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Review of Assessment Activities



Issue 6

Spring 1997

In This Issue

This issue of the newsletter begins by focusing on the use of high and low stakes tests. It then explores countries' reasons for using high stakes tests. *Country Highlights* continues with an in-depth look at the Austrian educational system and its approach for assessing students. Also, the *New Developments* section describes two new programs that are occurring in Luxembourg – one related to the transition from primary to secondary education and another related to vocational education.

This issue also provides updates about the activities of each of the four INES Networks. Finally, the *Current Activities* section provides information about what assessment-related activities are occurring between January and June of 1997.

Finally, we are pleased to announce that the newsletter website is now up and running! For details, see inside this issue, or simply go to the website at:

<http://www.ed.gov/NCES/inesnwa/neta.html>.

High Stakes versus Low Stakes Tests

A current topic of interest in the education community and among Network A members is the use of “high stakes” and “low stakes” tests. A high stakes test is a test on which decisions are made about students', teachers', or schools' futures based on test scores. Conversely, a low stakes test is a test on which no decisions are made directly about students', teachers', or schools' futures based on test scores. Low stakes tests typically are used to assess students' performance. Of course, it also is possible to use a combination of high and low stakes tests.

We asked you to tell us which type of tests you use. Some of you replied that a high stakes test is used as a factor in determining which students are eligible to attend a university or college. You emphasized that for these “entrance examinations,” the stakes are extremely high -- performance on the test determines access into further education and those who do not qualify are often affected dramatically. Although a few of you rely on high stakes tests at other points in the education system, their use was not widespread. Your responses are summarized in Table 1 and are described below.

**Table 1
Countries Using High Versus Low Stakes Tests**

Country	Type of Test Used
Belgium (Flemish)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High stakes tests are used by schools. Based on test results, each year, decisions to promote or retain are made, as are decisions about the subjects students will study.
Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The School Achievement Indicators Project (SAIP) is a low stakes test.
England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally, schools do not make decisions for students based on testing, but the Ministry of Education is encouraging schools to increase the stakes.
Finland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One high stakes test is used. A matriculation exam is given in the last year of upper secondary education is used to determine students' eligibility for tertiary education.
France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low stakes test are used.
Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An admittance exam is used to determine acceptance into tertiary education, along with an external exam, developed and administered by the Ministry of Education.
New Zealand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An externally administered national examination is used to determine subjects that students will study in secondary and tertiary education.
Portugal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low stakes tests are used.
Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In general, low stakes tests are used. However, students who wish to attend a university must pass an entrance examination.
Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High stakes tests are used to evaluate and determine developmental areas for students.
United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a low stakes test for students, teachers, and schools. Students who wish to gain access to tertiary education are generally required by colleges and universities to take a privately sponsored entrance examination such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Testing Assessment (ACT).

Belgium (Flemish) reported the most widespread use of high stakes tests. Teachers develop tests, which are used to determine whether a student should be promoted to the next grade or retained in the current grade. Furthermore, the test results provide input into the subjects that secondary students will study. A board of teachers uses the test results and other information about students to make these decisions. These decisions are made each year.

Five countries (**Finland, Hungary, New Zealand, and Spain**) responded that a high stakes examination is given to students in their final year of secondary education. The results of this entrance examination are used as one factor in determining whether a student is eligible to continue his or her education at the tertiary level. More specific details about the use of entrance examinations is as follows:

- **Finland's** matriculation examination is taken each year by about half of all 18- and 19-year-olds. It consists of a national examination and school-based report card of students' grades for three years of secondary schooling; these factors are then used to determine eligibility for tertiary education. Although the results have no formal consequences for teachers or schools, a teacher or school's reputation may be affected by the test results;
- In **Hungary**, students take an admittance examination to determine their eligibility in attending tertiary education. When making their decisions to admit students, universities and colleges take into consideration the results of this examination, as well as an external examination and an oral examination. The external examination is developed by teachers and consists of written, open-ended items as well as oral items. The oral examination is conducted independently by each college and university;
- **New Zealand** replied that its national examination for its year 11 and year 13 (which is the final year of secondary education) students is used to determine future course of study. For the year 13 students, test results help students choose the courses they take at the tertiary level and may even provide a monetary award; and
- **Spain's** entrance examination must be passed by every student who wishes to attend a university. The student's upper secondary grades and the results of the examination are combined into one score, which is then used to determine a final score. Different final scores are required to major in a particular subject or attend a particular university.

