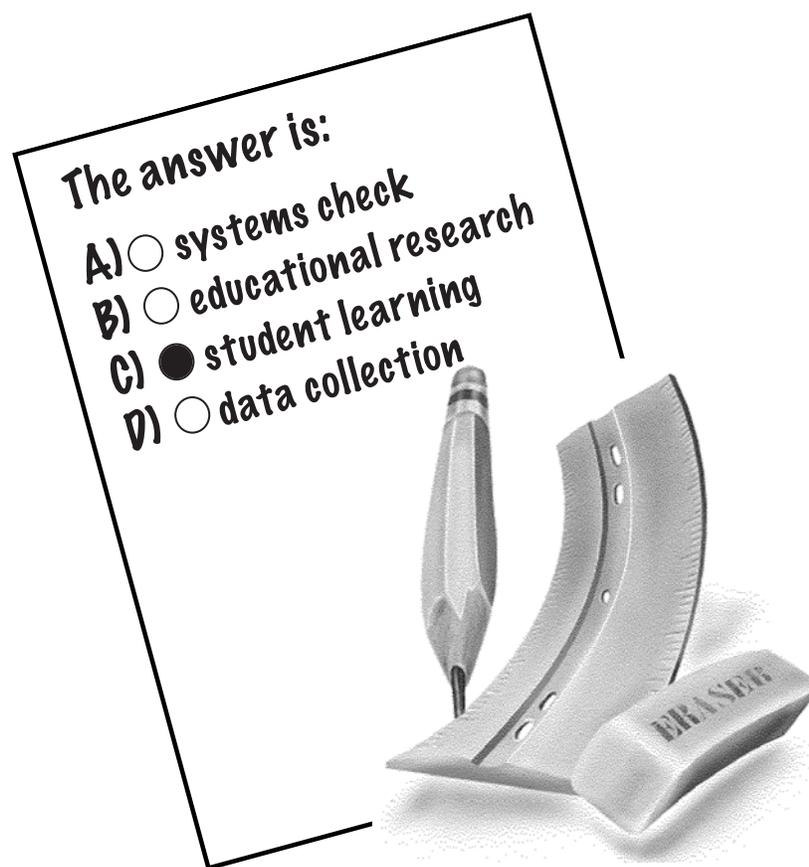


A Brief from the NBTA on the English Language Arts Proficiency Assessment



May 2009

At the February Board of Directors meeting, concerns with regard to the English Language Proficiency Assessment reached critical levels. At that meeting the Board approved a motion directing the Curriculum Committee to prepare a document, "...that details expectations of the ELPA this document will then be delivered to both the Minister of Education and the Deputy Minister of Education by the Executive Director and President of NBTA".

At the Post AGM Board meeting on May 30th, the document was approved for distribution to the Minister, Deputy Minister, and the membership. The following 3 pages contain the full text of the brief. Should a member receiving a hard copy of this issue wish to maintain a hard copy of the brief, the centre section may simply be removed.

In May 2007, the New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA) published a Position Paper on External Assessments. The decision to do so was prompted by the increasing importance being placed upon external assessment results by the Department of Education, and the concomitant increasing importance to all other stakeholders. In a break with colleagues within Canada, NBTA chose not to oppose the government's assessments. Teachers sought, rather, to improve the external assessments in order to better serve their students.

After years of playing a minor role in New Brunswick, external testing has once again become high stakes. Of all of the external assessments being conducted, none is higher stakes than the English Language Proficiency Exam (ELPA) being written by grade nine students. Since the successful completion of this exam is a graduation requirement, students (and teachers) are under tremendous pressure to produce acceptable results. Students who are unable to successfully complete the assessment must continue to rewrite yearly until they are successful – or fail to graduate. Ultimately, in the grade twelve year, students may write the exam on two separate occasions in order to fulfill the graduation requirement.

In the two years since the publication of the Position Paper on External Assessments, NBTA has been relentless in communicating concerns to the Department of Education, and lobbying for changes that would improve the external assessment process for students. The ELPA has been the priority target for change, simply because it is the province's highest stakes test. Although progress has been made, there is still much that needs to be improved in order for New Brunswick students to have fair expectations of success. To that end, the NBTA Board of Directors directed the Curriculum Committee to create a brief, outlining specific recommendations for improvements with

regard to the ELPA, and to ensure it is delivered directly to the Minister of Education.

Given the degree of concern that has arisen about the ELPA, and the amount of discussion and consultation that has already occurred provincially, the Curriculum Committee quickly identified a list of concerns and recommendations. The NBTA High School Council struck an ad hoc committee to develop a report on the ELPA as well, and their document informed the Curriculum Committee's work. The NBTA Board of Directors acknowledges the contributions of both groups in the development of this brief, and thanks them for their service to teachers.

Concerns and recommendations with regard to the English Language Proficiency Exam can be grouped into four distinct areas; Exam Design and Content, Exam Administration, Exam Grading, and Reporting of Results. The remainder of this brief addresses each of these areas in turn.

