

October 3, 2007
Opinion Column
Vancouver Sun

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Subject: Standardized Testing in Schools

Recent events are pushing standardized testing back into the public and media spotlight. As BC's Representative for Children and Youth, I strongly believe that the interests of children are not served by eliminating standardized tests.

In fact, standardized testing helps answer the parents' age-old question: "How is my child doing in school?" A particular concern of mine is those children for whom government assumes the role of the parent, to ensure their safety and well-being.

To help government-as-parent answer this question, to measure progress and to identify areas that require attention, Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) testing is critical.

FSA testing provides a snapshot of how well students are meeting expectations in reading, writing and math over time. It is also a good predictor of an individual child's future success in school. Students who do not meet expectations assessed by the FSA are far more likely to drop out of school than those who do.

As noted in our recently released report, "*Health and Well-Being of Children in Care in British Columbia: Educational Experiences and Outcomes*", there is a trend towards less participation in the FSA. That trend is more pronounced among vulnerable populations, including children in care, Aboriginal children and children with special needs.

More than 30 per cent of children in care and more than 20 per cent of Aboriginal children are not assessed on their reading, writing and math skills. This must be reversed.

Some are suggesting a better approach would be to assess a sample of students in order to obtain a provincial picture of performance. This view overlooks the fact that the FSA is a useful predictor of individual success. Testing just a few students province-wide would eliminate an indicator that a child is in difficulty and needs help.

The children most likely to be overlooked would often be society's most vulnerable. Only 500 children are in care and in grade 4. A sample might assess only ten or twenty of these students. What of the rest? Will there be a plan to help them?

Adjusting reported scores to account for the number of vulnerable children in a school has also been proposed. But this sets a lower standard for schools

serving vulnerable children. And the evidence is clear that one critical condition for school achievement is high expectations for all students.

As well, many important efforts aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty and poor education outcomes need the FSA results to determine if they are effective. Aboriginal Early Childhood Development and Strong Start programs will rely on the FSA to assess their effectiveness in improving reading, writing and math.

Parents, the public and organizations such as my office need to make sure that the energy and resources directed toward these important programs are paying off, and the only way to do that is by measuring. FSA testing allows us to measure the impact of these policy interventions, which are designed to improve educational outcomes.

Abandoning standardized testing in its present form means abandoning our most at-risk students.

The early years are critical years for children. Children who fall behind early never fully recover. Drop out rates in high school are indicative of children's failure to master the fundamental building blocks of reading, writing and math. Without the FSA we will have no province-wide picture of how well our youngest students are doing, particularly the most vulnerable.

Public schools must be helped to fulfill their promise by bringing all students to the high level of expectations we hold for our citizens.

There's an old adage that says "finishing well means starting well". FSA testing is an essential element to helping students start – and finish -- well.

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond is B.C.'s first Representative for Children and Youth. A former provincial court judge, she has been active in supporting healthy families and seeking greater respect and recognition of the unique situation for children in society.