

The BCCPAC FSA Information Kit for Parents

Media attention has created concern and questions around the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA). To help you understand why the FSA is written by students; below are some answers to common questions parents ask. More information on assessment can be found on the BCCPAC website: www.bccpac.bc.ca

The FSA issue is very complex. We hope to build understanding on what assessment is, what the FSA is meant to do, what it is used for, and provide answers to common misconceptions about the FSA.

What the FSA is:

The FSA is an assessment given to all students in grades 4 and 7 in all schools in BC to provide a snapshot of how the school system is performing in the areas of Math and English. Every student in these two grades is required by the Ministry of Education to write the FSA to ensure data collected is relevant and complete. This assessment is designed to evaluate how well the educational system is performing and highlight areas of concern or success for further investigation. In the end the FSA is an assessment - one of many assessments each student will take during their school years.

Facts about assessment relating to the FSA:

There are three types of assessment: **of** learning, **for** learning and **as** learning.

The FSA is an *Assessment **OF** learning*. This term is used to describe assessments that are done at the end of a unit or term to summarize what students have learned so far. It is purely evaluative and not meant to contribute to the education process of the student. Report cards, final exams and the FSA are good examples of assessment **of** learning.

The FSA is **not** an *Assessment **FOR** learning*. This term refers to ongoing testing, observation, and interaction between teachers and students. Assessment **for** learning allows teachers to discover what students understand so far and what needs to be taught. The FSA is not designed or intended as assessment **for** learning.

The FSA is meant to assess how well the education system is doing its job and give administrators valuable information to improve the education system for future students. It is not meant to create immediate improvements for current students.

What an FSA score can tell a Student or Parent:

1. FSA scores can tell parents if the mark a student is receiving is an accurate assessment of their ability in the core areas of English and Mathematics. An FSA score says nothing about marks in other important subjects or the skill or teaching ability of the teacher.
2. FSA scores can tell parents if the student's ability level in these two core areas is: not yet meeting, meeting, or exceeding expectations. An FSA score is only a clue that should be investigated further: a poor FSA result does not always mean that there is a problem but may indicate an area that would benefit from additional support.
3. FSA scores can tell parents if the student is learning the prescribed curriculum in the subjects of English and Mathematics.

An FSA score is only a *clue for possible further investigation* and should not be viewed as an indication as to how well a student is doing, as it is not a final assessment.

What the school system gains from the FSA results:

1. FSA data can identify groups within the school system that perform either above or below other students. Once identified, these groups may be looked at to discover the reasons why their scores were different. This provides information to improve the school system in the long term by identifying successful programs or techniques that should be copied in other schools, areas of curriculum which need improvement and demographic groups which require additional or focused resources.
2. Information to verify the success or failure of specific school programs or targeted resources and to provide statistical data that identifies gaps in the curriculum being taught or curriculum in need of improvement.

The primary purpose of the FSA is to help school administrators improve the school system. The FSA is not designed to rank schools or evaluate the ability of a school or a teacher to educate. Any such ranking of schools or teachers based on FSA data is incomplete and not a true reflection of the performance or ability of a school or teacher.

More detailed information on the FSA including each school's results for each question on past FSAs, how many students answered the question correctly, how many answered incorrectly, and if they answered the question incorrectly in the same way, what the error was, can be obtained at www.edudata.educ.ubc.ca

The primary users of the FSA results are Schools, School Planning Councils, School Districts, and the Province. FSA results are used by the BC Representative for Children and Youth to assess student learning in the province. The results of the FSA are also used by legitimate researchers. In the past two years approximately thirty research projects that rely on FSA data have taken place on a variety of education subjects. Without the FSA data, these studies would be difficult to undertake.

For detailed information on users of the FSA data, please see the letter from Minister Abbott here:

http://www.bccpac.bc.ca/UserFiles/File/FSA/142121_FSA_9_Nov_2010_Whiteaker_FSA_fromMOE.pdf

Common FSA Misconceptions:

1. *My child's FSA score evaluates the teaching ability of my child's current teacher.*

This is false. The FSA asks questions about material presented by many different teachers over many years of study. It is about school system performance; not the skill of any specific teacher.

2. *The FSA is stressful to the students writing it.*

Writing the FSA should be no more stressful than any other test taken by a student. The FSA does not count for grades and is excellent practice for later examinations that do.

