

# What Does an A on the British Columbia English 10 Provincial Exam Mean in the International Context?

## THE QUESTION

While we probably all consider an A to be an excellent mark, have you ever wondered how letter grades on British Columbia (BC) provincial exams compare with international standards? This paper compares the standards used for reporting student results on the BC English 10 provincial exam and on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

## WHAT IS PISA?

- PISA stands for the Programme for International Student Assessment.
- It is an international assessment organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- It is written every three years by 15-year-old students from around the World.
- It assesses student achievement in the areas of Reading, Mathematics, and Science in relation to international standards.

## WHAT IS THE BC ENGLISH 10 PROVINCIAL EXAM?

- It is written by all Grade 10 students in BC.
- It assesses student achievement in reading and writing in relation to the provincial standards.
- The provincial exam mark is worth 20% of the student's final grade – the remaining 80% comes from the classroom mark.
- Students can write the provincial exam in any of seven exam sessions throughout the year.

## THE STUDY

In 2009, PISA, with reading as the major domain, was written by about 470,000 students from around the globe. In BC, there were 2,195 students who wrote both the PISA 2009 reading assessment and the BC Grade 10 English provincial exam. This study compared the results of these 2,195 students on the PISA reading assessment and the BC English 10 provincial exam.

The first question the study examined is whether the content of the two assessments is comparable. In general, there is a strong association between the two frameworks. They both measure the same general concept of "reading"; they both cover similar content areas and cognitive processes. However, there are some differences between the two assessments in terms of their length (PISA is longer) and the types of questions asked (PISA is about half multiple-choice and half short written response questions while the BC English 10 provincial exam has fewer, but longer, written-response questions). The BC English 10 provincial exam also has a greater focus on literature and literary conventions than PISA.

## THE RESULTS

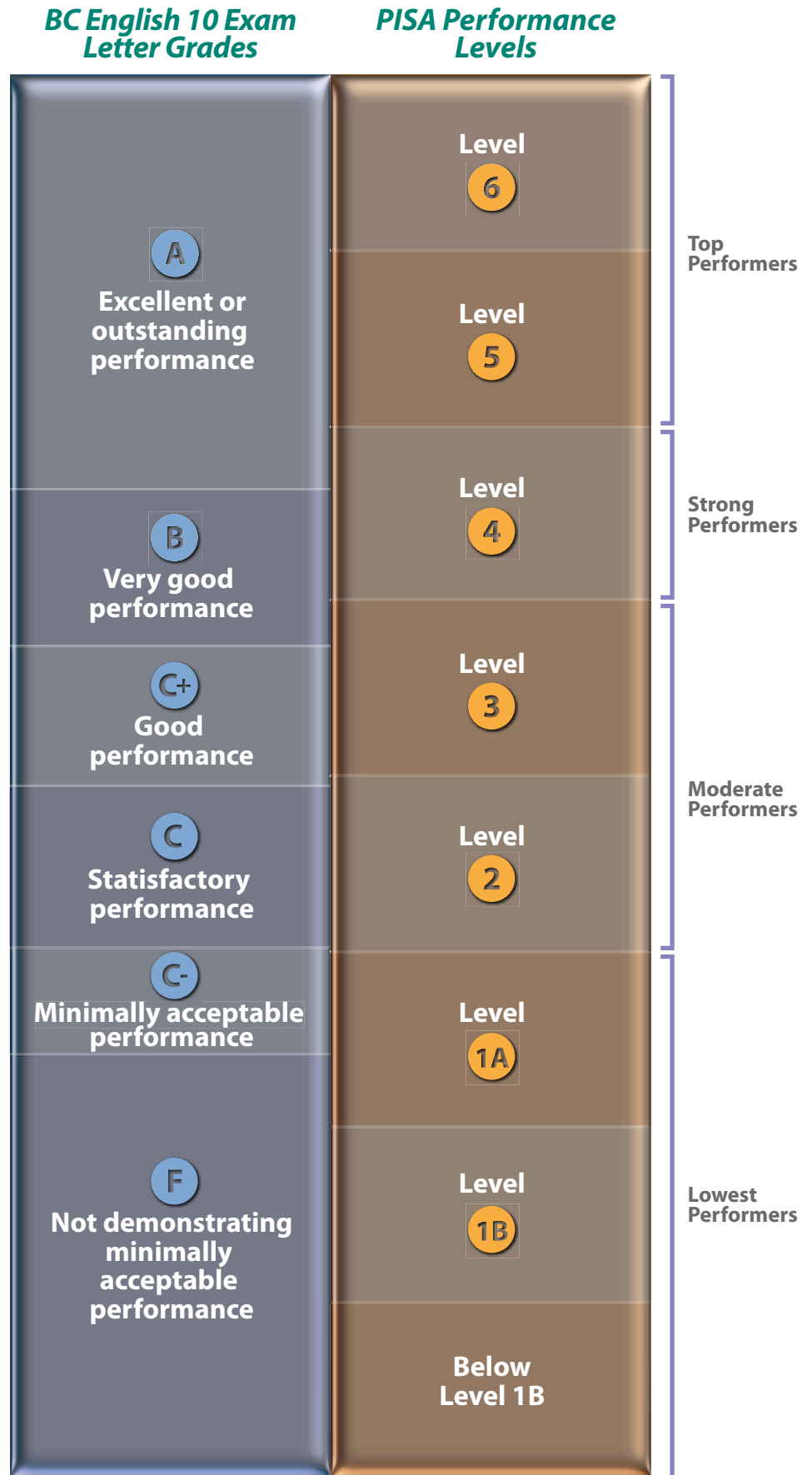
BC English 10 provincial exam results are reported on a **letter grade scale**: A, B, C+, C, C- and F.

