MASS
MANITOBA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

Essential Learning

A Position Statement - February 2014

> **"Essential learning ... the critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions each student must acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction."**
>
> *Dufour/Dufour/Eaker/Thomas*

I. Introduction

With this paper, MASS is interested in playing a significant role in advancing the conversation around essential learning. Educators leading learners into the future understand that learning is not about the minutia of curriculum but rather about learning those enduring, foundational and transferable ideas that students must know and the skills and attitudes that help students utilize those ideas over time.

Ultimately, when children and youth are engaged in learning experiences that are meaningful, relevant (enduring) with depth and complexity, students become curious, and see the relevance and usefulness of what they're learning. They understand what matters; what's worth learning *(Reeves, 2006)*.

The intention of this paper is to:

- Bring clarity to what is meant by *'essential learning'*.
- Establish some philosophical underpinnings as well as possible protocols and/or practices that school divisions may want to consider in their implementation process.
- Provide questions that may be used to help guide professional discussions within school divisions.
- Provide recommendations to *Manitoba Education in the area of curriculum development which supports and promotes the philosophical underpinnings of essential learning*.
- Provide examples and/or other resources that could be utilized by school divisions to help bring clarity to this topic.

The identification of essential learning is not intended to prescribe the learning focus for students but rather to provide a pathway through the curriculum, while still allowing teachers to *"innovate their practice and inspire their students" (Hargreaves, conference quote)*.

Preamble

The Province of Manitoba is on a continued journey to improve learning and teaching in classrooms. In response, Manitoba Education has gathered together several of the most current ideas in educational research to promote its educational initiatives:

- *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind*
- *Communicating Student Learning*
- *Provincial Assessment Policy Kindergarten to Grade 12*
- *The Provincial Report Card (the new report card has become a catalyst, offering a framework to advance the discussion and any actions related to essential learning)*

An important next step in this journey is to ensure educators have a common language and understanding of the learning and teaching cycle *(Appendix 2)* to ensure clarity throughout the province.

School divisions have made considerable effort and growth in the journey to improve teaching and learning. In the myriad of curricula with which teachers are expected to work and to engage students, the current challenges revolve around:

- What constitutes **'essential learning'**, **'enduring understanding'** or **'big idea'**?
- What are the essential learnings?
- How to align terms used in Manitoba curriculum documents with essential learning vocabulary *(Appendix 1 highlights some of the ambiguity of terms used)*?

In identifying essential learning in any curricula, three approaches that consistently emerge in the educational research literature:

1. A minimalist approach attempts to cut back curricula to a minimal size.

2. A futurist approach remodels the curricula to reflect 21st century learning.

3. A realistic approach takes curricula, in all its complexity and richness and looks for a common filter through which learning can be viewed *(Erickson, 2002)*.

Since the realistic approach honours the provincially mandated curriculum and enables educators to extend learning to reflect 21st century knowledge, skills, and values, MASS proposes adopting the third approach in Manitoba.

Bringing Clarity to Essential Learning

According to Nickerson (2010),
The term essential learning consists of the knowledge, skills and values/dispositions students 'must have' in order to participate fully in society. Essential learning is not learning that students engage in once and move on, but rather curriculum in which students explore, revisit and deepen as they move through school. To be considered essential understanding, skills and values must meet several criteria:

- They take time to develop
- They are foundational/support further learning
- They are durable
- They are transferable across curriculum and beyond the classroom walls

Essential learning has three components: **enduring understandings** (should <u>know</u>), **key performance skills** (should be able to <u>do</u>), and **values** (should <u>believe</u> about a given discipline).

Enduring Understandings (know)

Nickerson states that,
Enduring understandings are statements summarizing important ideas and core processes that are central to a discipline and have lasting value beyond the classroom. They synthesize what students should understand ... as a result of studying a particular content area. Moreover, they articulate what students should *"revisit"* over the course of their lifetimes in relationship to the content area.

Enduring understandings are statements that capture the essence; the important ideas and processes, of a particular subject area and those understandings have a lasting value beyond school life. They are a synthesis of what students should know and understand.

Key Performance Skills (do)

Key performance skills draw on a variety of skills. Performance skills develop within the individual and grow in sophistication over time. Some examples of these skills are problem solving, critical thinking, inquiry, and design process.

Values (believe)

Students need to develop the values and attitudes that assist them in understanding the discipline in depth, communicating that understanding and seeing the relationship **with other disciplines**.

Why Essential Learning?

1. Essential learning helps teachers manage curricular outcomes. Given the scope and depth of the provincial curricula, along with the fact that all curriculum outcomes must be taught, educators are challenged to make decisions about what is essential.

