# MANITOBA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

## Building an Assessment Future with Purpose in Mind
### Part 1 : Assessment for and of Learning (2007)

Increasing the opportunities for learning in every classroom across Manitoba is an important MASS priority. Over the past decade this priority has been supported by provincial educational reforms such as *New Directions*, new K to Grade 12 curricula and support documents such as *Success for All Learners*. The latest Western Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP) document, *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind*, pulls together the current research in the areas of brain research, motivational theory and assessment. It then describes how, when applied skillfully to classroom practice, student learning can be improved. As a MECY resource document, *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind* compels MASS and policy makers to rethink, re-examine and align belief, vision, and assessment and evaluation practices to more closely reflect this philosophical direction. As Lorna Earl states, "Changing how classroom assessment operates in schools is not trivial. It requires concerted attention on the part of provincial, school and district leadership. It also requires many teachers to rethink their assessment practices and engage in new learning themselves" (Earl, p.15).

MASS recognizes that this is the challenge educational leaders in Manitoba must face and work towards meeting if we are to truly make a difference in student learning. The purpose of this paper is to articulate the position of MASS with respect to assessment and evaluation and to provide a recommendation for future direction across the province's school divisions.

## Assessment in Education Serves Two Purposes

Assessment of learning provides a *summative* statement of what a child has learned or can do. This form of assessment usually occurs at the end of a unit of work and demonstrates whether curricular outcomes have been met. The purpose behind this form of assessment is to provide information to parents and the public, certifying competencies or ranking, and is most commonly used for reporting purposes.

The other form of assessment is assessment *for* learning where the design and practice is to promote student learning. Here assessment is *formative* and is used to provide information to teachers and students as they assess themselves and make decisions about the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Indeed, assessment is formative only if the information fed back to the learner is used by the learner to make improvements. (Assessment *for* learning includes in our view assessment *as* learning, a third form of assessment described in the *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind* document. The self-monitoring processes that students use constitute the assessment *as* learning function.)

If the primary purpose of assessment is to support learning, the question must be asked: "what assessment practices best accomplish this?" As Sutton states, "The challenge is to find a method that illuminates rather than removes the uniqueness of the child, and provides 'feed-forward' as well as 'feedback', so that all the recipients of the information can take effective decisions about future action" Sutton (1995).

Black and Wiliam's (1998) ground-breaking study, "Inside the Black Box," demonstrated that assessment for learning is a powerful process for enhancing learning. Their work involved over 250 studies from around the world. They concluded that when the intent of assessment was to promote learning, to inform classroom programming, to provide feedback to move learners forward, to activate students as instructional resources for each other, and to take responsibility for their own learning, student achievement improved. So herein lies the dilemma. Educational systems are responsible and accountable for reporting student progress, yet in teachers' efforts to meet the requirements of *summative* assessment by fulfilling the obligations of reporting student progress, assessment *for* learning opportunities that illuminate the strengths and needs of the learner are often overlooked.

Studies in Testing, Motivation and Learning (2002) conducted by the Assessment Reform Group of Great Britain found that testing, drills, ranking and comparisons of student grades and scores did little to motivate the majority of students or improve achievement. From this survey of the research literature, Anne Davies (2003) summarized the key classroom assessment strategies teachers used to enhance learning. They included:

- Explaining and discussing the purpose for learning,
- Offering choice and guiding student towards responsibility,
- Providing opportunities for student to learn from each other,
- Providing specific, descriptive and positive feedback,

- Involving students in assessment and setting criteria and goals,
- Involving students in on-going self-assessment in relation to clear criteria and learning targets,
- Encouraging and valuing student effort.

Ironically, the pressure to cover curricula and make frequent summative reports is often at the expense of these key classroom assessment strategies teachers need to use to enhance learnings. The blocks of classroom time required to allow for goal setting, feedback and student practice can become secondary to the demands of frequent summative assessment requirements and the pressures to cover curricula. The issues of how frequently summative reports are required and what flexibility teachers have in covering curricula must be addressed if there is to be sufficient time spent on key classroom assessment strategies that target the specific learning needs of students.

The evidence is unequivocal: formative assessment improves student learning. Yet these practices are often overshadowed as teachers, schools and systems feel torn between sound educational practices, covering curricula and grading performance. There is confusion as to how to appropriately use both assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning practices to the best advantage.

When systems encourage and promote the development and full implementation of assessment for learning classroom strategies, student achievement improves. Amrein and Berliner (2002) studied 10 high schools (top, middle and bottom levels of achievement) where 256 teachers were trained to teach students to use self-assessment. They found a significant difference in all curricular areas in the level of achievement of those students involved in self-assessment.

