

Moving Beyond the “Sort and Rank Model”

Educational consultant speaks about grades



Photo by Gord Waldner

Anne Davies believes standardized tests and the resulting letter grades aren't always a true reflection of what students have learned or could learn

Davies has a story she'd like to share. It begins at a track and field meet she attended in Grade 9. Sporting school colours and a pair of running shoes, Davies — a bystander — was waiting to watch the 100yard dash.

“The person from our school who was supposed to be in that race didn’t turn up,” she says. Somehow — she thinks she may have volunteered — Davies found herself between the starting blocks as a substitute for that missing sprinter.

“So there’s me and three athletes — I’m not an athlete,” she says. “The starter gun goes, and we take off. And I’m running as fast as I can, but I feel like I’m standing still.”

As she crossed the finish line far behind the other runners, Davies began to wonder if the race was a fair test of her athletic prowess.

“Was that a good assessment of my ability as an athlete?” she asked. “No. I hadn’t trained for it, I wasn’t ready for it — the competition was completely inappropriate.”

Years later, Davies — a former teacher and administrator turned educational consultant — has come to see that track meet as an analogy for some of the problems associated with the traditional marking system in schools. In much the same way she felt that race didn’t reflect her ability as an athlete, Davies feels standardized tests and the resulting letter grades aren’t always a true reflection of what a student has learned, or better yet, could learn.

“Public education shouldn’t be about the race,” she says. “It should be about getting us all to the level where we can enter the arenas that we want to compete in.”

Davies was in Saskatoon recently talking with teachers and administrators from Saskatoon Public Schools about incorporating different assessment practices into their ongoing effort to move beyond traditional teaching methods and better engage students.

“Assessment is really important here,” she said. “Because there’s such a change in mandate at the high school level, it’s causing the change in the assessment and evaluation practices.”

Davies — who argues assessment should be part of the learning process, not just the measure of it — is a recognized authority on educational practices. Her job is to help school systems move beyond what she calls the “sort and rank model,” where teachers rely on marks and the “bell curve” concept to determine which students are most likely to go on to further academic success.

“It’s hard because society wants everybody ranked,” she said, “but a lot of our high schools, because they have to be, are actually set up to value marks more than value learning.”

As an alternative, Davies presents what she calls “assessment for learning” rather than assessment of learning. Under her system, students participate in the assessment discussion, help set goals for their own learning and are given the chance to understand what constitutes quality academic work. When students are allowed into the assessment dialogue, Davies says success — at least academic success — is transformed into a set of skills that can be taught to those who are struggling in school.

“Your most successful students take their mark and they decode it,” she says. “They figure out for themselves what got them to that mark and what they didn’t do that they need to do next time. Your struggling learner doesn’t have the skills to decode it, so when they get an F, they don’t know what got them there.”

Although some fear de-emphasizing grades may lead to lower standards and irresponsible students, Davies said there is a mountain of research proving assessment for learning practices consistently result in students who learn more and get better grades.

“The research is undeniable,” says Saskatoon Public Schools superintendent John Dewar. Dewar was one of the administrators who invited Davies to come to Saskatoon. He says the school division chose Davies because she is an influential Canadian voice in assessment reform and a person the school system felt would resonate well with teachers.

“Anne’s greatest strength is helping teachers see what (assessment for learning) means in the classroom,” said Brad Hidlebaugh, an English teacher who’s spent 11 years with the division. Hidlebaugh has incorporated a number of assessment for learning techniques into his classroom. He sets clear goals for his students, tests them later in the term to give them more time to understand those goals and gives them the chance to look over and dissect a range of work — and he says the results have been very positive.

“The questions they ask me and the questions they’re asking each other indicate to me that the quality of their learning is improving,” he said. “Kids have started to relax. . . . They believe in themselves more. They can explore and try new things and not be afraid, because it’s not always going to be evaluated.”

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