

**Empowerment and Transformation:**  
**The Impact of Criteria Development on**  
**Stakeholders in**  
*Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools*

Nominated by: Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools  
For the 2015 Premier's Board of Education Award  
For Innovation and Excellence in Education  
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Board Chair: Lisa Rathgeber  
Director of Education: Barb MacKesey

Two teachers huddled in the board room of the Christ the Teacher Roman Catholic School Division (CTTCS) central office discuss *sotto voce* various ways to represent level 2 of a Social Studies 5 outcome related to the Dynamic Relationships goal. Curriculum document fanned out before him, another teacher around the same table highlights the performance indicators that best represent the outcome for which he is building criteria. In the corner diagonally opposite, three teachers endeavor to



differentiate Level 3 and Level 4 with respect to a particular performance indicator. As the ball passes from one to the other, one teacher pauses in mid-sentence to process an insight. A few seconds later, she finishes her thought—she will have to tweak her pedagogy to build in opportunities for students to provide evidence of level 4 performance. These teachers number among the fifty-seven strong from Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools who, beginning in the spring of 2013, chose to participate in the development of assessment criteria in the form of rubrics for the outcomes in the Required Areas of Study of the Saskatchewan curriculum in English (Practical and Applied Arts and Core French are on the docket for 2015-2016), as well as Religion, French Language Arts, Sciences humaines, and the Grade 1 and Grade 2 French Immersion Interdisciplinary program.

## GOAL

The goal of the project was simple and clear: to involve teachers in the construction of rubrics in all the Required Areas of Study from Kindergarten through Grade 9 to support outcomes-based assessment and to connect to the renewed Student Progress Report.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The catalyst for the preparation of assessment rubrics was the division move to outcomes-based assessment. Teachers would shortly be asked to evolve in their assessment practices from the task-oriented percentages model of assessment to an evidence-based outcomes model organized in four levels. To accomplish this transition, teachers needed tools. A little unsure of what the entire process involved but game to embark on an adventure, teachers responded to the call to develop criteria. With that commitment came the assurance of a maximum number of days away from the classroom and the promise of no homework, that is, no work on the project outside the seconded school day. Given the intense nature of the task and the high level of concentration it required,

teachers worked in half-day modules. They gathered for an initial half-day orientation session that endeavored to:

- build a common understanding of outcomes-based assessment principles;
- construct criteria for developing valid and reliable rubrics, based on the work of Susan Brookhart (2013, *How to Create and Use Rubrics for Formative Assessment and Grading*)

After the initial orientation session, teachers worked together separately. They collaborated to build a comfort level with rubric development on such a large scale, and then attended to their own designated outcomes, touching base with their colleagues frequently for questions and feedback. Teacher evaluations of the criteria development experience indicated a high level of satisfaction with that format, especially the orientation session, the autonomy afforded in the work, and the support provided throughout the process.

## **BOARD PARTICIPATION**

The revitalization of the division assessment plan, including the movement to outcome-based assessment and subsequently the creation of criteria, began at the CTTCS boardroom table in the fall of 2012. The commitment to launch the process began with the hiring of a part-time assessment consultant to lead the work with the intent to extend the contract once the scope of the work was fully realized. With the personnel in place, the Board began to receive regular updates as to the progress of the work as well as offering feedback.

Once the student progress report was finalized and the initial set of criteria for the Factors Affecting Achievement (the work habits and dispositions that impact student learning) was produced, Board members joined families and School Community Councils at each school in the division for information evenings unveiling the new assessment plan.

With the criteria development work in full swing, the Board continued to receive regular updates on the progress of the work and inquired about how the criteria assisted both teachers and students in measuring growth towards outcomes. In addition to the regular updates, the Board highlighted the importance of this work by approving it as a high-level action in the division Level II Strategic Plan.

## **INNOVATION**

In what respect might the CTTCS criteria development experience be considered innovative, given that other divisions in the province had already posted rubrics for all Required Areas of Study on their websites? Why couldn't teachers simply use the great work of other divisions, and save all that time and expense? The CTTCS criteria development venture innovated in the following ways:

### **1. A reflection on pedagogy**

The role of the rubrics in assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning would eclipse their summative function. Rubrics would make criteria for excellence clear to students, and in so doing, would allow students to analyze and assess their own work and that of others. Furthermore, teachers would use the rubrics to provide feedback. Using rubrics, then,

would not be about “manufactur[ing] consensus” (Maya Wilson, 2006, *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment*, p. 53), or assessing “on autopilot” (Wilson, p. 39) because the subject has been distilled into a particular mould and way of seeing. Rubrics would instead help teachers and students clarify the targets, rather than forcing them to see those targets in the same way. In that sense, rubrics would not only mitigate the limitations of rubrics Wilson identified; they would actually enable teachers and students to reach the goal Wilson specified as her own mission: “not for [students] to follow my suggestion, but to learn to assess their work on their own.” (p. 90)

