

# Keeping the SLA Promise to Enhance Student Learning

In the fall of 2014 and 2015, teachers administered the Alberta government's Student Learning Assessment (SLA) pilot program to their Grade 3 classes. The Alberta Teachers' Association invited the Grade 3 teachers who participated in the program to partake in an online survey and focus groups regarding their experiences with the SLA program.



## THE SLA PROMISES

### 1 To improve student learning

Parents will be able to use results to learn about strengths and areas of growth for their child.



### 2 To enhance instruction for students

Teachers will be able to use results to guide instruction, inform parents and select learning resources.



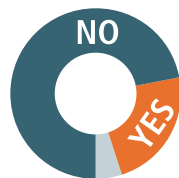
### 3 To assure Albertans the education system is meeting the needs of students

Principals will be able to use results to support teachers and instructional practices.



## THE REALITY

Did the SLA experience benefit students?



72% of teachers disagreed

23% of teachers agreed

2 + 3 = 5  
DAYS + DAYS = DAYS LOST

for teacher preparation and marking

for student completion of SLAs in class

for teaching and learning



“ These tests are not suitable for students who are ELL and for those who have difficulty reading at this level, of which we had many. ”

“ The performance tasks gave me some immediate data, but that could have easily been obtained from a writing prompt and math problem of my choosing in September. ”

## THE ROAD AHEAD



- **Stop misdirecting** resources on digital testing and data analytics.
- **Stop marginalizing** the role of teachers in student assessments.
- **Stop ignoring** the negative impacts on students with the current digital SLAs.



- **Start supporting** teachers in their use of a full range of classroom assessments.
- **Start supporting** teachers in diagnosing and responding to students' increasingly complex learning needs.
- **Start working** with the profession to enhance public assurance.

## THE VOICE OF ALBERTA'S GRADE 3 TEACHERS

### ONLINE SURVEY

476 respondents



266 written comments



### FOCUS GROUP

103 participants





# What Grade 3 teachers had to say

“As a teacher I am saddened to see my students having to stare into a computer screen for six hours to do these assessments that seem little more than a digital version of the old provincial achievement testing program.”

“What started out as a promise for formative assessment supports for teachers has turned into a focus by the ministry on gathering unusable data on something vaguely defined as literacy and numeracy—all through the use of an online testing tool that is inappropriate for most Grade 3 students.”

“Instead of the four hours promised to complete the SLAs, the average class time required was two full days, not including the 15–20 hours of additional preparation and administrative work for teachers.”

“Virtually all other reading done by Grade 3 students for reading comprehension assessment is completed in a nondigital format in the classroom. I question the validity or helpfulness of these digital assessment results for reading comprehension if they are not an accurate reflection of student comprehension. Second, I believe that these assessments can undermine weaker students’ confidence in their abilities—which is a really unfortunate way to begin Grade 3.”

“Along with my colleagues, I doubt the digital items reflected the outcomes in the programs of study. But I worry more for our students that the great effort expended in supporting the SLAs [will result in us getting] better at doing the wrong things.”

“Although the whole SLA experience was a little less of a nightmare this year compared to the fall of 2014, it still took an astronomical amount of time, and for what purpose?”

“While improved last year, the amount of time the SLAs took is hard to justify. The performance assessments were useful but, ironically, the government couldn’t be bothered to collect my marks from these—perhaps not surprising since the ministry only seems to trust in number crunching its digital items.”

## THERE IS A BETTER WAY

Both in survey responses and in focus groups, Grade 3 teachers offered hopeful suggestions for a fundamental change in direction. The growing diversity and complexity of Alberta classrooms call for support that will enhance teachers’ professional practice and create conditions that will allow all students to succeed. What is needed is a broader approach to public assurance, that is not driven by an excessive focus on standardization, by a culture of compliance, or by the inappropriate use of so-called “technological innovations.” Instead, immediate priority should be given to the development of performance assessments alongside professional development that supports teachers in their work with students and parents.

The Association continues to advocate for a fundamental redesign of the SLA program, one that will build public assurance within a broader plan for educational development in Alberta. To access the Association’s numerous research publications on building a broader educational development plan, including most recently, *Renewing Alberta’s Promise: A Great School for All* (2015), visit [www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca).

Sources: ALBERTA EDUCATION <https://education.alberta.ca/student-learning-assessments/sla-results/>; Presentation to SLA Working Group, October 27, 2015; Survey of 476 grade three teachers conducted September–November 2015.

