

Date of Issue: January 7, 2013

Effective: Until revoked or modified

Subject: DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT IN SUPPORT OF STUDENT LEARNING

Application: Directors of Education
Secretary-Treasurers and Supervisory Officers of School Authorities
Principals of Elementary Schools
Principals of Secondary Schools
Principals of Provincial and Demonstration Schools

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this memorandum is to outline how diagnostic assessment tools may be used effectively to inform teaching and learning practices in the classroom in support of student learning and achievement.

This memorandum also outlines how teachers shall use their professional judgement to determine:

- which assessment and/or evaluation tool(s) from the board's list of pre-approved assessment tools is applicable;
- for which student(s); and
- the frequency and timing of the use of the tool.

In order to inform their instruction, teachers must utilize diagnostic assessment during the school year.

A teacher's professional judgement is the cornerstone of assessment and evaluation. Diagnostic assessment is used to identify a student's needs and abilities and the student's readiness to acquire the knowledge and skills outlined in the curriculum expectations. Information from diagnostic assessment helps teachers determine where individual students are in their acquisition of knowledge and skills, so that instruction can be personalized and tailored to provide the appropriate next steps for learning. The ability to choose the appropriate assessment tool(s) as well as determine the frequency and timing of its administration allows the teacher to gather data that is relevant, sufficient, and valid in order to make judgements about student learning during the learning cycle.

Effective assessment, evaluation, and reporting practices play an important role in achieving the three core priorities of the Ministry of Education: high levels of student achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement, and increased public confidence in publicly funded education. The Education Act and regulations made under the act, the policy outlined in *Growing Success*, and related ministry policies and frameworks, such as the Ontario Leadership Framework and the School Effectiveness Framework, are not altered by the direction given in this memorandum.

Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools, First Edition, Covering Grades 1 to 12, 2010 outlines the policy that supports such effective practices, and the ministry is committed to the continued implementation of this policy. *Growing Success* requires teachers to conduct diagnostic and formative assessment as essential steps of assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning. Specifically, teachers need to:

- plan assessment concurrently and integrate it seamlessly with instruction;
- share learning goals and success criteria with students at the outset of learning to ensure that students and teachers have a common and shared understanding of these goals and criteria as learning progresses;
- gather information about student learning before, during, and at or near the end of a period of instruction, using a variety of assessment strategies and tools;
- use assessment to inform instruction, guide next steps, and help students monitor their progress towards achieving their learning goals;
- analyse and interpret evidence of learning;
- give and receive specific and timely descriptive feedback about student learning;
- help students to develop skills of peer and self-assessment.

(*Growing Success*, pp. 28–29)

This memorandum provides direction on the selection and use of diagnostic assessment tools used to gather data and information about student learning.

The direction, principles, and criteria set out in this memorandum will take effect immediately.

SCOPE

This memorandum applies to the use of formal diagnostic assessment tools. This memorandum does not apply to the following types of assessment:

- *Special education assessments.* These include educational and/or other professional assessments conducted to identify students with special education needs, to determine the special education programs and/or services required by these students, and/or to support decisions related to such programs and services.
- *Large-scale assessments.* These include provincial assessments conducted by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) – the assessments of reading, writing, and mathematics in Grades 3 and 6; the assessment of mathematics in Grade 9; and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. They also include assessments conducted as part of ministry-approved national or international assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP). They may also include ministry-mandated assessments.

USE OF DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT TOOLS IN SUPPORT OF STUDENT LEARNING

In *Growing Success*, the term *diagnostic assessment* is defined as “assessment that is used to identify a student’s needs and abilities and the student’s readiness to acquire the knowledge and skills outlined in the curriculum expectations. Diagnostic assessment usually takes place at the start of a school year, term, semester, or teaching unit. It is a key tool used by teachers in planning instruction and setting appropriate learning goals” (p. 146). Diagnostic assessment provides information that is “used by teachers and students to determine what students already know and can do with respect to the knowledge and skills identified in the overall and specific expectations” (p. 31).

Data from diagnostic assessment and formative assessment is used to determine students’ readiness to learn the new knowledge and skills set out in the curriculum expectations, and obtain information about students’ interests and learning preferences. This data may be collected through a variety of means, which can include observation, student portfolios, and student self-assessment, among others. This information helps teachers plan daily classroom instruction and assessment that are differentiated and personalized, and set appropriate learning goals with their students.