Additionally, in **the United States**, students wishing to attend many universities typically are required to take an entrance examination such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Testing Assessment (ACT). These examinations are developed and administered by private organizations.

England stated that currently low stakes tests are used, but that efforts are being made to encourage schools to use the results of assessments that have been conducted on 7-, 11-, and 14-year-olds in English and mathematics and on 11- and 14-year-olds in science. It is hoped that the assessment results could be used to improve teaching and learning.

France and Portugal replied that their education systems rely only on low stakes tests. **Canada's** School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) is a low stakes assessment that is given to 13- and 16-year-olds in mathematics, reading and writing, and science. Each year, an assessment is given in one of the three areas to a Pan-Canadian and a provincial/territorial samples of students. Additionally, **Spain** noted that at other levels

of its education system (that is, below upper secondary education), low stakes tests are used. **The United States** also replied that its National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a low stakes test. Its purpose is to obtain a “picture” of what students know and does not have consequences for students, teachers, or schools.

Several of you noted that changes are occurring surrounding the use of high stakes tests. **England** replied that currently, proposals are in Parliament that would require schools to set and publish targets based on national tests and class assessments. Recently, the popular press in **Finland** has begun to rank schools according to the performance of students admitted. Although this ranking provides an indication of the quality of students attending the school, it may not necessarily provide information about the quality of education that the school provides. **Hungary** told us that certain secondary schools are increasingly using entrance examinations. These schools tend to be the ones that most students want to attend. Not gaining admittance to one of them, however, does not preclude a student from continuing secondary education.

Rationale for Using High or Low Stakes Tests

In order to shed some light on why a country has decided to use a high or low stakes test, we asked you to explain the rationale for the type of test your country uses. Your responses yielded some interesting insights.

In **Hungary, Finland, and New Zealand**, the examination system is strongly influenced by tradition. **Finland** stated that the entrance examination to the university is almost as old as the university itself. **Hungary** plans on continuing to improve on its entrance examination by developing nationally

standardized tests. Current thinking is that this would increase the fairness of the selection process but may force the universities and colleges to rely more upon the test results. One idea for addressing this concern is to continue the oral examinations that each college and university conducts independently of the entrance examination. **New Zealand's** year 11 and year 13 examinations have been used for decades, even though their format has changed over time. Because the year 11 examination is the only point in the education at which a national assessment of all students is conducted, it is valued by many employers and the public in general.

Canada stated that its use of low stakes testing reflects its Constitution, which specifies that education is a jurisdictional responsibility. Curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment may vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Therefore, a high stakes test would not be appropriate. The SAIP is of value, however, for educational and political accountability and to ensure that students have access to equally strong educational systems across the country.

England's desire to rely more and more on high stakes reflects an attempt to improve education through an integrated approach -- in order to raise standards, students are tested according to the national curriculum. The tests, which occur at ages 7, 11, and 14 -- are used as one measure of student performance. Teachers of these students also are assessed. Results of both the student and teacher assessments are reported to parents. In addition, school-level results are published in the school prospectus. National-level results are computed by the Department for Education and Employment as another way of increasing teachers' and schools' accountability to parents and the community.

Spain does not use high stakes test below the upper secondary level because of the belief that each child must progress at his or her own rate. Rather than comparing children to external standards, their progress is assessed as it relates to their own capabilities.

New Developments

Luxembourg

Luxembourg reported that its Ministry of Education is beginning to conduct two noteworthy new projects – one on the transition from primary to secondary education and the other on vocational training.

Previously, students' transition from primary to secondary education was determined only by a national examination. Grade six students (ages 11 and 12) were tested to determine the type of secondary school they would attend. A new program has recently been implemented which takes a more individual approach. In addition to the national examination results, teachers' and parents' appraisal of students' performance are taken into consideration when determining the secondary school they will attend.

