

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Foundation Skills Assessment

What do the government's regulations say about participation in the FSA?

The Foundation Skills Assessment is not specifically named in the School Act, the legislation that governs education. The Act does mandate boards to administer provincial assessments however. This responsibility is further explained in a ministerial order called the Student Learning Assessment Order. It states that boards are responsible to ensure that the tests are given according to certain guidelines and that the information is returned to the minister and then returned to schools. It does not say that every student is legally bound to write the test however. In fact it clearly uses language that indicates that not all students will write the assessments. The guidelines for administering the FSA do anticipate that some students will not write the FSA. The principal may exempt some students from writing the FSA because of extended absences, significant special needs, in sufficient language facility because of ESL, or other extenuating circumstances. To our knowledge, however, there is no statement that clearly states that students are legally required in some way to write the FSA. It seems that the district must ensure the tests are given, but they are not obligated to ensure that each and every student writes them.

What would your child be doing if he/she were not writing the FSA?

Depending on the school, your child may be asked to go to another space so that he or she is not a distraction to those who will be completing the assessment. In other schools non-participating students will stay with their peers. It would be wise to make sure that your son or daughter has some reading material or other work to do that he or she can manage independently and quietly. If your child is behind on some school work, this would be an excellent chance for him or her to get caught up.

How will your child's non-participation be recorded?

Because there will not be any answers on your child's tests, the ministry will show your child as having insufficient information for coding his or her achievement. Students in this group will not be counted in any of the three categories (not yet meeting, meeting and exceeding).

Is this action right for my child?

Before making this decision, we would recommend that you speak with your son or daughter. Your child needs to know that the person giving the assessment may insist that a test be given to all students. How will your son or daughter respond to such a situation? As well, your child may be one of the few in his or her class to not write the test. Will your child feel comfortable doing something different than some or all of his/her peers? We don't think that the individual giving the test will place any undue pressure on children who are not participating, however it is possible. How would your child respond to such a scenario? (If you suspect that this might happen, it might be advisable to first speak with the person who will be administering the test to communicate your perspective). If you feel that it might be traumatic for your son or daughter to boycott the FSA, the Vernon Teachers' Association does not recommend this action. **Please note though, that in past years many individual children have been in the position of being one of the few (and in some instances one of many) in the class to not write the assessment, and we are not aware of a single situation where this has been a problem for that child.** By contrast, we are aware of several instances where a student or two has experienced some moderate emotional distress while writing the tests because they have been confused or overwhelmed, and the person giving the test has been unable to provide any assistance or guidance because the administration guidelines for the FSA do not allow for teachers to help.

What might your child's principal say to convince you to have your child write the FSA?

If you send in a letter to inform the principal that your child will not be writing the assessment, it is very likely that the principal will contact you to question your decision. The principal will probably ask you if there is any reason that your child should be withdrawn from the assessment (regulations governing the FSA provide for withdrawal of students for some very narrow reasons as mentioned above). If your child does not fit one of these criteria the principal will likely tell you that your child must write the FSA. Some might even suggest that the law requires children in grades four and seven to write the assessment. *To our knowledge this is not accurate. We are not aware of a single incident in the province where a child has been sanctioned in some way for not writing the tests.* The principal might also try to convince you that the FSA is a harmless exercise at worst and vital measure for school

assessment at best. *Obviously teachers disagree. It is mostly because of the way that the FSA has been used to undermine confidence in public schools that teachers have objected to it.* It is possible that the principal will try to convince you that the FSA is an important tool that local educators use to assess how the school and the district are doing. *Ask your child's teacher to see how much credibility this assessment has with regard to helping him or her plan for your child.* You may be told that the FSA gives you important information about how your son or daughter is doing in the areas of reading, writing and math. *Again, the ministry's own information suggests the assessment provides no more than a snapshot of your child's learning. To find out how things are going for your child talk to your child's teacher. He or she has many pieces of information that can be shared.* Some principals may question the motives of the Vernon Teachers' Association and the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, suggesting that teachers are afraid of accountability or something to this effect. *Not so. The best accountability comes from speaking directly to your child's teacher. No one, not even the Ministry of Education, is trying to suggest that two assessments taken in grades 4 and 7 can adequately hold a school system accountable for its actions.* Some may suggest that you and your child are being used as a pawn in a power struggle between the BCTF and the government. *Vernon teachers would respectfully disagree with such statements. We believe that public education is being systematically undermined by groups like the Fraser Institute and we all have a role in defending our schools, even parents. But don't just listen to Vernon teachers. If you are unsure what to think, please read some of the articles that have been linked to this site.*

What might you say if your child's principal contacts you?

So far, you may only have heard from the teachers, and so you may want to speak with the principal to hear arguments from the other side. Fair enough. Inform yourself so that you feel comfortable with your decision. If you are already sure about your decision however, you may not want to engage the principal in an argument. A simple strategy to avoid a verbal conflict is to say that you have already made up your mind, and you do not want to discuss the matter further (you may have to be quite firm on this point). Let the principal know that you are not seeking his/her agreement or approval, your decision has been made and you expect that it will be respected. If you have any concern that in response the principal will subvert your decision by placing pressure on your child to complete the assessment, let the principal know that such action would not be well received on your part and that it could easily get in the way of a positive, professional relationship between yourself and the principal. The Vernon Teacher's Association has no reason to believe that this would happen, however.

What do teachers want regarding the FSA?

Rather than having every child in grades four and seven write the assessment, teachers want the FSA to be given to a random sample of students so that neither individual students nor schools cannot be identified. Moving to a random sample will stop organizations like the Fraser Institute from producing its damaging and inaccurate rankings. It will also stop several other questionable practices that occur because data would no longer be available at the school level.

What are the legitimate uses of the FSA and what are its limitations?

The FSA is linked to a few narrow but important academic sub-skills in reading, writing and math. As a result it can give educators some insight into how we are doing at teaching some aspects of these areas. You need to know that this insight is fairly general because of the limited nature of the testing. What's more, the value of this information is only significant at the provincial and school district level. To continue to generate this kind of information, only a random sample is required. When we get to the level of an individual school, this information is much less reliable (because of the number of students involved and because the academic ability of students can vary widely from one cohort to another) and so is often of very little use. The change from one year to the next can vary widely for any number of reasons that have little or nothing to do with instruction or programming. At the level of the individual student the test results have almost no statistical reliability whatsoever and so become highly problematic to use. As the FSA information itself says, for individual students the FSA provides only a 'snapshot' of a student at one moment in time, not a comprehensive evaluation of his or her progress. If you want to know how your son or daughter is doing, you will learn far more by going and speaking with his or her teacher.