

**The Newfoundland and Labrador
Teachers' Association**



Summary Report

**Questionnaire on Criterion
Referenced Testing – Grades 3 and 6**

March 2003

In November 2002, a questionnaire on CRTs in Grades 3 and 6 was distributed. In total, 207 were returned, which represents a fairly significant response rate. The questionnaire itself used a four-point scale which included *strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree*.

For purposes of this summary, the percentages reported are clustered in two categories indicating the percentage of respondents who disagreed and agreed. The conclusions drawn for each of the questions reflect the percentages and the general nature of the anecdotal comments provided.

Because of the huge number of comments received, it is impossible and impractical to quote them in a summary report. For those who are interested in reading these comments, they have been placed on the Virtual Teacher Centre web site at www.virtualteachercentre.ca.

For further information on this questionnaire or on other issues related to testing and accountability, please contact:

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1. Criterion referenced testing is an appropriate means of measuring how well students are achieving curriculum outcomes.

Disagree – 35 percent; Agree – 65 percent

A significant majority of the membership agrees in principle. A number of comments point out that CRTs should be one of many ways to evaluate and measure student growth. There is also some concern expressed about measuring an inquiry-directed/process-oriented curriculum with a paper and pencil test.

2. It is reasonable to expect that students can perform effectively on CRTs in multiple subject areas, which are administered over a period that spans several weeks.

Disagree – 66 percent; Agree – 34 percent

Perhaps the most contentious issue with our membership is the administration of CRTs in several subject areas. Numerous comments indicated how “students become overwhelmed and frustrated by the whole process.” As one teacher indicated: “By the time the last Language Arts activity was completed on the ninth day, most students just wanted to get it over with and very few did their best.” In addition to student frustration and loss of interest over an extended period of time, there were comments about the loss of instruction.

3. The difficulty level of all test items was appropriate for my students.

Disagree – 57 percent; Agree – 43 percent

A slight majority of the membership felt that the difficulty level of test items was inappropriate for students. In addressing their concerns, teacher comments made reference to developmental differences, diverse learning styles and students who are on an ISSP. There were quite a few comments regarding the difficulty some students had with reading level. As one comment suggested: “I was told last year that the four of my students who were 1.5 to 2 grades below grade level in reading were not approved for exemptions. These children suffered through the test, and one boy started to refuse to attend school to avoid it.”

4. The sequencing of questions on the CRTs was logical and allowed students to optimize their performance.

Disagree – 20 percent; Agree – 80 percent

Comments indicated that questions were well designed and that the open-ended response questions allowed students’ creativity and individuality to be demonstrated.

5. Grade 3 students should be expected to complete no more than one CRT in one subject area in any given school year.

Disagree – 14 percent; Agree – 86 percent

It is clear that teachers do not agree with an extended CRT testing period covering multiple subject areas. As one comment reflected: “I don’t agree with subjecting eight year olds to the stress of writing such a major exam that extends over several days and sometimes weeks.”

6. The administration of one CRT that covers several subject areas would be appropriate for my students.

Disagree – 64 percent; Agree – 36 percent

There was substantial disagreement with the concept of using one CRT to cover several subject areas. Quite a number of responses suggested that the appropriateness of this would certainly depend on the format of the test instrument and the length of time for testing. Some suggested that if the length of the test was reduced and the administration time was more appropriate (about one week), this might be acceptable. On the other hand, some comments suggested that one CRT would probably not provide enough items to give validity to any one area.

7. The format of questions on the CRTs was similar to those used in my class throughout the year.

Disagree – 30 percent; Agree – 70 percent

Many written responses suggested that because of previous experiences with CRTs and existing awareness of the format, teachers were able to spend “extra time making up multiple choice and other types of questioning to prepare my students for the test.” This suggests that we may see the typical phenomenon of “testing to the test” emerging in our province. Comments from those who disagreed with the statement suggested that there was “not enough allowance for open-ended questions and answers. I do not teach and assess using multiple choice.” Another comment indicated that: “Classroom teaching emphasizes process – CRTs did not. Language Arts – class activities were set up to address diversity in performance abilities – CRTs did not.”