Exam Design and Content

- The ELPA must be developed locally, rather than purchased from Alberta. Teachers believe that provincially developed tests are more culturally relevant, better aligned with the New Brunswick curriculum, and more reflective of provincial educational practice. All of these are key components of a fair assessment.
- Provincial test development would include provincial field-testing and the creation of a provincial item bank.
- The reading portion of the ELPA needs to include more contemporary pieces. Many of the reading pieces are from out-dated texts, and do not reflect the current cultural or learning environments of grade nine students.

- The ELPA should include some constructed response items, rather than an editing piece. This would allow the test to better align with classroom practice.
- The marking rubric, including assigned values, should be included within the test itself so students understand the weighting, and focus their work accordingly.
- Care must be taken that reading portion of the ELPA be neutral in terms of gender, culture, and socioeconomics. In the past, the same concerns had been expressed with regard to the writing portion of the exam, but in 2009, the writing portion reflected this neutrality.
- In 2008 and again in 2009, the reading portion of the assessment was comprised of several individual text selections with a few questions on each. Given the length of text, many students ran out of time. They were unable to employ strategies they had been taught because they did not have the time to do so. The reading portion of the ELPA should have fewer selections and more questions on each.
- If it is not possible for the Department of Education to immediately initiate the production of a provincially developed reading assessment, and a test is once again purchased from Alberta, then the time allocated for students to write the reading assessment must be longer. The ELPA should be a test of literacy, not speed.
- Teachers question the quality of the Grade 12 June ELPA exam. The quality of the final test should not be altered. Another means of ensuring graduation for struggling students should be developed.

Exam Administration

- Not only must the actual length of writing time be changed, but also the time of administration. If the ELPA is an assessment of the standards expected of students at the end of grade 9, then the exam must be written at the end of grade nine.
- Further, as an exam, the ELPA should be

written during the high school exam period, with an additional day in the exam schedule devoted solely to its administration. Most grade nine students who wrote the ELPA in 2009, were forced, during their first experience with formal exams, to write as many as eight exams during a four-day period. The conditions under which our students wrote actually discouraged success. The exam date should be set and published provincially as part of the school calendar.

- The Department of Education must develop a more effective registration process. School administrators speak of spending as many as 120 hours trying to cross-reference lists from the Assessment Branch with school records in order to arrange for the administration of the exams.
 - Further, the Department of Education must develop a more efficient system for student tracking. Despite repeated contacts from schools trying to update enrolment lists, registration lists from the Department continue to contain errors, including students who no longer attend the schools.
 - Communications from the Department must be clear and concise. Not only are school personnel reporting confusion with regard to the registration process, but also with regard to the exam administration process. In 2008, for example, many schools reported that they only became aware that students would have access to dictionaries after the writing of the ELPA had commenced. In 2009, there were a number of reports of varying lengths of time being allocated to the assessment.
 - Students in laptop schools, who are accustomed to displaying their literacy skills via computers, must be permitted to use their laptops when writing the ELPA.
 - Any students with accommodated programs must be given the same accommodations they are accustomed to when writing the ELPA.
 - Students who have modified literacy programs must not be required to write the ELPA. Given that they are not taught the grade 9 outcomes, they must not be tested on them.
-

- Expectations for English as Another Language (EAL) learners must be clearly articulated. EAL students must be judged to have a reasonable expectation of success before being required to write the ELPA.

Exam Grading

- Although teachers are pleased they have again been provided with an opportunity to mark the ELPA, they have several concerns about the process used in 2009, and believe a review of the marking session is in order.
- Teachers of language arts and English at the middle and high school levels should be the individuals brought in to mark the ELPA. These teachers need to be trained prior to the marking session.
- The assessment rubric must not only be clearly articulated to those individuals marking the ELPA, but also to all language arts and English teachers. Teachers simply cannot prepare students for the assessment when they do not understand the expectations. If teachers clearly understood the marking rubric, then students would understand what is expected of their performance on the ELPA, and they would have reasonable expectations of success.
- The assessment rubric should be published for all stakeholders, including parents, to access.
- The writing pieces must be evaluated through a double blind process. Marking as a team of two is not an adequate substitute for double blind marking.
- Accommodated students who have evaluation accommodations within their program of studies must be identified, and have the same accommodations made in the evaluation of their ELPA performance.

Reporting Results

- Exam results must be provided in a timely manner. For an exam written in June, results should be made available to schools by the first of September.
- Students who do not write the ELPA because they are on Special Educational Programs (SEP) in language arts must not be included as unsuccessful in statistical reporting. Such a practice is, at best, misleading and demoralizing. In fact, all students who do not write, for whatever reason, should not simply be deemed unsuccessful.
- Results must not be misused to rank schools or judge individual staff performance.
- Results should be clearly communicated to teachers. Data must be disaggregated in such a way that teachers can use the results to inform instructional practice.
- Students also should be provided with a more detailed report of their own performance.

Although primary responsibility for student assessment and evaluation belongs to teachers, external assessment will continue to play a role for the foreseeable future. NBTA chose not to simply oppose such testing, but rather to seek improvements so student learning would not be negatively impacted by the external assessments. This brief contains the design elements required to ensure the ELPA does not continue to negatively impact our high school students' perceptions of literacy, but instead becomes a tool for enhancing learning.