Research confirms the importance of using various kinds of information to develop and monitor plans to improve student learning (in Ontario, the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement is such a plan). School and board leaders are expected to use data to identify trends, strengths, and weaknesses that can inform specific actions for improvement in student achievement.

Guiding Principles of Selection of Diagnostic Assessment Tools

All assessment conducted in Ontario public schools is guided by and subject to the fundamental principles listed and discussed on pages 6–8 of *Growing Success*.

In addition to the fundamental principles set out in *Growing Success*, teachers, principals, and school board staff will use the following principles when selecting diagnostic assessment tools:

- All available classroom, school, and board data and information (e.g., information from day-to-day classroom assessments, data from provincial report cards, and EQAO data) should be taken into account when determining what additional data and information, if any, is needed for board improvement planning.
- School board staff reviews diagnostic assessment tools to ensure that the tools support the collection of valid and reliable evidence.
- In developing their Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement, principals and school board staff must clearly communicate with teachers the purpose of the tool and how it is used.
- Duplication of effort and excessive student testing are avoided to allow for effective use of instructional time.

Criteria for Selection of Diagnostic Assessment Tools

In selecting diagnostic assessment tools, teachers, teacher affiliates, principals, and school board staff, in their respective roles and responsibilities, will consider whether a diagnostic assessment tool:

- is related appropriately to the knowledge and skills identified in the curriculum expectations;

- is designed to provide information that assists in identifying student needs and targeting improvements;
- identifies strengths and gaps in students' knowledge and skills and provides sufficient evidence from which inferences about students' learning can be made;
- is appropriate in content, design, and mode of delivery;
- provides a range of targeted strategies that teachers can use to plan next steps in instruction and student learning;
- forms part of a balanced, comprehensive assessment system that provides detailed evidence of each student's development.

Criteria for the Use of Diagnostic Assessment Tools

In using diagnostic assessment tools, teachers will ensure that:

- the tools are administered judiciously so that they support the identification of student learning needs, track progress, and supplement instruction;
- the tools are administered judiciously so that they produce the type of data and information required to effectively inform classroom instruction;
- the tools are administered in a manner that will allow the teacher to assess students' progress and share such information with the principal upon request;
- the information is used to guide students in focusing their learning efforts, setting and monitoring goals, and determining next steps in learning.

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT LEARNING

Collective Responsibility and Professional Judgement

Teachers, principals, and school board staff share a collective responsibility and accountability for student achievement and, in their respective roles, exercise their professional judgement as defined in *Growing Success*:

Judgement that is informed by professional knowledge of curriculum expectations, context, evidence of learning, methods of instruction and assessment, and the criteria and standards that indicate success in student learning. In professional practice, judgement involves a purposeful and systematic thinking process that evolves in terms of accuracy and insight with ongoing reflection and self-correction. (p. 152)

As stated in *Growing Success*, “teachers’ professional judgements are at the heart of effective assessment, evaluation, and reporting of student achievement” (p. 8). In addition, successful implementation of policy “depends on the professional judgement of educators at all levels, as well as on educators’ ability to work together ... on the continuing efforts of strong and energized professional learning communities to clarify and share their understanding of policy and to develop and share

effective implementation practices, ... on creative and judicious differentiation in instruction and assessment to meet the needs of all students, and on strong and committed leadership from school and system leaders, who coordinate, support, and guide the work of teachers” (p. 2).

Teachers

Teachers will use their professional judgement, as defined in *Growing Success*, when selecting and using diagnostic assessment tools. Teachers must utilize diagnostic assessment during the school year, selecting tools from the board’s approved list. In selecting and using diagnostic assessment tools from the board’s list, teachers shall determine the following:

- the diagnostic assessment tools that are applicable;
- which student(s) will be assessed (individual student, small group, or whole class);
- the frequency of use of the diagnostic assessment tools;
- the appropriate timing of the use of the diagnostic assessment tools.

Principals

Principals play an important role in ensuring a consistent and continuous school-wide focus on student learning. Through the use of a variety of tools to support and monitor student progress, principals will continue to provide leadership when working in collaboration with teachers to gather information about student learning in support of school and board improvement plans for student achievement.

Boards

Through the use of quality diagnostic assessment tools, valid and reliable data and information on student achievement is collected. Boards shall establish and provide a list of approved diagnostic assessment tools that are consistent with their board plans for improving student learning and achievement. In consultation with teachers and principals, boards will continue to collaborate to develop a common understanding of the planning process and the need for student data and information that can inform actions taken to improve student learning. Boards will continue to periodically review and update, where necessary, the approved list of diagnostic assessment tools.