The second project, which began in 1994, focuses on developing instruments that assess technical and vocational competencies. The new instruments assess students' progress in the training program as well as their final achievement level. This project also assesses the effectiveness of vocational schools training of commercial and technical apprentices. Future plans include training teachers to develop and administer their own assessments of their students.

Canada

As part of its SAIP, the first-ever expectations-setting session was held in September and October of 1996. Its purpose was to assist with the interpretation of outcomes for the 1996 SAIP Science Assessment. The Council of Ministers of Education - Canada (CMEC) convened a pan-Canadian, anonymous panel of educators and non-educators representing every province in Canada. After reviewing the assessment procedures, materials, and results, this 84-member panel determined the range of expectations (i.e., the inter-quartile range) for each of five achievement levels.

These expectations will be used in the next three years as guidelines by provincial and territorial ministries of education when enhancing science programs across Canada. The range of expectations identified for each level of achievement, along with the confidence intervals for the actual results, will inform curricular and instructional improvements.

Charts 1, 2, 3, and 4 show the cumulative expected and actual results for each performance level for the 1996 SAIP science assessment. They generally show that more than expected numbers of students achieved acceptable mid-range performance. For example, Figure 1 shows that on the written component of the assessment, 53 percent of 13-year-old Canadian students are expected to reach level 3 or above, whereas 43 percent actually achieved these upper performance levels. In both the written and practical components, the mismatch between expectations and results was particularly evident at the upper performance levels.

