



CASS

College of
Alberta School
Superintendents



Continuing
Education
Program

LEARNING LAB

*Utilizing Provincial Assessment Results in System
Education Leader Professional Practice*





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*College of Alberta School Superintendents
Suite 1300, First Edmonton Place
10665 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5J 3S9
P: 780.540.9205
E: admin@cass.ab.ca
www.cass.ab.ca*

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Overview

- Learning Labs are designed to facilitate active learning, collaboration, and practical application of knowledge as it relates to system education leadership.
- Learning Labs are designed to be worked through independently or collaboratively. Learning Lab sessions will be offered at CASS Conferences, but the resources are also designed for use by individuals or teams outside of conference sessions.

Connection to Research

- Learning Labs are used in various educational settings, including schools, universities, professional development programs, and corporate training, to enhance learning outcomes and provide a dynamic and immersive learning experience.
- Each Learning Lab includes relevant research related to the topic of the lab.

Application

- Stories of practice case studies demonstrate the application of the concept within a school authority.
- Practical application and reflective exercises help solidify understanding of the material and allow participants to apply their learnings to their own context.
- Learning Lab topics can be applied to a variety of school authority contexts.

Learning

Lab

Study

- Each Learning Lab allows participants to deepen their understanding of a specific topic and reflect on related case studies from practice.
- Interactive and hands-on elements keep participants actively engaged in their learning process.
- The focus on real-world application aids in developing practical skills that can be directly applied in professional or personal contexts.

Synthesis

- Stories of practice case studies are accompanied by synthesis questions designed to allow participants to synthesize their learning and consider applications to their own context and/or professional growth as a system education leader.
- When Learning Labs are done in a collaborative setting, the sharing of diverse ideas and experiences can contribute to system education leaders' learning.

Introduction

- The purpose of this Learning Lab is to inform and strengthen excellence in system education leaders' professional practice as it relates to utilizing the *Provincial Assessment Results* in their school authority.
- Participants will explore system education leadership strategies and professional practice as it relates to utilizing the results from the Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Exams to foster student success, continuous improvement, and ultimately lead to optimum learning for all students.
- This Learning Lab has been designed to align with the following Professional Practice Standards:



Learning Outcomes

Participants in this Learning Lab will:

- analyze how provincial assessment results can inform professional practice.
- interpret current research about large-scale assessments in relation to professional practice.
- reflect upon learning lab content within their local context.

Guiding Questions

- How do system leaders utilize Provincial Assessment Results (PATs and Diploma Exams) to inform and enhance system education leadership practices?
- What are the perceived successes and challenges faced by system education leaders in implementing strategies based on Provincial Assessment Results, and how can these be leveraged to achieve optimum learning for all students?

These questions aim to explore the practical application of the provincial assessment results as it relates to system education leadership, the identification of effective strategies for improving student outcomes, and addressing the potential challenges in the process.

CEP Credits

- For information on credit allocation for the completion of this Learning Lab, please refer to the [Accreditation Requirements](#) document on the CASS CEP website.

Acknowledgements

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Connection to Research

History of K-12 Provincial Assessment in Alberta

To provide context for current practices in standardized assessment in Alberta, several chronologies of Alberta's standardized testing practices emphasize policy shifts starting in the 1970s (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004).

1959

- In 1959, the Cameron Report highlighted the demand for a capable workforce to support the province's burgeoning oil and gas field, including several recommendations to enhance the quality of education in the province (Aitken, 2009). During this period, the external examination program was referred to as Departmental Examinations, including Grades 9 and 12 assessments (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004). Aitken (2009) described these examinations as limited in their scope and the skills tested.

1972

- The Worth Report of 1972 questioned the legitimacy of external examinations (Graham & Neu, 2004), which was identified as a catalyst for the phasing out of Departmental Examinations in 1973 (Aitken, 2009; Graham & Neu, 2004).

1976

- In 1976, the Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Achievement (MACOSA) was established by the Government of Alberta, prompting eighteen studies that informed the recommendations of their 1979 report (ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004). The Curriculum Branch of Alberta Education prompted the 1977 Harder Report, which offered highly influential support for standardized testing across four grades (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004).

1982

- Amid socio-economic and political drivers for educational reform, Alberta initiated the Achievement Testing Program (Grades 3, 6, and 9) in 1982, which included English language arts, social studies, math, and science subjects, administered on a rotational system (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004; McEwen, 1995). These tests accounted for 50% of students' final grades (Graham & Neu, 2004). Moreover, optional comprehensive examinations were offered to Grade 12 students (Graham & Neu, 2004).

1984

- In 1984, the Grade 12 Diploma Examination Program was established (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004), alongside a series of other reform initiatives: "the School Act Review, the Management and Finance Plan, the Review of Secondary School Programs, and the introduction of five evaluation policies (student, teacher, program, school, and system)" (McEwen, 1995, p. 27). Notably, these Grade 12 examinations were now mandatory and accounted for 50% of students' final grades (Graham & Neu, 2004).

Connection to Research

1994

- In 1994, the frequency of testing increased to annual assessments of Grades 6 and 9 literacy and numeracy achievement, and Grades 9 social and science subjects (Graham & Neu, 2004). Additional accountability measures followed with the launch of the province’s Educational Quality Indicators in 1988 (McEwen, 1995). McEwen (1995), who was employed in Alberta Education’s Policy and Planning Branch, referred to the reforms of the 1980s as motivated by convictions that “(1) the student is the central reason for schooling, and (2) education is a purposeful endeavour that can be assessed” (p. 28).

Recent Changes to Provincial Assessment

Several notable changes have recently shaped the format of provincial assessment practices.

2009

- In 2009, Alberta Education announced a decision to remove the written responses for DIPs in math and science subjects (O’Donnell, 2009). Planned for 2018, Education Minister David Eggen announced the return of written responses for math Diploma Examinations (DIPs), and the addition of a separate mental math section on the Grade 9 PATs (Clancy, 2016).

2017

- Another major shift occurred in 2017 when the province announced that all students would receive double the scheduled time to write PATs and DIPs without formal accommodations (Alberta Education, 2017; French, 2017). Alberta Education (2017) released a question-and-answer document that clarified the rationale for this shift: “Performance should be a reflection of a student’s knowledge and abilities rather than a result of how quickly a student can complete a task” (p. 1). Furthermore, the decentralization of accommodations processes deferred greater decision-making to districts and schools, which was intended to reduce inefficiencies that impacted the resources available to students (Alberta Education, 2017; French, 2017). In addition to enhancing time allowances, Alberta Education decreased the weight of DIPs on students’ final grades in 2015 (Slomp et al., 2020). Lowered from 50%, a students’ final course grade is now calculated by blending the diploma exam score, weighted at 30%, with their school-based mark, weighted at 70% (Alberta Education, 2023a; Slomp et al., 2020).

2020

- The COVID-19 pandemic also disrupted provincial assessment practices, including exam cancellations and temporarily reduced weightings (CBC, 2022). Although digital test formats had been used prior (i.e. Quest A+), the province is in the process of progressively adopting a new digital assessment platform (Alberta Education, 2023b; 2024a). The rationale for this transition included enhanced features related to accessibility and interactivity (Alberta Education, 2023b).



Connection to Research

Provincial Assessment Practices (2023-2024)

Alberta's [provincial standardized assessment program](#) includes annual administration of the Provincial Achievement Tests in Grades 6 and 9 core subjects, and DIPs for select Grade 12 courses (Government of Alberta, 2024a; 2024b). In the 2023-24 school year, changes to the Alberta curriculum resulted in disruptions to the administration of PATs (Alberta Education, 2023b). Moreover, the Grade 3 Student Learning Assessments (SLAs) were not administered in 2023-24 and are under evaluation (Alberta Education, 2024c). The recently adopted K-3 literacy and numeracy screening assessments will continue as mandatory in 2024-25 (Alberta Education, 2024d).

Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs)

- The PATs are criterion-referenced tests based on the Grades 6 and 9 provincial curriculum (Alberta Education, 2023b).
- Student achievement reporting includes a cut score, the numerical score on the exam, corresponding to an acceptable standard and a standard of excellence (Alberta Education, 2023b).
- According to Alberta Education (2023b), the PAT results can help inform adjustments to classroom teaching to improve student achievement, cautioning that students' scores are "best interpreted within the context of local quantitative and qualitative information" (p. 3).
- Prior to provincial marking, PATs are graded by teachers who share these initial grades with parents in a format that is at the discretion of the school (Alberta Education, 2023b).
- The central goals of the PATs are to verify that student learning is aligned with the program of studies, share student achievement data with the public, and support various education stakeholders in tracking and enhancing student achievement (Government of Alberta, 2024a).
- PATs enlist a strategy comparable to statistical equating to bolster assessment equity (Alberta Education, 2024e).

Diploma Examinations (DIPs)

- Slomp et al. (2020) referred to Alberta's DIPs as "medium stakes" (p. 431) exit exams because school-based grades are combined with the DIPs results to determine students' final grades, so the exams are not the only determinants of high school graduation.
- As exit exams, DIPs offer a performative threshold for high school graduation (Slomp et al., 2020), so their aims are distinct from the PATs (Alberta Education, 2023a; 2024a).
- Alberta Education (2023a) outlined the three-fold goals for the DIPs: "to certify the level of individual student achievement in selected Grade 12 courses" (p. 1), "to ensure that provincewide standards of achievement are maintained" (p. 1), and "to report individual and group results" (p. 1).
- To statistically equate exams across administrations, most DIPs include a combination of common items, questions that appeared on prior exams, and unique items, which have not been used prior (Alberta Education, 2023a). Equating first occurred in 2003 with the aim of mitigating fluctuations in the challenge level of DIPs across administrations.

Connection to Research

This collection of studies has demonstrated direct and indirect associations between system educational leadership and standardized measures of student achievement.

1

With a focus on system educational leadership practices, participants highlighted the significance of data-based approaches centered on ameliorating student achievement (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2015).

2

System and school leaders reported an enhanced capacity to interpret and use provincial data sets to improve instruction, including student achievement from the PATs and DIPs (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2015).

3

Three studies found positive relationships between the key district effectiveness features and student achievement (Handford & Leithwood, 2019; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019).

4

Two studies (i.e. Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019) found robust correlations between four district practices and students' literacy and numeracy scores: "Mission, Vision and Goals, Coherent Instructional Guidance, Uses of Evidence and Alignment" (Leithwood & McCullough, 2021, p. 144).

5

Two studies (Leithwood et al., 2019; Hanford & Leithwood, 2019) found that district leadership had robust indirect relationships with student achievement through "an aggregate measure of conditions included as a part of the Emotions, Organisational and Rational categories of conditions but not the Family category" (Leithwood & McCullough, 2021, p. 144).

6

Power Indices were used to evaluate the indirect relationship between district characteristics and math achievement, identifying the strongest associations with conditions related to teacher affect: "Teacher Trust, Collective Teacher Efficacy, and Teacher Commitment" (Leithwood & McCullough, 2017, p. 49). As such, provincial test scores have provided reliable measures of student achievement to research investigating its association with the features of effective school districts.

Connection to Research



- Use these self-reflective questions to consider the connection between the research and your local context.

Questions to Consider:

- As you read about the evolution of Alberta's K-12 provincial assessment practices, what resonated with you or surprised you?
- What impact have the recent changes to provincial assessment practices had within your school authority?
- What impact do your policies or procedures about provincial assessments have on leadership practices within your school authority?
- Are you aware of any research, legislation, policies, or procedures related to provincial assessment that might be missing from this section? If so, what would these add to your learning?



Story of Practice Case Study

CESD - Context



Chinook's Edge is one of the largest school divisions in the province, serving over 11,000 students in 40 Central Alberta schools between Calgary and Red Deer. In their 2022–2023 Annual Education Results Report (linked on the image), CESD identified that the provincial assessments are key data points for assessing academic excellence.



Mission

Chinook's Edge School Division will engage every student in meaningful learning by challenging, encouraging and believing in them.

Vision

Chinook's Edge School Division will be universally recognized as a collaborative learning community where learning is personalized for all students to achieve success as compassionate and innovative global citizens.

School Authority Priorities

Career Connections

All students will graduate high school with career pathway experiences and skill development that will lead to a successful transition to post-secondary and careers.

Academic Excellence

Chinook's Edge School Division students will reach their highest academic potential.

Social-Emotional Well-Being

Students and staff members will have the knowledge, skills and attributes to respond to their social-emotional needs and the needs of others.

Story of Practice Case Study

CESD - Context

Taking a Balcony View

In Chinook's Edge School Division, the Associate Superintendent of System Services has a dedicated role in ensuring a systemic approach across the school authority, including the K–12 student experience. This dedicated system education leader leads the alignment of the assessment experiences for students across the grades in the school authority and the entire leadership team supports this work.

Taking a balcony view means examining the student experience from when a student enters CESD to when they stride across the stage for their high school graduation. CESD wants students to have positive and consistent experiences that make them feel prepared for the next steps and have some sense of anticipation for what is coming next.. The following critical question guides this work: *How are we ensuring students in the younger grades are ready to succeed and thrive in high school and, most importantly, are well equipped to succeed beyond high school?*

Attention is paid to detail and micro-actions that might disrupt a student's experience as they progress from grade to grade. Questions to explore students' experience as they progress from grade to grade include: *Is key vocabulary for certain subject areas consistent across elementary, middle and high schools? Do students experience similar expectations for behaviour, workload, ethics and technology use across the school authority?*

This systematic analysis includes purposeful reflection on the school authority's provincial assessment results. As shown throughout this case study, CESD is pleased with their results and can identify points for celebration, but they have acknowledged that their results are not yet at pre-pandemic levels.

How are we ensuring students in the younger grades are ready to succeed and thrive in high school and, most importantly, are well equipped to succeed beyond high school?

Story of Practice Case Study

CESD - Application

Collaboration

- Teams of teachers come together to analyze and reflect on provincial assessment results
- Collaboration time is structured and focused on continuous improvement.
- Teachers share expertise and effective instructional strategies
- Teachers ask questions and learn from each other
- They feel safe to be vulnerable and share challenges and celebration
- Teachers leave with lessons and resources to use in their classrooms

Attunement

- System education leaders are attuned to an ever-changing context.
- They create the conditions for offering a safe atmosphere that is conducive to sharing.
- System education leaders need to think differently about the education system so they can be nimble and responsive to meet the needs of their students.
- Requires professional conversations across the school authority and a mechanism for collecting stories of practice to inform decisions.

Cohesion

- High school teachers receive 3 full days of face-to-face professional learning annually.
- Lead teachers in every high school subject area collaborate on topics such as resource alignment, balanced assessment practices, and effective instructional practices.
- Consistency and connection are important tenets of cohesion.
- System education leaders are present with high school teachers on these professional learning days. They are connected through their work to ensure optimal learning for all students.

The CESD system education leader team believes that, as a system, it is CESD's responsibility to support teachers in being intentional in the design of student learning experiences. They believe that students should not have a good teacher or experience in a classroom by chance but rather **by design**.



Story of Practice Case Study

CESD - Application

Levelled Conversations

- Repeated non-judgemental professional conversations about assessment data occur at different levels.
- Trough these conversations, best practices emerge.
- School administrators ask teachers: Where did successes lie for our students? What challenges did we see? What will you do differently the next time you teach this content? Are there any overall wildcard reflections that you want to share?
- Administrators recognize teachers' vulnerability and demonstrate care and empathy.
- System education leaders discuss provincial assessment results and meet with each school administrative team to identify overall success and challenges across all subject areas.
- Examples of best practices that emerged from these conversations are: the need to ensure that the vocabulary used in middle school math matched the vocabulary used in high school math, and the importance of two weeks of review time before provincial assessments.

Flexibility

- Preparing students for provincial assessment requires flexibility each year because the dates of these assessments are not consistent.
- Assessment scheduling impact the time available to deliver curriculum which potentially impacts the assessment results.

Leadership Capacity

- The structured approach of the collaboration model naturally builds leadership capacity throughout the school authority.
- Lead teachers have the autonomy to lead thier subject-area teachers.
- Lead teachers gain experience with leading and some eventually move into formal leadership roles.

