

A leadership challenge paper in support of UNESCO Futures of Education 2050

## Assessment: A Promising Vision for the Future

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### **A Report Card on the Current State of Large-Scale Assessment**

Large-scale assessment is failing. Large-scale assessment (LSA) is failing students by narrowing their educational experience, focusing on what is easy to measure rather than what is worth learning (Thompson, 2015; People for Education, 2013). It is failing the education system by encouraging ‘teaching to the test’ (Thompson, 2015) and thereby limiting opportunities for teachers to improve their practice as they help students improve their learning (Murgatroyd & Sahlberg, 2016). It is failing policy makers, particularly in regard to international large-scale assessment (ILSA), by exerting pressure to conform and compete (Breakspear, 2014; Sellar, 2019). It is failing the public by creating a narrative that makes headlines, but does not accurately represent the value of the learning taking place in classrooms.

Many within the education sector, along with members of the general public, are largely unaware of the precarious nature of the situation. Jurisdictions continue to pay to participate in PISA (Addy & Sellar, 2019). Newspaper headlines warn of “alarm bells” (Alphonso, 2013) as a result of a drop in ILSA math scores. While the Alberta Student Assessment Study (Weber et al, 2009) revealed high parent support for provincial standardized testing within most response categories, 46% of parents also agreed or strongly agreed that “provincial standardized testing negatively affects student emotions” (p. 77).

At a time when mental health is of great concern to educators, families, and communities, large-scale assessments create a culture of competition, and seek to motivate students and systems through fear of failure (Biesta, 2019; Thompson, 2015). In Alberta, provincial assessment results are reported to the public, creating the conditions for quick judgements to be made about teachers, students, schools, and jurisdictions, with no guarantee that the viewer of these reports has even a cursory understanding of the psychometric principles behind the data.



As ubiquitous as these sentiments may be, they are incompatible with the competitive nature of large-scale assessments as previously described. To achieve coherence between what a school professes as its vision and mission, and how large-scale assessment data are used, will require courageous conversations, serious reflections, and an unwavering commitment to act.

This paper will present a case for reimagining how large-scale assessments might be used in a way that could actually support improvement within the education system in Alberta and beyond, rather than just measure it. The current impact of large-scale assessment will be viewed through the lens of *UNESCO's Futures of Education 2050 – Learning to Be*. A scenarios approach (Ogilvy, 2015) will then be used to articulate possible paths for reimagining large-scale assessment.

### **Walking the Talk of a Global Vision and Mission**

If vision and mission statements truly provide the foundation for how schools and jurisdictions aspire to be, then the values of success, dignity, equity, and community must be front and centre in all educational decision making. This would include decisions regarding which assessment data are collected and for what purposes, how these data are interpreted, and how those in governance roles create policy to ensure appropriate use of data to support learning, for students, as well as for the system.

*UNESCO's Futures of Education 2050 – Learning to Be* is an initiative that invites us to “rethink education and shape the future” through a focus on humanistic qualities (UNESCO pamphlet, p. 2). The approach is markedly different from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that according to Breakspear (2014), works from the perspective of “human capital theories of economic growth, and the changing skills needed for