CHART 1

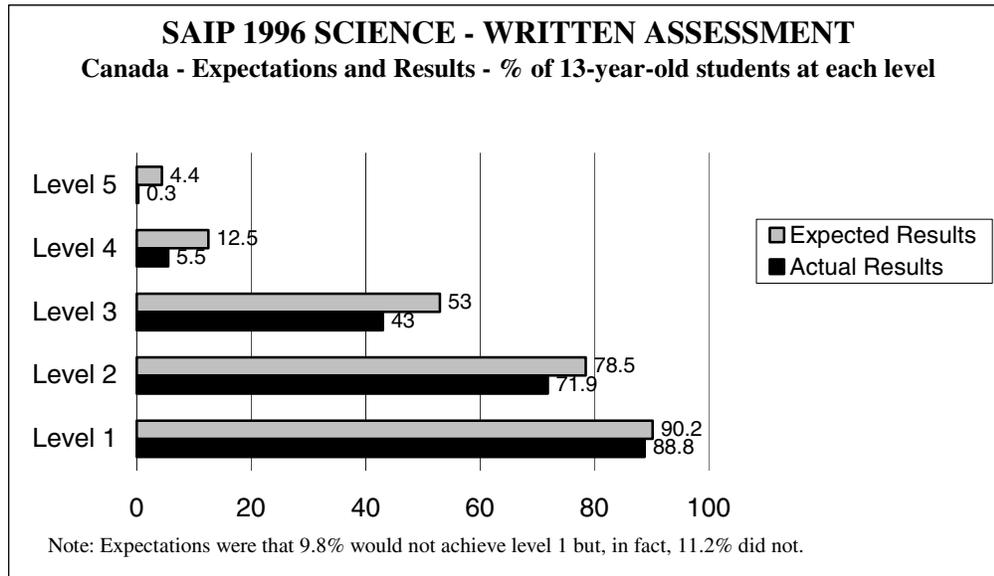


CHART 2

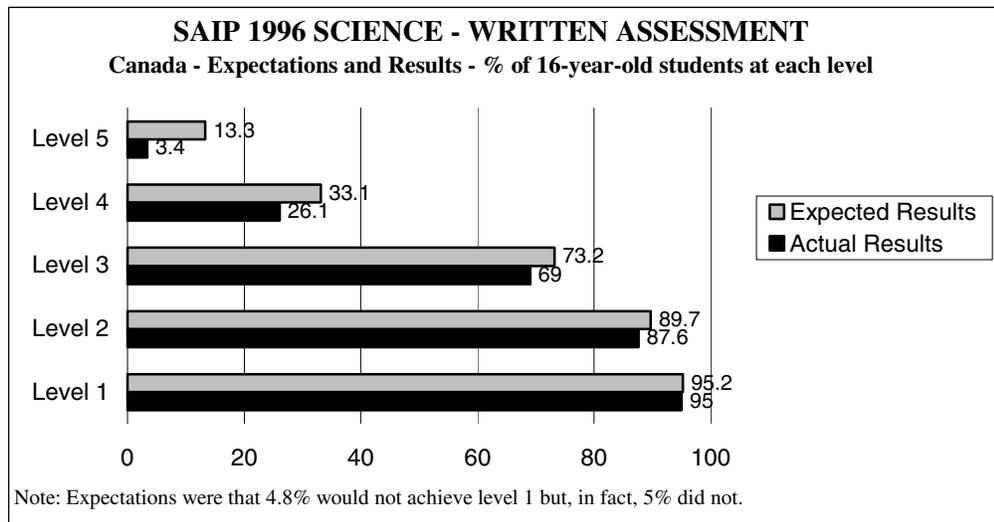


CHART 3

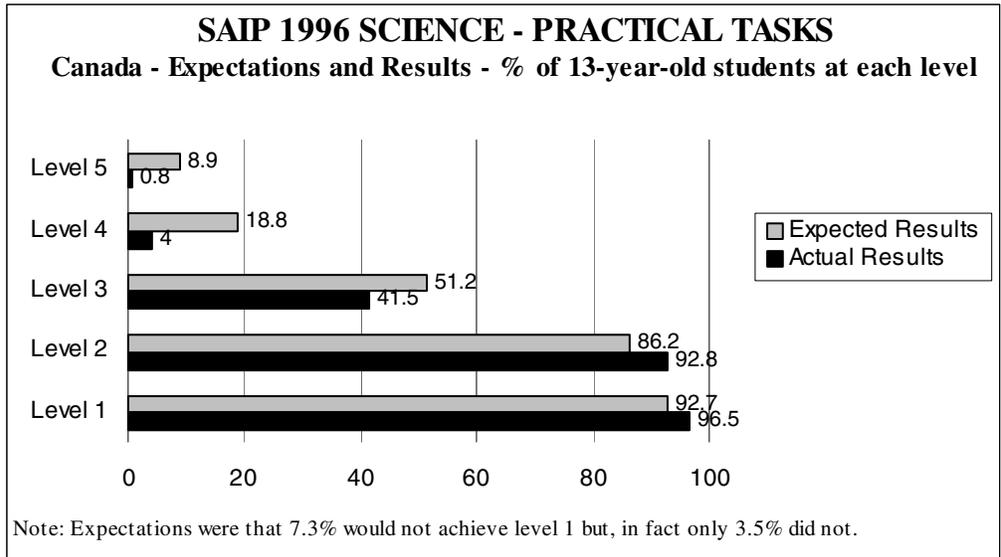
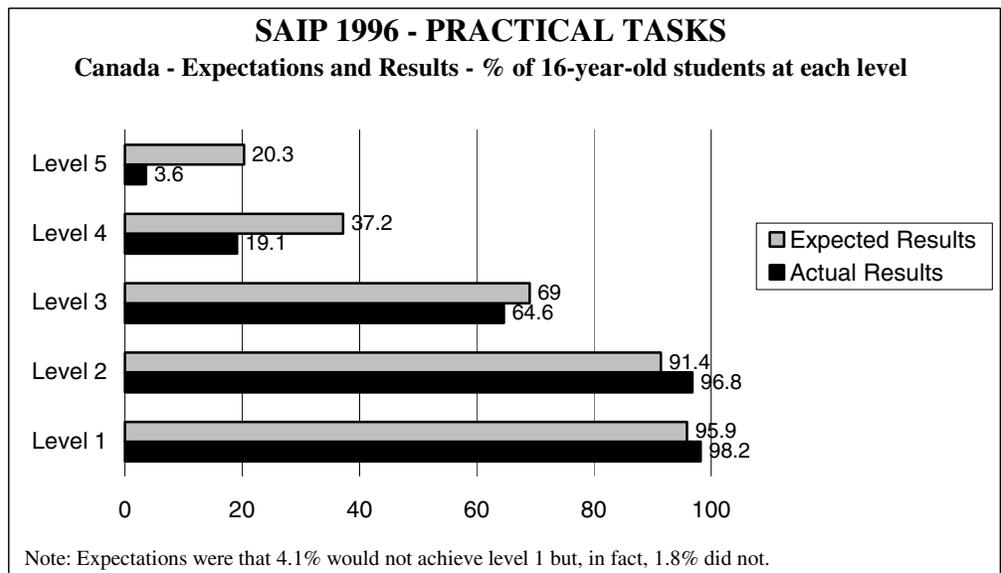