Story of Practice Case Study

CESD - Study



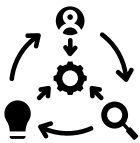
- Regarding the lessons learned about being data-informed about the provincial assessment results, CESD recognizes the importance of building a structure to reflect and act upon provincial assessment results. Doing so requires creating a culture of safety focused on teacher well-being, which requires building trust across the school authority.
- System education leaders in the school authority emphasize that they trust their teachers to do the work they need to do and that, to do their work, teachers need time to connect as professionals to engage in collaborative conversations guided by lead teachers. CESD also recognizes that teachers need opportunities to continually hone their teaching skills and ask questions. Teachers' sharing best practices with other teachers is a powerful collaborative practice.
- Through this collaborative process, the CESD system education leaders gain a better understanding of how they can be responsive in their work to support teachers and ultimately improve student success. This collaborative model has been in operation for four years, providing the opportunity to see what does or does not work. Now, CESD is ready to cascade the model down to middle-level teachers.

“
System education leaders in the school authority emphasize that they trust their teachers to do the work they need to do and that, to do their work, teachers need time to connect as professionals to engage in collaborative conversations guided by lead teachers.
”

Next Steps

- One of the greatest strengths of this collaboration model is that high school teachers are engaged in their subject-area specialty. CESD aspires to achieve the same results with middle-level and elementary teachers, focusing on speakers and learning that targets the age group with which the teachers are working to gain a deeper understanding of specific challenges related to not only academics or curriculum but also social and emotional well-being.

Story of Practice Case Study CESD - Synthesis



- Why are the students getting these results on the provincial assessments?
- Are you satisfied with these results?
- What assumptions are you making about the assessment results?
- How do you prove or disprove our assumptions?
- What is the story these assessment results are telling you about your students? How do you know?
- How are you connecting with your school administration, and how is your school administration connecting with teachers to collect non-judgmental stories to better understand the provincial assessment results?
- What part of this case study is similar to and different from your experience with provincial assessment results in your school authority?

A large, empty rectangular box with a light blue gradient background and a thin grey border, intended for writing a response to the questions above. A black pen icon is positioned at the bottom right corner of the box, with a wavy line suggesting a signature or mark.

Story of Practice Case Study

GHSD - Context



Mission

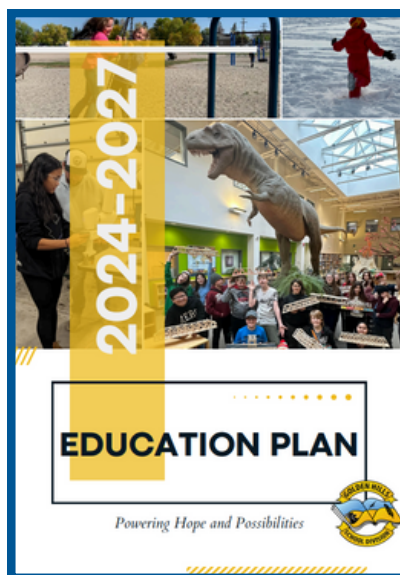
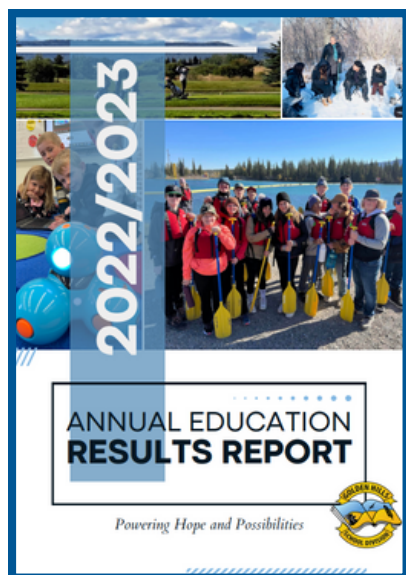
Intentionally maximizing learning for all

Vision

Inspiring confident, connected, caring citizens of the world

Golden Hills School Division (GHSD) serves approximately 10,000 students in 41 central Alberta schools between Calgary, Medicine Hat, and Trochu. It includes 15 regular schools, two Christian alternative schools, two virtual schools, three outreach schools, 19 Hutterite schools, and an international program with 250 students from 30 countries.

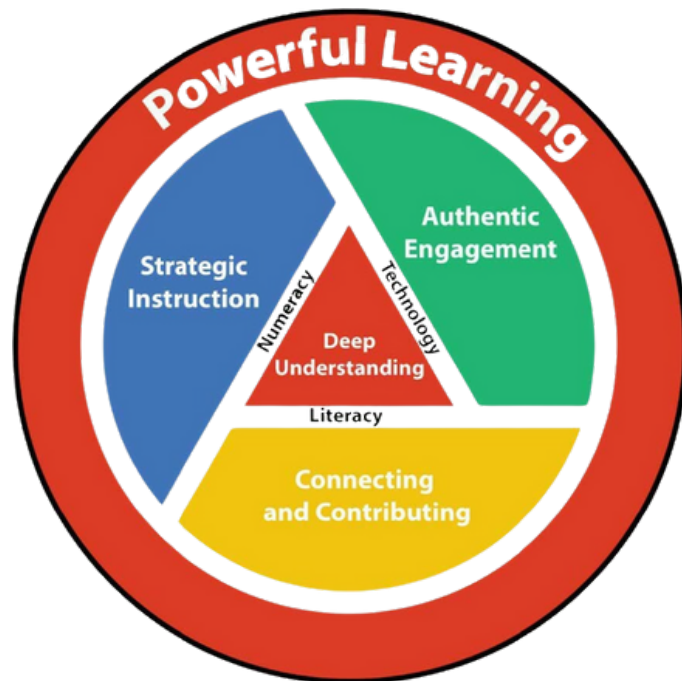
In the 2022–2023 report (linked on the image below), GHSD identified that the division ensures instruction is up to date and incorporates technologies and resources to prepare the students for work and life after they graduate from high school. GHSD also recognized that it is constantly improving how students are taught by implementing high-yield, evidence-based strategies. Teachers, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders are continually looking for the most engaging ways to teach the students to set them up for deep learning that will transfer between the classroom and the community.



Story of Practice Case Study

GHSD - Context

GHSD's powerful learning framework comprises three drivers: strategic instruction, authentic engagements, and connecting and contributing. Assessment is an aspect of all three drivers. The GHSD leadership team discusses the provincial assessment results with their school administrative teams and the Board of Education to determine how the results inform the education plan and how this education plan aligns with their division plan.



In the [2024–2027 Education Plan](#), GHSD identified four divisional goals:

Every Student Is Successful

To ensure continued success for all students, GHSD utilizes Powerful Learning. Powerful Learning is the design and implementation of purposeful and impactful learning experiences that foster deep student understanding of the curriculum outcomes and competencies designed to prepare students for future challenges.

Promote Well-Being Through Positive Relationships and Skill Building

GHSD is committed to a culture of continuous school improvement. Its goal is to support educators in creating a culture of well-being as the foundation for all learning.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Students Are Successful

GHSD partners with the Siksika Board of Education through an Educational Service Agreement that supports 155 Siksika students in GHSD schools.

Literacy and Numeracy Success for All Learners

Providing the best educational experience and opportunities for success means supporting the leaders in GHSD's schools and classrooms. District-wide systems and support to ensure powerful learning in classrooms include collaborative job-embedded teams of teachers, instructional coach supports, collaborative leadership development, and local decision-making.

Story of Practice Case Study

GHSD - Application

Collaboration

GHSD identifies collaboration as a successful practice in the school authority. Teachers are provided collaborative days to gather, examine provincial assessment results, and look at how to improve and enhance the results. This collaborative process of analyzing the data to make a difference within the classroom makes a difference for students, and the evidence is in their assessment results. One area of success is in the subject area of physics.

Approximately 10 years ago, the physics teachers in the school authority began to collaboratively examine the results of their diploma exams and ask how they could improve the results. Through this collaborative effort, the results of the physics exams improved to consistently be above the provincial average. GHSD has duplicated this success with the assessment results for chemistry, biology, and mathematics. The school authority is on a path to examine the provincial assessment results to determine how to improve and enhance them.

