



## Assessing and developing K–Grade 12 students' employability skills

# B.C. MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

## *Showing What a Skill Looks Like*

### CASE STUDY 11

*A core product of the Employability Skills Forum, National Business and Education Centre*

**Program**  
Government

**Date Established**  
1993

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#### Name of Program

B.C. Ministry of Education's  
Employability Skills Development Initiatives

#### Skills Developed

- Academic
- Personal Management
- Teamwork

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The B.C. Ministry of Education supports a continuous process of generic employability skill assessment, development and reassessment for its secondary school students to prepare them to meet the challenges of the world of work.

#### Overview

The B.C. Ministry of Education has undertaken a variety of initiatives to define, develop and assess employability skills. One of the most innovative is School District 59's development of performance criteria with which students, teachers and employers can assess students' employability skills.

In 1993, one year after the Conference Board published its Employability Skills Profile, School District 59 (Peace River South) in Dawson Creek, B.C., in consultation with employers in three local communities (Chetwynd, Dawson Creek and Tumbler Ridge), developed two subjective employability skills evaluation tools. One of these tools centred on employers' evaluations of students' demonstrated employability skills in work placements; the other focused on students' own evaluations of their employability skills based on their work placement experiences. Both tools were used extensively to record individual students' skill levels and map

collective strengths and areas needing improvement.

Employers are asked to comment on the reasons behind their ratings of students' skill levels in different areas; to discuss their evaluations with students; and to make recommendations on how students might improve their skills. Students, for their part, are asked to comment on their own self-assessments and to set goals for themselves to improve their skills in areas where they feel their skills need improvement or are only satisfactory. Assessment, reflection and goal setting focus employers' and students' minds on developing employability skills systematically and strategically.

In 1994, the Ministry produced a *Performance Assessment Handbook*. This handbook offered guidance for teachers as they expanded their assessment repertoires to include objective, criterion-based assessment techniques that clearly specify what a student must demonstrate to meet a given requirement across all curricula.

In 1995, the Ministry sharpened its focus on the development and assessment of a number of personal and career development issues, including employability skills, by producing Career and Personal Planning Curricula for kindergarten to Grade 7 and Grades 8 to 12. One of the purposes of the Career Development section of these two curricula is to assess and develop students' knowledge,

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skills and habits of mind against lifelong learning standards (which closely parallel the Conference Board's Employability Skills) that cut across disciplinary boundaries and are applicable in the wider world, including the world of work.<sup>1</sup>

Measuring students' abilities against lifelong learning standards—complex thinking, information processing, effective communication, co-operation/collaboration and effective habits of mind—requires agreement on certain performance criteria or demonstrable expectations that specify precisely what a student must do to meet a given standard. Achieving the highest skill level in a given area constitutes meeting the standard in that area; falling short indicates that there is room for improvement. Since the performance criteria for a given lifelong learning standard spell out the demonstrable expectations for achieving at that standard, it is clear what kinds of knowledge, skills and habits of mind a student must work on in order to meet the standard in the future.

In 1996, School District 59 produced a draft set of performance criteria to more accurately assess students' demonstration and development of their employability skills.

Students are asked at regular intervals to judge whether they have demonstrated the performance criteria for each employability skill, checking "Yes" if they have demonstrated the skill in question and "In progress" if they still have not managed to demonstrate that particular skill.

Having students evaluate themselves to determine whether they have learned particular employability skills is one half of the education equation. The other half is intentionally teaching them these skills, with heavy emphasis on the word "intentionally." For example, when attempting to teach students teamwork skills, it is not sufficient simply to put students together in groups. It is also necessary to involve

them in identifying performance criteria or articulating what demonstrating teamwork skills looks like as a product. The students must actually demonstrate their mastery of teamwork skills, then be encouraged to reflect on their performances, to articulate precisely how each student in the group contributed to the work of the team, and to identify lessons that could improve their performance in future situations requiring teamwork. Teaching teamwork skills requires students to set new skill development targets in an iterative process.

Adequate performance assessment therefore requires the completion of the educational cycle: moving students from teaching to learning to self-teaching. The present case study deals with the completion of the employability skills development cycle. A population moves from having an awareness of employability skills, through participating in skills enhancement processes, to assessing their performances and setting goals for improvement.

**Groups Served**

- Students, teachers (both as educators and employees), employers, parents and the public at large.

**Objectives**

- Make the process of assessing students' learning of employability skills more objective.
- Convert the Conference Board's Employability Skills Profile from a static list of skills into a dynamic assessment tool.
- Transform assessment of students' skills from a dictated into a developmental process involving consultation with students at every stage, from identifying skills, through agreeing upon what constitutes a demonstration of a given skill, to comparing self-assessments with evaluations made by teachers and employers.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Marzano et al., *Assessing Student Outcomes: Performance Assessment Using the Dimensions of Learning*

*Model* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), p. 15.

### The Employability Skills Forum Mission

We are committed to improving the productivity and quality of life for individuals, organizations and society by enhancing the employability skills of the current and future workforce of Canada.

