

Educational Accountability in Manitoba

Students Write Fewer Tests than Any Other Province except PEI

Executive Summary

- Manitoba's current government substantially changed its standards testing policy when it replaced compulsory tests with mostly optional ones.
- Most other Canadian provinces still have compulsory standards tests administered to students at a variety of grade levels.
- Under the previous government, all students in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 were expected to write standards tests in four core subject areas, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies and Language Arts. Depending on grade level, these exams counted for a progressively larger percentage of a student's final mark. This gave Manitoba a testing regime similar to that in Alberta.
- The current government abolished the Grade 3 standards tests and made the Grade 6 and 9 standards tests optional. Only Grade 12 tests have remained in place on a compulsory basis.
- Manitoba students now write fewer standards tests than their counterparts in any other province except Prince Edward Island.
- The current government also cut the budget of the Assessment Branch of the Department of Education by over 60% in the year 2000, and funding levels have remained at about that level since.
- These changes have reduced the province's level of educational accountability.

Introduction

As with all public spending programs, accountability is an important component of our public education system. For example, school divisions are required to report detailed descriptions of their program spending to the provincial government. The government tabulates this data and publishes it annually in a format known as the FRAME report. The FRAME report makes it possible for the public to see where money was spent and to hold school divisions and the provincial government accountable for their financial decisions.

Yet in the area of evaluating student achievement, the current Manitoba government has moved away from accountability. While the previous government had introduced compulsory standards testing for all students in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 12, the current government has substantially diluted these standards by making most of the tests optional and significantly reducing their frequency. These actions have made objective evaluations of the progress of Manitoba students more difficult.

In contrast, most other provinces had moved in the same direction as the previous Manitoba government and had strengthened accountability by expanding the use of standards tests. Most provinces have substantial testing programs in place at a variety of

grade levels. As one of the provinces with the least testing in place, Manitoba has demonstrated a lack of serious regard for educational accountability.

Standards Testing in Other Provinces

The status of standards testing in other provinces demonstrates that Manitoba's de-emphasis of these performance evaluations is out of line with the general trend in Canada.

British Columbia

All students in Grades 4, 7, and 10 participate in the Foundation Skills Assessment on an annual basis. Reading, writing, and numeracy are the subjects covered. In addition, the provincial learning assessment program is administered to the same grade levels on a periodic basis. Various subjects are covered on a rotating basis. Grade 12 students are required to write a final standard exam in most of their subjects, including mathematics, science, language arts and social studies. The results count for 40% of the student's final mark.¹

Alberta

All students in Grades 3, 6, and 9 write standards tests on an annual basis in the core subjects of mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies.² Grade 12 students write standardized diploma exams in their core subjects. These exams count for 50% of their final marks in each course.³

Saskatchewan

A random sample of Grades 5, 8, and 11 students participate in standards tests in mathematics, language arts and technological studies on a bi-annual basis. The results do not affect their final marks. Grade 12 students write diploma examinations in most of their subjects, and they count for approximately 25% of their final marks in each course.⁴

Ontario

All Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 students are required to write standards exams prepared by the Educational Quality and Accountability Office. Grades 3 and 6 students are assessed on mathematics, reading and writing skills, while Grade 10 students are assessed on reading and writing. Grade 9 students are assessed on mathematics.⁵

Québec

All students in Elementary 6 and Secondary III are required to write standards tests in French (the equivalent of language arts in other provinces). All Secondary IV and V students write standard provincial exams on the history of Québec and Canada, physical science, language of instruction and second language. These exams count for 50% of a student's final mark.⁶

New Brunswick

All Grades 3 and 5 students write standards tests in reading, writing, mathematics and science. In addition, Grade 8 students are required to write the Middle Level English Proficiency Assessment and the Middle Level Mathematics Assessment. If they are

¹ Canadian Teachers Federation, *Assessment and Evaluation*, www.ctf-fce.ca/E/WHAT/OTHER/ASSESSMENT/testing-main.htm

² Grade 3 students write standards tests in only Language Arts and Mathematics.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

unsuccessful, these tests need to be re-written in Grade 10 and again in Grade 11, if necessary. All Grade 11 students write diploma examinations in mathematics and **language arts and these exams count for 30% of their** final marks. All Grade 12 students are required to undergo the French Secondary Language Oral Proficiency Review. The regional Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation science exams are optional.⁷

Nova Scotia

All Grade 6 students are required to take a standard language arts exam. Grade 12 students write standard exams in chemistry, physics, biology, mathematics and language arts. These exams count as 30% of their final marks in each course.⁸

Prince Edward Island

There are no standards tests in Prince Edward Island. Grade 12 students write exams made up by their classroom teachers that count for 30% of their marks in each course.⁹

Newfoundland and Labrador

All Grades 3, 6, and 9 students write standards tests in mathematics, science, core French and writing. Grades 4, 7, 10, and 12 students write the Canadian Test of Basic Skills once every three years. Grade 12 students taking chemistry are required to write a standardized exam which comprises 50% of their final marks in that subject.¹⁰

Summarizing the Other Provinces

- 1) All provinces except Prince Edward Island require students at a variety of Grade levels to participate in standards tests.
- 2) Most provinces require standards tests to be incorporated in the final marks of students, especially at the higher grades.
- 3) Grades 3, 6, 9 and 12 are the most common grades at which standards tests are administered.