CHART 4



Newsletter Web Site

As we noted in the previous two issues, we have been working hard to make the newsletter available over the Internet. We are pleased to announce that the website now can be accessed. It contains each newsletter issue, the newsletter contacts, and Network A members! The newsletter website is part of a larger website developed and maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The website can be found at the following URL:

<http://www.ed.gov/NCES/inesnwa/neta.html>

To view the website, you need an Internet connection and a web browser. The website is best viewed with Netscape Navigator 2.0 (or more recent) or with Microsoft Internet Explorer, although it has been designed so that it can be viewed reasonably well with other browsers or earlier versions of Netscape. Because each computer system and means of gaining access to the Internet is different, it is recommended that if you have any questions, you first contact your local technical support staff. However, we will be glad to answer your questions, technical and otherwise, as best we can. We also welcome comments and suggestions for improving and expanding the website.

Network Updates

We are pleased to present updates for each of the four INES Networks. We especially appreciate the time the Network Chairs spent providing input for this section.

Network A

Last October, Network A met in Paris, where it discussed on-going plans to initiate a regular

cycle of data collection. Another important part of the meeting was a session with the Network C chair, Jaap Scheerens, to discuss possible areas of collaboration between the two Networks. The next meeting is in Lisbon in March, where Network A will continue its efforts to pursue the data strategy and will hold a joint session with a Network C subgroup to develop ideas about collaboration.

Additionally, the publication resulting from work performed by Network A's Cross-curricular Competencies (CCCs) subgroup has recently been published. It is entitled *Prepared for Life* and is available for purchase through OECD.

Network B

Network B met in Paris in November, where many important decisions were made. An agreement concerning the harmony of classification between EUROSTAT and Network B was made. The Network resolved to work closely with EUROSTAT and OECD to identify and resolve data collection issues. Also, three subgroups – on Human Capital Investment, Continuing Education and Training, and School-to-Work Transition – will form the basis for continuing developmental work on these issues. The Network also decided to take a more “issue-related” approach to its indicators.

This Spring, the Network will be collecting data. Its next meeting will be in June 1997 and will be hosted by Norway. Anticipated topics include the results of the Spring 1997 data collection and the developmental work that is being conducted by the subgroups.

Network C

Network C's last meeting was in Thessaloniki, Greece, where decisions were made about conceptual and analytic work in order to

improve the Network's data collection procedures. As noted above, a Network C subgroup will be holding a joint session with Network A in Lisbon. It is anticipated that the two Networks can provide input to each other regarding their indicators so as to maximize the usefulness of the data that each Network collects.

Network C will be meeting in The Hague at the end of May to discuss the development of school staffing indicators, a proposal for revising the locus of decision-making survey, and a paper on the topic of equity.

Network D

One of Network D's current undertakings is a proposal for developing and pilot testing a questionnaire on the employment-education interface. It is anticipated that the Network can proceed with piloting the questionnaire soon. It is hoped that the Network can generate valid and reliable data on this topic and eventually produce indicators on such topics as the skills and personal qualities of new recruits, the importance of skills and attitudes in job performance, initiatives and partnerships between schools and employers, and current and future skills and priorities.