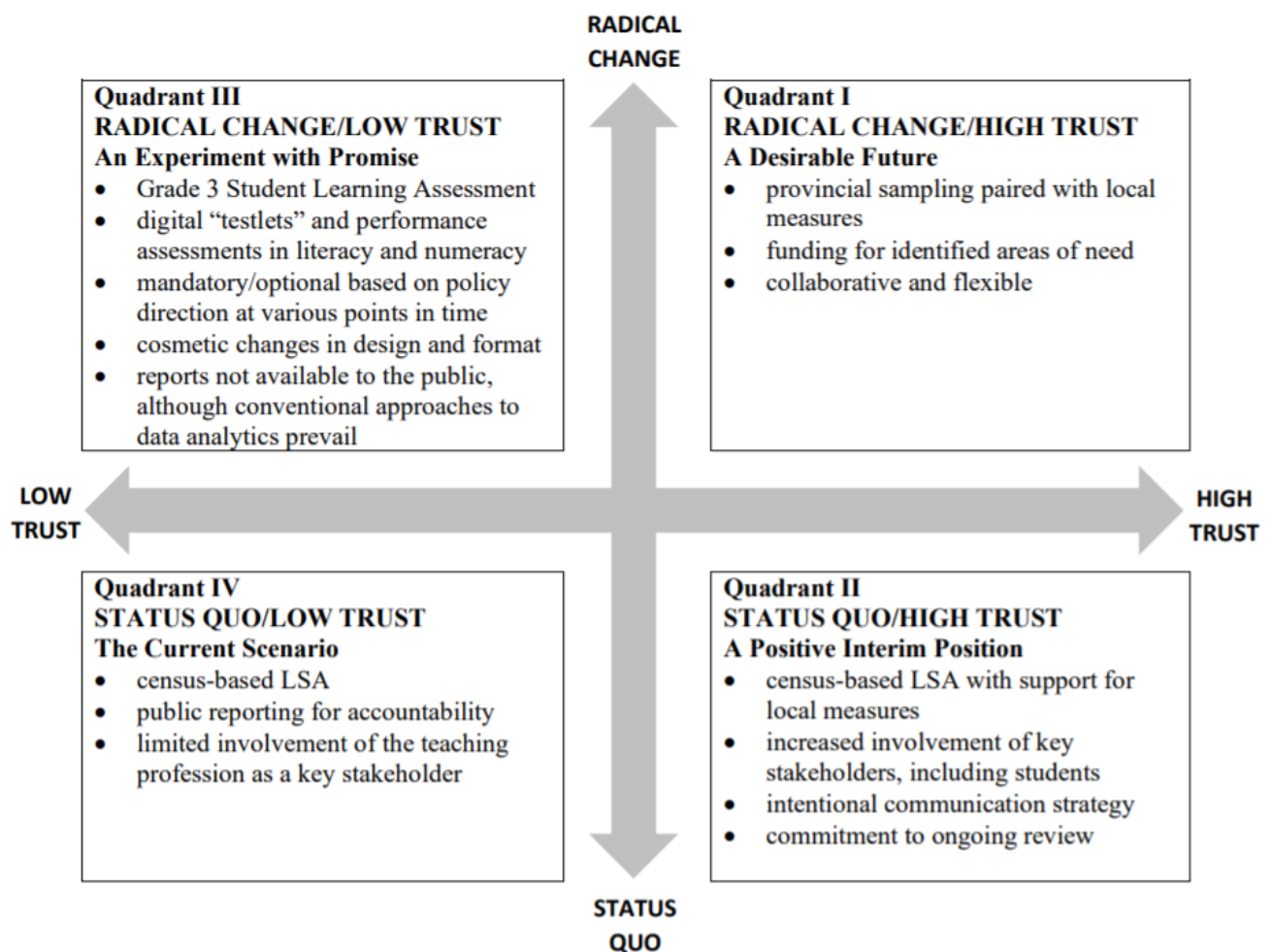
national and individual competitiveness” (pp. 12-13). While many within the international educational community are embracing ILSAs, Professor Antonia Novoa (2020) believes that a consumerist approach is “the greatest danger for the future of schooling” (UNESCO panel transcript, 2020, p. 9). Novoa (2020) further reminds us that “education needs to be a factor to fight inequalities and not a creator of great inequalities” (p. 9).

“High-performing school systems are those which put equity, not competition, at the heart of their work” (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2015, p. 28). In like manner, Westheimer (2019) encourages policymakers to “keep their eyes on the prize: policies that will best support—rather than “hold accountable”—teachers who enter their classrooms every day hoping to improve the lives of their students and who face enormous obstacles wrought by social, economic, and political forces beyond their control” (p. 4). The chaos that recently ensued in both Scotland (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2020) and the UK (Adams & McIntyre, 2020) as a result of the attempt to provide an algorithmic response to student grade calculations when LSAs were cancelled during the pandemic, highlights the extent to which the culture of competition surpasses the voice of reason, common sense, and humanity.

Murgatroyd and Sahlberg (2016) argue that equity can be an alternative to the pervasive reform movement. “Rather than having a strong focus on accountability, this approach favours social responsibility and human judgment informed by variety of assessments focused on helping the teacher to improve her work and the learners improve their learning” (p. 13). Rick Stiggins (2019) provides a compelling reason why schools today simply cannot allow students to give up in hopelessness. Schools today have the responsibility to prepare students, not for the job market, but to be life-long learners. It is no longer sufficient to rank and sort students. Society needs to understand the imperative to replace intimidation and anxiety with confidence and hope.

### Scenarios for the Future

Using a scenarios approach derived from foresight thinking (Ogilvy, 2015), four possible options are provided for the role large-scale assessment could play within the Alberta context, based on varying degrees of trust and change. Figure 2 summarizes key features of each scenario. The numbering system represents a departure from the standard mathematical numbering sequence in order to flow, in reverse numbering order, from the current scenarios in Quadrants IV and III, through to an interim possibility described by Quadrant II, ending with a desirable future in Quadrant I. A more in-depth description of each scenario follows.



**Figure 2:** Scenarios for the role of large-scale assessment within the Alberta context

**Quadrant IV: The Current Scenario - Status Quo with Low Trust.**

The current Alberta provincial assessment program currently includes year-end assessments for students in Grades 6, 9, and end-of-semester assessments for some courses at the end of high school. One section of the Alberta Education website makes the following statement on the relationship between provincial assessments and classroom assessment.

