



# Talking about Student Assessment and Achievement



## Overview

The progress of students in Manitoba's K-12 schools is monitored on an ongoing basis. Monitoring falls into two broad categories. **Formative assessments** reveals a student's individual strengths and weaknesses, and helps educators develop a roadmap to improved learning outcomes. **Summative assessments** focus on how well a student has mastered particular skills or knowledge at a given moment of time. Simply put, formative assessment is forward looking, while summative assessment is backwards looking. Both are important.

In Manitoba, *teachers* administer regular tests to determine how well students understand the material they have covered. Test results are shared with parents, and teachers use the results to assess their own teaching practices. Some divisions also require that students write *divisional exams* in particular subjects or grades. Students also take part in *provincial assessments*. These include Grade 3 reading and numeracy assessments, middle years assessments of math, reading comprehension, writing and engagement, and Grade 12 provincial exams in language arts and math. The Grade 12 provincial tests count towards 20 to 30% of a student's final grade.

Students may also participate in national or international assessment programs. The primary national program is the **Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP)**. The **Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)** is sponsored by the Organization for Educational Cooperation and Development (OECD). Both PCAP and PISA assessments test a small sample of students in specific subjects and specific grades. These assessments are not conducted annually, but on a multi-year cycle.

## Key Points

- The progress of students at all levels in Manitoba's K-12 classrooms is assessed continually, to determine how well students have mastered material covered, and to develop a roadmap to improved future learning outcomes.
- Assessment in Manitoba schools is largely teacher and classroom based. Teachers are in the best position to understand their individual students and their learning needs.
- Standardized provincial assessment programs determine student progress towards required learning outcomes at key junctures. The results of standardized provincial assessments may also shape revisions to provincial curricula and learning resources.
- Provincial, national and international assessment results show that Manitoba students are achieving at a high level, and that their level of achievement is rising year over year.
- School boards monitor student achievement, and allocate resources in accordance with identified goals and needs. Research shows that effective school boards can lead to improved student achievement.

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# Student Assessment and Achievement



## Q&A

***Sometimes I hear that kids today are so smart, and other times I hear that standards have been slipping for decades. What's the real story?***

Kids today are smart, and in so many ways. They achieve at high levels in academic subjects, they are developing technical and vocational skills, they know how to work as a part of a team, they are creative, and they are empathetic with a highly developed sense of social justice. Collectively, these are some of the traits that have been identified as essential to 21st century learning. Sometimes, when people talk about falling standards, they have fallen victim to what Jamie Vollmer, a one-time critic turned champion of public education, has dubbed “nostesia.” Nostesia is a dangerous combination of nostalgia and amnesia. Victims of nostesia long for the good old days, while at the same time forgetting some of the key features of that time, such as complacency that many children simply wouldn't graduate from high school. Today, the expectation is that all children can achieve at high levels, and that the role of the school is to provide the supports needed to make that happen.

***How well do Manitoba's students perform on national and international tests?***

Very well, actually.

The results of Manitoba's students on tests such as PCAP and PISA are often used to compare Manitoba's students with those in other provinces. Rank-ordering the test results is an easy way to try to extract some meaning from these results, but it is far from the most useful. Each province in Canada is different, with different levels of affluence and poverty, and varying degrees of diversity within their populations. Socio-economic status (SES), for example, can influence score outcomes by a factor of up to 40%, and Manitoba has a relatively high number of students from families with a low SES.

Much more useful than rank-ordering the results among provinces is to look at what they can tell us about how many students are meeting or exceeding expectations in the subjects tested, and how results are trending over time. Across the province and across subjects tested, more than 80% of Manitoba's students regularly meet or exceed expectations in math, science, reading and writing. This number does not vary significantly from results in other provinces. Furthermore, over the last several testing cycles, their results have shown steady improvement, meaning that what our schools are doing is working.

***Wouldn't kids do better on these tests if schools spent more time teaching the basics—you know, reading, writing and arithmetic?***

Kids *might* do better on these tests, but the real question is would they do better in life? One of educators' concerns about standardized testing has always been the temptation to “teach to the test”—that is, to spend a lot of time and energy on material that you know will be the focus of an important assessment. There is no question that traditional core subjects such as math, science, and reading are important for our students' futures, but if we focus on those exclusively, we will be depriving our students of the depth and breadth of education that is needed to build strong futures and rewarding lives. They might do marginally better on a test or two, but at what cost?



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*I understand the role teachers have in student success, but do school boards really matter when it comes to how well our kids do in school?*

Yes, school boards definitely matter, and the research proves it. One of the most comprehensive studies comes out of Iowa. The Lighthouse Project looked at otherwise-similar school districts with either unusually high or unusually low records on student achievement, and contrasted the knowledge, beliefs, and actions of school board members in the two groups. The examination revealed that school boards in those jurisdictions where students achieved at a higher level:

- have high expectations for student achievement, and defined clear goals towards their vision;
- have strong shared beliefs about what is possible for all students and for their ability to learn;
- work collaboratively with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving goals;
- embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement;
- align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals; and
- lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.

So yes, school boards do matter when it comes to student achievement.