Context

GHSD recognizes the importance of unpacking and analyzing the provincial assessment results to understand the context, especially for reporting purposes. For example, GHSD examines the academic achievement of non-primary students who take provincial assessments within their school authority. Non-primary students refer to high school students who are registered in another school authority but access online diploma courses within GHSD. Non-primary students typically take one or two online courses with GHSD, and their assessment results are included in the overall assessment results for GHSD. GHSD has noticed a difference in the assessment results between their local students and non-primary students for various reasons, prompting the school authority to further disaggregate the results to show in-district and out-of-district in its reporting and use this for more intentional planning and programming.

Story of Practice Case Study

GHSD - Application

Trend Analysis

GHSD recognizes that the provincial assessments are summative and represent a snapshot in time, but the school authority's overall philosophy is that, if GHSD is focused on its vision of powerful learning and student success, the provincial assessment results are a byproduct of what the students are learning. The division does not focus only on the provincial assessment that students must write because it is simply another piece of evidence to inform the powerful learning model. GHSD also focuses on long-term trends. It reports five-year trends and compares the division data to provincial data. The school authority does not compare assessment results between schools but does compare data between school, district, and provincial results to determine the acceptable standard of excellence. Within this process, GHSD recognizes that student assessment results will go up and down depending on numerous factors. For example, Alberta Education utilizes a coding system to identify and track students who have diagnoses that impact them in a learning environment. The number of students who are coded is increasing, and this increase impacts the long-term trends in the analysis of the assessment data. Understanding the context during trend analysis is critically important. The data is much more than simply numbers. GHSD shares the successes and areas it examines for improvement through the reporting. All the schools post their assessment results publicly as part of their accountability expectations.



Story of Practice Case Study

GHSD - Application

Coherence

GHSD uses the provincial assessment results to inform each school education plan and the school division education plan. It has established a process for analyzing the results and engaging in professional conversations to better understand the results and how the results can inform planning. This process leads to achieving coherence between the school division's and the schools' planning, and the results inform program planning and resource allocation. This cohesive approach impacts students because accommodations are examined to determine whether some students might need access to accommodations or different accommodations. GHSD views this process as action research, examining the current situation, determining what can be learned from the situation, and actioning how the situation can be improved. This structured process informs and improves the four division collaborative days, which are organized according to grade and subject levels. The teachers are able to examine their results and use an education management system to provide deeper insight into student performance. This granular analysis allows trends to emerge, and teachers can collaboratively design instructional strategies to improve student learning. This approach requires creating a culture of trust so that teachers can be vulnerable and examine their practice to talk about what they did well in a particular area but not so well in other areas. As a result of these collaborative days, common assessments have been developed, and common instructional strategies have been shared.

The data is also broken into sub-groups to inform the next steps. For example, GHSD examines its data to understand the success of EAL students and identify where they are having success, where they are not, and what they need to do next. Sometimes, focus groups are formed to address and resolve specific challenges. Through this approach, new learning can emerge, or successful instructional strategies can be identified. This focused approach builds professional capacity and encourages a collaborative problem-solving approach.

“
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Story of Practice Case Study

GHSD - Application

Coherence

The system education leaders in GHSD ensure each school has the data it needs to make informed decisions about its education plan. They equip principals with tools to make a difference. Their administrative meetings are learning meetings. Opportunities are created for collaborative discussions to share what they are working on and how they are working to improve student learning. Key presenters are brought in to help further the learning process, such as how student wellness affects student learning.

GHSD also creates opportunities for schools to apply for powerful learning proposals. Schools can apply for additional funding for projects that will build the teachers' professional capacity to improve student learning. Instructional coaches work closely with schools to ensure the proposals align with the overall education plan and the powerful learning model the school authority has developed.

GHSD's instructional coaches also work with lead teachers from each collaborative group. The lead teachers participate in a leadership series to develop their leadership skills. Working closely with the instructional coaches, they develop long-term plans informed by data and the powerful learning model. This cohesive support system connects teachers across the school authority and builds professional capacity.

This cohesive system took time to build, and the powerful learning model gave them a deep understanding of the deep learning in the school authority. Each year, the model is tweaked; however, the support for the model is strong, and GHSD continues to strive to improve it. There are several moving components in motion to create this coherence –lead teachers, facilitators, instructional coaches, school administrators, and system education leaders working in unison. Overall, the powerful learning model has been very successful for GHSD.



Story of Practice Case Study

GHSD - Study



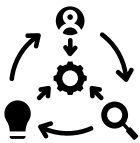
- When reflecting upon lessons learned regarding being data-informed about the provincial assessment results, GHSD recognizes the importance of being intentional. The type of structure and model the school authority has developed is intentional and a priority. Student achievement is GHSD's core business, and it is continually asking what it must do to improve. The school authority identifies where change is needed, examines assessment results, and determines the next steps. GHSD is intentional about identifying and implementing the strategies it undertakes and believes will make a difference. Being intentional and using data to be informed is a skill that needs to be continually honed. GHSD is intentional about ensuring that school administrators are informed, know how to examine the data and take action at the school level.
- GHSD can see the results of its intentionality. Schools are now better informed about the information they can access, and they critically examine the data to make decisions about where they want their resources to go. Their goals are more focused, so they make better informed, long-term decisions. They have the big picture of evidence that something is working. They understand the importance of looking at context and of being self-reflective. Understanding context and self-reflection are part of being intentional.
- To sustain this collaborative and intentional culture, GHSD is thoughtful about its hiring process. The division seeks individuals who demonstrate interest and the ability to work collaboratively. Once hired, new teachers participate in a three-day mentorship program where they are introduced to the powerful learning model. An entire day is spent on assessment. New teachers are also paired with an instructional coach for two years. Similarly, new school administrators are provided with professional learning with GHSD system education leaders and directors of learning. New administrators receive in-depth information about the powerful learning model and the collaborative approach in GHSD.
- GHSD's efforts in recruitment have shown returns because prospective teachers are coming to this division due to what they have heard about GHSD and want to be part of the collaborative culture.

Additional Resources

- [Powerful Learning Model](#)
- [Powerful Learning Model – Learning Services](#)

Story of Practice Case Study

GHSD - Synthesis



- How do we ensure the school authority resources and supports are student-centred and strategic?
- How do we know our resources and supports are student-centred and strategic?
- What is the impact of the resources and supports we offer?
- What specific actions do we need to take to impact the learning for specific groups of students (e.g., EAL students) to improve their learning results?
- What opportunities are provided for collaboration amongst the teachers at the school and division levels? How do we support and encourage collaboration opportunities?
- What professional learning can we provide to support building the professional capacity of teachers to deliver the best research-based instructional and assessment practices?
- What drivers have you identified for your school authority to provide focus and intention?

Story of Practice Case Study

CTR - Context

Christ The Redeemer Catholic Schools (CTR) serves approximately 10,000 students in 17 schools operating in the central and southern Alberta communities of Brooks, Canmore, Drumheller, High River, Okotoks, Oyen, and Strathmore. It includes 15 traditional schools, three Outreach schools, and a distance education school.



Mission

As an evangelizing school division, in partnership with the family, we will deliver an authentic Catholic learning experience by creating a foundation of faith and knowledge in a warm, caring environment to guide all students to appreciate the goodness of all creation and to meet the challenges of life with hope and confidence.

Vision

The truth of Christ and knowledge of God's creation will be experienced by and manifested in the students, staff, parents, and supporters of our Catholic school community.

School Authority Priorities

Faith

Faith seeking understanding.

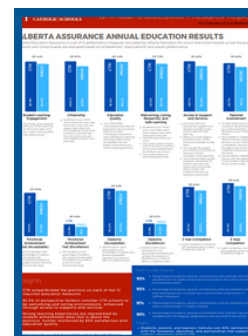
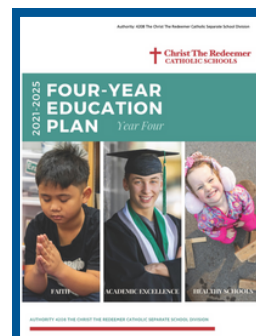
Academic Excellence

CTR Catholic prides itself on its students' academic achievements.

Healthy Schools

Healthy schools promote the spiritual, emotional, social, intellectual, and physical wellness of staff and students.

CTR's 2021–2025 Education Plan (linked in image) identified three divisional priorities. Their most recent Annual Education Results Report (AERR, linked in image) identified that CTR outperformed the province on each of the 12 required assurance measures. CTR also noted that strong learning experiences are demonstrated by student achievement data above the province's, further reinforced by 93% satisfaction with education quality.