School administrators play a key role in systems which encourage and promote the implementation of assessment for learning classroom strategies. Assessment-literate administrators promote student success by advocating and sustaining a collaborative school culture and instructional programming which focus on improving student learning and

the professional growth of staff. Effective school environments provide opportunities for teachers to work daily with one another to examine students' work, review data, and make the necessary adjustments to instruction in order to meet the needs of students (Sparks, 2005). When staff work together, school capacity is increased which leads to improved student achievement. Administrative leadership is a necessary component in building school capacity to develop balanced assessment practices (Fullan, 2006).

The evidence is compelling. The instructional decisions that have the greatest impact on student learning are made day to day in the classroom by teachers who are skilled in assessment *for* learning practices. Assessment for learning practices can lead to powerful key ideas about student learning such as differentiated instruction as teachers teach to the understanding of 'big ideas' in curricula (Wiggins & McTighe 1998).

With student achievement as the target the following Principles of Assessment have been developed to guide divisions in developing and implementing sound assessment practice.

## Principles of Assessment

The following compilation of principles, proposed by MASS, has been adapted from The Assessment Reform Group (2002), Stiggins (2001), and *Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada* (1993):

- Assessment recognizes all educational achievement. All learners are able to achieve their best in all learning activities.

- Assessment actively involves students in the assessment process. Self-assessment and self-reflection are an important part of this process and assist students in determining the next steps in their learning. Teachers assist students in building their capacity to take charge of their own learning.

- Assessment promotes the understanding of goal setting. It is important for learners to understand what it is they are trying to achieve. Learners

must have a role to play in deciding the learning goals and the criteria for assessing their progress. Educators should communicate with their students about assessment in language that is familiar to them as well as providing examples of how students can meet the criteria for progress.

- Assessment helps learners know how to improve their learning. Students need information and direction in order to guide them in developing a plan for what comes next in their learning. Feedback to students should be descriptive and clear, identifying both areas of strength and improvement, and be frequent and immediate. Students also require numerous and varied opportunities to improve upon their learning.

- Assessment should foster rather than discourage motivation. Assessment used to build student success and self-confidence - with its focus on achievement and progress rather than failure - fosters motivation. Motivation can be enhanced by implementing assessment strategies that provide choice, descriptive feedback and opportunities for student direction.

- Assessment must be sensitive and constructive. Feedback must be fair and appropriate to the developmental needs of the learner. Educators should be aware of the impact of their feedback on students' self-confidence and motivation. In order for assessment to be constructive, the focus must be on the learning rather than the learner.

- Assessment is a critical professional skill. This skill is required to plan for assessment, observe student learning, interpret the evidence of learning and then provide feedback to the learners. Continuous professional development is necessary in assisting educators with developing these skills. Teachers should use assessment information to revise and guide their teaching in order to improve student learning.

- Assessment is central to everyday classroom practice. Assessment should be ongoing and fluid and involve both the teacher and the learner in reflection, dialogue and decision-making. It should focus on the "how" of learning as well as the "what" of learning and provide many opportunities for practice.

- Assessment is an integral part of effective

planning. The planning process should provide opportunities for both the learner and the

teacher to gather and use information about progress towards developing learning goals. Assessment should also be flexible in order to respond to a variety of ideas emerging from observations and discussions about student learning as students progress through their educational experiences.

The impact of implementing these principles has been well documented. As Amrein and Berliner (2002) reported and Rick Stiggins (2004) states,

***Effective classroom assessment on student achievement had demonstrated remarkable gains ... on student scores on assessments of learning. Students have demonstrated that assessment for learning rivals one-on-one tutoring in its effectiveness and that the use of assessment particularly benefits the achievement of low performing students. The latter finding has direct implications for districts seeking to reduce achievement gaps between minorities and other students (p.27).***

Looking to the future and the potential to enhance assessment strategies that improve opportunities for learning in every classroom across Manitoba, MASS has determined that provincial and school division leaders should make every effort to find the appropriate balance between assessment of learning and assessment for learning in their policies and practices.

## Recommendation
## MASS Respectfully Requests:

**That provincial, school and division leaders use the foregoing research-based principles to develop policies to guide classroom practice and educators' professional judgment.**

Adoption of these principles by school divisions will require the following actions to support teachers' development of the necessary knowledge and skill in assessment practices, particularly in the area of assessment *for* learning:

- Re-examining assessment policies and practices;
- Ensuring that assessment for learning practices that support student learning and the assessment *of* learning practices are not in conflict;
- Examining the impact of grading practices to ensure that they are aligned with the principles of assessment;
- Informing parents and community members of assessment practices and their impact on improving student learning.