3. *The overall combined score on the FSA at a particular school tells you how good that school is at educating.*

The FSA is only one of many things that should be looked at when evaluating a school's ability to educate. The FSA is not designed to be able to evaluate a school's entire education program. To use FSA results alone to do so would be an incomplete evaluation.

4. *The FSA requires excessive preparation time.*

Spending excessive time "teaching to the test" defeats the purpose of the FSA and should be discouraged. The FSA is like a medical check up of the school system. Like a visit to the doctor, the FSA confirms that things are going right, and checks to make sure things are not going wrong. Like a medical test your doctor does, if the results of the FSA suggest that something is going wrong, it is looked at more closely.

5. *The FSA is conducted primarily to provide the Fraser Institute with data so it can rank schools.*

This has never been the purpose of the FSA, nor should it be. The FSA and its predecessor the Provincial Learning Assessment Program (PLAP) were done for many years before the Fraser Institute started ranking schools. Many educational partners, including BCCPAC and individual parents, have raised objections to this practise by the Fraser Institute and expressed concerns about the inaccuracy of these rankings. Using FSA combined scores to compare schools may be statistically unsound.

Can your child opt out of writing the FSA?

The Ministry of Education requires that every BC student in grades 4 and 7 write the FSA.

The **only** three reasons that a student can be excused from the FSA are:

- a) Illness,
- b) Family Emergency, or
- c) Extenuating Circumstance (Something that is beyond the control of the student that prevents them from writing the FSA.)

Some parents have reported being asked, encouraged or even pressured into withdrawing their child from writing the FSA. If considering such a request please ask yourself these questions:

1. Is writing the FSA causing my child stress? If so, why and what can I do to help?
2. Do I want to know if the marks my child is receiving accurately reflect their level of understanding of the course material in English and Mathematics?
3. Will abolishing the FSA prevent ranking schools, or in the absence of FSA data will other ranking methods be found?

Other FSA Questions and Answers:

1. *Does the FSA take excessive time away from other studies?*
The entire assessment takes 4½ hours to write spread over a four week period during each of grades 4 and 7. This totals 9 hours of FSA time over 8 years of schooling.
2. *Do students have to practice for the FSA? Doesn't this practice take away from classroom time?*
Students cover the foundation skills of reading, writing and numeracy in their regular classroom activities. Teachers do not need to “teach to the test” for the FSA. However, familiarity with the FSA format may help students feel more comfortable with their FSA writing experience. Sample FSA questions are available at: www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment/fsa/
3. *Have there been changes made to the FSA?*
Yes, three important changes were introduced to the FSA in 2008:

 1. The FSA occurs at the beginning of the year instead of May. (In January 2010)
 2. The multiple-choice questions (not the written answers) are done online, using computers.
 3. Teachers score students' written work but the scoring takes place in schools or districts and not in a central location.
4. *Why were changes made to the FSA in 2008?*
The changes enable the Ministry to provide results back to parents by the end of March, and results back at district and school levels within the school year. For those students struggling with these foundation skills, the FSA provides another measure for schools and parents to make plans to help students before the end of the school year.
5. *Why is the FSA done on a census (all students basis) rather than a random sample basis (some students, in some schools)?*
A census provides information about every individual student and provides information at the school or district level about:

 - specific groups like aboriginal students, ESL students, students with special needs by category, children in care and other vulnerable students
 - school districts and schools
 - Individual student achievement levels for all parents and teachers.

These important demographic pieces of information would be missed or inaccurately identified through random sampling.

The census approach allows strategic and focused planning for improvement in achievement for all students, groups of students, schools and school districts within BC.

6. *The big national and international tests rely on a sample basis. Why not the FSA?*

The national and international tests only give results at the provincial level. The FSA is about more than the overall performance of the provincial school system. These sample-based tests do not give any information specific to school districts, schools, several specific groups of students or individual students.

7. *Why are BC students writing the FSA?*

The primary purpose of the FSA is to help schools; school planning councils, school districts and the province evaluate how well the foundation skills are being addressed and make plans for improvement. The secondary purpose is to give parents, teachers and principals some information about individual students and provide information to researchers to help improve the school system.