Story of Practice Case Study

CTR - Application

Shared Vision

- Creating and sustaining a shared vision requires the superintendent to set the conditions to develop the overarching vision through a continuous improvement process.
- The assessment data serves as evidence to track progress and areas needing improvement. CTR recognizes the importance of presenting the data transparently and clearly communicating the data to demonstrate a commitment to improvement.
- Communication is key across the school authority, ensuring school-based administrators are provided with a clear narrative about the school authority's vision and goals. School-based administrators take ownership of the data and the responsibility to improve student outcomes in partnership with the teachers.
- Structured feedback mechanisms inform the shared vision. For example, “Superchats” are structured feedback sessions among the superintendent, teachers, and school staff conducted at each school to gather direct feedback on the school authority's education plan and areas of focus.
- CTR also hosts Ward meetings where trustees invite community members to share their diverse perspectives, including the local priest, staff, parents, and students.
- Student feedback is gathered in a manner that is not overwhelming for the students but rather a process to gather meaningful input. CTR seeks to actively understand students' perspectives on what works well and what needs improvement.
- All data gathered from the various stakeholders are used to inform the development of the education plan and set goals for CTR, representing areas of celebration and areas for improvement, especially based on student achievement data and emergent items requiring decision-making from the superintendent level.
- CTR ensures that principals are connected to the vision and understand their role in enacting it, while also receiving their feedback and allowing this to shape the division's direction.
- By providing a clear vision, ensuring transparency, engaging with various stakeholders, and setting informed goals, CTR creates a shared vision that drives continuous improvement within the school authority. Engaging directly with staff, parents, and students helps build a sense of ownership and agency, ensuring everyone works toward common goals.

Story of Practice Case Study

CTR - Application

Collective Inquiry

- CTR engages its principals and teachers in a collective inquiry process to understand the provincial assessment results, including deep analysis, reflection, and continuous support.
- The school authority uses a collaborative data analysis approach with schools and school-based administrators to deeply analyze the data and identify trends, strengths, growth areas, and discrepancies in assessment results.
- To support this process, teachers receive a document that contains all the assessment data and are encouraged to reflect on the data using three reflective questions:
 - *What have you learned about your students?*
 - *Reflecting on your teaching and learning throughout the process, how will this inform your next steps?*
 - *How will you continue to find areas of growth to build upon those areas of strength?*
- CTR recognizes the importance of contextual understanding in the analysis and conducts a deep dive to understand the differences between assurance data, teacher perceptions, school-based marks, and provincial assessment results. The school authority strives to understand the unique context of each school to interpret what the data reveals about its specific challenges and successes. These in-depth conversations lead to the identification of strengths and gaps.
- By engaging in a collaborative inquiry into the data, striving for contextual understanding, valuing teacher reflection, and offering continuous support, the school authority helps teachers and principals understand the assessment results and use them to enhance teaching and learning. This process ensures that all stakeholders are involved, heard, and supported in their efforts to improve student outcomes.

Story of Practice Case Study

CTR - Application

Shifting Mindsets

- CTR is known as a high-performing school authority in the province, as demonstrated by the results of its assurance survey and provincial assessments. For many years, this reputation has been a point of celebration for the school authority.
- CTR has evidence that its instructional practices are effective; however, this success presents a challenge, as it can be difficult to inspire change when the school authority is already established on a successful foundation. For example, in this post-COVID state, the school authority has gathered more complete data sets in other subject and grade areas. This data, combined with current diploma results, indicates results that are not considered within an acceptable range for CTR. CTR has identified a need to engage with the data from a perspective of wonder and curiosity to gain a deeper understanding of this emerging concern.
- CTR's current and past practices may not work in this new post-COVID state. In this current reality, the challenge is understanding how CTR can engage differently with the emerging data and create a sense of urgency to identify successful instructional strategies and change practices to meet the needs of all students inclusively.
- Doing so means changing the mindset of how educators work in their classrooms to ensure that every student can experience mastery, and it could mean changing instructional practices to meet students where they are rather than expecting the students to rise to an instructional practice that is not working for them.
- This change happens by shifting the questions that focus on justification to questions that spark curiosity and wonder about the reasons for these results. Having an open mind and thinking about how instructional practice can change to best support students is key.



Story of Practice Case Study

CTR - Application

New Curriculum and Technologies

- CTR is on a journey to understand what excellent classroom instruction, coupled with the new curriculum, looks like for students.
- CTR is an early adopter of the new curriculum, as demonstrated by the school authority's willingness to conduct curriculum field testing. This early adoption has allowed CTR to begin understanding the new curriculum in-depth.
- CTR's early involvement with the new curriculum has made the school authority think about the assessment practices in the classroom. Students are not preparing for a single answer on a multiple-choice assessment but are now understanding how to provide three responses instead of one. CTR asks, *"What does this mean for the learning provided to students? What opportunities does this create for instruction?"*
- The new provincial assessments, aligned with the new curriculum, mean that CTR and other school authorities will not have longitudinal assessment results for several years due to the shifts in the new curriculum, evoking questions such as the following: *"What is the curriculum asking us to achieve? How are we ensuring students are learning the new curriculum?"*
- To answer these questions, CTR designates Friday afternoons for Catholic Learning Communities (CLC), which are professional learning communities with designated time free from instruction for professional goal setting and reflection in collaborative teams.
- This praxis type of model is a space for continuous improvement in which goals are set and progress is examined over a period of several weeks. This organic co-generative model occurs in schools, and the teachers determine the areas of focus and how to move forward.
- This important vehicle is how CTR ensures it is aligned with its data story. The school authority sees this as part of its work. One never arrives in this work; rather, through a continuous improvement process, everyone works together, striving to ultimately see improved student outcomes.
- School-based leaders are actively involved, seeking evidence that students are learning through observation, artifacts of student work, formative assessment results, and collaborative conversations with teachers.

Story of Practice Case Study

CTR - Application

New Curriculum and Technologies

- It is through this deep examination of assessment results that challenges can be identified.
- For example, CTR recognizes the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on education and the shift that it is precipitating, especially regarding student assessment at the secondary level.
- The school authority understands that eliminating cell phones in the classroom will not solve this dilemma because AI will still be a factor in what students produce for their assignments. The ease of accessibility of AI to students will necessitate a shift in assessment practices and, in fact, will require embracing this new reality.
- CTR is observing a widening discrepancy between school-based and diploma exam results, raising the question about the use of AI, particularly for students who study in an online environment. The reality is that, when the students are never in a face-to-face classroom, except to write a diploma exam, it is extremely challenging for a teacher to assess the knowledge and skills of the students. CTR has started to use AI detection tools to help with this assessment dilemma.
- In addition, when significant discrepancies are noted, CTR will establish divisional teams of teachers to dig deeper into the challenge, such as a two-day retreat focused on mathematics. This focused approach includes examining instructional strategies for a particular concept across the grades and teachers' sharing their journey to shift the instruction practice in the classroom.
- CTR also provides professional development for school-based leaders to help them understand how to best support the teachers, recognize high-yield instructional strategies, and encourage self-reflective practice about instructional impact and evidence of student learning.

Story of Practice Case Study

CTR - Study



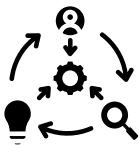
- Regarding the lessons learned about being data-informed about the provincial assessment results, CTR believes in the fundamentals of being curious. The school authority recognizes and acknowledges the feelings teachers have when they take deep responsibility for their students' provincial assessment results but strives to focus on the creation of optimal conditions for successful student achievement. CTR understands this focus is extremely important because it extends the agency of the assessment responsibility to whole-school productive conversations about student assessment. This approach encourages curiosity.
- In action, this means focusing beyond the why and more on the how: How can we change that outcome for students? How comfortable are we with these results? How do we celebrate the successes? CTR believes all students deserve the best education, and it is through curiosity and wonder that educators can learn how to better support the learning needs of students in this everchanging world. They create an environment in which people feel safe and can be vulnerable. People are in this together, doing the work that needs to be done, because they all care about the students and want the best for them.
- School-based administrators are provided with a whole day to do a "slow walk" of examining achievement and assurance data. Through reflection questions, school-based administrative teams engage in conversations about their school data to better understand what the data is telling them.
- Throughout all their work in the school authority, CTR emphasizes the importance of approaching the topic of assessment through the lens of faith, which calls for compassion and meeting each student where they are. Not doing so would contradict the beliefs of everyone involved, particularly as Catholics, who are called to serve others' needs. A change-resistant mindset for those insisting on their own instructional practices, even when students are not succeeding, is seen as being fundamentally at odds with the values of their faith, which should be the foundation for how they approach their work.