Country Highlights: Austria

Traditionally, Austrian students have been assessed by their teachers. The Austrian educational culture emphasizes the importance of combining instruction and evaluation. The conditions of assessment are regulated in great detail on a national basis. This country highlight section briefly describes the Austrian education system and then explores in more detail the Austrian approach to assessment.

The Structure of the Educational System

Several actors have responsibility for different parts of Austria's educational system – which is based on the 1962 Federal Constitution Act. These actors include central government (*Bund*), federal provinces (*Laender*), districts (*Bezirke*), and local councils (*Gemeinden*). A simplified summary of the responsible actors that play a role in each educational level is as follows:

- Pre-school education is the sole responsibility of the provincial and district authorities;
- Primary education is the responsibility of the central government (mainly through the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs), provinces, and districts;
- Lower secondary education consists of two major streams – mainstream “compulsory” schools and higher or academic schools (*Gymnasium*). Responsibility for lower secondary education is shared by the central government (through Parliament and Ministries), the provinces (through inspectorates and educational branches), districts, and councils;
- Upper secondary education consists of one-year of pre-vocational school that is required before continuing on to an apprenticeship, the apprenticeship that is conducted in the workplace and at apprentice colleges, and intermediate and higher education in technical, vocational, and academic general schools. Responsibility for upper secondary is the same as that for lower secondary education.

It should be noted that the Ministry of Education, for the most part, is explicitly responsible for the national curricula and for establishing the legal framework for assessment, among other responsibilities. It also has authority over the provincial and district inspectorates and, more directly, is responsible for federally maintained schools (i.e., the higher general, intermediate and above technical and vocational schools, and teacher training colleges). The national curriculum, for the most part, is implemented through national syllabi, which specify teaching goals and pedagogical principles and through authorized textbooks.

Assessment: Austrian Style

As noted above, evaluation and assessment of students' progress is almost entirely the responsibility of the teacher, who develop and administer their own tests. Thus, Austrian teachers not track students' progress but also (and as required by mandate) assess student performance as it relates to the national curriculum.

Teachers use a variety of approaches to assess students, including on-going, or continuous, assessment (i.e., where they observe students' learning first-hand in the classroom). They also use "formal" written tests, oral tests, and practical or hands-on tests. Teachers score their own tests using a uniform marking system consisting of five grades, which represent general levels of proficiency.

Students are informed of their grades two times per academic year. The first report (*Schulnachricht*) is purely informative, containing the student's grade in each subject. The second report (*Zeugnis*), which occurs at the end of the academic year, contains the student's final grade and states whether the student has passed each subject and will be promoted. These decisions are based on an assessment conference consisting of classroom

teachers and the headmaster (or headmistress) that meets at the end of each academic year.

The assessment conference is a mere formality for students who have passed each compulsory subject. Those who fail one subject may be promoted as long as they have not failed the same subject previously. A system is in place that warns students before the end of the academic year if they are in jeopardy of failing a subject. A recent initiative by the Education Minister enlists parents' cooperation in preventing the failure.

To complete secondary education, a set of formal examinations are held, in which students are tested on required and optional subjects, using written and oral questions. These examinations are given by a board of examiners, which is chaired by the school inspector. Successful completion of these examinations qualifies a student for tertiary (i.e., college and university) education.

Assessment: International Style

Although standardized and centrally evaluated tests were used to help design Austria's educational structure at the lower secondary level, there has been no attempt to assess students on a national basis. The predominant view in Austria is that it is more sensible and effective to ensure that educational standards are met by assessing students at the classroom level and using formal examinations at the end of secondary education.

Participation in international assessment surveys is a rather new policy for Austria. So far Austria has taken part in such international surveys as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and IEA's Computers in Education Study (COMPED). International comparisons of the general level of performance for Austria's students on the basis of these surveys have been satisfactory so far and, for the most part, have reassured policy makers and the general

public of the quality of the education system. Nevertheless, in-depth analyses of these surveys could provide information useful for improving the education system. It is anticipated that Austria will participate in future international assessment efforts that focus on such topics as school quality and measuring schools' value-added performance.

Current Assessment Activities

Many assessment activities are being conducted between January and June of this year. Individual country activities are described below and summarized in Table 2.

