school may be

(not good) and he should be allowed to use a computer.” A final comment from an elementary student conveys the belief that “girls get higher marks.”

Perceptions of senior high students about teacher responses to some students are somewhat negative. One student remarked that, “If they don’t like you, they mark you more harshly,” and another said, “Student status or physical appearance affects treatment.”

**Challenging policy and practice.** Secondary principals were not very positive about teacher knowledge and practice in matters of fairness and equity and assessment. One respondent felt that the accuracy of special needs assessment was questionable in general. Another indicated the perception that ESL issues were considerable and that there was a perceived need to improve teacher knowledge and practice in the area. Similarly another teacher noted that there is “not a great deal of understanding of cultural diversity.”

Elementary school teachers were more positive in their perceptions. One teacher indicated that she didn’t give initial consideration for culture, race, or gender in her teaching and assessment practice, but that this was beginning to be an area of focus in her present day practice. Another elementary level teacher thought that the more recent graduates from teacher preparation programs have a better focus on the unique needs of students who are coded or who have exceptional learning needs. Quantitative findings support the qualitative data, as shown in Table 40, in that only 27.7% of educators perceived that *Schools accurately assess students whose first language is not English/French*. On this same item, parent responses were similar to teachers with 25.2% agreement or strong agreement, although students were more optimistic with a 40.1% agreement.

Students in senior high schools and elementary teachers who were interviewed also commented on how some parents are challenging current assessment policy and practice. The point was made that it was a good thing that the option of challenging some courses was available. However, the student further indicated, “The amount of effort it takes to challenge the system is ridiculous.” Another senior high student made the point that “not all parents have the time and resources to navigate the system.” Comments from elementary teachers suggest that, in some instances, the school had to “wait two years for students to be psych tested” and that some parents decide to use their own funds and make arrangements for private assessments to avoid the wait.

Members of the alternative high schools had some very positive comments to make about the features of their schools that were appreciated the most:

*The grading is fair... but how you are marked is different. They have taken more thought into the grade, like how you have grasped the topic [and effort].... I spent 18 hours on one piece I had made. (Student)*

*Humanity is not a number and neither is a student. We are all human beings and we are all different. (Student)*

*Compared to other schools we do an excellent job because we try to personalize it. Detailed, use a lot of comments because students are coded and have individual*

One elementary teacher suggested that for students with language barriers, modifications made for children with learning disabilities might be appropriate. On the positive side, a senior high teacher advocated for multiple chances by stating “if students are willing to keep working, there are endless opportunities to succeed.” Similarly, another senior high teacher felt that alternative high school students do best when they experience continuous assessment. A parent participant voiced agreement with other participant groups by saying, “Those on IPPs can be assessed differently and that’s fair.”

It is of interest to note that quantitative findings on the matter of assessment modification (see Table 40) reveal that teachers show high levels of agreement (94.8% agreed or strongly agreed) that students with special needs should have access to accommodations/adaptations for assessments. Parents are slightly more cautious in their rankings on the matter (74.9% agreed or strongly agreed) and on a similarly worded survey item on Table 40, *Students with special needs should have access to the help they needs to do tests*, 78% of the students were in strong agreement or agreement with the statement. However, on the item *Students with special learning needs get the help they need when writing Alberta Education examinations* students were less positive with only 44.4% showing agreement of strong agreement. In a similar vein, the perceptions that teachers do change assessments for students with special needs was strongest for educators at 87.4%, 73.7 % for elementary students, 52.3% for secondary students, and only 37.8% of parents agreed or strongly agreed. On a related item, *How teachers change assessments for students with special needs is satisfactory*, only 28.3% of parents were in agreement or strong agreement. These statistics convey some lack of confidence about whether and how assessments are modified for children with special needs. However, high percentages of parents who indicated, “don’t know” (52.7% and 62.2% respectively) on these two survey items also suggest that many parents simply may have no experience or information on the matter. Inspection of the survey responses on an item pertaining to how often assessments were altered for students with special needs (see Table 39) showed that educators were more optimistic with 71.2% indicating “always” or “often,” whereas secondary students responded more cautiously, much like their parents, with only 42.1% indicating “always” or “often.”