The FSA provides a “snapshot” of how well BC students are doing on foundation skills. The results help to answer these questions:

- Are students learning the foundation skills they need to achieve student success?
- Is student achievement improving over time in these core areas?
- Are there any trends in student performance at the school, district or provincial levels that should be further investigated or addressed?
- How are specific groups of students doing in these areas?

8. *Is the FSA expensive to administer?*

The FSA costs about \$7.50 for each student in Grade 4 and 7, or about \$700,000 province-wide out of a total education budget of \$4.5 billion. (Less than 0.0016% of the annual budget) This includes such things as creating the tests, printing and shipping the answer booklets, providing money to school districts to train scorers and giving schools and districts added information about how groups of their students did on FSA questions. School districts may have some expenses to complete the local scoring.

9. *Who creates the FSA?*

BC teachers are contracted by the Ministry to develop the FSA tests.

10. *How is the FSA scored?*

The majority of the FSA is multiple-choice questions allowing for automated scoring. Each school district and each independent school scores the written questions. Separate scores for reading, writing and numeracy are given. There is no overall score for the FSA.

11. *If the written sections are scored locally, how do we know the scoring is fair, accurate and consistent?*

Training and scoring information is available on the Ministry website. (<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment/fsa/training.htm>) Common standards are used across the province by trained scorers as they follow Ministry guidelines and use provincial scoring guides and examples of student work. Scorers develop a better understanding of the provincial standards by discussing some of their scores with each other.

In addition, the Ministry takes a sample of FSA written answers and re-scores them during the summer. Districts and schools are asked for those samples right after they have done their scoring. The re-scoring does not change any student or school results but it allows the Ministry to give schools and school districts tips on how to get as close as possible to the provincial standards.

12. *What happens to the FSA scores?*

The Ministry combines the written scores with the multiple-choice scores and gives the total back to the schools in a report for each student.

Schools then send each student's three separate FSA scores (reading, writing and numeracy) home to parents in March. Results are presented in the following levels of achievement "Performance Level Unknown", "Not Yet Meeting Expectations", "Meeting Expectations" or "Exceeding Expectations". Parents are encouraged to discuss the results with their child's teacher.

The Ministry of Education compiles all of the individual student scores to produce school, district and provincial results. Scores are "weighted" (for example, the more difficult questions, based on how all students across the province did on each question, are given a slight amount of "extra credit"). And are "equated", by looking at how all the students in BC did on any of the questions that have been used in earlier years of the FSA. The compiled information is then presented to schools and districts in the spring to be used for planning and monitoring trends in student achievement. Detailed information on FSA results for individual schools is available at:

www.edudata.educ.ubc.ca.

13. *Do FSA results count towards students' report card marks?*

No, FSA results do not count towards the student's report card marks.

However, the FSA results should complement other information such as

report card marks and classroom assessment activities and should help parents and teachers identify and discuss ways to improve student learning. Sometimes the information from the FSA seems different from the information parents have been receiving from the school. A child's teacher is in the best position to explain why this might be the case.

14. *What do schools and districts do with FSA results?*

Schools and districts use their results for planning and monitoring trends in student achievement. FSA results can help schools and districts see if they are making improvements from one year to the next. The goal is for each school to improve student achievement over time. Questions about school or district results should be directed to the school principal, the school planning council or the superintendent.

15. *How can parents and teachers support FSA and reduce a child's stress about writing this public school assessment?*

Encourage all children to do their best without putting pressure on them. Remind them that there may be some questions on topics from the previous school year and maybe a few they haven't covered yet. This is normal because some topics are covered in different order in different schools. Parents can ensure their children are well rested and attend school during the testing period. Parents can also discuss the results with their children and teachers in March.

For Further information:

You will find:

- sample FSA— including on-line questions
- scoring guides
- examples of student responses to typical FSA questions
- samples of the individual student report
- and more

on the Ministry of Education website at: www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment/fsa/

The school results will be available through this site in the spring. Schools also receive additional information about how their students did as a group on specific test questions. This detailed information is available at:

www.edudata.educ.ubc.ca Other common questions, answers and links are on the BCCPAC website under FSA information.

Further information on the topic of assessment in general is contained in *Student Assessment in B.C.'s Public Schools: A Guide for Parents*. This can be found at:

http://www.gramediting.com/pdf/student_assessment.pdf