2. Essential learning supports educators to move to best practice of planning with the end in mind. Planning shifts from a primary focus on good strategies to a focus on the *"why"* and the *"what"* of instruction. Identifying the learning expectations for all students using this planning model is at the heart of developing specific essential learnings.

3. Essential learning supports a learning environment dedicated to promoting the highest levels of thinking in order to deepen student learning. In essence, the focus

of essential learning places clear emphasis on the *"what"* and the *"how"* of learning. It improves the quality of discourse of students by changing the dialogue in the classroom, leading to a deeper understanding of the curriculum. In order to deepen learning, teachers provide opportunities for critical thinking, problem solving, creative thinking and effective communication.

4. Essential learning has the power to reform classroom-based assessment. An essential learning framework facilitates assessment for learning, performance assessment and student involved assessment. The process of articulating the essential learning assists teachers' in clearly determining the evidence students must demonstrate in order to show their learning. When teachers know <u>why</u> they are teaching <u>what</u> they are teaching, they can better explain to their students what is expected of them as learners. This requires a shift in practice from grading and reporting student achievement according to tasks, to essential learning based on enduring understandings and essential questions as they relate to outcomes.

5. By determining what is essential, we are able to make communication about learning clearer. Clarity ensures teachers can effectively communicate students' learning to students, parents and other educational partners *(Manitoba Education, Report Card Support Document Partners in Learning, 2012)*.

Essential learning ultimately supports teachers' work to improve student learning.

Supporting Professional Learning Conversations

When undergoing the process of identifying the essential learning, school divisions must articulate the standards they are striving towards and the indicators that help students and teachers understand the path towards achievement. Examples and/or descriptions of this work could be shared across the province and be used as a guide to support learning. Creating and implementing common assessments within Divisions could further assist in measuring student success as could designing and implementing plans for ongoing growth.

Appendix 2 mRLC (Manitoba Rural Learning Consortium) Framework for Learning and Teaching outlines an example of the process as well as teacher skill sets and mind sets required for quality classroom instruction.

MASS believes that although significant work has been done in this regard, there is still room for deeper conversations to ensure all educators clearly understand the meaning of essential learning and its implication on teaching within the disciplines. In support of colleagues

across the province, sample questions are provided to facilitate and support professional learning conversations.

Questions:

Creating the Culture

- Does the culture of the division encourage exploring enduring understandings and considering essential questions?

- How do we engage teachers in the conversation around teaching and learning?

    - Who in the division should be engaged in the conversation?
    - Who is already moving in this direction?
    - How do we make this sustainable?
    - How do we embed it?

- How are students engaged in this process?

- How do we involve educational partners including parents and board members in the process and convince them of the importance of this work?

- What formalized structures exist for teachers to collaborate?

Planning for Student Learning

- What do we want all students to know, be able to do and to value as they leave our system?

- How do the teachers make decisions about what to teach? What thinking allows us to teach for transfer and to teach strategically?

- How does essential learning fit within the context of a teaching and learning cycle?

- How can the knowledge of essential learning help guide educators' professional discourse?

- What are the enduring understandings, thinking and performance skills in each curriculum?

- What are the essential learnings that are common to all curricula?

- How do essential learnings bring clarity and help make teaching and learning manageable?

- How do essential learnings bring a greater purpose to what is happening in the classroom?

Assessing and Communicating Student Learning

- How do teachers assess for report card categories (blending ideas to reach broader categories) and how do they assign a mark to a student (learning indicator) based on their assessments?

- How do teachers assess essential learnings?

- What pillar assessments could be developed at different grade levels?

- How do we want students to communicate learning?

- How do they use enduring understandings and performance skills to report student achievement using the report card categories?

Recommendations

Essential learning is the critical next step in articulating the **"Big Ideas"** that must be fostered in classrooms in all Manitoba schools, while focusing on provincial curricula. In Manitoba, we as educators need to move beyond thinking of the curriculum as a series of general learning outcomes, supported by specific learning outcomes.

Wiggen's and McTighe's (2009) states:

Any education, regardless of content or philosophy, should help learners, right from the start, to "come to understanding" in two senses (1) to enable them to constantly make meaning from their school work and (2) to equip them to apply their learning to new situations not only in school but also beyond it - that is, to transfer.

As such, the following recommendations are respectively put forth.

1. MASS provide leadership around essential learning.

A. MASS hosts professional learning opportunities to guide divisions through the process of developing and/or using a framework for essential learning.