Assistive technology and the opportunities this could offer toward assessment modification were captured in some of the participant quotations. A senior high school teacher asserted that online learning should have an auditory component for students with reading difficulties. Similarly, an elementary teacher indicated “technology can assist by reading tests to students.” This approach to assessment modification for ESL students was described by another elementary level teacher:

*We have a lot of ESL kids so anything that does not require a lot of reading is good. ... I can type up a test and scan it and then the computer reads it back to them. There are a few that feel they are being singled out and they say they just want to do the written test but then you end up reading it to them and it is very time consuming.*

To summarize this section on *Fairness and Equity*, quantitative findings reveal that teachers are more positive than parents and students in their perception that students with special needs should have access to accommodations/adaptations for assessments, and that teachers should and do modify assessments. There is strong perception of parents and students that student behaviour affects grades and report card marks, whereas gender does not appear to be a concern associated with student assessment. The quantitative data pertaining to students with minority cultural backgrounds, giftedness, and students whose first language is not English/French suggest that assessment policies and practices may need to be reviewed and changed. Qualitative data revealed that a combination of low expectations and certain cultural, home, and school factors contribute to widespread perceptions of stigma for students who are challenged by typical assessments practices. It appears that some type of transformation may be required to ensure that all students have improved opportunities to demonstrate their learning and that schools make adjustments and modifications to ensure accurate assessment of student learning.

### Politics of Assessment

Study participants provided ample evidence in Stage Three of the study of the politics associated with student assessment. This is perhaps understandable, given the observation of an elementary teacher who noted “assessment is controversial because it’s people’s children who are at stake.” It also may be understandable in light of the large numbers of Albertans who are affected directly by how teaching and learning occurs in provincial schools.

Individuals who were interviewed on their own and in small groups offered observations that fall into four categories. They are assessment as an accountability tool, informing stakeholders, enculturation, and postsecondary gatekeeping.

***Student assessment as teacher accountability.*** Perhaps surprisingly, it was mainly teachers who spoke in favor of increased teacher accountability. A common strand among elementary and secondary teachers’ views was that the use of student assessment data to evaluate teachers and schools is a response to insufficient accountability in the education system. An elementary teacher observed that teachers are not held sufficiently accountable and a senior high school teacher observed, “We’re not scrutinized enough as a profession.” This view was echoed by a senior high school assistant principal who offered her opinion that, “Rankings [by the Fraser Institute] are a result of no previous accountability.”

A group of senior high school teachers, who participated in a small group interview, offered the following comments. First, a male teacher suggested, “bad assessment begins with bad teachers.” His colleague stated, “We get locked into things we’ve done for too long. We get lazy or tired.” A third comment was very strong: “Teachers who are not performing should be removed from the profession.” The group members agreed that, “Provincial diplomas are great equalizers.”

The view that teacher accountability is inadequate, was corroborated by parents, one of whom stated his opinion that, “The teacher should be assessed more than the students.” Similarly, a student in a rural alternative high school program reported, “My brother goes



Alberta]. His concern was shared by an elementary school vice principal who warned that too much of the discussion about student assessment in Alberta includes “a lot of testing influence from the US.” A related caution expressed by the senior high school assistant principal who went on to say, “Very seldom have I seen [unions] operate with the best interest of kids and their learning. It is about teachers.” A junior high school teacher wondered if the [teachers’ organization], though a support for teachers, is “perhaps too strong.”

A senior high school teacher expressed a cautionary view that countered the hyperbole surrounding student assessment. He said, “We are talking about two different things, government testing and classroom testing.” He suggested that educational stakeholders understand the strengths and limitations of each form of student assessment.

Another perspective demonstrated how teachers risk enculturation with particular views about student assessment. A novice senior high school teacher described what she saw as the challenge associated with being a new teacher and observing student assessment practices that she did not feel comfortable doing: “It’s pretty tricky to go into a department and go ‘thanks but that’s not how I do it.’ Because there are 14 people and 13 people were teaching longer than I have. I would have been insulting them.”