MASS believes that implementing the guiding Principles of Assessment through local policy and the provision of professional development opportunities for teaching staff will enhance the quality of learning opportunities in every classroom in Manitoba. The challenge will be to shift, systematically and strategically, the emphasis away from the predominant use of assessment of learning practices toward employing more classroom assessment for learning strategies as the driving force in the successful learning life of every student in Manitoba. Balance is within reach.

# Part 2 : Effective Communication About Student Learning (2009)

## Preamble

In the May 2007 position paper entitled, *Building an Assessment Future with Purpose in Mind*, MASS clearly articulated the need for educational leaders to balance practices related to assessment *of* learning and assessment for learning in order to improve opportunities *for* learning in all Manitoba classrooms. MASS believes that implementing and aligning guiding principles of assessment with current assessment research will enhance the quality of learning opportunities.

Since the release of *Building an Assessment Future with Purpose in Mind*, many divisions across the province have begun the task of developing policies to guide classroom practice to improve

student learning. During recent years, school divisions have committed significant resources to support and enhance professional practices related to assessment.

As the journey toward improved learning continues, MASS recognizes the pressing need to ensure that educators communicate effectively and accurately with partners about student learning. The purpose of this paper is to assist school divisions to align communication about student learning with key principles for effective assessment.

The fundamental purpose of assessment and reporting should be to improve student learning at the classroom, school and system levels. Assessment and reporting of student learning should be undertaken formally and informally for all learners (Principles of Assessment and Reporting in NSW Public Schools, p.15).

Manitoba Education's recent document, *Communicating Student Learning*, notes that,

***As the primary function of schools shifts from categorizing students as high, average, and low achievers to certifying their proficiency on learning outcomes, we need to rethink what, how, and when we need to communicate to students and parents (p.38).***

This document highlights the many dimensions that affect communicating about student learning. This includes being clear about the desired outcomes and criteria for success and the importance of informing a range of partners about student learning.

With greater emphasis on assessment to improve student learning, rather than on using assessment to accumulate marks or have students compete with others, MASS recognizes that it is critical to define the information to be collected and to communicate this information to students and parents. For continued systemic improvement of student learning, educators must re-examine the ways in which student achievement is currently communicated.

Conditions are optimal for school divisions to examine their existing reporting and grading poli-

cies and procedures or to determine whether they are providing accurate and meaningful information necessary to the learning process. To that end, this addendum provides guiding principles for two areas of the communication process: *grading practices and report cards*.

# Grading Principles

The following principles taken from *Communicating Student Learning* (Manitoba Education, 2008) and *Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades* (Ken O'Connor, 2007) can serve to guide divisions' policies and practices regarding assessment and evaluation:

**1.** The primary purpose of grades and reporting is to communicate about achievement with achievement being defined as performance against accepted published standards and learning outcomes.

**2.** Required content and performance standards must be clear and used to focus curriculum, instruction and assessment.

**3.** Formative and summative assessment is criterion-referenced to curricular outcomes and facilitated by clearly defined targets.

**4.** Information about student growth, progress, and achievement should be communicated to students and parents/guardians throughout the learning process, but only summative assessment should inform student grading.

**5.** Student grades should reflect the degree of achievement of curricular-based outcomes and should not be reduced or inflated for behavioural reasons.

**6.** The final grade should reflect the most recent trend in a student's achievement of curricular-based outcomes.

**7.** Professional judgment is necessary when reviewing evidence of student learning. Student grades must be an accurate and fair reflection of student achievement of curricular outcomes.

**8.** Teachers must ensure that students understand how grades have been determined. Students must be actively and meaningfully involved in all phases of learning and assessment.

**9.** Changes in grading practices, from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced assessments, will occur when teachers engage in professional dialogue about grading.

**10.** Teachers should agree on guidelines that avoid inappropriate use and interpretation of grades, shifting their emphasis from a summative to a more formative approach.

**11.** Grades must be valid and reliable and must be communicated in ways that meaningfully support student learning. They can be a worthwhile source of information that students, teachers, and parents use to make sound and appropriate decisions when they are communicated in a timely manner.