8. The CRT questions were an accurate reflection of the outcomes students dealt with in their primary years.

Disagree – 23 percent; Agree – 77 percent

There was satisfaction with the match between outcomes and CRT items. There was some concern over the ability of CRTs to measure the breadth of outcomes. As one comment suggested: “Students are dealing with the outcomes, but I question if one exam, given at a specific time, is a good judgement of how well students have dealt with specific outcomes.” As another respondent suggested: “I agree to some extent; however, these tests can only measure pencil and paper activities. There are a lot of outcomes that can’t be measured by simple reading tests and responding only in writing.”

9. The CRTs were too long and stressful for my students.

Disagree – 26 percent; Agree – 74 percent

Most of the comments revolved around the Language Arts CRT. “Using ten consecutive days of Language Arts is difficult as students are working independently continuously, and this is not normal in Language Arts.”

10. Students felt positive about writing CRTs.

Disagree – 60 percent; Agree – 40 percent

Many of the comments referred to the high pressure of anxiety which students experienced. Although some comments did acknowledge that students had no difficulty and actually “liked the challenge,” the majority had less than positive experiences as summarized by the following comment: “Many students wrote in their journals that parts were too difficult to understand and that they didn’t understand some of the questions. Many felt it was too long.”

11. Some parts of the CRTs were confusing and unclear for my students.

Disagree – 25 percent; Agree – 75 percent

A number of CRT components were identified as being confusing and unclear for students. They include the listening poem, the chart format of reading comprehension, questions on visuals, incorrect questions on the Grade 6 Language Arts, the map insert in Language Arts Grade 6 and the double-page spread with the Rotting Stump. Two comments worth recording are: “I think some of the items on the CRT are geared towards children living in cities who have much more exposure to everything compared to children living in rural areas. Students who live in rural areas are much more sheltered than city children, and they just don’t have the same experiences or opportunities; for example, make up a CRT about hunting or fishing, and our rural students will excel.” “In the listening/following directions activity, students were given a picture of a house and were asked to draw a chimney on the right-hand side of the house. One of my students became upset because she didn’t know if they meant the right-hand side looking at the house or if you were in the house looking out.”

12. Some parts of the CRTs were confusing and unclear for me as a teacher.

Disagree – 55 percent; Agree – 45 percent

The areas of confusion identified for teachers appear to be the same areas as identified for students.

13. The administration of CRTs resulted in a loss of too much instructional time.

Disagree – 35 percent; Agree – 65 percent

In addition to the concerns in earlier questions about the length of the testing period, there was concern expressed about the length of time required to prepare students for CRTs. As one commented indicated: “We had concerns about the amount of time used to practice for the test,

especially in Math where some teachers finished the program weeks in advance and drilled for weeks in preparation for the CRT at the expense of other subject areas.” The infringement of instructional time in subject areas not covered on the CRTs was noted in quite a number of comments, such as: “For those two weeks, we get basically nothing done in other subject areas.” “I lost about two months of instructional time – one month preparing students (making students test literate) and approximately one month doing the test.”

14. I was adequately prepared to administer CRTs.

Disagree – 20 percent; Agree – 80 percent

Generally, teachers felt that they were well prepared for the CRTs with some comments noting considerable improvements for the 2002 tests. It was noted that the administrative manual was self-explanatory, and Department of Education personnel were accessible. There appears to be, however, a need for more face-to-face inservice time.

15. My students were adequately prepared to write the CRTs.

Disagree – 20 percent; Agree – 80 percent

Teachers felt that students were prepared since CRTs do reflect the outcomes being dealt with in the classroom. There was, however, significant acknowledgment of teaching to the test as one representative comment indicates: “Our Grade 2 and 3 teachers have been working diligently on test-type activities.”

16. All students, regardless of their Pathways designation, should write the CRTs.

Disagree – 84 percent; Agree – 16 percent

The vast majority of teachers do not believe that students with learning difficulties, such as non-categorical special education students, should be expected to complete CRTs without significant modifications and accommodations. As one teacher indicated: “If we are providing Pathways accommodations to students, they should receive the same treatment at CRT time. We cannot/should not give a child who is reading at a Grade 1 level a passage at the Grade 3 level.” In another comment, it was stated: “It was just too stressful and frustrating for some Pathways students and me. All year long I can assist/accommodate/modify in various ways for them and now when they want/need my help the most, I am not allowed.”

