Advisory Group on Provincial Assessment

THE GRADUATION LEARNING YEARS

FISABC

BCSSA

CASE British Columbia Council of Administrators of Special Education

BCTF

fnesc

REPRESENTATIVE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

bcpvpa

BCCPAC

CSF Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique

BCSTA British Columbia School Trustees Association

SFU

UBC

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Advisory Group on Provincial Assessment: the Graduation Learning Years

FINAL REPORT

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The Advisory Group included representatives from the following stakeholder groups:

BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC)
BC Council of Administrators of Special Education (BCCASE)
BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA)
BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA)
BC School Trustees' Association (BCSTA)
BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF)
Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Brittanique (CSF)
Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University
Faculty of Education, University of BC
Federation of Independent Schools Association (FISA)
First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC)
Office of the Representative for Children and Youth, BC (RCYBC)

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Advisory Group on Provincial Assessment: the Graduation Learning Years

PREAMBLE

The BC Education Plan is moving toward educational choice and flexibility, with less focus on specific facts and more on concepts and competencies. Within this environment, *teaching* is no longer about imparting or mediating knowledge, and *learning* is no longer about absorbing information in order to prepare for timed achievement tests. Within the new vision for education, teaching will involve empowering and guiding learners, who will engage in discovery, creativity, and problem solving. The freedom from structured curricula allows students a freedom to develop curiosity, imagination, and the ability to think alone and collaboratively in groups with others.

The education community needs to align assessment and evaluation practices with the new vision for learning in BC, and with what is known about how children learn. An important goal is to ensure that the freedom and flexibility of the Education Plan is maintained within the assessment environment of the graduation learning years. A series of structured, content-specific examinations on mandated topics alone would provide incomplete information on student learning. Whatever program of assessments is adopted, it must place the needs of the learner first and it must provide a broad and nuanced picture of learning.

Assessment and evaluations have multiple roles to fulfill: documenting system effectiveness; tracking and monitoring data to understand how well students are doing; assessing potential for future learning; and representing and reporting individual learning, among others. Each stakeholder group represented in the Advisory Group on Provincial Assessment—Graduation Learning Years (informally referred to as AGPA II), needs different information for different purposes at different times and in different forms.

The BC Ministry of Education formally terms Grades 10 to 12 as the "graduation learning years." This document discusses recommendations for the corresponding program of assessments, and makes reference to both the early and late graduation learning years. This report focuses more on stages of learning and student readiness, rather than on grade-specific recommendations. It should be understood that the early graduation learning years roughly correspond to Grades 10 and 11.

The program of assessments within the graduation learning years needs to attend and be responsive to the varied information needs of the education partner groups. While not all groups will require all information, a comprehensive program of assessment is needed to ensure that the system is functioning effectively while concomitantly ensuring that no subgroup within the system is disadvantaged. When doing so careful consideration needs to be given to how these groups can be tracked. This would enable different partner groups to make informed decisions based on the data, and to better link resource allocation in response to the results of that tracking.

AGPA II is sensitive to the risks posed with data that could identify individuals and thus violate standards of privacy. Data collected can be used to isolate and compare groups of learners at the classroom or school level. In some instances this will be informative, while in others it could be detrimental. While following the rules laid out in the Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act is important, equally important is the decision as to what data should be collected. Weighing carefully the benefits that will be gained by collecting any data against possible damage resulting from the misuse of that data must be a decision undertaken with prior consultation with all partner groups. Regardless, the focus of assessment must be on informing the system as a whole while providing feedback on the progress of each individual within the system.

PROCESS SUMMARY

The Ministry of Education convened the Advisory Group on Provincial Assessment (AGPA) in April, 2013. The mandate given to AGPA was to provide a broad set of recommendations on provincial assessments, based on the perspectives and issues faced by the stakeholder groups. AGPA members met for a series of four meetings early in 2013. The group submitted a preliminary report to the Ministry in September, 2013. The Ministry reconvened AGPA for a series of three meetings in February and March, 2014, with a final report and recommendations going to the Ministry shortly thereafter. The first two series of meetings and reports are collectively and informally referred to as AGPA I.