PISA results are reported on a scale of **seven levels of proficiency**. Level 2 is defined as the minimal level of achievement needed to fully function in and contribute economically to society.

The diagram at right shows the results of the linking study between the two assessments; it shows where each letter grade of the BC English 10 provincial exam falls in relation to the seven levels of reading performance in PISA. For example, a student who receives a letter grade of C on the BC English 10 provincial exam is performing at PISA level 2. While some of the BC letter grades correspond to a single PISA level, others, such as A, span several PISA levels (levels 4, 5 and 6).

In general, we see a lot of similarities between the two scales. For example, we see that the BC English 10 provincial exam letter grades C-, C, C+ and B correspond quite similarly to PISA performance levels 1A, 2, 3 and 4 respectively.

There are also some differences between the two reporting scales. For example, you may notice that the BC letter grades are clustered in the middle of the PISA performance levels, and that



the BC letter grades A and F cover large ranges of PISA proficiency

levels (levels 4, 5 and 6 for A and levels below 1b, 1b and 1a for F).

## WHY THE DIFFERENCES?

**The reporting needs are different.** While one of the purposes of PISA is to make as many distinctions as possible between the different performance levels of a wide range of students (470,000 students from diverse countries were assessed), the purpose of the BC English 10 provincial exam is to see if and to what extent students are meeting the learning outcomes laid out in the provincial curriculum. If students are not meeting the BC learning outcomes (F), we definitely want to know that, but we do not necessarily need to know that one low-achieving student slightly outperformed another low-achieving student. Along the same lines, if a student demonstrates an excellent performance in relation to the BC learning outcomes (A), we want to know that, but not necessarily that one high-achieving student *slightly* outperformed another high-achieving student.

**The purposes of the two assessments are different.** While the BC English 10 provincial exam is designed to measure how students are meeting provincial outcomes in reading and writing (linked to the curriculum), PISA is designed to provide information about how well prepared students are for entering post-secondary education and the labour force. The information collected in PISA is more closely linked to workforce readiness, while the BC English 10 provincial exam reflects the broader goals of language arts curriculum, beyond workforce implications.

## CONCLUSIONS

In light of these results, we should be confident in the standards present on the BC English 10 provincial exam. What BC defines as an F (not demonstrating the minimally acceptable performance) is very similar to the levels that PISA defines as the lowest performers (levels below 1b, 1b and 1a). In addition, BC's definition of an A (excellent or outstanding performance) corresponds to what PISA defines as top performers (level 6) and strong performers (levels 4 and 5).

In conclusion, the results of this linking study demonstrate that the standards of the BC provincial English 10 exam measure up to international standards and an A on the BC English 10 provincial exam does in fact mean that a student is likely to be a high performer internationally.

**Want to learn more about linking the BC English 10 Exam and PISA?**

**Read the full report by Fernando Cartwright.**

**Want to learn more about BC's participation in International Assessments?**

**Visit the Ministry of Education Webpage.**