Another important consideration was the need for teachers to broaden their concept of assessment. To create rubrics whose design aligned with research, teachers would have to let go of assessment as a merging of task evaluations and embrace a different paradigm—analysis of a collection of evidence compared to established criteria articulating proficiency around an outcome. Indeed, Susan Brookhart spells out the critical nature of this approach: *Rubrics should not confuse the learning outcome to be assessed with the task used to assess it. The biggest mistake teachers make . . . is that they focus on the task, the product, and not the learning outcome or proficiency the task is supposed to get students to demonstrate.* (Susan Brookhart, 2013, *How to Create and Use Rubrics for Formative Assessment and Grading*, p. 15).

## 2. **The value of process**

The final product, the rubric, however important in itself, was far overshadowed by the process of its creation. Time and again, in evaluations of the experience, teachers indicated that the criteria development process was some of the most valuable professional learning they had ever experienced. One teacher wrote, “This was an enlightening, mind-stretching and profound professional learning process.” How interesting, in that organisers framed the event as a service teachers provided to their division; never did they associate the phrase “professional learning” with the criteria development project. That description came from the participants.

## 3. **The power of the content-process alignment**

The criteria development experience aligned content with structure. Teachers who participated in the experience took away key principles around student learning that were modelled throughout the sessions, including:

- a. a constructivist approach to creating a concept of quality rubrics;
- b. tools that enable the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies, ranked as having an effect size of 0.6 on student achievement, where 0.4 indicates a positive impact on student learning (John Hattie, 2012, *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*, p. 255), such as the use of metaphor, the mind map, the one-word summary, the say-something reading strategy, the gallery walk;
- c. the feedback loop, wherein teachers provide specific and descriptive feedback to their colleagues, and in turn receive feedback from their colleagues and a facilitator, through conversations, hand-written comments, and comments provided

- electronically through Track Changes in Word, and through which they experience first-hand the power of feedback, to which Hattie attributes an effect size of 0.75;
- d. the co-construction of criteria for valid and reliable rubrics, using prior knowledge and examples.

#### 4. **The growth of capacity**

Teachers involved in the rubric creation process were not only invested in the product, but better able to use it. They had participated in discussions and decision-making around rubric design, and they understood the rationale. Furthermore, coming together from various schools in the division, they were resources to the teachers on their staffs, who may have had questions about the rubrics. Some criteria developers later agreed to facilitate sessions on the rubrics with subject-area colleagues. The division brought these new facilitators together for a half-day collaborative planning session.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

The CTTCS rubrics already enjoy extensive use. CTTCS teachers use the rubrics to track student progress toward the outcomes, and to support their communication to parents, both through the Student Progress Report and student-led conferences. Each year, teachers become more comfortable with this tool and more innovative in its use. Furthermore, the rubrics are posted online and are accessible to anyone in the world to whom they might be useful. The rubrics will also be adapted for the French curricula this year in Physical Education, Health, Science, Arts Education and Mathematics. By the end of the year, teachers in Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools and the province will have a complete set of assessment rubrics in English and French for the Required Areas of Study.

## **CLIENTS**

All primary stakeholders benefit from the criteria development work and its results.

### **Students**

The rubrics put the criteria for success front and centre for students. As Rick Stiggins maintains, a student can hit any target that they can see and holds still for them (Stiggins, 2004, quoted in <http://www.plpsd.mb.ca/Assessment/FollowClearTargets.pps>). Students are then set up for success. Students also assume more ownership of their learning. Rubrics in hand, they are able to assess their own progress, and set targets for improvement. Stiggins emphasizes that “the students’ role is to strive to understand what success looks like, to use feedback from each assessment to discover where they are now in relation to where they want to be, and to determine how to do better the next time” (Rick Stiggins, 2007, “Assessment Through the Student’s Eyes,” *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 64 No. 8). One teacher commented on the impact of the rubrics for the Factors Affecting Achievement. In his words, students “have discussions about where they need to improve and what they can do to improve.”

Teachers involved in the rubric development process field-tested their rubrics during the creation process. In that way, student response was integrated into the final product. As well, some of the rubrics point to co-construction of the criteria with students, especially when the indicator might involve a task inherent in mastery of the outcome.

