

Redefining Success: Prioritising What Matters

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British Columbia's education system is globally respected as oft lauded as a "world class education system". Results from international assessments such as Performance for International Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) show we are certainly delivering a top-notch education. [Results from 2016 PISA](#) show British Columbia students rank first in reading and on the top 6 in Math and Science. Beyond these rankings, are we carefully looking to ensure we are measuring what matters and counting what counts? Current curricular changes are asking educators to continue the excellence in teaching of core curriculum (math and sciences, reading and writing). In addition, we are asking students to develop non-cognitive skills such as communication, creative thinking, critical thinking, positive personal and cultural identity, personal awareness and responsibility and social responsibility. The million dollar question is to ask ourselves how to shift our thinking to ensure we are measuring what truly matters.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) promotes economic viability and competitiveness of a country as key criteria for world class education systems. From this perspective, our schools have a critical role to play in preparing human capital, our youth, to ensure continued economic gains in our province. In fact, OECD advocate, Andreas Schleider (2018) asserts that should an educational system encounter significant shortcomings it could "have an effect equivalent to a major economic recession." Monitoring how we are doing in our schools, it seems, warrants our on-going attention.

Currently, world class systems are identified largely by measurements of academic test scores in one country relative to those in other countries. With the goal of BC education to prepare today's young to be educated citizens, not solely as human capital, measuring only academic success tells a partial story. We are not convinced that the "right things" are being measured or emphasized to truly reflect the goals of education to develop individuals as compassionate, collaborative and lifelong learners. We believe cognitive assessments are a narrow lens from which to study and evaluate whether a system is truly world class.

In support, Henry Levin (2002) in, "More Than Just Test Scores," strongly reminds us that skills valued in the workplace are no longer only cognitive skills. "We must also have a workforce that is skillful and possess positive values and habits. Individuals must develop interpersonal skills that enable them to relate to in many different societal situations." In fact, academic tests do not measure the capacity to formulate and solve problems nor do they measure valuable interpersonal behaviours such as collaboration, communication skills, time management and impulse control. In our complex, ever-changing world, these skills are foundational.

Indeed, when the BC Ministry of Education moved to include Core Competencies, also known as non-cognitive skills, in its redesigned curriculum, the message we received was loud and clear; as a society, we value the development of educated citizens as more than human capital with a solid knowledge base. It was deemed of paramount importance that high school graduates also possess the ability to communicate clearly and well, the ability to think critically and creatively, and the ability to manifest personal and social awareness and responsibility in a variety of contexts. The Core Competencies are intended to work alongside literacy and numeracy foundations, coming

into play when students are engaged in “doing” any area of learning. The competencies are sets of intellectual, personal, social and emotional proficiencies that all students develop in order to engage in thoughtful, reflective learning. This modern curriculum encompasses rigorous learning opportunities from which students’ gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to succeed in today’s world.

Our curriculum has provided an opportunity to make systemic changes to prepare students’ for their futures. Part of these changes include an emphasis on classroom assessment and the replacement of subject based provincial examinations for graduation with only numeracy and literacy assessments in grades 10 and 12. At the same time, the BC Ministry of Education has been stalwart in keeping the oft debated Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) for grade 4 and 7 students. Nevertheless, while BC’s curriculum emphasizes the integration of the Core Competencies through all subject areas, the summative classroom assessments and standardized tests, such as the FSA, do not adequately provide the whole picture when it comes to students’ growth areas in Core Competencies and how we are doing as a system.

Interestingly, however, the assessment of core competencies, is a challenging one to quantify. As a result, teachers are currently mandated to assess and evaluate cognitive skills in school subjects, such as Language Arts and Math. While there is a requirement for *student* self-assessment of the Core Competencies, teachers do not evaluate them. Part of this is due to teachers’ requiring flexibility to meet diverse student needs and the emphasis being placed on supporting student ownership of Core Competency learning. To that end, teachers facilitate students understanding of Core Competency language by noticing and naming them as they teach. More precisely, teachers

intentionally weave these important skills in all areas of the curriculum and provide regular opportunities for students to practice, set goals and self-reflect. But this still begs the question, “How are BC students doing with internalizing and demonstrating these important ways of being?”

Non-cognitive skills are a new era of assessment and there will need to be new measures or innovations developed to underline the importance of what we value. There are possibilities, as Angela Duckworth and David Scott Yeager relay, such as, giving students performance tasks in order to measure the skills needed to accomplish them, and measuring the improvement in practice over time. In addition, some BC schools are exploring innovative ways to prioritize non-cognitive skills. For example, Mark R Isfeld Secondary School in the Comox Valley and Brooks Secondary School in Powell River require senior students to complete a [Capstone Project](#) to provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate learning ownership in an area of choice. Students at Chilliwack Middle School also have a Success Showcase at the end of the year to encourage reflection of learning in both cognitive and non-cognitive skills. We are encouraged by these important student opportunities. To continue to prioritize these possibilities, we would advocate for student examples to be uploaded on our Ministry website, as one strategy to bring a qualitative narrative to what we endeavor to value in our educational system.

Current global educators and institutions lean heavily on standardized test scores. In British Columbia, the Fraser Institute rankings determine how schools are performing academically, and rank schools according the results of this Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) standardized test. At present, and importantly, there are no tests that highlight the Core Competencies; nor should there be. Self assessment of core competencies are tremendously valuable as it ensures student involvement in the process of reflection and meta-cognition. At the moment, creating

opportunities for student self assessment are not aligned provincially; some guidance for educators is valuable and timely. Further, educational leaders would be setting the stage to encourage the use of experimental and problem or project based learning while practising soft skills and core competencies. Performance assessment will go a long way in supporting this endeavor. The challenge remains, then, for educators to find ways to ensure we balance the value we place on cognitive and on non-cognitive skills. If we can effectively do this, we would be well on our way. Yong Zhao, one of the world leaders in global education, says in his book “Counting What Counts: Reframing Educational Outcomes,” we need to shift the paradigm of education from short-term instruction to long-term education, and to define success in new ways.

Certainly developing caring, creative, and responsible citizens is needed for our dynamic world of today and tomorrow. For BC to truly be considered an ongoing world class education system, we need to continue to assess cognitive skills while prioritising non-cognitive skills and finding ways to meaningfully illuminate, monitor and promote them as essential. Our students are counting on us.