



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

## OPINION PIECE

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### **Article inspires SFU Dean to write**

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Given the political dynamics of B.C. public K-12 education that were present in 2003 when I joined the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, it seemed to me that my role should be to move among the stakeholder groups and foster constructive dialogue on education issues. Four years later, my opinion hasn't changed and I continue to knock on doors, invite and attend meetings and comment on media reports regarding our schools. In this spirit I take up the remarks of my colleague, Deputy Minister of Education Emery Dossdall as reported in the May 8th issue of the Similkameen News Leader.

I think the DM accurately represents the aspirations of the Foundation Skills Assessment program when he closes by stating, "Evidence-based instruction should be the norm in our classrooms." The FSA is one attempt to contribute to this evidence base and during the early years of its implementation, although there were disagreements, it was not a focus of great contention as it is today. What has changed?

For some time the discussions regarding provincial testing were largely held in house among the education stakeholder groups. This internal policy debate, however, has become secondary to the public, mediated one since The Vancouver Sun began two years ago to give great prominence to the Fraser Institute's elementary school Report Card. What had been a debate among professionals erupted into a major annual media event that colours public perception of our schools. The May 8th article gives no mention of this new dynamic. The FSA debate, however, is no longer internal and has to be seen in this new context. To quote a popular princess, "There were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded."

Collaboratively, The Sun and the Fraser Institute became the third partner in what had become a push-pull between the Ministry and the professional educator and trustee bodies.

Why is mere newspaper publicity significant? Because the unapproved (by the Ministry) rankings created from FSA data in order to create winners and losers among our schools and to pit public and private schools against one another made a professional policy discussion into a major political issue. In this way the FSA – which, as the DM says, is not intended as a "high stakes test" – was made into a high stakes test by non-professional entities with their own motivations. The Fraser Institute is well known for its "free

market” economic ideology as reflected in the school voucher initiative of Milton Friedman. (Some call this point of view “market fundamentalism.”) The Sun, although Canwest’s stated mission is to “inform, enlighten, and entertain.” Is a for-profit enterprise and the Report Card issue is said to be the newspaper’s second largest selling one of the year. Personally, I prefer to entrust our children’s interests with the Ministry, the BCTF, our school principals, superintendents, and trustees, even though they have to debate their way to a working consensus. I allege theirs is an honest, professional debate with student welfare, not economic or political gain at heart.

Finally there is the issue of validity and the DM makes the case for the FSA’s usefulness at appraising student achievement in the B.C. curriculum as a step in improving instruction. SFU’s visiting professor, David Berliner, a leading educational psychologist, has written about this matter in his new book *Collateral Damage* (Harvard Education Press). He enumerates four types of validity and here’s how, in my view, the FSA stacks up in terms of this analysis once the third player entered the marriage! Content validity (that is in relation of the FSA to the B.C. curriculum) remains unchanged; the FSA appears to be rooted in the curriculum but functioning at a general enough level that its clear relationship to improvement of instruction may be a difficult case to make. Construct validity, or the “underlying characteristics” that the FSA measures, is corrupted by the media making the assessment into high stakes testing. Since the FSA is used for school rankings, as well as instructional improvement, test prepping and test taking skills have increasingly become the constructs being tested. Rather than the test serving the curriculum, the curriculum is manipulated to serve the test. Because of the superficial analysis of the Fraser/Sun data presentation (unlike other models such as that of the C.D. Howe Institute), the influence of socio-economic status on FSA outcomes is left unconsidered. Criterion validity asks what the tests are predicting about future academic achievement and the FSA was designed to have a role along with teacher tests and other assessments in making this judgment. Through the Fraser/Sun intervention the FSA is given far disproportionate weight and a misleading aura of precision in this regard. Consequential validity speaks to the decisions made in light of test scores. Once again, as the non-educators at the Fraser Institute and the Vancouver Sun forcefully took center stage in this debate, the FSA began to influence real estate purchases, the migration of children from school to school, public perception of school performance, and parental reaction to testing. We have witnessed a movement of “parental nullification” of testing by parents who withhold their children from the process as a way of protesting the Fraser/Sun’s misuse of the data.

The “third person” has for the moment changed the landscape of testing in B.C. We cannot ignore the impact on the FSA dialogue of a highly publicized and unscientific use of its data. It is likely that the Fraser/Sun



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Report Card is having a detrimental impact on at least three of the four types of validity. Educators hope we can get back to an honest and grounded debate on evaluation issues that result in ongoing, meaningful school renewal and not an American-style testing mania that narrows curriculum and urges “one size fits all” schools. The impact of the FSA, originally intended to inform parents and educators and to promote considered school choice and reform, is being corrupted. The de facto results, if unchecked, will include less variation in school experiences and a flight from progressive educational change. These results will also include moving schooling toward preparation for testing rather than effective preparation for life in our society. You don’t have to look far to see it happening elsewhere.

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