

Foundations for Learning Campaign

The Purpose and Process of Annual Assessments

Introduction

Assessment forms an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Our National Curriculum Statement is clear and emphatic on the principle of building assessment into the planning, implementation and evaluation of the education process. The Foundations for Learning (FFL) Campaign develops on this fact and seeks to enrich, strengthen and deepen quality assessment for purposes of coming up with evidence-based and targeted plans for improvement.

Assessments in the FFL Campaign

It is important to emphasize that the FFL is much broader than assessment. It is about energizing the system to focus on all critical aspects of laying solid foundations for learning, particularly in the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy. However, assessment will play a critical role in informing and directing interventions of the Campaign. In the years leading to 2011 frequent assessment will enable schools to gauge the pace at which achievement of the foundational learning outcomes proceeds towards set short- and long-term goals. For instance, one specific goal in the FFL is that no learner should attain lower than 50% in standardized literacy and numeracy tests. To realize this goal, there must be a sustained process of assessment and tracking of progress. That process will culminate in a national study to evaluate the impact of the campaign in 2011.

Specific Purposes of Annual Assessments during the FFL Campaign

The key purposes of assessment in the duration of the campaign will be to:-

- Produce reliable data, based on standardized tests, for use by schools themselves, districts and provinces to set goals and monitor own progress towards achieving local and national goals for improvement. Although there are local initiatives for common tests papers, there wide disparities in the types and quality of assessments developed and administered by individual schools.
- Provide schools with model assessment tools as a resource. This is particularly critical in schools that do not as yet have sufficient levels of learning and teaching resources.
- Assist teachers in developing own assessment tools of a high quality at school level. Studies and other interactions with teachers continue to raise assessment as one challenging area facing the implementation of the NCS. The annual assessments will contribute towards addressing this challenge by modeling a wide spectrum of approaches and techniques for assessing a wide range of skills.
- Provide information that districts can use to develop appropriate support programmes for schools in different contexts and at different levels of performance.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about annual assessments

Since the launch of the FFL Campaign and as all role-players begin to reflect on its implications, some questions have come up in increasing frequency. Questions range from the purpose of the standardized tests, their development, distribution, administration, use of the results and what will happen beyond the FFL Campaign.

A. The Purpose of the Standardized Tests

1. What will be covered in these assessments?

To kick-start the process, DoE has drawn up and distributed key “milestones” as a guide to teachers for covering the critical knowledge and skills that learners must acquire throughout the school year in each grade. Assessments will be aligned with the milestones and will focus on assessing basic skills in literacy and numeracy. It is important to emphasize that both the milestones and the assessments are not anything additional to what the NCS covers, but are meant to be a focused elucidation on critical skills and competencies that prepare children for learning in a broader sense, e.g. reading and writing skills, comprehension and logical reasoning in given texts, ability to manipulate the basic numeracy operations, etc.

2. Will the assessments be used for promotion of learners?

No. The assessments will not be used for promotion of learners. The policy on continuous assessment and how to make decisions on learner progression remains in place.

3. Will the test results be used to judge schools and/or teachers?

No. The tests are meant to assist teachers and districts monitor the pace of improving levels and quality of learning outcomes. These tests will have absolutely nothing to do with any decisions related to the employment conditions of teachers.

4. Will the test results be publicized?

No. The Department publicises grade 12 and systemic evaluation results. The annual tests conducted under the FFL campaign are meant for a different purpose, namely, improvement of learning outcomes at school level.

5. How different will these tests be from systemic evaluation assessments?

Systemic evaluations are conducted on representative samples of schools and learners to evaluate the performance of the entire education system in a given phase. The annual tests will be taken by every learner from grade 1 to grade 6 in two learning areas or subjects, namely literacy/language and numeracy/mathematics. Their purpose is to assist individual learners in improving their achievement of learning outcomes.

B. The Development and Distribution of the Tests

6. Who will develop the assessment tools?

DoE will develop the first set of the literacy and numeracy tools for 2008 and augment these over the remaining period of the campaign. In addition, DoE will share exemplar frameworks on test development in the various learning areas or subjects. Eventually the development of tests must happen at school and district levels.

7. What will schools receive from DoE?

Each school will receive a pack of literacy and numeracy tests in the various languages used in the province for the school to select the tests in the language they use for learning and teaching. In addition, the tests will be made available in a CD. Schools will then be expected to use equipment and materials that they normally or routinely use at their disposal to make copies of the tests for their learners?

8. How will the tests be delivered to schools?

The test packages will be delivered through normal mechanisms used by districts to get materials into schools. These could include principals' meetings, routine visits to schools by district officials, principals could pick up their packs from district offices, etc.

9. When should districts and principals expect to receive tests packs for their schools?

Distribution of test packs from DoE to individual districts will commence after 15 October and should be completed by end of October.

C. The Administration and Marking of the Tests

10. Will there be a fixed timetable for writing these tests?

No, the timetable will be flexible to avoid unnecessary logistical pressures associated with writing according to a fixed timetable. But, at school level, SMT and affected teachers must ensure that the tests are written in a serious and properly controlled setting. The test results must be a true reflection of what each child can or cannot do so that they can be given appropriate assistance. Schools must arrange to write the tests between **1 and 30 November 2008**.

11. Who will administer and mark the tests?

Teachers responsible for each grade and class in each school will administer and mark the tests as part of their normal school activities. SMT must develop a timetable and a system of invigilating the tests so that the validity of their results is not compromised. SMT will also be expected to check the marks for accuracy (validation) before sending them to the district offices.

12. How will the results of the tests be captured?

DoE will provide a schedule template for teachers to capture the marks of their learners. The template will be sent at the same time as the delivery of test packages.

13. What additional materials should schools have to administer the tests?

Ideally none. However, where schools lack basic equipment (e.g. photocopying paper) and materials, which they should be provided with in any case for their normal running, the schools should be prioritized for assistance not just for the tests, but for normal day-to-day operations.

14. What are the chances that cheating may bedevil the test results?

The prospects of cheating in these tests will be reduced significantly if everybody understands their purpose, knows that they are not meant for passing judgment of any kind on anybody or any school and appreciates that cheating will deny children interventions which they deserve.

D. How Will the Tests and their Results be used?

15. What happens to the schedules?

The schedules provide a critical source of information for all role-players charged with ensuring quality learning by all our children. The results in the schedule should form the hub of school annual plans. District professional support programmes should be directed by the results in the schedule. Schools will keep the original mark schedule and forward a copy to the district office.

16. Will Parents have Access to the Results of these Tests?

Yes. Parents play a major role in the learning of their children. Information from these tests will assist them make informed decisions on how best and where to play their support role in improving their children’s chances of success.

17. What will happen to the tests after administration?

The tests remain at school as a resource to be added to the teachers’ assessment portfolios.

18. Isn’t there a Risk of Teachers “Teaching to the Test”?

No risk at all. New tests will be set each year assessing same competencies in different ways. What will be important is for everybody to understand the critical foundational skills that need to be strengthened at every level of the schooling journey. It is not conceivable that anyone could drill children in tests which will be of no consequence in the child’s progression to the next grade.

19. What will happen in 2011 and beyond?

The year 2011 will be the fourth and final year of the FFL Campaign. At the end of that year a more structured and controlled assessment will be conducted to evaluate the impact of the four-year Campaign and assess if the set targets have been achieved. Hopefully by then schools shall have internalized the assessment process and practice to make sure it remains a sustained practice for monitoring the quality learning outcomes of all our children.