Additional Resources

- Davies, A., Herbst, S., Reynolds, B. P., & Davies, A. (2011). *Leading the way to assessment for learning: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). Solution Tree Press.
- Davies, A., & Herbst, S. (2020). *7 actions of assessment for learning: Accounts from elementary classrooms*. Connections Publishing.
- Dufour, R., DuFour R., Eaker, R., Many, T., Mattos, M., & Muhammad, A. (2024). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. (4th ed.). Solution Tree Press.
- Williams, D. (2018). *Embedded formative assessment: Strategies for classroom assessment that drives student engagement and learning*. Solution Tree Press.
- Williams, D., Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2024). *Student assessment: Better evidence, better decisions, better learning*. Corwin.

Story of Practice Case Study

CTR - Synthesis



- What are you curious about when reflecting on your school authority assessment results? What is the data telling you?
- How is your school authority using assessment data to set priorities and goals to improve your student achievement results?
- How does your school authority provide time and a non-judgemental space to examine the provincial assessment results?
- How does your school authority engage in a process of continuous improvement?
- When students are struggling, how do you plan and activate support for those students?
- Who are your champions in the school authority who are willing to provide testimony to their instructional practice?
- How does your school authority establish meaningful conditions to reflect on student assessment results and demonstrate reflective practice to enact change to improve the results?

Story of Practice Case Study

Edmonton Catholic - Context



EDMONTON CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

ECSD Embraces Collaboration and Trust on its Journey Towards Optimal Learning

Edmonton Catholic Schools (ECSD) serves over 50,000 students in 94 schools from Pre-kindergarten to high school. ECSD is the fourth-largest school authority in Alberta. The school authority offers a full range of programming, within the Catholic educational context, such as French Immersion, other Language areas, academies, S.T.E.M., and an international baccalaureate program, to name a few.

In its [2023–2026 Education Plan](#), ECSD identified divisional goals in four areas:

Mission

The mission of Edmonton Catholic Schools is to provide a Catholic education that inspires students to learn and that prepares them to live fully and to serve God in one another.

Vision

Our students will learn together, work together and pray together in answering the call to a faith-filled life of service.

Living our Faith

Goal F1 - Students and staff will grow and develop in mind, body, and spirit.

Goal F2 - ECSD schools and departments will clearly demonstrate their Catholic identity as presented in the 5 Marks of Catholic School Identity model.

Embracing Diversity

Goal E1 - Students and staff recognize and celebrate the unique gifts and talents of every member of their learning and working community.

Learning Excellence

Goal L1 - Students will experience learning opportunities that allow them to fulfill their potential.

Goal L2 - Students' learning needs are met through a collaborative, responsive model of instruction, assessment, and data-informed decision making.

Goal L3 - Staff will build their capacity to meet student needs and to be collaborative contributors at their sites and beyond.

Organizational Excellence

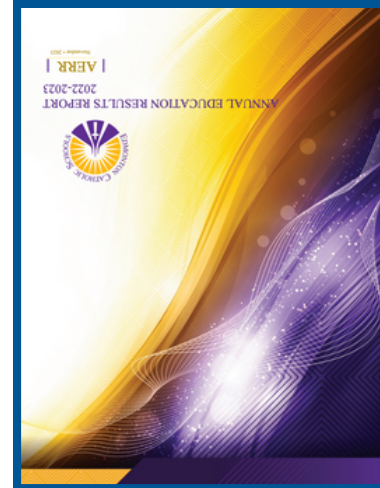
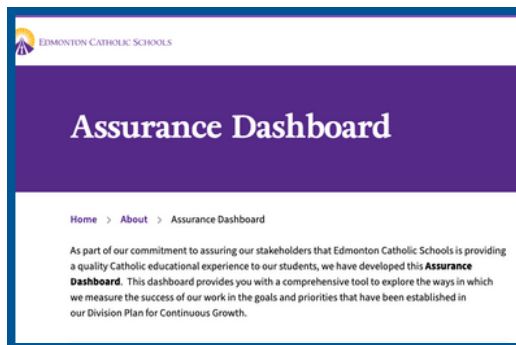
Goal O1 - Students, staff, and educational and community partners will work together for our common good.

Goal O2 - Staff will utilize ongoing communication, collaboration, and engagement processes to become more effective, efficient, and responsive to the needs of students, families, and each other.

Story of Practice Case Study

Edmonton Catholic - Context

- ECSD has an online Assurance Dashboard and posts its Annual Education Results Report (AERR) on its website. In the 2022–2023 report, ECSD identified that while the provincial assessments results for many subject areas are at standard or the acceptable standard, and they have a very high participation rate, they continue to create opportunities for the teachers to work in collaborative groups to develop strategies and common assessments to continually analyze and improve assessment results.
- A team of system education leaders work collaboratively to ensure a cohesive approach across the school authority to collectively examine the provincial assessment results and strategize on improving the learning for each student. This team includes the coordinated efforts of the chief superintendent, superintendent of learning services, superintendent of leadership services, and director of curriculum and assessment and an expansive number of central office and school-based personnel to activate this collaborative process across the school authority.



Story of Practice Case Study

Edmonton Catholic - Application

Collaboration

- ECSD has demonstrated a strong collaborative relationship within the school authority, particularly in how provincial data is analyzed and utilized to support teachers, principals, and consultants. This collaboration aims to create optimal learning conditions for all students.
- A team of superintendents regularly meets with principals to review provincial assessment results and school growth plans, providing touchpoints throughout the year to discuss results, identify successes and challenges, and determine the best ways to support schools. These small group meetings facilitate the sharing of best practices, the collection of recommendations, and identification of actions, which in turn fosters cohesion in the creation of division and school learning plans.
- This collaborative approach is not just about looking at results but is a journey taken together, built on trust, and focused on mentoring and guiding school leaders.
- This intentional support from superintendents enhances the overall cohesiveness and success of the school authority.

Data-Informed Decision Making

- The division has made significant progress in implementing tools such as dashboards to make data from provincial assessments accessible and actionable for administrators. This empowers school leaders to make data-informed decisions based on thorough data analysis conducted at the central office.
- By providing this data in a usable format, administrative teams are empowered to interpret and act upon it, supported by learning services and division monitoring.
- Various dashboards are available to meet the specific needs of administrative teams, ensuring they have access to accurate data. This data-informed approach extends to the identification and implementation of strategies and supports, particularly in response to the increasing number of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students.
- The leadership team uses provincial assessment results to guide system-wide educational practices, fostering continuous improvement, and leading to optimal learning for all students.

Story of Practice Case Study

Edmonton Catholic - Application

Universal Design for Learning

- The division is making strides in applying universal design principles in classrooms to address the diverse needs of students, especially English as An Additional Language (EAL) students.
- Recognizing the increasing complexity of classrooms, ECSD is equipping educators with the tools and knowledge to address these challenges through universal design for learning.
- Efforts are being made to align these principles with assessment practices, linking them to accountability measures such as provincial assessments.
- This comprehensive approach involves not only endpoint assessments but also screeners and other types of assessments that are being developed and refined.
- Achieving coherence across multiple grade levels and classrooms in applying these universal design principles is a significant, complex undertaking, but it is crucial to meeting the needs of all students.

Responsive Leadership

- Responsive leadership plays a vital role in adapting to the evolving needs of the school authority.
- The senior leadership team is data-informed in its approach, particularly in when responding to increasing needs.
- Learning Services have been intentional in supporting teachers and school-based administrators, ensuring that the division remains responsive to changes in student demographics. However, challenges remain, such as maintaining and improving the standards of excellence, particularly during transitions from elementary to junior high, and in diploma exams.
- Inclusive education for EAL students and kindergarten students, along with the growing complexity of classrooms, poses ongoing challenges.
- The division's senior leadership team is committed to addressing these challenges, but to also ensuring that support translates into consistent action and improvement across all schools which requires ongoing attention and continued refinement.

