

# Curriculum and Student Assessment

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Curriculum exists for students. It is concerned with both content knowledge and process. Content refers to what Albertans want students to learn while process refers to how the content is managed in concert with the conceptual knowledge that is built over time from students' prior knowledge and experiences. Curriculum must be characterized by a balance of knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes. It must be organized in a logical and sequential manner while making provision for special interest development. It must encourage critical and creative thinking and provide the student with opportunities to develop the ability to make reasoned judgments. To accomplish this, curriculum in Alberta classrooms should have common subjects and at the same time provide for varying abilities and interests of students through complementary courses and/or optional units within the core subjects.

Student assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process and, as such, must be thoughtfully integrated into the planning and implementation of curriculum as lived experience. Students require timely, constructive feedback to support their learning and development. The teacher is best positioned and most responsible for monitoring and assessing student learning as well as reporting this learning to parents or guardians.

## Role of the Teacher

The Code of Professional Conduct and the Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers identify members of the teaching profession as major advocates for the educational welfare of students. Because it is teachers who must translate curriculum into specific learning experiences, teachers must be central figures in curriculum decision making. Decisions concerning objectives, content, interaction and student assessment must be made by sources as close to the students as possible. Classroom teachers are also in the best position to develop assessment strategies that align with the curriculum and address the individual learning needs of students.

It is a teacher's role to facilitate learning experiences of students. Efficient expedition of this role requires the provision by school jurisdictions of adequate time and resources to translate the aims and objectives of curriculum into learning activities that will meet the needs, motivation and capabilities of students. Professional education and teaching experience prepare teachers well for having a major voice at all levels of curriculum decision making.

## Role of Society

Society's primary responsibility is to ensure provision of educational programs and services appropriate to the educational needs of all students. The government of the province, as an agent of society, sets broad aims of education and provides resources to translate these aims into specific objectives; defines the skills, knowledge and attitudes that reflect these aims; and designates those objectives to be included in a common education for all in a democratic society. The government should also provide curriculum guides to assist the teacher in interpreting and meeting the prescribed objectives and provide consultant services and teacher inservice related to new and revised courses of study.

As benefit to the student and society is the primary purpose of education, the government must establish a provincial program, curriculum, and student assessment planning and decisionmaking process that is transparent, continual, orderly and sequential and that provides for the participation of the profession and the public, including a ministerial advisory body on program, curriculum and student assessment. Because of their professional experience and education, teachers must comprise a significant membership on committees and boards dealing with program, curriculum and student assessment matters.

## Relationship Between Curriculum and Student Assessment

Student assessment is an integral part of curriculum development and implementation. Teachers understand the complexity of curriculum, which in Alberta is expressed in the form of learning outcomes. They further recognize that many learning outcomes cannot be assessed using the traditional pencil-and-paper techniques. As such, students must be assessed on the curriculum they have been taught. Classroom teachers design student assessment based on the curriculum that students have been taught. It is unfair and unethical for teachers to assess students on material they have not had the opportunity to learn.

## Program Evaluation

Program evaluation is an integral part of curriculum development and of the total education process and must take into consideration the goals of education, available resources, interaction among curriculum components and contributions of the total program to societal goals and student achievement. Program evaluation should be continual and carried out at all levels of the educational system in the light of accepted educational policy and research and take into account unique characteristics of the school and community served.

Major purposes of program evaluation should be to render school programs more relevant and responsive to changing needs and to examine the adequacy of essential education support services that meets the needs of all students.

## Student Assessment

Information about student learning is gathered for a number of different purposes, using a variety of assessment strategies depending on the purpose. The primary purposes of student assessment are to facilitate the teaching/learning process (formative assessment), diagnose areas of a student's learning strengths and weaknesses, and make decisions about a student's progress (summative assessment). The determination of student progress occurs when a teacher uses the results of assessment and other relevant information to make a decision about the quality, value or worth of a student's response during the learning process or a student's overall performance for placement and reporting purposes.

Large-scale assessment of groups of students is conducted to determine curriculum or program effectiveness, research new ideas and enhance public assurance. Judgments made on the basis of the information gathered and reported in these areas are assessments too, but the assessments are in reference to the performance of the group, not individual students.