B. MASS promotes the common vocabulary defined in this paper throughout the province in discussions about essential learning. This is critical to ensuring essential learning and must be interpreted in such a way that it can be implemented to its highest standard.

C. MASS takes a proactive approach by ensuring clear, consistent communication with all relevant partners in regards to essential learning and in particular with school boards.

D. MASS promotes the sharing of essential learning samples developed by educators across the province *(see Appendix 3 for an example)*.

2. MASS strongly encourages Manitoba Education to work with educators across the province to redesign the K - 12 curriculum, considering:

A. A compelling vision for education that prepares all students to be confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors in their world.

B. The development and implementation of a dynamic, developmental, integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum .

C. Meaningful and relevant curricula for <u>all</u> students through the infusion of Aboriginal perspectives, Education for Sustainable Development and Learning with ICT (Information Communication Technology).

D. A common language through all disciplines *(See appendix 1: Table of Words currently used in curriculum)*.

E. A synthesis of learning outcomes to reflect essential learning; enduring understandings, key skills and values,

F. Research-supported practice in assessment/reporting.

References

Erickson Lynne H., 2002. *Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction: Teaching Beyond the Facts,* Corwin Press Inc.

Hargreaves A., August 2012. *Address to MASS membership*, ElkHorn, MB.

Reeves D., VA:ASCD, 2006. *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results*.

Hattie J., 2008. *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement Routledge*.

Nickerson W., March 2010. *Presentation*.

Manitoba Education, 2010. *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind, Communicating Student Learning, Provincial Assessment Policy Kindergarten to Grade 12 and the Provincial Report Card*.

Sutherland E. and Tighe L., February 2012. *mRLC Framework for Learning and Teaching*.

Wiggens, G.P. and McTighe, J., 2009. VA:ASCD *Schooling by Design: Mission, Action and Achievement*.

# Appendix 1: Current Manitoba Curriculum Document Terminology

Subject Area			Subject Area Organization			Integrated Throughout		Making Sense of the Outcomes	
Mathematics	Goals		Strands	General Learning Outcomes	Specific Learning Outcomes	Processes	Achievement Indicators	Enduring Understandings	Essential Questions
English Language Arts			Strands	General Outcomes	Specific Outcomes				Suggestions for Instruction
Arts Education	Goals		Essential Learning Areas	General Learning Outcomes	Specific Learning Outcomes				
Social Studies		Core Concepts	Clusters	General Learning Outcomes	Specific Learning Outcomes (Knowledge, Values, Distinctive)	Skill Outcomes		Enduring Understandings	Learning Experiences
Science	Goals	Foundations for Scientific Literacy	Clusters; Units (in High School Courses)	General Learning Outcomes	Specific Learning Outcomes	Cluster o (Skills and Attitudes Outcomes)			Suggestions for Instruction
PE/HE	Vision			General Learning Outcomes	Specific Learning Outcomes				
Technical Vocational Education									

mRLC Learning and Teaching

Professional Development

Plan for Learning
- Backwards Design
- Determine Key Assessments
- Engage Students
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Define Learning Goals
- Understand Essential Learning (*Enduring Understandings & Performance Skills*)
- Set Criteria
- Determine Quality Student Work

Teach for Learning
- Use DI Approaches/Strategies
- Engage Students
- Opportunities for Practice without Grading
- Productive Pedagogy

Check Outcomes, Feedback
- Formative Assessment
- Provide Quality Descriptive Feedback
- Involve Student Self-Assessment
- Triangulate Data - Observations, Conversations, Products

Adjust Teaching and Learning
- Use Student Evidence
- Reflect, Record, Analyze, Plan
- Self-Reflective Practice - what worked? what didn't?

Communicating Learning
Provincial Report Card
- Summative Assessment
- Record Keeping - Outcome Based Gradebook
- Determine Grades - Professional Judgement
- Report Card Comments - Strengths/Challenges/Next Steps

Instructional Leadership

Principals and Vice-Principals | Middle Leaders | Teachers

Teacher | Resource | Guidance

Roles in Supporting Teaching for Learning

> "Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence."
>
> *Abigail Adams*
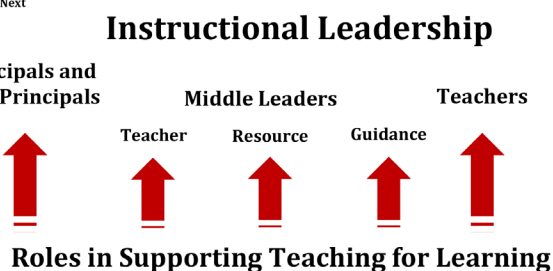
Appendix 3: Grade Seven - Statistics and Probability

Enduring Understanding:
Students will understand that data can be collected and communicated in a variety of ways which help make inferences, predictions and/or conclusions about the data. Students will understand that probability is a measure to describe the likelihood that an event will occur.