Story of Practice Case Study

Edmonton Catholic - Study



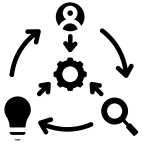
- The lessons learned from being data-informed about provincial assessment results and the impact on system education leaders' practices reveal several key insights, both about the use of data and the importance of trust and collaboration in education.
- One of the most significant lessons is the realization that having abundant data does not necessarily translate into actionable information. A system can be "data-rich but information-poor," meaning that without the proper training and support, even the best data can fail to drive meaningful change. The focus has therefore shifted towards refining data collection systems and ensuring that both administrators and staff are equipped to interpret the data accurately. This includes not only understanding the reports but also knowing how to translate this understanding into effective classroom practices. The ability to disaggregate data into actionable insights is crucial, as it enables educators to build professional learning plans and supports within the school system that truly impact student outcomes.
- Another lesson learned is the importance of addressing issues on multiple levels within the educational system. For instance, when science results were found to be lacking, the response was twofold: addressing systemic issues, such as the physical capacity for science labs, and providing targeted professional development to help teachers translate assessment skills into classroom practice. This dual approach highlights the need for comprehensive strategies that address both the macro and micro aspects of education, ensuring that improvements are felt throughout the system.
- The implementation of new curricula and the focus on transitions between critical grade levels have also underscored the importance of consistency in language and learning progressions across the division. Building a common understanding among educators about what specific outcomes should look like is vital for creating coherence and continuity in student learning. The introduction of pacing guides, for example, has been instrumental in aligning teaching practices across classrooms, promoting collaboration and cohesion among teachers and principals.
- Lastly, a significant lesson learned revolves around the importance of trust within the organization. Data can be deeply personal, especially when tied to individual classrooms or schools, and building a culture of trust is essential for fostering open, solution-focused conversations about data. Establishing norms, engaging in intentional trust-building activities, and ensuring that data discussions are collaborative rather than evaluative are all crucial elements in creating an environment where educators feel supported and empowered to improve. This culture of trust, combined with transparency about how data is used and the outcomes it informs, helps ensure that everyone in the division is aligned in their efforts to enhance student learning.

Additional Resources

- [Collaborative Response](#)
- [Essential Features of Effective Networks in Education](#)

Story of Practice Case Study

Edmonton Catholic - Synthesis



- What is collective efficacy in your local school authority context? How do you define and communicate the vision of collective efficacy to all stakeholders? What steps are you taking to ensure that every member of your school authority feels a sense of shared responsibility for student success?
- How are you fostering shared responsibility throughout your school authority, and what specific actions or systems are in place to encourage and maintain a culture of trust? Are there opportunities for collaboration that reinforce this shared responsibility?
- How do you ensure that plans and initiatives are effectively implemented and impactful at the classroom level?
- Does each school in your school authority have the necessary resources and support to be successful? Are the funding formulas, administrative support structures, and resource allocations equitable and responsive to the unique needs of each school community in your school authority? How do you identify and address gaps in support that may hinder a school's ability to achieve success?
- How do you celebrate and amplify areas of success to build collective efficacy and maintain momentum? What opportunities do you create for principals and teachers to share successful practices with their peers? How do you ensure that successes are recognized and integrated into the broader narrative of continuous improvement?
- Are there barriers to collective efficacy and success that need to be addressed, and how can they be removed?
- How do you maintain a strengths-based approach to leadership, focusing on what is working well and building upon it?

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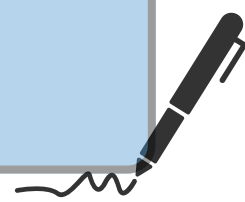
Pulling It All Together



- Use the following questions to connect your learning to your own context and role as a system education leader.

Commitment to Action

- What are you curious about in your own context related to your school authority's use of provincial assessment data?
- How will you apply your learning to your role as a system education leader?
- What might you do differently based on what you learned during this Learning Lab?
- What is one action you will commit to as a result of your learning? Who can support you with this?



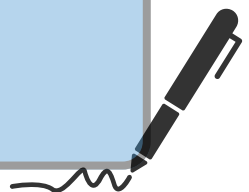
Pulling It All Together



- Use the following questions to connect your learning to your own context and role as a system education leader.

Reflection and Key Takeaways

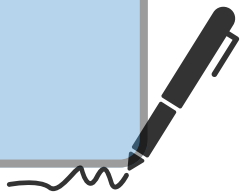
- What are your most important takeaways from this Learning Lab? How will these takeaways impact your learning and practice?
- What would you share with a colleague about this Learning Lab experience?
- What makes your learning today meaningful and relevant?
- What ideas, strategies, or resources do you want to explore further?



Notes



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Notes



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Appendix A

Detailed Research



Standardized Assessment in Alberta

History of K-12 Provincial Assessment

To provide context for current practices in standardized assessment in Alberta, several chronologies of Alberta’s standardized testing practices emphasize policy shifts starting in the 1970s (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004). In 1959, the Cameron Report highlighted the demand for a capable workforce to support the province’s burgeoning oil and gas field, including several recommendations to enhance the quality of education in the province (Aitken, 2009). During this period, the external examination program was referred to as Departmental Examinations, including Grades 9 and 12 assessments (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004). Aitken (2009) described these examinations as limited in their scope and the skills tested. The Worth Report of 1972 questioned the legitimacy of external examinations (Graham & Neu, 2004), which was identified as a catalyst for the phasing out of Departmental Examinations in 1973 (Aitken, 2009; Graham & Neu, 2004).

In 1976, the Minister’s Advisory Committee on Student Achievement (MACOSA) was established by the Government of Alberta, prompting eighteen studies that informed the recommendations of their 1979 report (ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004). The Curriculum Branch of Alberta Education prompted the 1977 Harder Report, which offered highly influential support for standardized testing across four grades (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004). Amid socio-economic and political drivers for educational reform, Alberta initiated the Achievement Testing Program (Grades 3, 6, and 9) in 1982, which included English language arts, social studies, math, and science subjects, administered on a rotational system (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004; McEwen, 1995). These tests accounted for 50% of students’ final grades (Graham & Neu, 2004). Moreover, optional comprehensive examinations were offered to Grade 12 students (Graham & Neu, 2004). In 1984, the Grade 12 Diploma Examination Program was established (Aitken, 2009; ATA, 2024; Graham & Neu, 2004), alongside a series of other reform initiatives: “the School Act Review, the Management and Finance Plan, the Review of Secondary School Programs, and the introduction of five evaluation policies (student, teacher, program, school, and system)” (McEwen, 1995, p. 27). Notably, these Grade 12 examinations were now mandatory and accounted for 50% of students’ final grades (Graham & Neu, 2004). In 1994, the frequency of testing increased to annual assessments of Grades 6 and 9 literacy and numeracy achievement, and Grades 9 social and science subjects (Graham & Neu, 2004). Additional accountability measures followed with the launch of the province’s Educational Quality Indicators in 1988 (McEwen, 1995). McEwen (1995), who was employed in Alberta Education’s Policy and Planning Branch, referred to the reforms of the 1980s as motivated by convictions that “(1) the student is the central reason for schooling, and (2) education is a purposeful endeavour that can be assessed” (p. 28).

Appendix A

Detailed Research



Recent Changes to Provincial Assessment

Several notable changes have recently shaped the format of provincial assessment practices. In 2009, Alberta Education announced a decision to remove the written responses for DIPs in math and science subjects (O'Donnell, 2009). Planned for 2018, Education Minister David Eggen announced the return of written responses for math Diploma Examinations (DIPs), and the addition of a separate mental math section on the Grade 9 PATs (Clancy, 2016). Another major shift occurred in 2017 when the province announced that all students would receive double the scheduled time to write PATs and DIPs without formal accommodations (Alberta Education, 2017; French, 2017). Alberta Education (2017) released a question-and-answer document that clarified the rationale for this shift: "Performance should be a reflection of a student's knowledge and abilities rather than a result of how quickly a student can complete a task" (p. 1). Furthermore, the decentralization of accommodations processes deferred greater decision-making to districts and schools, which was intended to reduce inefficiencies that impacted the resources available to students (Alberta Education, 2017; French, 2017). In addition to enhancing time allowances, Alberta Education decreased the weight of DIPs on students' final grades in 2015 (Slomp et al., 2020). Lowered from 50%, a student's final course grade is now calculated by blending the diploma exam score, weighted at 30%, with their school-based mark, weighted at 70% (Alberta Education, 2023a; Slomp et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also disrupted provincial assessment practices, including exam cancellations and temporarily reduced weightings (CBC, 2022). Although digital test formats had been used prior (i.e. Quest A+), the province is in the process of progressively adopting a new digital assessment platform (Alberta Education, 2023b; 2024a). The rationale for this transition included enhanced features related to accessibility and interactivity (Alberta Education, 2023b).