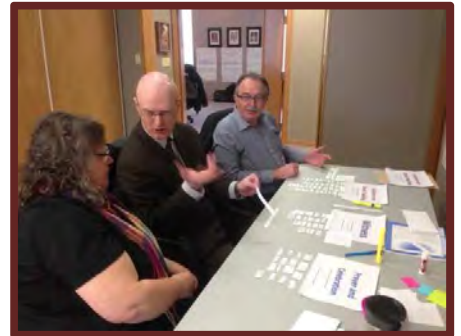
Both the process of criteria development and the rubric tools that have been its product have created learning environments for First Nations and Métis students that are more culturally responsive, as the assessment and instructional practices align more closely with First Nations and Métis ways of knowing. *Our Words Our Ways: teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learners* (Alberta Education, 2005) points out several benefits of rubrics as a tool in instruction and assessment design:

- a focus on what students can do, rather than what they cannot (p. 24);
- the use of a strength-seeking approach (p. 29);
- the use of rubrics in meta-cognition that, according to the document, “is fundamental to working with Aboriginal student s” (p. 36);
- giving students more ownership of their own learning (p. 37) and the ability “to take control of their own learning processes” (p. 37);
- “they clearly and concisely convey assessment expectations” (p. 110).

Indeed, the positive, empowering focus of rubrics as a tool to foster autonomy in assessment as learning harmonizes with autonomy, a key characteristic that describes the Independence quadrant in the Circle of Courage, a philosophy Dr. Martin Brokenleg developed for working with troubled youth (Dr. Martin Brokenleg, 1990, *Reclaiming Youth At Risk*).

## Teachers

Fifty-seven (57) individuals answered the call for criteria developers from April, 2013, through February, 2015. This number represents fifty per cent (50%) of the teaching body in Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools (113 teachers from Kindergarten through Grade 9). When the twelve (12) Practical and Applied Arts teachers, who begin the process in October, are included, the percentage rises to sixty-one per cent (61%). Of those sixty-nine (69) teachers in total, twelve (12) served for two rounds, that is, two subject areas, and three individuals participated in three rounds. Seven administrators or central office personnel numbered among the fifty-seven as well. Teachers who identify as members of First Nations served on the team for Social Studies and Science.



Teachers were uniformly grateful for the opportunity:

“Thank you for the opportunity to extend my professional development.”

“It’s amazing to watch the change that occurs throughout the process.”

“Having a greater knowledge of the curricular outcomes is very empowering.” (Teacher underline).

Although teachers were not expected to work on the project on their own time, they generously provided a final reading to be sure the editing process respected their intent.

The process had an important impact on their professional growth. One teacher summarizes the impact by saying: “Building the rubrics helped me focus on what exactly the outcome was asking for our students to be able to do rather than what my [sic] expectations had evolved into. I felt that my work became more transparent and I was better able to share with parents the curriculum expectations.”

## **Parents**

Parents had access to a continual flow of information from the beginning of the criteria development process. Principals explained the development of assessment tools at meetings of their School Community Councils beginning in March, 2013. In addition, a brochure inserted in the June, 2013 report cards indicated the role of rubrics in clarifying learning outcomes for students and parents. At an information night held at each school in the division in the fall of 2013, parents had the opportunity to ask questions, review documents ready in draft form, and provide feedback. In response to parent comments, the rubric descriptors remained uniformly focused on what students are able to do, and the language of the document was simplified further.

Parents can access the rubrics on the Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools website. They have immediate access to the learning outcomes for their children, as well as the criteria that indicate achievement of the outcome. When parents attend student-led conferences, they witness the empowerment that has developed in their children as they discuss their learning and their goals using the terminology of the subject and of learning.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

The criteria development work was a very ambitious undertaking for the one of the smallest school divisions in Saskatchewan. Even given the generous response of teachers in the division, it became clear that the demands on teacher time would need to be mitigated.

### **Good Spirit School Division**

Coincidentally, a year into the criteria development project in Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools, Good Spirit School Division initiated a partnership for the final phase of the work. Teachers from both school divisions worked together to develop criteria for Mathematics, Arts Education, Career Education, Band, and Kindergarten. As a result, another level of collaboration enhanced the experience. Now, teachers had the opportunity to discuss ideas and processes with colleagues from another division. Conversations around outcomes and indicators and levels often digressed momentarily to teaching practices, resources, or possibilities for partnerships. Superintendent for Good Spirit School Division Darran Teneycke summarizes the experience:

*In the end, a product was produced that will support assessment practices in K-9 classrooms in both divisions. The assessment rubrics that were developed will allow teachers in both divisions the opportunity to interpret the curricular outcomes consistently as they report using an outcome-based report card . . . Parents and guardians will receive a consistent message regardless if their children attend a CTTCS or a GSSD school.*



## **Regina Catholic School Division**

Exchanges with Regina Catholic School Division around the implementation of the Grade 1 and Grade 2 Interdisciplinary Program resulted in a partnership to develop assessment criteria for both curricula. Five Grade 1 and 2 French Immersion teachers from CTTCS partnered with nine RCSD teachers. The project began with a common orientation session in Regina in October, 2015. By February, teachers had finished. They meet for a final feedback session and celebration of their work. Language consultant Diane Lacasse underlines the accrued benefits:

*Teachers could have deep professional conversations in the language of instruction regarding learning targets, formative and summative assessment, and best practices to support the delivery of a quality French Immersion program. . . . This project resulted in support tools developed by French Immersion teachers for French Immersion students and teachers, thus respecting the integrity and philosophy of the French Immersion program, where most often translations of English documents are used to fill the gap.*

School divisions with French Immersion programs were apprised of this resource available online for their primary French Immersion teachers. This year, again working in tandem, sometimes together, sometimes separately, CTTCS and RCSD will partner to adapt the English rubrics in the Required Areas of Study to the French Immersion curricula for those subjects.

## **IMPROVED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

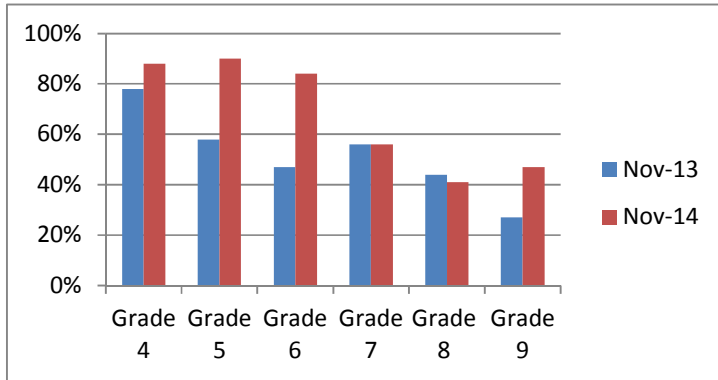
Triangulated evidence points to the impact of criteria development on student achievement in CTTCS. According to Davies, Herbst and Reynolds (2008), evidence retrieved from conversations and observations as well as products broadens the picture of student achievement and provides a more accurate representation. As alignment of administrative practices with those recommended for teachers in the classroom is a cornerstone of CTTCS leadership principles, a collection of triangulated evidence from observations, conferences, and products is appropriate to assess the effect of the rubrics on student achievement. During the criteria development process, participating teachers, especially those returning for a second round, told stories of changes in student behaviour attributable to the rubrics. One teacher relates,

*Students were very quickly able to identify themselves as a 1, 2, 3, 4 based on the criteria that had been set. It was impressive to see how many students, for example, who wouldn't have normally made eye contact during show and tell suddenly become aware of audience during speaking.*

When students know what the learning goal is and the criteria for success, as Susan Brookhart underlines, they are able to hit the target (2014, *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 72 No. 1). In fact, students are even motivated to exceed expectations. A teacher reports that “an area where I noticed a significant impact was the number of students who normally achieved 3s with explicit instruction working harder and more focused to give the extra effort to achieve a 4.”



Heightened engagement is the result of this increased agency. One teacher notes, “Students are more engaged because they always know how they will be assessed and it is consistent through the entire year.” The *Tell Them From Me* survey confirms the anecdotal evidence. In response to



*Tell Them From Me* Student Motivation and Engagement  
2013 - 2014

questions about their disposition to learning new things in general as well as in specific subject areas, students responded more positively in the 2014 data, after criteria use was pervasive, than in the 2013 survey, before criteria were implemented. A correlation exists, then, between the use of the rubric tools and engagement of students in learning.

Increased student engagement leads to improved student achievement. Kathleen Cushman noticed the trend in her research: “As students came to

expect that they could improve their academic skills through effort, their motivation to engage with difficult academic work increased—and so did their capacity” (2014, *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 71, No. 4). Clear criteria enabled students to set targets, reach them, and experience the satisfaction of improvement and accomplishment. The sense of empowerment has led to increased engagement and motivation, which, in turn, contribute to achievement in an infinite loop.

## COST

Like the investment in electronic health records and electric cars, the cost of the criteria development will pay dividends for years to come. While the accumulated costs of the criteria development project included the salary of the assessment consultant (\$105 219) and sub costs to second teachers (\$40 371), the criteria will continue to have an everlasting impact for our teachers and students even though on-going funding will not be needed. As previously reported by participating teachers, those involved in the project saw it as professional learning, although it was not touted as such. To that end, the cost of sending each teacher that was involved in the criteria development to a two-day (the minimum number of days teachers were working on criteria) assessment workshop would cost the division roughly \$66 000 (conference fees and travel).

While we can calculate the costs of salaries and sub days, the benefits of this work are incalculable. We have come to realize that this work, available on-line for all school divisions in the province, has far-reaching effects. We now understand that, given the learning of our teachers, the motivation of our students, and the availability of assessment tools in two languages, the impact of this work has been exponential, and will continue far beyond our anticipated original goals.