

CBE Grade Three Report Card: Adoption into District Schools

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When considering the effectiveness of the CBE early elementary report card as a report of student achievement we must look at best practices in assessment, teaching, and student learning. The report card has three main elements: stakeholder information including student information, school notices (Manitoba Education, 2006; Joint Advisory Committee, 1993), and attendance rates; indicator legends that define the levels of mastery in STEM qualities (Calgary Board of Education, n.d.-c), numerical achievement for courses, lettered indicators for competencies, as well as additional information including the inclusion of technology, and definitions for modified programming, English as a second language (ESL), Individualized Program Plans (IPP), and NER (no evaluation recorded); assessment of coursework and competencies using two different measurement scales for grading, space for teacher feedback; and ESL proficiency levels.

This report card is an instrument to allow a variety of users to gain determinative information about the student and their progress. The information provided allows stakeholders (students, parents/guardians, teachers, curriculum developers, etc.) an understanding of “what is being assessed, the method of assessment, performance standards that will be utilized to describe the learning, and [influences] how the results obtained will be used” (Alberta Education, 2016, p. 26). Including identifying information explicitly indicates to the student and their parent/guardian that the assessment details recorded are individualized and private. Students will use the information provided to take measure of their achievements and to use the grades as a formative assessment to decide what improvements need to be made in the future (Alberta Assessment Consortium, n.d.). Parents/guardians can become informed about the achievement of their student, allowing them to become “partners in school improvement” (Guskey, 2004, as cited in Foothills School Division, 2016, p.67). Teachers can use the standardized reports to better assess individual students as well as obtain norm-referenced results (Manitoba Education, 2006) of the whole class allowing for guidance in teaching pedagogy. Administrators, policy creators, and curriculum developers can use the data collected from multiple reliable and comprehensive report card results to make decisions on curriculum development, teacher professional development and support. (Foothills School Division, 2016; Alberta Education, 2010; Manitoba Education, 2006; Joint Advisory Committee, 2003).

In order for stakeholders to make important decisions about student learning they must first discern what the indicators mean and how they relate to an assessment of learning. The

legend provides information on how to decipher the scales used. The legend includes a thorough list of “accurate and meaningful”(Guskey, 2000, p.18) grades, a number scale associated with a descriptor, a grading scale that changes the descriptor word per rubric only (Popham, 1997; Tierney & Simon, 2004), levels and descriptors that are clearly laid out and provide an easily comprehensive indicator of student progress (Calgary Board of Education, n.d.-a). Keeping in mind that report cards must use “plain language while preserving the complexity appropriate for professional teachers” (Alberta Education, 2016, p.1), the word choices for the descriptor words and indicators could be improved. The overall language in the legend is not clear enough for both parents and students at a Grade 3 level to understand fully (Chappis & Stiggins, 2002), and use of more factual descriptors is needed as they may affect student efficacy (Chappis & Stiggins, 2002). The descriptor words also need to be more specific which will allow for less room for subjectivity (O’Conner, 2007; Koh, 2011) when understanding assessment results. As learning is a “continuum of growth” (Foothills School Division, 2016, p.91) the language could be changed to one that supports a growth mindset (Guskey, 2000). One example of wording that could be changed is using “not yet” instead of “not meeting” so as not to discourage students’ progress. While providing a definition of NER and what it indicates, the report card should reflect a positive learning continuum, and this may “perpetuate low expectations for certain students rather than promoting learning” (Tierney & Simon, 2004, p.3). There is also no indication of how a student can improve upon this grading (Wiggins, 1994), and is ambiguous as it could mean that there wasn’t enough evidence of learning from the student, or that the outcome was not assessed in the time period provided. As the report card is primarily used for bridging parent’s understanding to better support their student (O’Conner, 2007) there needs to be more emphasis on student achievement (Manitoba Education, 2006). Descriptions of what the terms related to assessment of citizenship, personal development, and character could more allow for better understandings of the rubric used (O’Conner, 2007). Finally, use of consistent language to describe ELL (vs. ESL), should be adhered to.