***Postsecondary gatekeeping.*** A senior high school council provided an important observation about student assessment in Alberta. They emphasized that at least some of the pressure on students, teachers, and schools arose from limited access to postsecondary institutions and the resulting competition among students for admission to universities and polytechnics. They suggested that increasing access to postsecondary education would reduce the pressure for high school students.

The school council members expressed their concern about current limits to postsecondary institutions. For example, one parent said, “Some average kids do well in postsecondary. We are limiting access for many young people who would be very successful.”

Educators in other schools shared the parents’ concern about access to higher education. For example, a junior high school teacher suggested that pressure on students to achieve on classroom and Diploma examinations comes in part from “fluctuating marks to get into postsecondary.” However, a senior high school teacher pointed out what he saw as a need for Diploma examinations because they “are great equalizers in term of admission to universities in Alberta.

2. Curriculum outcome provide assessment foci.
3. Assessment informs curriculum and instruction.
4. Educators will provide multiple, ongoing opportunities for students to demonstrate learning outcomes in a variety of ways.
5. Students know assessment purposes, criteria, and performances prior to being assessed.
6. Assessment data provide the basis for student and teacher reflection.
7. Teacher feedback must support student learning.
8. Maintain assessment focus on individual students.
9. Homework is designed to support learning outcomes.
10. Student voice must help shape assessment practices.
11. Students, teachers, and parents have access to technological tools that enhance student assessment.
12. Assessment practices respect student dignity.
13. Assessment must not be used to reward or punish.
14. Assessment of achievement is not aggregated with assessment of behaviour.
15. Timed assessments are used only when they align with curricular learning outcomes.
16. Neatness is assessed only when it directly relates to learning outcomes.
17. No-zero policies support student-learning outcomes.

#### **Classroom-based Assessment: Practices**

1. Educators must apply effectively *Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada* (Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation. 1993)
2. Assessment tools and strategies will align overtly to the Program of Studies.
3. Teachers collaborate within and across grades and disciplines.
4. Assessment data are used to plan classroom instruction.
5. Students will have a variety of assessment opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, skill, and understanding.
6. Teacher feedback to students must be clear, honest, frequent, timely, sensitive, constructive, and motivating.
7. Assessment will be differentiated in order to meet individual student learning needs.
8. Ensure that graded tests are returned to students so they can improve their learning.
9. Assessment data are used for individual student program planning.
10. Students will engage in assessment design.
11. Teachers include students in rubric construction.
12. Students are allowed, encouraged, and taught to use technology to do their work.
13. Teachers have access to online test banks.
14. Teachers use technology-adapted assessment.
15. All members of classroom and school communities use technology networks to communicate about student assessment.
16. Technological tools are used to align assessment and curriculum outcomes.
17. Assistive technology is available for learners with special needs.
18. Late assignments are accepted without penalty.
19. Bonus marks are not used.
20. Homework assignments are designed explicitly to foster learning outcomes contained in the Program of Studies.

5. Teachers, principals, and superintendents maintain a balanced focus on provincial standardized tests so that undue stress for students is not introduced.
6. Provincial standardized tests reflect a range of cultural contexts.
7. Teachers address all curricular learning outcomes, not only those tested by provincial standardized tests and examinations.
8. Students are able to write provincial standardized tests in comfortable environments.
9. Students are allowed sufficient time to demonstrate on provincial standardized tests what they know and can do.
10. Educator decisions reflect the strengths and limitations of standardized test data.
11. All stakeholders report and use provincial assessment data accurately and honestly.
12. Provincial achievement test and diploma examination results are reported in a user-friendly format.

## **Performance Standards: Optimal Theory and Practice**

In this section performance standards are addressed in terms of optimal assessment theory and practice.