## Reporting Principles

The fundamental purpose of reporting is to communicate the level of students' achievement. Teachers gain a deeper understanding of what a student knows and is able to do through observation, conversation and collection of products. It is paramount that reports focus on what the student *can* do, including the next steps for learning. With this in mind, the following Reporting Principles were developed to support system-wide best practices in reporting:

**1.** Student reports should identify student performance related to essential skills and knowledge.

- Reports must identify the achievements expected of students at a particular level. Significant adaptations and accommodations that exceed the wide range of differentiated instruction and assessment should be specified.

**2.** Student reports should build on identifying student strengths, areas that require attention, and next steps to enhance learning.

- Marks, grades and/or letters are not sufficient. Reports must contain accurate information about the student's current level of progress/achieve-

ment in relation to curricular outcomes, and include areas for further development.

**3.** Student reports should be easy to understand.

- Reports need to use clear language that both the parent and student can understand or provide definitions for language for which no appropriate substitute terms exist.

**4.** Student reports should share student progress.

- Reports must accurately reflect the student's most recent level of learning with a focus on learning and progress. Engaging the student in this process is as important as communicating to parents.

**5.** Student reports should be based on valid and reliable assessments (see the aforementioned Grading Principles).

**6.** Student reports should include academic and social information separately.

- Reports must provide information about all aspects of student development.
- Academic reporting considers a student's strengths or progress in meeting the essential curricular outcomes.
- A student's social skills and behaviours are reported separately from academic attainment.

**7.** Student reports should be constructive.

- Reports need to provide information in a constructive manner that identifies actions that can support further learning.

**8.** Student reports should be time-efficient and manageable to prepare.

- Reports need to draw on routinely collected and systematically recorded formal and informal evidence from teachers' ongoing classroom assessment practice.

While report cards are an important aspect of the communication system, we cannot rely on report cards and grades alone as the main communication tool. MASS believes that:

- Report cards provide only one piece of an overall

communication system.

- School divisions and schools must develop additional communication strategies that provide more information than a traditional report card.

- Various communication tools must inform parents and students about achievement of the student (MECY, 2008, p.20).

## Suggestions for Implementation

While change in assessment practices can be both an individual and collective process, changing the assessment practices of individual teachers or schools will not result in systemic change. Therefore, a culture of readiness to change - and a collective commitment to improve student learning - are fundamental. For real change to occur, the individuals involved must embrace responsibility for what they are being asked to do. *Educators must be knowledgeable about, and possess the necessary skill sets to reflect on, assessment innovations that are appropriate, useful, and effective in the classroom; most importantly, they must be ready to adopt these innovations that are appropriate, useful, and effective in the classroom (Assessment Reform Group, 2008).*

As changes in grading and reporting practices are implemented with a view to sustain these change efforts over time, MASS believes it is critical for school divisions to provide varied and differentiated opportunities for professional learning and dialogue. This learning needs to reflect a system-wide commitment for change and support. As these professional conversations unfold, they should not only include considerations of impact on each grade and subject area, but should focus also on key ideas and principles.

To facilitate these conversations, discussions should focus on the importance of (O'Connor, 2007):

- *Exercising professional judgment related to selecting curricular outcomes that become the focus of instruction.*

- *Making learning outcomes clear to students.*

- *Using a variety of instructional strategies in classrooms to meet student needs.*

- *Utilizing formative assessment in promoting student learning.*

- *Involving students in goal setting and self-assessment.*

- *Using professional judgment during the evaluation process and separating academic progress from behaviour when determining grades.*

*Professional learning must aim for a change in understanding rather than merely a superficial change in teaching techniques (Assessment Reform Group, 2008).* These professional learning opportunities should be developed collaboratively over time and be clearly articulated in a divisional implementation plan. Furthermore, these professional development activities should be multi-layered and differentiated, allow for multiple entry points, provide opportunities for teachers to practice between sessions, and be both school-based and division-based.

## Conclusion

*The challenge of changing assessment practices is not to be taken lightly. Clearly the link to assessment and communicating student learning is pivotal with assessment arising from and leading naturally to communication (MECY, 2008, p.6).* As the research referenced in this paper has indicated, effective communication has a major role to play in improving student learning, but can only occur when all educational partners are authentically involved in the learning process. MASS believes that student learning in Manitoba will be enhanced when educators both reflect on and re-examine their existing practice and work to align that practice with the guidelines of communicating student achievement as outlined in this paper.

## Recommendation
## MASS Respectfully Requests:

**That division and school-based leaders use the foregoing research-based principles to develop policies to guide classroom practice and educators' professional judgment.**

# References

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**The Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS) provides leadership for public education by advocating for the best interests of learners and supporting its members through professional services.**

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