While the competencies in this report card are not explicitly stated, the CBE uses STEMS (Calgary Board of Education, n.d.-b) to assess the 3E’s (Alberta Education, 2010; Alberta Education, 2011). The report card separates the competencies with academic achievement (Reeves, 2006), and the outcomes align with the 21st century skillset (Alberta Education, 2005; Alberta Education, 2010). Unfortunately, the information on STEMS is not easily accessible to

stakeholders outside of the CBE, and it would be beneficial for understanding if the competencies were written in the same language as the Alberta Government to achieve consistency. By changing the report card from a focus on academic achievement to a “focus on competencies would move education to a process of inquiry and discovery – not just dissemination of information and a recall of facts” (Alberta Education, 2010, p.7). Further, there is no way of knowing how the marks for the competencies are evaluated or derived (Manitoba Education, 2006; Alberta Assessment Consortium, 1993). Including prompts or a larger comment section for teachers to give descriptive feedback would be beneficial for all users (Joint Advisory Committee, 1993; Alberta Assessment Consortium, 1993).

In looking at the academic achievement section of the report card that includes ELA, Math, Phys.Ed, Science, Social Studies, Health and Life Skills, and Music, the students are provided with an assessment of learning on several areas that are derived by the outcomes from the Program of Studies (Calgary Board of Education, n.d.-a; Joint Advisory Committee, 1993). Academic achievement and citizenship are separated (Reeves, 2006), the reporting is done in two terms putting an emphasis on growth (Ontario Education, 2010; Foothills School Divison, 2016; Guskey, 2000), and subgrades are provided within each subject (Wiggins, 1994; O’Connor, 2007), as well as clearly defined outcomes that align directly to the Alberta Program of Studies providing a specific learning criteria that is based on achievement and not class performance (Guskey, 2000). While the report card provides clear, reliable reporting, the assessment practices that inform this report card are unclear. Aligning the descriptors to the Grade 3 outcomes in the program of studies would clearly show if they are hitting the benchmarks, or if interventions are needed. It would also provide relevance to the individual grades and outcomes (Guskey, 2000, O’Connor; 2007) allowing for an accurate profile of student learning in relation to the outcomes (Joint Advisory Committee, 1993). Finally, while there is space for feedback, the space provided does not encourage teachers to leave lengthy descriptive feedback that is personalized to the student (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Joint Advisory Committee, 1993; Alberta Assessment Consortium, 1993).

It is unclear how the grades in this report card are obtained. By clearly identifying what methods were used will allow students and others to more firmly understand that valid measures are being used (Reeves, 2006; Manitoba Education, 2006, Alberta Education, 2009; Stiggins,2006; Joint Advisory Committee, 1993). By stating that a triangulation of student learning assessment is being used will clearly convey that there are no misconceptions or

misconstrued information on how the student is graded. At this point the 4 rubric scale could be representing either a mean, or a modality-based grading system (Manitoba Education, 2006; Foothills School Division, 2016), however the report card is unclear. Using a 4-point rubric “requires teachers to make a decision about which level of achievement best describes the student’s understanding without defaulting to the middle level” (Foothills School Division, 2016, p. 88), however, in some cases a “teacher’s professional judgement” (Foothills School Division, 2009) can be influenced by other factors (Reeves, 2006; Koh, 2011). In this way letter or number grades may not be appropriate for summative assessments. Instead the use of “personal communication in the form of descriptive feedback is an effective way to provide feedback and report student progress” (Alberta Assessment Consortium, n.d, p.7).

Assessment of learning should be a “celebration of what [the student] knows, and can do” (Armstrong, 2006). In order to portray that there is balanced assessment that is consistent, reliable and valid, while also supporting student’s growth in academics and competencies, a change of the rubric and reporting of assessment should be considered. Moving towards a one-point rubric with a focus on formative assessment will allow students the “opportunities to think critically about their values and beliefs and to align their current and future actions to those values” (Alberta Assessment Consortium, n.d., p.7). To achieve this “assessment results must go beyond merely providing judgement about student performance to providing rich descriptions of student performance” (Stiggins, 2006, p.2). Formative assessment enables all users instant information about the student’s progress (Manitoba Education, 2006, Stiggins & Chappis, 2006; Stiggins, 2005), and descriptive feedback (Joint Advisory Committee, 1993; Alberta Assessment Consortium, 1993), also allowing for transparency of student achievement in relation to outcomes and competencies (Joint Advisory Committee, 1993, Alberta Education, 2015).

As the “traditional approach leaves students with no sense of the whole” (Foothills School Division, 2016, p.19) more frequent use of IRIS (Calgary Board of Education, n.d.-d) in conjunction with this report card, or the adoption of programs such as Fresh Grade (Sherlock, 2016) and/or the use of portfolios which includes formative assessment practices would better provide information regarding the why and how students are learning.

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