In March, 2015, the Ministry invited representatives of the stakeholder groups to participate in a third set of meetings, the purpose of which was to make recommendations on assessments in the graduation learning years. The representatives met four times between April and June, 2015. During these meetings, AGPA II members examined the principles articulated in the final report of AGPA I; discussed key questions relative to the outcomes of provincial assessments in the graduation learning years; and developed a framework of recommendations for a revised program of assessments in the graduation learning years.

During the first meeting, discussions focused on key questions to which the AGPA II group was expected to respond. The second meeting featured a presentation by the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer, discussing the needs of post-secondary institutions in BC and beyond. At the request of AGPA II members, the third meeting centred on a discussion of AGPA I principles and their applicability to the graduation learning years. This was followed by a presentation by teachers from the Surrey School District on the use of digital portfolios in a variety of school settings. During the fourth and final meeting, AGPA II members re-visited the key questions discussed in the first meeting.

The co-chairs prepared the first draft of this report, which was refined and revised based on input from all stakeholder groups. The revised report was distributed to stakeholder groups for a second round of consultation and revision.

In the discussions of what the K-12 education system should be doing, AGPA II members returned to the preamble of the British Columbia *School Act*. In this document is embedded the definition of an educated citizen, who is "...literate, personally fulfilled and publicly useful" and moreover has acquired "...the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy" ([RSBC 1996] Chapter 412). One of the purposes of assessment, then, is the provision of public assurance that the education system is graduating citizens who are literate and who are ready to participate in and contribute to society. AGPA II members further refined the definition found in the School Act to suggest that a graduate of the BC education system should be:

- Literate;

- Numerate;

- Both curious and a critical thinker;

- Able to lead a healthy lifestyle; and

- Able to understand and connect to society and the community, and able to connect to one's past, present, and future.

REVISITING THE PRINCIPLES OF AGPA I

The principles embedded in the recommendations of AGPA I are also embedded in the recommendations of this report. Some of the principles are augmented to better reflect the needs of those who are stakeholders in the graduation learning years. The new material is highlighted in bold.

1. The system of education and the accompanying modes of provincial assessment must be based on an ethical foundation, in which social justice shares equal importance with system quality and excellence as the primary outcomes.

   We must recognize the diverse needs and purposes of stakeholder groups within the **K-12** education system. **We must also recognize that stakeholder groups that are external to the K-12 education system (e.g., employers and post-secondary institutions) have commonly relied on graduation data to inform their decisions. While we recognize these "external" needs, we also acknowledge that meeting the needs and purposes within K-12 must remain the primary drivers for assessment, and that the functions of the K-12 system should not be controlled by external needs.** The diverse needs of these groups imply a need for diverse strategies for meeting these needs.

2. Assessment comes in different forms and is used for a variety of purposes. We must recognize the need for balancing relevant and reliable data that can be used to inform how well the system is doing with information needed to inform how well individuals are doing, **while recognizing that some data provide**

information on both aspects. Indeed, often the data on the individual student, for example the transition to Grade 10, in aggregate is a good indicator of how the system as a whole is doing.

- Large-scale assessments provide system data, useful for providing a general snapshot of system quality.

- Large-scale assessments may not provide sufficiently robust data to enable accurate comparisons of service quality. In general, the more **fine-grained** the comparison, the less reliable the data from large-scale assessments **might become unless the data supporting them is also sufficiently detailed.**

- Professional educators are sources of critical information on how individual **students** are doing.

- Student self-evaluation allows students to reflect on their learning, set learning targets, and participate in managing their own learning. Student self-evaluation increases the opportunity for students to take responsibility for their own learning.

3. We must attend to all within the system, and not just the majority or the advantaged. **This document considers that at-risk individuals or populations includes vulnerable, gifted, Aboriginal, and special needs students.** Safeguards need to be in place **to ensure that these populations or individuals have access to quality education and sufficient resources. We need a mechanism that allows us to identify and** protect at-risk populations

or individuals and prevent them from falling behind or falling through the cracks. **Consideration should be given to those who are able to excel. The assessment system should be flexible enough to support and accommodate those who wish to advance more quickly or in different ways.** Given the diversity of needs of learners within the system, we may need to consider additional or alternative:

- Reporting mechanisms, particularly for learners **who are progressing to post-secondary institutions;**

- Tracking mechanisms, to better follow individuals and groups of individuals through and within the system;

- Flexibility, for example, in scheduling assessments to lessen learner anxiety;