Manitoba's Standards Tests Policy (1994-1999)

The previous Manitoba government enacted a program entitled *Renewing Education: New Directions*. A key element of this program was the establishment of standards tests for Grades 3, 6, 9 and 12 students. All students in Grades 3, 6 and 9 were to write standards tests in the four core subject areas, mathematics, science, language arts and social studies, while Grade 12 students would write standards test in mathematics and language arts.¹¹

These standards tests would also comprise an increasingly large portion of a student's final mark. The final mark of Grade 3 students would not be affected, while Grades 6, 9 and 12 students respectively had 25% 35%, and 50% of their final marks made up of their scores on these standards tests.¹²

This program clearly had many points of similarity with the standards tests programs in other Canadian provinces. As with most other provinces, students would write standards tests every few years and they would comprise an increasingly large portion of their final marks. In particular, Manitoba's standards testing schedule was very similar to the model

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Manitoba Education and Training, *Renewing Education: New Directions, The Action Plan*, January 1995.

¹² Ibid.

provided by Alberta, a province with a long-standing history of standards testing. This policy gave Manitoba and Alberta some of the most extensive and comprehensive standards testing policies in Canada at the time.

Manitoba's Standards Tests Policy (1999-present)

Soon after being elected in 1999, the current government made substantial changes to Manitoba's standards testing program. Most notably, the government eliminated the Grade 3 testing and has replaced it with a broad literacy and numeracy assessment conducted by individual teachers. In addition, all Grades 6 and 9 standards tests have become optional. School divisions must now make the decision to opt in before their students write these exams. The only policy that has remained unchanged is the requirement for Grade 12 students to write standards tests in language arts and mathematics, although they now constitute only 30% of the final mark).¹³

These substantial changes in the amount, frequency and compulsory nature of standards tests administered to Manitoba students meant a reduction in the budget of the Assessment Branch of the Department of Education. This cut is quite striking.

Assessment Branch of the Department of Education--Funding¹⁴

Year	Budget of Assessment Branch
1994	\$1,037,000
1995	\$1,046,100
1996	\$1,644,100
1997	\$2,672,000
1998	\$8,800,200
1999	\$10,364,400
2000*	\$4,198,700
2001	\$5,013,700
2002	\$5,416,200
2003	\$5,551,900

*This was the first budget brought down by the current government

While the previous government had invested a significant amount of money in the development of standards tests, the current government chose to cut the Assessment Branch's budget by over 60% in one year and eliminate most compulsory standards tests. The changes meant:

- 1) With the exception of Prince Edward Island, Manitoba students now write fewer standards tests than students in other provinces. This makes objective evaluations of actual student learning almost impossible.
- 2) Other provinces do not have optional standards tests. Making them optional contradicts their purpose and utility. If only some divisions choose to utilize them, they fail to measure educational progress in the province as a whole, and make judgements

¹³ Canadian Teachers Federation, op. cit.

¹⁴ Manitoba Finance, *Provincial Budget Documents*, 1994-2003.

about the relative effectiveness of curriculums, teaching methods and practices impossible.

- 3) A large portion of Manitoba students will never write a standards test until they reach Grade 12. Their lack of familiarity with such a process confers a significant disadvantage when they face much more rigorous protocols in post-secondary and vocational institutions.
- 4) The decision to decimate the budget of the Assessment Branch undid several years' worth of essential work in the establishment of base lines for assessment and of the infrastructure needed for objective evaluation. It will take a significant amount of resources to bring us back to the point where we were in 1999.

Conclusion

Manitoba's current government has substantially changed the province's direction in terms of educational accountability. This has been a shift in the wrong direction. Manitoba students now write fewer standards tests than students in other provinces and this makes it more difficult to hold our educators accountable for student learning. Students, parents and teachers are significantly disadvantaged by a lack of benchmarks to judge the effectiveness of learning programs and the loss of a reliable device to correct poor school performance.

About the Author:

Dennis Owens is the Senior Policy Analyst at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy. A native of Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, and a descendant of homesteaders, Dennis Owens moved to Winnipeg to attend United College in 1965. He graduated from the University of Winnipeg in 1970 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Political Science. Over a 20-year career in the transportation business, he rose to the position of operations manager of a Winnipeg-based firm. Since then he has researched and written about Canadian public policy issues for a variety of organizations including the Manitoba Taxpayers Association and the Prairie Centre.



The Frontier Centre for Public Policy has established a program of research and commentaries that focuses on education policy, called the Education Frontiers Project (EFP). Its objective is to examine and communicate policy changes within our education system that will make it more sensitive to the needs of its clients and more effective in its performance. A main theme of the Centre's work is creating greater transparency and neutrality within all public services. In the field of public education, this means measuring results, building the case for the efficacy of standards testing in our schools, and improving curricula by returning to the cultivation of basic literacy and numeracy skills. The project also examines the arguments and evidence for increasing the range of school options by considering the different education methods and models and comparing educational achievement across provinces and between countries.

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