Report Card Subject Categories	Essential Learning	Essential Question	Concepts	Specific Learning Outcomes	Essential Vocabulary
Knowledge and Understanding	Understand measures of central tendency.	What are the measures of central tendency? How can the measures of central tendency be determined? How can we describe a set of data using a single value?	- mean, median, mode and range, central tendency, outliers	7SP1, 7SP2	average data mean measure of central tendency median mode outlier range statistics Venn diagram angle circle graph key legend percent pie chart sectors sum sum of the central angles certain event dependent event event experimental probability favourable outcome frequency table or chart impossible event independent event likely outcome possible outcome probability random relative frequency
	Construct and read circle graphs.	How can circle graphs be constructed, labeled and interpreted?	- construct, label and interpret circle graphs	7SP3	
	Express probabilities in different ways.	How can ratios, fractions, and percent be used to express probabilities?	- express probabilities as ratios, fractions, and percent	7SP4	
	Apply the principles of probability of a single event to independent events.	How can the principles of probability be applied to a single event as well as independent events?	- sample space of 36 or fewer elements with two independent events - tree diagram, tables	7SP5, 7SP6	
Mental Math and Estimation	Apply the principles of probability of a single event to independent events.	How can the principles of probability be applied to a single event as well as independent events?	- sample space of 36 or fewer elements with two independent events	7SP5	
Problem Solving	Understand measures of central tendency.	How can the measures of central tendency be used to solve problems?	- mean, median, mode and range, central tendency, outliers	7SP1, 7SP2	
	Construct and read circle graph	How can circle graphs be constructed, labeled and interpreted when solving problems?	- construct, label and interpret circle graphs.	7SP3	
	Apply the principles of probability of a single event to independent events.	How can we apply the principles of probability to a single event as well as independent events when solving problems?	- sample space of 36 or fewer elements with two independent events - tree diagram, tables	7SP5, 7SP6	

Grade Two Science (sample grade book) - Cluster Three: Position and Motion

Enduring Understanding:
Students will understand spatial relationships between stationary and moving objects, including themselves.

	Report Card Categories												
	Knowledge and Understanding					**Scientific Inquiry Process**					**Design Process/Problem Solving**			
	Essential Questions What are the similarities and differences between the positions of objects? How can simple machines be used to make motion easier? How can friction affect the motion of objects?					**Essential Questions** How can different simple machines be used? How can friction be shown?					**Essential Question** How can a vehicle be designed in order to move?			
	Evidence from Learning Experiences					**Evidence from Learning Experiences**					**Evidence from Learning Experiences**			
Students	Position: Fixed and Change	Position: Perspective	Simple Machines	Friction	Vocabulary	Inclined plane experiments	Inclined plane: Communicating data	Wheels and Axles experiments	Wheels and Axles: Communicating data	Friction	Creates a plan	Collects appropriate materials	Develops the vehicle	Tests the vehicle	Evaluates the vehicle

4 Thorough understanding   2 Basic understanding   ND Not yet demonstrated

3 Very good understanding   1 Limited understanding

Stage 1: Planning with the End in Mind

Identify desired learning
What aspect of the strand/unit are you focusing on in this plan?
Enduring Understanding/Big Idea/Purpose
Essential Questions:

Know Students will know and understand …	**Do** Students will be able to … -

Key Vocabulary:

Stage 2: Determine Acceptable Evidence

Determine acceptable evidence
Address the questions through these assessments …

Formative	Perfor	mance	Summative
Write(Product)/**Do** (Observation)/**Say**(Conversation)			

What are the performance indicators?					
Report Card Categories	**Questions**	**Level 1**	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Level 4**

Sample Grade Book

Grade Strand:	Enduring Understanding:										
	Knowledge and Understanding				**Mental Math and Estimation**				**Problem Solving**		
	Essential Questions				Essential Questions				Essential Question		
	Evidence from Assessments				**Evidence from Assessments**				**Evidence from Assessments**		
Students											

Stage 3: Plan Learning Experiences

Plan Learning Experiences

Learning Sequence:

Lesson 1: Activate/Acquire/Apply – Assessment
Lesson 2: Activate/Acquire/Apply – Assessment
Lesson 3: Activate/Acquire/Apply – Assessment
And so on.

Instructional Adjustments :

Resources: