

Creating Conditions to Support Student Success on Provincial Assessments/Examinations



Tips for Improving Student Motivation and Performance – Feedback from Teachers and Administrators

Engage staff in discussions about preparing students for optimal performance on classroom, school-based, and provincial assessments/examinations. Research has shown that classroom time devoted to assessment preparation, beyond short sessions on the assessment format and strategies, can have a negative impact on student performance. The emphasis should instead be on fostering a classroom/school culture focused on student learning, curriculum expectations, student effort and perseverance.

Below are a few suggestions from classroom teachers and administrators that have been successful in motivating students to give their best effort on the provincial assessments:

- Make sure that students understand the purpose of the assessments, so they are more likely to put forth their best effort (i.e., “We will be using the assessment results to help us improve our teaching and to identify areas where we can help you.”).
 - Some principals make a point of meeting with classes prior to the assessment to talk about its purpose and why it is important for students to do their very best. During this time principals explain how the results are used to improve teaching and learning. This time also provides principals with an opportunity to respond to any questions students may have about the assessment.
 - Answering questions about the assessment and addressing student anxiety can help prevent emotional upset from compromising test performance. Remember that students may come from families or cultures where testing is very high stakes even though this is not the case with Nova Scotia Assessments.
 - Students who demonstrate significant anxiety or distress should be exempted from the assessment. In these exceptional circumstances, the principal, in consultation with the student and/or parent/guardian, may grant an exemption to an individual student. Exceptional circumstances are determined on a case-by-case basis as professional judgment and consultation are required.
 - Results should also be shared with students as developmentally appropriate. One middle school principal meets with each student to review their assessment results in relation to their current classroom progress to engage them in discussion about their learning.
- Brain research has identified a number of healthy habits to optimize performance: physical, mental, social/emotional. Some schools reported that prior to writing an assessment or examination they:
 - engage students in a few minutes of physical activity (i.e., short brisk walk, jumping jacks) to get the blood flowing and “wake up” the brain
 - provide students with a healthy snack (i.e., milk or banana).
- Prepare students for the formats used in provincial assessments (i.e., selected response/multiple choice). In the Documents tab for each assessment on the PLANS website (plans.ednet.ns.ca), teachers can find a document called Sample Questions which includes suggested procedures/guidelines for use in preparing students for the formats used in each assessment. Teachers have reported these to be very effective in building student confidence in using the assessment formats.
 - The sample questions are intended to be used as a whole class activity to engage students in the process of responding to the questions as a group. A suggested procedure for using the sample questions is as follows: select a question from the sample questions and pose the question without revealing the selected response answers. Ask students to think about what the question is asking. After the students have thought about the question, show them the selected response answers. Ask them to choose the best answer for the question.

Ask students to share their thinking and responses. Facilitate conversations about the reasonableness of each choice. Using this think aloud strategy will help students increase their comfort and confidence with the selected response format.

- Help students learn to work independently. Although students must learn to work collaboratively in group situations, it is also necessary for students to feel confident in their own abilities to work independently. Students need explicit instruction and practice around the skills and strategies for successful independent work. Some suggestions for encouraging independence include:
 - posting “what to do when I get stuck” strategies in the classroom
 - requiring students to commit something to paper before brainstorming in a group, i.e. “stop, jot, and share” or some variation of “think, pair, share”
 - encouraging students to self-assess, seek feedback and use the information for learning.
- Remind students that this is not a race to finish, that you are looking for their best effort so that you can use the information to help improve teaching/instruction and to help them in their learning.

Responses to concerns expressed that may impact student performance on provincial assessments.

1. *“Students are not familiar with the multiple choice format of questions. This is not something we commonly use in the classroom to assess our students.”*

In order to mitigate an assessment format bias, the Student Assessment and Evaluation Division has created sample questions for the assessments. They are available on the PLANS website (plans.ednet.ns.ca) under the documents tab of each assessment page.

It is important to note that these practice forms should not be handed out and given as a silent task for students to work on independently, nor are they meant as an extensive practice of the outcomes that are addressed on the assessment; they are meant to familiarize students with the look of the provincial assessments as well as the format and thinking strategies involved in responding to selected response (multiple choice) questions.

Instructions for using the sample questions are included in the sample questions document for each assessment. The following are some examples:

- Approach the questions as a whole class activity, project them onto a screen or board.
- Relate the importance of reading all the choices before making the final selection of the best answer to the question and bubbling in the response.
- Reveal the answer and explain why it is the best answer, go through the distractors and explain why they are not the best answer – it is important here to verbalize the thinking process for the students so that they are aware of the strategies needed to answer multiple choice questions.

2. *“Students are failing to take the assessment seriously; students are not trying their best on the assessment.”*

It has been reported by some boards that students are not taking the assessments seriously because they do not “count”. It is important that teachers, in an effort to reassure students and relieve anxiety about the assessments, do not inadvertently minimize the importance of the assessments with comments such as, “Don’t worry about the assessment, it does not count towards your grade.” or “It’s ok, this doesn’t count.”

To encourage students to give their best effort teachers should inform students of the purpose of the assessments and how the information gained is used to support teaching and learning. Students should also be informed that they and their parents will receive an individual student report of their results on the assessment and that this report will be posted in PowerSchool.

We do have evidence that our students are showing perseverance on the assessments. The number of unanswered questions is typically very low for the selected response (multiple choice) sections and very few students overall are not attempting the writing tasks. This is a sign that students are working through the assessments.

Even though the assessments are administered at certain grades and subject areas, it is important that all teachers in the school are aware that the assessment is being written. Teachers should avoid assigning major tests and projects during this time and should also avoid minimizing the importance of the assessments.

When asked if the assessments count, a recommended response would be “Yes, of course they count, everything you do counts to help me understand how you are doing as a learner and how I can support you and the class to be successful. They do not count towards your report card grade but these assessments are important. The assessment results help us make decisions about what we are doing well and where we need to improve in our teaching and learning. It is important for you to try your best so that we get the best information possible.”

It is also important for teachers to talk about the assessment experience and provide them with test-taking strategies such as “You may encounter some questions that you find difficult, this is normal. If you have difficulty answering a question, leave it, and then come back to it in the end when you have answered all the questions that you are able to answer more easily.

Although substitute teachers who are familiar with the assessment information guide, administration procedures and scripts can administer an assessment, it may be more effective to have a teacher who is familiar to the students administer the assessment. In this case the substitute would cover that teacher’s class for the administration of the assessment. Students are more likely to put forth their best effort when with a teacher with whom they already have a relationship. Regardless of who administers the assessment, it is critical that the teacher is familiar with the purpose of the assessment, the information guide, administration procedures and scripts prior to the administration.

School administration should talk to the students about the importance of the assessment in the weeks leading up to the assessment and highlight the information that is gained as a result of their participation. The point is not to pressure students but to have them gain an appreciation that the assessments do in fact provide information that will inform the instructional decisions of former, present and future teachers based on areas of strength and need identified by the assessment.