17. It was clear to me the types of accommodations and adaptations that I could make for students on modified programs.

Disagree – 51 percent; Agree – 49 percent

Responses to this question indicate that there is still some confusion in the field regarding the types of accommodations and adaptations which are permitted during the administration of CRTs. A number of comments indicated that clarification required phone calls to the Department of Education and that information on modification/adaptations was communicated quite late to schools.

18. The test results released in the Fall of 2002 accurately reflected the performance level of my students.

Disagree – 42 percent; Agree – 58 percent

Although a slight majority agreed with this statement, considerable concern still exists. Some of the anecdotal comments suggested that there were “few surprises.” However, many responses questioned the influence of test preparation as a factor. “It’s a reflection of how well they are coached. There are so many factors involved in the testing and learning process that no one instrument can accurately reflect performance.” There were also references to test anxiety as well as many students not taking the test seriously, resulting in an inaccurate reflection of true performance.

19. Rubrics were provided to me and explained so that I could use them in my planning and teaching during the year.

Disagree – 17percent; Agree – 83 percent

Teachers seem pleased with the provision of rubrics; however, many felt they would have benefitted from a more thorough explanation and inservicing.

20. The rubrics were clear and adequate exemplars were provided.

Disagree – 26 percent; Agree – 74 percent

There was strong endorsement of the rubrics, although some teachers commented on the inherent subjectivity in grading rubrics.

21. I was provided a detailed explanation of test results of my students.

Disagree – 29 percent; Agree – 71 percent

As one representative comment suggests: “We were given statistical data along with Department’s overall findings, which gives us an opportunity to take this data and work it into a school plan that will help us to build upon the strengths and needs of our learning community.” Many comments pointed out that CRT results for the previous year had still not arrived at the school.

22. I was provided an opportunity to work with colleagues in analyzing results and to collaboratively plan strategies for improving student performance in problem areas.

Disagree – 19 percent; Agree – 81 percent

Quite a number of responses suggested that time had been set aside to meet with school board personnel to analyze results and plan to address areas of weakness. A number of schools had used part of their professional development time to conduct this analysis.

23. Adequate supports and resources are available to address problem areas in student achievement as identified through the CRTs.

Disagree – 53 percent; Agree – 47 percent

The membership was divided on this issue. Some noted that the assessment kit provided by the Department of Education has been a helpful resource, and there were some positive comments about the assistance provided by school board personnel. Some resource deficiencies include instructional materials such as information texts and viewing materials and more time and personnel to assist students with difficulties. One comment which reflects a recurring theme in a number of areas states: “It seems that the goal is to up the scores at all costs. Measures have been taken in our district and school to do whatever it takes to raise our scores. Few people care about ‘real learning’ anymore. Best practices are being thrown out the window and traded in for drill and skill and rote memorization.”

General Conclusions

The majority of teachers seem to be satisfied with the use of criterion referenced testing to measure student achievement of curriculum outcomes.

Rubrics have been well developed by the Department of Education, and teachers seem to be aware of how these rubrics are to be used.

Opportunities are being provided for teachers to work together in analyzing results and to collaboratively plan strategies for improving student performance.

Teachers felt that the administration manuals provided by the Department are excellent, but they require more face-to-face inservicing.

Many teachers feel that there are inconsistencies between the types of learning experiences provided in the classroom and the limited questioning format of the criterion referenced tests.

A significant number of teachers feel that improvement is being achieved by “teaching to the test,” which compromises the use of diverse teaching strategies and reduces the focus on subject areas which are not part of the CRT process.

A majority of teachers feel that there should be no more than one CRT covering one subject area administered in a given year.

The amount of time required for students to complete CRTs is too long and stressful, particularly with English Language Arts.

Not all students should write CRTs. Pathways designations need to be considered and information on the types of accommodations and adaptations permitted needs to be communicated more effectively.

Recommendations

- ① No more than one criterion referenced test in one subject area should be administered at a grade level in any given year.
- ② The amount of time required for students to complete CRTs should be minimal, and appropriate to the age of the students.
- ③ The involvement of students in Pathways 2 through 5 in the CRT process should be reviewed by the NLTA/Department of Education Pathways Working Group so that appropriate recommendations and procedures can be agreed upon.
- ④ CRTs should be as low risk as possible and should not be counted as part of the final grades for students.