What is Performance-based Accountability?
In Canadian elementary and secondary schools, large scale student testing is used as a measure of educational accountability; how well students and schools are doing in relation to specific content or curriculum. Student performance is measured on standardized tests. Two examples of these types of tests are the FSAs [Foundational Skills Assessments] used in British Columbia or CTBS [Canadian Test of Basic Skills] used in Newfoundland. Results act as one indicator of how well a school is doing in relation to provincial standards in areas like math and reading. When the results are used to hold schools accountable, it is called performance-based accountability. These results are intended to foster school change to enhance student learning and success.

What do Performance-based Accountability models look like?
Based on a study conducted Sonia Ben Jaafar and Lorna Earl of the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education, the authors examined 10 Canadian jurisdictions and characterized five features of performance-based accountability models:
(1) the number of grades tested, who takes the test, and the time lag between the administration of the test and the reporting of the results (testing structure);
(2) the stated primary purpose of the testing system, form of performance, acceptable performance, and the source of curriculum alignment (standard setting);
(3) the consequences of test results for students and schools (e.g., school reconstitution, awards, sanctions, grade promotion) as well as public reporting of school results to attract students and student-linked funding (consequential use of data);
(4) the types of comparisons and combinations of indicators (e.g. gender, race, type of school) and the intended audience (reporting);
(5) the degree and type of involvement of the educator in order to increase educator understanding of student work in relation to the learning outcomes of the curriculum (professional involvement).

How do provinces use Performance-based Accountability?
Provincial Ministries of Education use performance-based accountability to articulate their intentions or goals and to provide resources such as online or print guidelines, regulations, rules, policies, or procedures that help guide or provide direction for the actions of local school districts, individual schools and teachers. This study indicates that four provinces, Quebec, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, promote the use of test results to inform teacher practice in the classroom and that frequent monitoring is intended to direct improvement efforts relative to professional involvement to support student achievement. Saskatchewan also used testing to monitor the students’ achievement for quality of program in grades 11 and 12. British Columbia, Ontario,
Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Yukon use performance-based accountability similarly but place a greater emphasis on the consequences of test results for students and schools prior to the administration of the tests. Alberta is the only province that set acceptable performance standards for both the system and individual students. The requirement for an improvement plan using the results from the reports generated by school districts was common to each province.

**What is the impact of Performance-based Accountability in Canadian Schools?**

In Canada, each jurisdiction continues to invest substantial resources to develop and implement individual performance-based accountability systems. Each Ministry of Education claims its model improves student achievement and school practices. They make this claim based on their observations and experience with testing as opposed to concrete evidence that compares the influence of different models on actual practice. Further research is necessary to determine the influence of performance-based accountability policies and systems and to expose policy similarities and differences within educational systems. By doing so, valuable insight will be gained into the influence, appropriateness and usefulness of performance-based accountability models which offers the potential for within-jurisdiction, national, and international comparisons.

The authors of this study contend that educators and policy makers should consider the provincial differences in performance-based accountability when they investigate results and deliberate on employing large-scale provincial testing. Although the theoretical contribution of a comprehensive, conceptual, policy-level model is important to the scholarship on educational accountability, the significant practical and theoretical value of the findings in this study will only be realized when they are employed in follow-up impact studies.


This summary was prepared for the Canadian Society for the Study of Education by Lisa J. Starr, graduate student at the University of Victoria.