- **Linking mechanisms, to ensure that students have access to the courses and supports they need and to demonstrate**

that we are enhancing student learning according to the new BC Framework for Enhancing Student Learning; and

- Means of interactions (e.g., linking educators with those in social and justice systems) to ensure that children are not **falling behind or** falling through the cracks. **Equally, we need enhanced means for interactions with home, community, and work.**

4. We must consciously and intentionally link resource allocation to identified gaps or system discrepancies. It is not enough to simply track students or groups that are at risk, vulnerable, gifted, Aboriginal, or special needs; the data must be used to inform priorities and to allocate budgets and other resources. **However, we also caution against a formula-driven approach to resource allocation. Assessments provide an important first step for considering the distribution of resources; final decisions should consider the context of the results, and be made in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.**

PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT IN THE GRADUATION LEARNING YEARS

The Advisory Group recommends that the Ministry devise a system of assessments that will serve these diverse purposes:

1. DOCUMENTING SYSTEM EFFECTIVENESS AND TRACKING DATA

An effective system supports all students, while not losing track of vulnerable groups such as Aboriginal students and children in care. Government and citizens expect some assurance of high standards measured in a standardized way. The Advisory Group recommends that the Ministry develop a set of performance standards that provide a measure of accountability. This will give the public sound and reliable information about the effectiveness of the system in preparing students for future learning and careers. Additionally, it will demonstrate that students are being credentialed on some key areas in a consistent manner.

2. ASSESSING INDIVIDUAL POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE LEARNING AND FUTURE SUCCESS IN LIFE

Students encounter a variety of opportunities following school completion. Post-secondary institutions have traditionally used grades to select students for admissions and awards. Some are now moving toward a more holistic approach, examining portfolios, volunteerism, references, and other documentation. Practices vary across the country and around the world. The Advisory Group is mindful that any new assessment system must not place BC students at a disadvantage as they apply to post-secondary or pursue other opportunities.

Some holistic approaches such as portfolio projects and volunteerism may be difficult for at-risk and vulnerable children to compile or participate in. For example, children in care are more likely to experience disruptions in their learning (e.g., school moves, changes in social workers, or missed classes due to appointments). They are less likely to have the supports that will allow them to participate in volunteer opportunities. It is important to develop a system of assessments that promotes the diverse learning needs and success of all students. Whatever practice the province adopts must demonstrate that it values the learner over the institution.

It is clear that a layered and richly nuanced portrait of student learning is needed in order to support successful transitions. The Advisory Group recommends consideration of the following example of a suite of assessments:

- An assessment of literacy and numeracy, preferably conducted close to the expected graduation year;

- A performance standard for graduation that includes competencies related to the five characteristics of a BC graduate identified earlier; and

- a project-based assessment comprising (for example) the personal and social responsibility competencies.

The multiple data points provided by the assessment suite might be contained within a digital portfolio. The portfolio could be translated at the secondary school level into a recommendation or grades, to be used by post-secondary institutions. An important component of the assessment suite is a set of performance standards. The standards would describe expectations for graduation along a scale. Students would be fully informed of the performance standards and would assess their own performance in relation to the standards.

This broad approach to assessment will allow the recognition of multiple forms of student achievement, both on tests and beyond. It will recognise what the student is capable of in a way that a high-stakes test may not. The assessment suite will highlight student achievement and will push each student to achieve his or her full potential.

3. REPRESENTING AND REPORTING ON INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

Representing and reporting student learning is best done by classroom teachers. The data from large-scale provincial assessments may inform the teacher as part of a bigger picture of overall student progress. Individual teacher assessment and reporting of learning provides key insights and should be combined with examples of student work when compared to expected standards. Students should participate in their own assessment. Careful attention should be given to how students' assessment of their own performance and a teachers' assessments will be incorporated into the assessment suite.

Assessments need to be reported to parents, caregivers, and guardians (including, for example, social workers or foster parents) in a way that is relevant to them. Parents, caregivers, and guardians need to have a clear understanding of the child's academic progression in order to help plan and support the child's future learning. Overall, any reporting meant for parents, caregivers, and guardians must be complete, timely, impactful, and be understandable to someone at a Grade 4 reading level.