### **Performance Standards: Principles**

1. Performance standards serve a benchmarking function that guides educators and informs students, parents, and other stakeholders.
2. Performance standards are aligned with curricular learning outcomes in the Program of Studies.
3. Performance standards must reflect all levels of Bloom/Krathwohl's Taxonomies.
4. Teachers must know the Program of Studies for the courses they teach.
5. Classroom and provincial standardized assessments reflect performance standards.
6. Teachers are familiar with achievement indicators for all courses.
7. Classroom instruction is based upon Program of Studies learning outcomes.
8. Classroom instruction is predicated upon appropriate outcomes that are designed for students representing diversity in ability, culture, race, and religion.
9. Performance standards are predicated upon teacher knowledge of and ability to use achievement indicators, exemplars, rubrics, and scoring guides.
10. Teachers have access to and know how to use descriptions of performance standards in all courses.
11. Rubrics based on achievement indicators are used in all courses.
12. Students participate in the design and use of rubrics.
13. Information and communication technology is integrated with performance standards in all courses.

## Using External Tests and Classroom-based Assessment for Decision Making

This section of the report provides guidelines for optimal use of classroom-based assessment and external testing for decision making by students and teachers, plus decision making at the school, jurisdiction, and provincial levels.

### External Testing

Guidelines for optimal use of external test data are presented below in relation to the student and teacher role and, also, by jurisdictional level.

***Student decision making.*** The results of external examinations, particularly Grade 12 Diploma Examinations, should be useful for individual students as they take the following actions.

1. Apply to postsecondary institutions.
2. Focus on potential careers.

***Teacher decision making.*** Similarly, the results of external testing should inform individual educators as they make the following decisions, ones which all teachers make regularly as they progress through their careers.

1. Counsel students about academic and career choices.
2. Reflect purposefully on classroom assessment practices.
3. Critically analyze personal understandings of curriculum.
4. Choose mentors for teachers.
5. Select teacher career options and preferences.

#### ***School-level decision making***

1. Set school goals
2. Benchmark across classrooms and schools.
3. Analyze discrepancies between expected and achieved student grades.
4. Initiate change processes.
5. Identify staffing needs and preferences.
6. Identify professional development needs.
7. Allocate resources.
8. Focus on curricula.
9. Maintain consistency across classrooms and departments.
10. Demonstrate improvement.

#### ***Jurisdiction-level decision making***

1. Set district goals.
2. Benchmark across school districts.
3. Create multi-year district plans.
4. Analyze provincial assessment data.
5. (Re)Evaluate school improvement efforts.
6. Allocate district resources.
7. Recognize school success.

#### ***Provincial-level decision making***

1. Benchmark with other provinces and countries.
2. Review provincial educational policies.

### ***Jurisdiction-level decision making***

1. Challenge complacency.
2. Reduce confusion.

### ***Strengthening Assessment Leadership***

The guidelines for educational leaders that follow address the study objective to describe how educational leaders can strengthen their professional practice in support of effective student assessment.

## **Facilitating Effective Classroom Assessment**

The guidelines presented here were identified during the study as the leadership practices that support best assessment practices in classrooms.

1. Lead with integrity.
2. Maintain a strong assessment knowledge base.
3. Use assessment data knowledgeably to guide decision making.
4. Make best assessment practices a school-wide priority.
5. Establish acceptable assessment practices.
6. Ensure teachers assess students fairly.
7. Focus on the personal impact of assessment practices on individual students.
8. Challenge complacency.
9. Communicate clearly.
10. Garner sufficient support from members of school communities.
11. Share assessment leadership.
12. Create space for student involvement in assessment decision making.
13. Provide time for professional development.
14. Manage change successfully.
15. Be persistent in pursuing best assessment practices.
16. Maintain self-efficacy and resilience.
17. Celebrate professional growth.
18. Celebrate improvements in student achievement.
19. Continue in one school long enough to provide stability and create sustainability.

## **Facilitating Accurate and Meaningful Reporting of Assessment Information**

Best leadership practices are described below as they apply to facilitating accurate and meaningful reporting of assessment information to parents and to Alberta Education.

### ***To parents***

1. Ensure that teachers, principals, students, and parents are full partners in the reporting process.
2. Align educationally sound reporting with community expectations.
3. Ensure that report cards are clear, accurate, and respectful.
4. Report academic achievement, progress, and behaviour separately.
5. Recognize that reducing grades to reflect misbehaviour is punitive and unethical.
6. Report with a focus on the whole student.

