

DATE: November 8, 2011

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Edgar Schmidt, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Provincial Achievement Tests (Trustee Request #129)

ORIGINATOR: Sandy Forster, Director Projects and Research

RESOURCE STAFF: Bruce Cline, Rick Gingras, Carolyn Mathew, Greg McNulty, Anthony Walsh, Colin Woelfle

REFERENCE: October 11, 2011 Board Meeting (Trustee Spencer)

ISSUE

The following information was requested: Summarize arguments for and against maintaining Provincial Achievement Tests, particularly at the elementary level. What alternatives for assessment and accountability are being considered by Alberta Education?

BACKGROUND

The issue of Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) in the Alberta context is sometimes included as part of the larger discussion about standardized testing in American jurisdictions (Burger & Krueger, 2003); therefore, it is important to focus on the intended purpose and use of PATs in Alberta.

CURRENT SITUATION

PAT results do not provide all the information in terms of individual student achievement. Generally, it is the unintended uses and consequences of PATs that generate misunderstanding and conflict. General arguments against maintaining PATs can be summarized as:

- It is one test on one day, thus it does not accurately reflect the learning of an entire year
- It causes unnecessary anxiety and stress for students
- It only assesses a portion of the curriculum
- The results are not available until the fall, thus it does not provide timely information to the learner
- Organizations such as the Fraser Institute use it to rank schools without considering the larger context of the teaching and learning in those schools

The intended purpose and use of PATs provides a balance to the conversation. Arguments for maintaining PATs can be summarized as:

- PATs are a valid measure against the Alberta Programs of Study
- PATs are a reliable measure due to extensive field testing in Alberta
- PATs are developed by current Alberta teachers
- PATs act as a public system check for Alberta Education and for Edmonton Public Schools to monitor the Programs of Study and trends against those outcomes

It is clear that “not all aspects of student learning can be measured in an objective fashion by paper and pencil tests” (Burger & Krueger, 2003), such as collaboration, critical thinking, and knowledge and attitudes learning outcomes found in the Programs of Study. However, the

information that PATs do provide is based on tests that are created by Alberta teachers, aligned to the Programs of Study (criterion-referenced), field tested on a broad scale in advance of being used as final test questions. Finally, the PATs are equated to ensure that the tests have the same level of difficulty from one year to the next in order for Alberta Education and school authorities to make valid year to year comparisons, and to observe trends over time. The PATs are a set of large-scale assessments that are one piece of evidence that provide valuable and useful information to teachers, authority representatives, and government policy-makers for decision-making based on valid and reliable information.

The *Teaching Quality Standard*, [Teaching Quality Standard](#), requires that “Teachers select and develop a variety of classroom assessment strategies and instruments to assess the full range of learning objectives. They differentiate between classroom and large-scale instruments such as provincial achievement tests, administer both and use the results for the ultimate benefit of students. They record, interpret and use the results of their assessments to modify their teaching practices and students’ learning activities”. Teachers can utilize PATs as an opportunity to reflect on their classroom programming and assessment alignment against the Programs of Study. For the English Language Arts PAT Part A (writing), teachers have the opportunity to assess students’ writing in advance of submitting student booklets to Alberta Education. By doing this, teachers receive feedback that is based on a valid and reliable test. Additionally, this assessment offers teachers the opportunity to compare their assessment to the standards set and used by the Provincial marking process during the summer.

In relation to anxiety and stress on students, Alberta Education advocates that the “...best way to prepare students for the achievement tests is to teach the curriculum well. Excessive practicing is of little benefit to the students. They should be familiar with the multiple choice format and this can be accomplished easily with the practice questions from the subject bulletins and released items”, [Achievement Tests Q & A](#). Alberta Education acknowledges that some students may require accommodations in order to write PATs, and that it may not be appropriate for some students to write PATs altogether. With the Superintendent’s approval, accommodations and exemptions are permitted (Attachment I). Also, a parent may choose to excuse their child from writing PATs.

Alberta Education was not able to provide possible alternatives that they may be considering at this time.

KEY POINTS

- Consider the intended purpose and use of PATs when deciding whether or not to maintain or eliminate them at the elementary level, instead of their unintended purpose and use.
- The intended purpose and use of PATs is an integral element of Alberta teachers’ professional responsibilities.
- The consideration of maintaining or eliminating PATs should be separate from the debate stemming from standardized tests and funding in the United States.

ATTACHMENTS & APPENDICES

ATTACHMENT I Accommodation and Exemption Information

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Accommodation and Exemption Information
(from General Information Bulletin, Alberta Education)

Alberta Education is committed to accommodating the learning needs of all Alberta students so that they may have fair and equitable access to educational opportunities, including the writing of achievement tests.

To ensure fairness and equity for all students, Alberta Education permits achievement tests to be administered using one or more of the following accommodations:

- Accommodation 1: CD version of the test – visually impairment
- Accommodation 2: CD version of the test – learning and/or physical disability
- Accommodation 3: Additional writing time – up to 2 times the scheduled time
- Accommodation 4: Calculator – Grade 3 Mathematics only
- Accommodation 5: Scribe
- Accommodation 6: Large print version
- Accommodation 7: Braille version
- Accommodation 8: Reader
- Accommodation 9: Sign language interpreter
- Accommodation 10: Recorded response
- Accommodation 14: Miscellaneous

The goal in permitting the use of writing accommodations when administering achievement tests is to promote fairness and equity by removing obstacles to performance. Consequently, accommodations are neither intended nor permitted to:

- alter the nature of the construct being measured by a test
- provide unfair advantages to students with disabilities over students taking tests under regular conditions
- compensate for knowledge or skill that a student has not attained

Although many accommodations are used in teaching situations, not all of those accommodations are appropriate for use in a testing situation.

Principals should contact the Special Cases & Accommodations team (see the *Contacts* section) for clarification before recommending the use of an accommodation that is not specifically identified in the list above (i.e., those that would be classified as **Accommodation 14: Miscellaneous**).

Note: *Isolation* is only considered to be an accommodation if it is used in conjunction with another approved accommodation.

Who May Use Writing Accommodations

All accommodations that are permitted to be used for achievement test writing purposes are intended for students who **regularly use them** in learning and testing situations in their classroom, **throughout the school**

Who Writes Achievement Tests

Students registered in grades 3, 6, and 9 and ungraded students* in their third, sixth, and ninth years of schooling shall write provincial achievement tests, subject to the following caveats and/or exceptions:

1. A superintendent may, on an individual basis, excuse a student from writing an achievement test for the following reasons:
 - a. the student is not capable of responding to the assessment in its original or approved accommodated form
 - b. participation would be harmful to the student

2. Upon advice from the teacher, the principal in consultation with the parent/guardian, shall recommend to the superintendent that a student be excused from writing. A copy of the documentation in support of the recommendation, including the student's Individual Program Plan, if applicable, shall remain in the school for auditing purposes.

[Achievement Testing Program - General Information](#)

Burger, J. M., & Krueger, M. (2003). A balanced approach to high-stakes achievement testing: An analysis of the literature with policy implications. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, 7(4), Retrieved from http://www.ucalgary.ca/iejll/burger_krueger