PATs [Provincial Achievement Tests] are only one of many ways to evaluate student learning and are not meant to replace day-to-day teacher observations and classroom assessment. They are sources of information that must be interpreted, used and communicated within the context of regular and continuous assessment by classroom teachers.

Official position aside, the current policy of census testing allows the public, as well as third-party organizations to access jurisdiction level data based on the results of these assessments. Two prominent examples include the Fraser Institute (School Rankings: 2020) and the Eight Leaves graph of discrepancies between school awarded and diploma scores (Comparing Alberta high schools: 2017). Government policy sets the stage for PLSAs to be one of the most public means by which the effectiveness of the education system is judged.

Another area of low trust is the limited extent to which the profession is included in decision-making processes in regard to provincial assessments. Teachers' input consists of developing items and marking extended response items. Decisions surrounding provincial assessment have become politicized, as evidenced by the United Conservative Party election platform to reinstate the PATs for Grade 3 (French, 2019). Politically motivated policies will continue to keep this status quo scenario at the low end of the trust continuum.

**Quadrant III: An Experiment with Promise - Radical Change with Low Trust.**

Radical change was recently experienced in Alberta in regard to the new Grade 3 Student Learning Assessment (SLA), which launched in Fall 2014. The SLA was partly digital, providing students with options beyond the typical ‘bubble sheet’ responses. Performance assessments were another new feature. The assessment was designed to be ‘informative’ in nature, providing information for teachers at the beginning of the year to assist with instructional planning in support of student learning.

Another key area of innovation within the SLA involved convening a stakeholder working group to provide advice; however, it soon became clear that the desire on the part of the Ministry for conventional data analytics was guiding the program, based on the reporting processes that were developed (Alberta Education, 2020a). While the digital items were engaging and able to assess a broader range of skills than pencil/paper tests alone, a review by the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) found the level of cognition on over 40% of the Fall 2015 digital items was lower than the learning outcomes to which they were linked (Alberta Assessment Consortium, 2016). Overly detailed scoring rubrics for the performance tasks complicated the process and eclipsed the value of the information teachers were able to glean from the results. Teachers reacted with frustration (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2015).

Changes have been made to the SLA over the years since its initial inception, including a more streamlined rubric for the performance tasks. Greater choice was made available, largely based on a political response, which vacillated between mandatory and optional participation, some years at the discretion of the school and other years by decision of the jurisdiction (French, 2019). While the SLA appeared to be a radical change, the change was largely cosmetic in nature. The emphasis on conventional data analytics, in spite of all the other technological



innovations, rendered this initiative low trust. In general, both low trust options have little capacity to shift the trajectory of how large-scale assessment data are used. The high trust options have greater promise.

### **Quadrant II: A Positive Interim Position - Status Quo with High Trust.**

Even if the political will does not exist at present to shift away from a census model of provincial assessment, positive changes could still be made that would engender a greater degree of trust than what currently exists. Jurisdictions and schools always have the option to create local measures in addition to the required provincial measures (Alberta Education, 2020b). However, the resources required to develop, promote, communicate, and celebrate these additional measures “can be challenging when public perception, as based on standardized measures is so pervasive as to render local measures of lesser import” (Alberta Assessment Consortium, 2012, p. 21). In order to shift that perception, Ministry would ideally signal support for local measures through a funding commitment for teacher professional learning in assessment, as well as an enhanced communication strategy to celebrate success, with the audience of the general public in mind.

Within recent years, the Ministry undertook a review of the current accountability system with a desire to replace it with a public assurance model. Stakeholder consultation was part of that process, although it was halted in the months just prior the announcement of the provincial election in the spring of 2019 (personal participation in the Assurance Review Working Group). Reconvening such a stakeholder committee, including representatives of the profession as well as students (Wiliam, 2014) could begin to shift the level of trust in anticipation of moving towards the preferred future described in Quadrant I.

**Quadrant I: A Preferred Future - Radical Change with High Trust.**

The Alberta Assessment Consortium (2012) outlined a progressive vision of public assurance that included provincial measures of literacy and numeracy alongside locally determined measures, which ideally would be developed through authentic community engagement. A sampling approach would be used to gather provincial data to inform governance and funding decisions.

Local assessment measures could include a wide variety of formats, including performance assessment, portfolios, oral assessments, and so forth. While this would initially require additional funding, these “costs are dwarfed, however, by the substantial costs of inaction” (Parsi & Darling-Hammond, 2015, p. 13). The shift from census to sampling could free up funds that could be reallocated to support collaboration and job-embedded professional learning. Ministry personnel could work with teachers to design assessments and identify standards for student work, thereby increasing educator assessment capacity and public confidence. Reinstating a professional learning program with an intentional focus on lateral networks, similar to the vision that guided the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects, would benefit students, teachers, and the system as a whole.

