



Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP)

Writing III Assessment

FACT SHEET

General facts about SAIP

- **What is SAIP?** SAIP is a cyclical program of pan-Canadian assessments of student achievement in mathematics, reading, writing, and science that has been conducted by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) since 1993.
- **Why did CMEC develop SAIP?** The provinces and territories, through CMEC, developed SAIP to assess the performance of 13- and 16-year-old students in mathematics content and problem solving, reading, writing, and science knowledge and inquiry skills. This information, together with the review mechanisms of individual jurisdictions, gives each minister of education a basis for examining the teaching and learning in these subject areas and other aspects of the school system.
- **Is the writing assessment a one-time-only test?** The Writing III Assessment is the second of four assessments that make up the third cycle of SAIP. The assessments are administered in April and May of each year, on a rotating basis. The SAIP Writing III Assessment was administered in the spring of 2002. Previous versions of the writing assessment were administered in 1994 and 1998. While these were similar, the topic, scoring criteria, and procedures for 2002 were more precisely defined with an additional element required. In 2002, students were expected to *generate public awareness about a dilemma*, and this expectation was reflected in the scoring criteria. These changes are significant enough to suggest that any reading of comparisons of performance must take into account the changes in design. Nevertheless, specific jurisdictional analysis suggests that a form of comparison can be made by referring to *comparative percentage differences* in performance by gender, age, and levels between 1994, 1998, and 2002. For example, if 16-year-old girls were 15% stronger than boys at level 3 in 1998, how does this compare with the difference between the same groups at level 3 in 2002?
- **How can student performance across Canada be compared?** School curricula differ from one part of the country to another, so comparing test data resulting from these diverse curricula is a complex and delicate task. Young Canadians in different jurisdictions, however, do learn many similar skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. Throughout the history of SAIP assessments, development teams composed of representatives from various jurisdictions have

consulted with all provinces and territories to establish a common framework and set of criteria for each subject area. These are intended to be representative of the commonly accepted knowledge and skills that students should acquire during their elementary and secondary education.

- **Will SAIP replace provincial and territorial assessments?** SAIP is designed to complement existing assessments in each province and territory, providing Canada-wide data on the achievement levels attained by 13- and 16-year-old students across the country and on the extent to which skills and knowledge develop between the ages of 13 and 16.
- **Who are the partners funding SAIP?** Funds for SAIP have been provided by participating jurisdictions through CMEC and by the Government of Canada through Human Resources Development Canada.
- **Who wrote the test?** During the spring of 2002, a random sample of approximately 13,000 thirteen-year-olds and 11,000 sixteen-year-olds from all provinces and territories was tested on writing skills. About two-thirds of the students completed the assessment in English, and one-third in French.
- **What did the writing assessment consist of?** The writing assessment involved two sessions. The first session, which was approximately one hour long, allowed students to engage with the theme of the writing task by first responding to a short text for 20 minutes. This first session was to precede the second session by five days or less. The students discussed a series of brief texts that explored the theme in a resource handbook. In the second session, students had two and a half hours to fulfil the assigned writing task.
- **What did we learn from this assessment?** SAIP assessments continue to confirm that it is possible, despite some differences in curriculum, to reliably assess students' knowledge and skills in writing across Canadian jurisdictions.
- **How were writing knowledge and abilities assessed?** For writing, achievement was described over five levels, representing a continuum of knowledge and skills acquired by students over the entire elementary and secondary school experience. Level 1 criteria were representative of knowledge and skills typically acquired during early elementary education, while level 5 criteria were typical of those acquired in advanced and university entrance courses. The writing piece produced by the student was ultimately assigned a performance level based on the criteria. Examples of student work and criteria characteristic of each level were used to ensure consistency in the scoring.
- **What kind of information does the report contain?** SAIP is a program assessment, not a student achievement assessment. SAIP assessments essentially measure student performance in a subject and reflect this back to each jurisdiction. These assessments do not replace, but rather complement, individual student assessments, which are the responsibility of teachers, school boards, and ministries and departments of education. The results are reported at the pan-Canadian and jurisdictional levels only. In SAIP, results are not available by school or school district. The achievement of individual students is not identified, and no attempt is made to relate

an individual's achievement to that of other students. Information obtained from the student, teacher, and school questionnaires on school experience and attitudes toward the various subjects being assessed is also provided.

- **What are the results of this third assessment of writing?** Given that 13- and 16-year-olds are administered the same assessment, the SAIP designers thought that the largest proportion of 13-year-olds would achieve at least level 2 and that the largest proportion of 16-year-olds would achieve at least level 3. Generally, there is a consistent distribution across the five levels of performance, although significant differences in performance at several levels can be observed. While direct comparisons of performance results from Writing I, II, and III are not made in this public report, there is value in comparing the percentage differential between jurisdictional performance and pan-Canadian results for each assessment. For example, where francophone jurisdictions perform below the Canadian French results or anglophone jurisdictions perform below the Canadian English results, generally the percentage differential is less than it was in 1998. This is particularly true for 13-year-olds in those francophone jurisdictions where French is the minority language. Similarly, where there are differences between 13-year-old boys and girls in a jurisdiction, generally the percentage differential is less than it was in 1998.
- **How will the results be used?** The analysis of the results will lead to further discussion among the provinces and territories about what are appropriate expectations for student achievement in writing. The report on SAIP Writing, together with the review mechanisms of the individual provinces and territories, will give each of the ministers of education a basis for examining the curriculum and other aspects of the school system.
- **What are expectations-settings sessions?** For each assessment, a pan-Canadian panel of about one hundred representatives from various sectors of society meet to examine the assessment criteria, the items used to assess student performance, some of the contextual variables, and the overall student performance results. The members of the panel, which comprises both educators and non-educators, are then asked to state their expectations of student results based on their interpretation of the information that is provided. The sessions are held in three regions, Western Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories), Central Canada (Ontario and Quebec), and Eastern Canada (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador). The expectations set in the various regions are then aggregated into one series of pan-Canadian expectations and published in the public report.
- **What is the total cost of the Writing III Assessment?** The total expenditure on this writing assessment, in direct costs, from the planning work begun in April 2000 through to the report in May 2003, was approximately \$1.5 million. When divided by the total number of 13- and 16-year-olds in Canada, this assessment costs approximately \$2.25 per student.