A number of schools and school districts are using digital portfolio, demonstrating how technology combined with pedagogy provides the opportunity for assessment as the responsibility of the learner. Such rich assessment is integral to the learning process, and is easily communicated to and accessible by parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Advisory Group believes that assessments should provide an opportunity for students to respond critically and creatively to prompts that allow them to show what they are able to do, rather than revealing the things they are not able to do.

2. The Advisory Group notes that no one instrument can meet all purposes: each instrument has strengths and limitations. It therefore recommends that the Ministry develop a dynamic set of instruments within a suite of assessments. A review of evidence-based practices, assessment approaches, and tools should be completed to guide the development of the most appropriate and effective system for the BC education system. The Advisory Group recommends a move toward forms of assessment that connect closely to classroom assessment and that examine 21st century skills and competencies.

3. The notion of self-evaluation needs to be embedded into the learning and assessment process. Self-evaluation allows students to reflect on where they are now, where they intend to go, and what they need to do to get there. When self-evaluation is implicit, the learner will be responsible for and an active participant in his or her own learning.

4. The Advisory Group recommends that adaptive assessments be used early in the graduation learning years. Provincial assessments administered at the beginning of the graduation learning years should not limit opportunities as students grow and develop throughout the remainder of their time in secondary school. Rather, assessments should identify areas for support and intervention early on. Teachers can intervene effectively and in a timely manner, identifying areas in which the student should be encouraged to excel.

5. Assessments of literacy and numeracy, which are not tied to specific curricular areas, should form the foundation of the provincial assessment program, and indeed should be the only formal assessments in the early stages of the graduation learning years. These assessments should be offered in a flexible manner, at a time in the school year when the classroom teacher, in consultation with the learner, feels that the learner is ready. Data collected in these assessments should measure system performance and provide feedback for individual development.

6. For curricular areas such as science and social studies, the Advisory Group suggests that the focus of assessment be on related competencies. For example, the notion of past, present, and future ties closely with social studies as well as the personal identity competency area. Science connects well to critical and creative thinking as well as personal and social competencies. Such assessment could happen in the form of classroom-delivered inquiries, a series of capstone projects, or a comprehensive examination to be completed at the student's own pace. These assessments must not further disadvantage vulnerable students. Information structures and support practices must be put in place to help highly mobile learners and to ensure that progress on these assessments is not lost when students move to a new school or district.

7. Competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, working together, empathy, social responsibility, and creativity are not curriculum-specific and should not be assessed using a formal provincial examination. One approach, as noted above, might be the completion of a capstone project or comprehensive examination, in which students demonstrate their learning across multiple domains: transferable skills (e.g., teamwork), higher order thinking skills (e.g., creativity), foundational cognitive skills (e.g., literacy), working with others (e.g., group projects), and content (e.g., democracy). If a capstone project approach is chosen, it must be understood as a school-based project that will be completed during school time with the support of teachers. Much of the work can be gathered into a portfolio (e.g. a digital portfolio), to be used by students, post-secondary institutions, and employers.

In addition to the consensus recommendations, the Co-Chairs would like to add the following two recommendations based on the written feedback. In doing so, we acknowledge that these suggestions were not fully discussed and thus may not have the support of all participants.

Supplementary Recommendation 1:

> The Advisory Group recommends that the province engage a diverse group of educators in the development of flexible yet standardized criteria for the capstone projects and comprehensive examinations. The same group could be tasked with the development and ongoing evolution of a numeric scoring system for students progressing to post-secondary institutions. They should also develop the performance standards by which students can evaluate their own achievement.

Supplementary Recommendation 2:

> The Advisory Group recommends that school districts be provided with resources, training, and learning objects around sound formative assessment practices. These supports will then be available for teachers implementing new assessment practices.

IMPLEMENTING AND COMMUNICATING THE CHANGES

The changes to assessments in the graduation learning years, as recommended by the Advisory Group, will necessitate a careful and thoughtful strategy for consultation, implementation, and communication. The Ministry will need to involve the members of all the partner groups, including students, in dialogue, providing commentary from experts in the field and allowing stakeholders the opportunity to share opinions, express concerns, and explore possibilities. The Advisory Group recommends that the Ministry develop a communications plan that authentically engages partner groups and the public in a meaningful conversation, sharing information and working toward a common understanding about assessment in the graduation learning years.