Test construction, development, and revision activities are underway in the following countries:

- **Belgium (Flemish)** is constructing mathematics tests for grade 6 (12-year-olds) to assess the new national goals;
 - **Canada** is revising its SAIP reading and writing tests and is field testing modified items and the writing topic;
 - **France** is developing protocols for a large-scale diagnostic assessments of students entering primary education. So that these protocols can be used in classrooms beginning September of 1997, logistical planning is underway, including the preparation, organization, and implementation of the protocol. A questionnaire will be given to teacher about the practices they use to teach reading. Also, the assessment protocol is being finalized for students entering the first level of compulsory education;
 - **New Zealand** is planning and developing its 1997 national assessment tests;
 - **Portugal** is developing frameworks for assessing English as a foreign language; and
 - **The United States** is constructing and field testing its 1998 Civics Writing and Reading.
- The following countries are engaging in coordination, preparation, and consensus building activities:
- **Canada** is building consensus in reading and writing topics. In preparation for the administration of the SAIP mathematics assessment, administrative materials are being printed and provincial contact training sessions are being held;
 - **France** is organizing the administration of an evaluation in plastic arts (e.g., sculpting and molding) for a sample of 3ème (year 9) students;
 - **Spain** is coordinating a general evaluation of its educational system by assembling five groups to assess (a) student achievement, (b) plans and teaching methods, (c) educational administration and management, (d) teachers, and (e) relationships between society and schools;
 - **Turkey** is building consensus on tests that were developed by experts, and is considering the effectiveness of several scoring methods; and
 - **The United States** is preparing its civics assessment for 1998.
- Pilot activities are being conducted as follows:
- **England** is piloting mental arithmetic tests for 11- and 14-year-olds and English grammar, spelling, and punctuation tests for 14-year-olds; and
 - **France** is planning a pilot test for an assessment to be given in the Fall of 1997.

The following data collection activities are transpiring:

- **Canada** is administering its SAIP mathematics assessment;
- **England** is giving its assessment tests in English and mathematics to 7-, 11- and 14-year-olds, and in science to 11- and 14-year-olds; and
- **Hungary** is collecting data for its regular national assessment in reading, mathematics, and science.

Scoring and analyzing procedures are being carried out in the following countries:

- **Canada** is scoring and analyzing the results of field tests that were conducted for its reading and writing items and the writing topic; also, student responses for its mathematics content assessment are being coded;
- **England** is scoring the English and mathematics tests on 7-, 11-, and 14-year-olds and the science tests for 11- and 14-year-olds;
- **France** is analyzing the results of its 1995 3ème (year 9) questionnaire on student perceptions of scholastic life;
- **New Zealand** is scoring results from the National Education Monitoring conducted during October of 1996 on reading, speaking, technology aspects, and music for students in year 4 and year 8. Analysis preparation is expected to be complete by July; and
- **Portugal** is scoring and analyzing results from its first national assessment.

The following countries are involved with reporting activities:

- **Canada** is releasing the SAIP Science Public Report as well as the SAIP Technical Report for its 1996 assessment;

- **England** is publishing, for the first time, Primary School Performance results of 11-year-olds;
- **France** is publishing the results of its 1996 large-scale assessment, the 1995 3ème (year 9) school assessment, and the 1995 junior year student perception of scholastic life questionnaire;
- **Hungary's** report of an assessment that was conducted on five student populations in three subjects is being released;
- **New Zealand** is preparing a report for the National Education Monitoring;
- **Portugal** is summarizing and reporting results from its first national assessment; and
- The **United States** is reporting math and science assessment results of data collected in 1996.

Table 2
Current Assessment Activities

Assessment Activities	Countries
Test construction, development, and revision	Belgium (Flemish), Canada, France, New Zealand, Portugal, and the United States
Coordination, preparation, and consensus building	Canada, France, Spain, Turkey, and the United States
Piloting	England, France
Data Collection	Canada, England, Hungary
Scoring and Analyzing	Canada, England, France, New Zealand, and Portugal
Reporting results	Canada, England, France, Hungary, New Zealand, Portugal and the United States

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