This study was made possible through funding by members of the Employability Skills Forum.

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- Show students, teachers and employers how to learn skills not just by putting them into passive teaching and learning and skill development situations, but by having individual students or groups of students actively reflect on their own performances in relation to the demonstrated competencies of their co-workers, colleagues and/or classmates, whether individually or in group settings.

#### Activities

In the last few years, the B.C. Ministry of Education has launched a variety of initiatives to define, develop and assess employability skills.

Skills definition initiatives include the Statement of Education Policy Order for the kindergarten to Grade 12 system, 1996, which includes an employability skills-focused description of the “Educated Citizen,” who is, among other things, able to learn and think critically and is flexible and co-operative.

Employability Skills development initiatives include the Career and Personal Planning Curriculum for Grades 8 to 12, 1995. Skills assessment initiatives include the Centre for Applied Academics’ Applications of Working and Learning project, which assesses students’ ability to transfer and apply their knowledge of applied academics course content to a work environment and, importantly, School District 59’s criterion-based employability skills assessment project.

Details of the evolution of criterion-based assessment are recorded above in the Overview section; our focus here will be on the steps educators must take to teach employability skills effectively.

1. Engage in a dialogue with students to identify employability skills—it is important that students know for themselves what these skills are.
2. Brainstorm with students to produce a list of mutually agreed-upon performance criteria showing them how they can demonstrate their possession of, and proficiency in, a given skill area.

3. Model or show by example or by role playing activities what employability skills look like in practice.
4. Walk students through a complete self-evaluation to identify their strengths and skill areas in which they need to improve.
5. Review performance criteria with work placement employers to adjust those criteria for specific workplace settings and make individual employers aware of skill areas that students have flagged for improvement; this enables employers to help individual students enhance skill areas in which they perceive themselves to be deficient.
6. Ensure that employability skills are developed both in the workplace and in the classroom so that the lessons from each setting are re-inforced in the other.

In addition, employers and teachers should prepare assessments of individual students’ employability skills and discuss these evaluations with individual students. Individual students should then be encouraged to compare their own self-evaluations with those completed by their teachers and employers to identify any skill areas where they still have room for improvement. Students can then set new goals and work on their weak spots.

#### Resources Required

- Copies of the Employability Skills Profile, instructional video and assessment tool.
- Time release for a designated staff person in the school to liaise with employers to show them how the assessment tool works and explain its benefits.

#### Achievements/Outcomes

Students become knowledgeable about and are able to visualize transferable skills and what their applications look like. Students are therefore better able to demonstrate their

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*Our grateful thanks to our interviewee:*

*Sheila Simard*

employability skills and become more able to speak confidently about the skills they have.

### Benefits

#### Students

- Feel a sense of ownership in their learning of employability skills because they have actively participated in every stage of the process.
- Know the standards of excellence that will be applied to them, both in the workplace and in the classroom; they know what is expected of them, which increases their chances of improving their skills.
- Can use performance criteria to reflect on their work, which helps them to recognize their individual strengths and weaknesses and to set clear, achievable targets for improvement.
- Learn to take calculated risks, think critically and creatively and solve problems as a direct result of participating in the formulation, delivery and review of the process of assessing their employability skills.

#### Employers

- Know precisely what to look for when evaluating students and employees.
- Can report in specific terms the skills that students and employees have and have not demonstrated.
- Participate in developing standards of excellence that they will apply to students and employees in the workplace.

### Innovation

The innovation of School District 59's criterion-based employability skills assessment project lies in (1) its collaborative approach to developing performance criteria and (2) its focusing of students, teachers and employees alike on the common object of enhancing employability skills. It has developed a truly common language in which students, teachers and employers can converse together about what constitutes a proper demonstration of each employability skill. Teaching, learning and workplace training and performance are greatly facilitated by the deliberate focus that performance criteria bring to the active development and ongoing assessment of generic skills.

### Keys to Success

A program of this type demands a significant expenditure of time on the part of students, teachers and employers, who work together to define performance criteria that relate both to desired curricular outcomes and workplace priorities. It also requires that all three groups cooperate to develop and assess students' performances based on these criteria.

### Greatest Challenge

Ensure that teachers and employers budget enough time to plan and coordinate their teaching/employability skills-developing efforts with students. The collaborative and reflective aspects of the criterion-based assessment process analysed in this case study are precisely what makes criterion-based assessment such a powerful and innovative technique.

### NBEC Publications Relating to Employability Skills Development and Assessment

*Employability Skills Profile*

*Science Literacy for the World of Work*

*Best Practices in Assessing and Developing Employability Skills—20 Case Studies (Sept. 98)*

*The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in the Workplace, 206-97 Report.*

*Enhancing Employability Skills: Innovative Partnerships, Projects and Programs, 118-94 Report.*

*Linking Teachers, Science, Technology and Research: Business and Education Collaborations That Work, 144-95 Report.*

*1998 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook*

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