In order to realize this scenario, there needs to be a greater level of understanding regarding the different purposes for large-scale and classroom assessment. Large-scale assessment data can be helpful when looking at how groups of students perform, whereas classroom assessment can provide a better picture of individual student learning (Davies, 2011; Wiliam, 2014). This level of understanding is not yet universal among all the stakeholders in Alberta, which has led to some of the pitfalls that characterize the assessment system at present.

### **Some Tentative and Speculative Conclusions**

While it may be tempting to want to rush towards Quadrant I, the complete elimination of large-scale assessment is neither feasible nor plausible at the present time (Behn, R. 1977; Sellar, Thompson, & Rutkowski, 2017). Setting our collective sights on how to realize Quadrant II can be an effective way to begin to make noticeable change, even within the existing policy constraints. Rather than expecting policy makers to focus on long-term, idealistic visions, it is more important to demonstrate “that powerful ideas can work in diverse environments and creating powerful networks that are capable of operating with or without the cover of public authority” (Elmore, 2016, p. 533). Perhaps people within communities and schools, rather than government, can be the focal point of change and innovation (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2015, p. 27).

What is needed, it seems, is a more rationale and inclusive conversation about large-scale assessment and how it can fit within the broader goals for education within a community and jurisdiction. Two purposeful and concrete steps are offered as a way to begin to create a promising vision for the future of assessment.

#### **A Conversation about What Matters Most.**

Rather than attempting to reform an existing assessment system, it might be wise to begin with a community dialogue on what matters most for students to learn (People for Education, 2013; Zhao et al., 2019). Then, and only then, could an assessment system be designed that could be compatible with this vision.

This is not a new idea. *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010) engaged Albertans in extensive conversations as to their vision for education in the year 2030. This initiative,

although promising, has failed to produce results. It is possible that the pace was too rapid for breadth and depth of the anticipated change. In hindsight, what the leaders of *Inspiring Education* could not have known is that the political landscape in Alberta would be marked by tumultuous changes in ideology, leadership, and bureaucracy during the decade since its release.

Given the further disruptions of COVID-19, perhaps there is a new opportunity to revisit the question of what matters most, on a more intimate, community/school-based level (Zhao et al., 2019). Technology platforms could provide a way to share data across regions and the province, offering an opportunity to build a level of consensus. The next step would be to consider how to gather evidence of that learning in ways that are meaningful and robust.

### **Assessment Literacy: It's Everyone's Responsibility.**

It has been quipped that everyone who has attended school is an expert on education. While educators may beg to differ, there may well be more potential in that statement than appears at first glance. Imagine the level of support educators could have from parents and the public if assessment practices “should be known and understood by adults and young people alike, [and that] they should be formulated in such a way that everyone can articulate them and explain their meaning in the context of practice” (Elmore, 2016, p. 534).

Policy makers and leaders would understand the purpose for various assessments. Large-scale assessment would be used to determine how systems are progressing, and provide guidance for allocating resources based on demonstrable areas of need. A sampling approach would be sufficient to meet these needs, and resources previously allocated to large-scale assessments could be diverted to enhancing classroom assessment capacity, where a greater variety of assessment formats and types are possible, along with the potential for greater student

engagement. Teachers would feel empowered to make instructional decisions based on formative assessment data obtained “minute-by-minute and day-by-day” (Leahy et al., 2005), and school leaders would be able to see results in real time. Students and parents would understand the value of assessment as a process, rather than limited to a specific event.

This framework would be most effective if it were enacted and supported throughout all levels of the education system. However, it is possible for players at any level within the system to enhance their own assessment literacy and begin to make changes, even when policies ‘at the top’ are not optimal. Teachers can design classroom assessments with greater accuracy, respond to student learning needs through a greater breadth of options in assessment formats, and include opportunities for student choice and reflection. School leaders can provide assessment leadership as they engage in productive assessment conversations with teachers (Alberta Assessment Consortium, 2020). Parallel processes can be in place at the system level, as system leaders support school leaders. These actions are consistent with the Alberta professional practice standards that guide the work of teachers (Ministerial Order 001/2018) (Alberta Education, 2018a), school leaders (Ministerial Order 002/2018) (Alberta Education, 2018b), and system leaders (Ministerial Order 003/2018) (Alberta Education, 2018c).

By working through effective conversations and making a commitment to enhance collective assessment capacity, a promising new vision of assessment could emerge. As Margaret Mead has stated, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has” (Goodreads website).

Who are those thoughtful, committed citizens? This is the invitation for leadership in Alberta schools and jurisdictions in the years ahead.

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