Provincial Assessment Practices (2023-24)

Alberta's provincial standardized assessment program includes annual administration of the Provincial Achievement Tests in grades 6 and 9 core subjects, and DIPs for select grade 12 courses (Government of Alberta, 2024a; 2024b). In the 2023-24 school year, changes to the Alberta curriculum resulted in disruptions to the administration of PATs (Alberta Education, 2023b). Moreover, the Grade 3 Student Learning Assessments (SLAs) were not administered in 2023-24 and are under evaluation (Alberta Education, 2024c). The recently adopted K-3 literacy and numeracy screening assessments will continue as mandatory in 2024-25 (Alberta Education, 2024d).

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Detailed Research



The PATs are criterion-referenced tests based on the grades 6 and 9 provincial curriculum (Alberta Education, 2023b). Student achievement reporting includes a cut score, the numerical score on the exam, corresponding to an acceptable standard and a standard of excellence (Alberta Education, 2023b). According to Alberta Education (2023b), the PAT results can help inform adjustments to classroom teaching to improve student achievement, cautioning that students' scores are “best interpreted within the context of local quantitative and qualitative information” (p. 3). Prior to provincial marking, PATs are graded by teachers who share these initial grades with parents in a format that is at the discretion of the school (Alberta Education, 2023b). To statistically equate exams across administrations, most DIPs include a combination of common items, questions that appeared on prior exams, and unique items, which have not been used prior (Alberta Education, 2023a). Equating first occurred in 2003 with the aim of mitigating fluctuations in the challenge level of DIPs across administrations; the PATs also enlist a comparable strategy (Alberta Education, 2024e). Slomp et al. (2020) referred to Alberta's DIPs as “medium stakes” (p. 431) exit exams because school-based grades are combined with the DIPs results to determine students' final grades, so the exams are not the only determinants of high school graduation.

As exit exams, DIPs offer a performative threshold for high school graduation (Slomp et al., 2020), so their aims are distinct from the PATs (Alberta Education, 2023a; 2024a). The central goals of the PATs are to verify that student learning is aligned with the program of studies, share student achievement data with the public, and support various education stakeholders in tracking and enhancing student achievement (Government of Alberta, 2024a). In comparison, Alberta Education (2023a) outlined the three-fold goals for the DIPs: “to certify the level of individual student achievement in selected Grade 12 courses” (p. 1), “to ensure that provincewide standards of achievement are maintained” (p. 1), and “to report individual and group results” (p. 1). In connection, Bedard and Mombourquette (2015) interviewed forty-five system educational leaders, principals, and trustees across three Alberta school districts, identified due to their high achievement (n=2) or notable improvement (n=1) on provincial assessments. With a focus on system educational leadership practices, participants highlighted the significance of data-based approaches centered on ameliorating student achievement (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2015). System and school leaders reported an enhanced capacity to interpret and use provincial data sets to improve instruction, including student achievement from the PATs and DIPs (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2015). As such, these findings provide some evidence that high-performing districts in Alberta reportedly use provincial assessment results to foster education quality.

Appendix A

Detailed Research



Measures of Student Achievement

With relevance to system educational leadership, studies conducted through provincial research partnerships have analyzed provincial assessment data to study impacts on student learning (Friesen et al., 2023; Leithwood & McCullough, 2017). Two mixed methods studies (i.e. Friesen et al., 2023; Leithwood & McCullough, 2017) defined student learning through the dimensions of achievement, engagement, and well-being.

With the goal of district-wide improvement, Leithwood and McCullough (2017) outlined results from their long-term partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Institute for Educational Leadership. Student achievement data came from annual literacy and numeracy test scores collected through Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing program (Leithwood & McCullough, 2017). The EQAO data allowed for the analysis of district-level shifts in student achievement across five years, including Grades 3 and 9 math and language arts achievement, Grade 10 literacy, and Grade 9 math scores (Leithwood & McCullough, 2017). For quantitative data, their statistical analyses included correlations and Power Indices. In relation to nine traits of effective districts (Leithwood, 2010), Leithwood and McCullough (2017) found that seven of them had robust relationships with a one-year measure of language arts scores, whereas only two related to the one-year measure of math achievement. However, they did not find significant correlations with five-year measures in either subject area. Power Indices were used to evaluate the indirect relationship between district characteristics and math achievement, identifying the strongest associations with conditions related to teacher affect: “Teacher Trust, Collective Teacher Efficacy, and Teacher Commitment” (Leithwood & McCullough, 2017, p. 49). As such, provincial test scores have provided reliable measures of student achievement to research investigating its association with the features of effective school districts.

To study the implementation of Alberta’s professional practice standards, Friesen et al. (2023) acquired student achievement data for students in Grades 6, 9 and 12 from the PATs and DIPs. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they collected standardized achievement data from Years 1 and 4 of the study to evaluate relationships with the province’s Teacher and Leadership Quality Standards. In their final report of the Optimum Learning for All study, their quantitative results showed that all groups (teachers, leaders, and superintendents) had favourable rated their implementation of the standards. Multiple multivariate regression analysis was used to analyze links between Alberta’s Teacher Quality Standard (TQS), Leadership Quality Standard (LQS), and the three measures of student learning (Friesen et al., 2023). Friesen et al. (2023) found that teachers’ enhanced competencies were “statistically significant” (p. 118), whereas school leaders’ competencies demonstrated “a marked improvement” (p. 188). For both groups, they found that positive changes in their competencies were related with students’ PAT and DIPs results. In support of Alberta’s nested standards, they found strong interconnections among the TQS, LQS,

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and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS). As such, standardized test scores have provided consistent measures of student achievement for longitudinal research related to teacher and leadership effectiveness.

To study the impacts of system educational leadership, several other Canadian studies have used provincial test scores to measure student achievement (Handford & Leithwood, 2019; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019). Two studies conducted in Ontario relied on student achievement data from EQAO numeracy and literacy tests, including Grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 (i.e. Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019). As well, Handford and Leithwood (2019) conducted a mixed methods study of twenty-one districts. They used achievement data from British Columbia’s provincial assessments, which include tests spanning elementary (grades 4 and 7 literacy and numeracy), and secondary student achievement (Grades 10 and 12 literacy, and grade 10 numeracy). The earliest study (i.e. Leithwood & Azah, 2017) evaluated the impacts of system educational leadership on student achievement, whereas the other two studies (i.e. Handford & Leithwood, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019) used identical survey instruments to evaluate the Framework for District Leadership Practices, which includes nine distinct characteristics of effective districts (Leithwood & McCullough, 2021). All three studies found positive relationships between the key district effectiveness features and student achievement (Handford & Leithwood, 2019; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019). Leithwood and McCullough (2021) integrated the correlational findings of these three studies with a fourth study of school leadership in Texas elementary schools (i.e. Leithwood et al., 2020). Although seven of the effective district practices were linked to student achievement, two studies (i.e. Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019) found robust correlations between four district practices and students’ literacy and numeracy scores: “Mission, Vision and Goals, Coherent Instructional Guidance, Uses of Evidence and Alignment” (Leithwood & McCullough, 2021, p. 144). In addition, two studies (Leithwood et al., 2019; Handford & Leithwood, 2019) found that district leadership had robust indirect relationships with student achievement through “an aggregate measure of conditions included as a part of the Emotions, Organisational and Rational categories of conditions but not the Family category” (Leithwood & McCullough, 2021, p. 144). In summary, this collection of studies has demonstrated direct and indirect associations between system educational leadership and standardized measures of student achievement.

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