In most instances, the assessment of a student or a group of students should be on the basis of the objectives of the curriculum and the student or students' opportunity to learn. The teacher is the professional who understands the factors in the assessment of learning and has a thorough mastery

of subject matter to be assessed. The teacher translates the learning goals into course objectives and selects assessment procedures to reflect the curriculum designed to achieve those goals and objectives. The teacher uses a variety of strategies to recognize differences in teaching methods and in students' abilities, needs and learning styles. These procedures are fair, just and equitable; motivate students; instill confidence in students' abilities to learn and succeed; test a variety of skills; and are consistent with the *Principles of Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada*.

The assessment of student progress is the responsibility of the teacher providing instruction. The role of the provincial government is to facilitate teachers in carrying out their professional responsibility.

## **Standardized Testing and Large-Scale Assessments**

Teachers are opposed to standardized testing, including achievement testing and the growing use of large-scale assessments, when the test is not appropriate to the educational needs of the student and when the results are misused. Standardized tests are developed by people or organizations outside the classroom and administered to a large number of students under standardized conditions. Standardized tests and large-scale assessments generally stand alone and are administered as single assessments. Examples of standardized tests are the provincial achievement tests, commercial tests and the growing number of international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment. The use of standardized tests and international assessments should be limited to the purposes for which these tests have been designed. Typically, standardized-test results should not be combined with results from curriculum assessments because each is designed to understand different aspects of student achievement. As well, the results from a single standardized test should not be used to determine a student's final grade or program placement.

Standardized tests and large-scale assessments become high-stakes tests when the results are used to assess students, teachers and schools or to determine educational funding. When the results of standardized and achievement tests are used in these ways, valuable classroom instructional time may be spent teaching to the test and training students to read multiple-choice tests and complete computer answer sheets. These activities intrude on the instructional process and often distract policy makers from the system-level obstacles to student learning.

## **Curricular Content**

The goals of education reflect perceived needs and expectations of society. Curriculum decisions are made within the context of these goals. It is important that goals determine content. Allowances must be made for variations in curriculum content to reflect the unique needs of communities in general and of students in particular. Thus, a close association among those who set goals, create content and implement curriculum is essential.

Goals for education include possession of respect for self and others; a sense of social responsibility; feelings of selfworth and integrity; and the knowledge, skills (including ethical and living skills) and attitudes required in a democratic society.

The fundamentals in education are those learning experiences that assist students in acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes that contribute to continued learning, social awareness, cognizance of a changing society, responsible citizenship and personal wellbeing.

## **Curriculum Support**

Even with optimal curriculum content and processes in place, attention needs to be given to mechanisms that will support curriculum implementation and optimal teaching and learning. Without adequate funding and resources, the best curriculum becomes difficult to implement. Implementation of a new curriculum requires that draft program and resources are evaluated through a field test, approved programs and resources are available at least eight months prior to implementation and sufficient funding is available for teacher inservice and purchase of approved resources. An important support mechanism for bringing curriculum into students' learning experiences is the provision of library services via libraries and qualified teacher-librarians; these services can bolster all levels of instruction.

In meeting needs of students, considerable attention must be given to those students with exceptionalities. While this may be done through specialized supports and programs, there is an obligation for society to provide the education system with the resources to identify students with diverse needs and, where required, provide professional and other supports required.

## **Conclusion**

Curriculum must be forward thinking and address the growing diversity and complexity of classroom and school communities. It must provide students with those learning experiences that enable them to become knowledgeable, selfdirected, responsible individuals able to adapt to and cope with a complex and rapidly changing society. Its design should ensure development of human relationships, social values, a pride in cultural and Canadian heritage, a sense of ethics, a desire for continued learning and a positive selfimage. A broad range of content knowledge balanced with an opportunity for in-depth learning and considerable resources, personnel and organization are necessary if these objectives are to be met.

Teachers are committed professionals who use assessment to improve learning opportunities for students. They use multiple sources of information to provide for the ongoing assessment and reporting of student progress. As a final word on assessment, the profession maintains that teachers are ultimately responsible, both legally and professionally, for assessing and reporting student progress; that the current emphasis on standardized testing programs does little to address the individual needs of students and diverts precious resources away from the classroom; and that relying on standardized testing programs and international benchmarking to determine school and school-system performance misrepresents the work of teachers and schools.