5. Professional development will focus on improving student learning.
6. Professional development will be continuous, substantive, and sustainable.
7. Professional development will be practical.
8. Professional development opportunities promote collaboration among educators.
9. Professional development will be evaluated rigorously with student achievement as a primary focus.

## **Preservice Teacher Learning Guidelines**

### ***Needs***

1. Explicit teaching of assessment knowledge and skills.
2. Knowledge of assessment unique to specific disciplines.
3. Modeling of appropriate assessment practices by university faculty members.
4. Consistency across universities.

### ***Knowledge***

1. Assessment theory.
2. Practicalities of the full range of assessment methods.
3. Differentiated assessment.
4. Creation of an ethic of care in assessment for a diverse student population.
5. Understanding that assessment is a responsibility shared by all teachers in a school.

### ***Approaches***

1. Balance among theory, practice, and reflection.
2. Balance practicum and campus-based learning.

### ***Challenges***

1. Inconsistent faculty member knowledge and understanding of assessment practices.
2. Students observing good assessment practices in schools but experiencing outdated assessment practices at university level or vice-versa.
3. University instructors with no school-based teaching experience.

### ***Opportunities***

1. Knowledgeable novice teachers.

### ***Evaluation of preservice learning***

1. Critical analysis of novice teachers' student assessment practices.
2. Impact on educational leaders' preference to hire graduates of particular teacher education programs.

### ***Opportunities***

1. Collective openness to new, different, and better practices.
2. Capacity-building initiatives through, for example, Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, regional consortia, and Alberta Assessment Consortium.
3. Technology-mediated professional development.

### ***Evaluation of inservice***

1. Critical analysis of intended changes.
2. Teachers' implementation of intended assessment practices.
3. Impact of changes to assessment practices and student learning.

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The findings of The Alberta Student Assessment Study allowed the research team to offer a set of observations about current practices, values, and beliefs that relate to student assessment as it is conducted in classrooms and through provincial standardized testing programs. Those observations and suggested guidelines are intended to inform practitioners, policy makers, and teacher educators in Alberta, indeed, all educational stakeholders. However, perhaps the most important and highest impact task assigned to the research team was to answer the question, “Where do we go from here?”

This section of our report offers answers to this question in two areas. First, recommendations are offered in relation to the development of a holistic framework for classroom assessment for the province. Then, the researchers offer a set of additional recommendations that draw on all that the research team learned while conducting the Alberta Student Assessment Study.

### **Recommendations for Developing a Holistic Framework for Classroom Assessment**

Assessment in Alberta will:

1. Recognize that public education is critical to the well being of individual students and to society generally and that some form of monitoring such as the provincial standardized testing program is essential for the effectiveness of the Alberta education system.
2. Continue Provincial Achievement Tests<sup>22</sup> and Diploma Examinations<sup>23</sup>.
3. Make provincial assessment data publicly accessible<sup>24</sup>.
4. Continue current performance standards that serve important benchmarking functions.
5. Recognize that all educators have a responsibility to report and explain provincial and classroom assessment results accurately and from a balanced perspective that emphasizes both the strengths and limitations of test results.

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<sup>22</sup> The only area where notable reservations about achievement testing were expressed is the Grade 3 testing and even those data were far outweighed by support. No clear preferred and/or viable alternatives to standardized achievement testing emerged in the study.

<sup>23</sup> The only question that arose relates to the actual weighting. No preferred weighting emerged to guide a change from the current 50% weighting of diploma examinations. The data suggest that Diploma Examinations provide a number of benefits to students and the education system generally.

<sup>24</sup> The importance of keeping education data public outweighs the danger of misreporting by independent agencies.

6. Be explained unambiguously, systematically, and in a widely accessible format by Alberta Education in terms of the purposes and intended uses of provincial assessment data to counter misinformation and misunderstanding.
7. Be supported by an Alberta Education online database containing assessment tools, templates, and exemplars.
8. Include widespread use of assistive technology.
9. Include technology-mediated professional development that facilitates provincial, national, and international learning communities.
10. Inform student assessment policies and practices with ongoing research conducted in the province.



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