Presentation to the Board of Trustees  
English Language School Board  
Prince Edward Island  
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Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR)

Education 20/20 Inc. is a national, not-for-profit education organization, located in Charlottetown, PEI. We are governed by a volunteer Board of Directors, comprised of people who have demonstrated an interest in and knowledge of education but are not representative of any educational constituency. Our mission is to improve the quality of education for every Canadian.

Today, Education 20/20 is here to ask the English Language School Board (ELSB) to consider the merits of Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) programs. PLAR is a formal evaluation process whereby students can obtain course credit towards their high school diploma based on their prior learning. Within a PLAR framework, there are a number of approaches that could be adopted including challenge for credit and exam exemptions. With the “challenge” process, students can choose to be assessed on course material without having taken the course. And typically students can apply to challenge for credit at any time. Such a process recognizes a student’s prior knowledge and skills, and is consistent with a student-centered approach to education. Further PLAR validates the view of learning as a process that takes place in numerous settings both inside and outside of the school.

Students continuously develop and utilize skills and knowledge through their life experiences. For example, work, family interactions, independent study, volunteer service, civic activities, travel and hobbies all offer the potential for an individual to learn. Why not give students the opportunity to gain academic credit for this independent learning? Consider the student of a farming family who has been working on the family farm for years. He may have already mastered the requirements for Agriscience 621A where students “follow a guided inquiry process that will result in an investigation and presentation of a crop production issue”. What about the student who has been tinkering with computers in her garage? She may already know the core material covered in Information Technology 801A where “students who complete this course will be able to describe the internal components of a computer, assemble a computer system, install an operating system, and troubleshoot using system tools and diagnostic software”.

Today, highly credible and comprehensive learning resources such as the Khan Academy are available to students to support their independent learning. PLAR offers a way to
recognize and incorporate this individualized learning into the existing framework of student assessment. The PLAR process should certify that learning meets the prescribed standard. And the standard of achievement must be the same as for those students who completed the course, that is, students should be evaluated against the PEI curriculum.

Prior learning assessment highlights the key distinction between instruction and content mastery. With PLAR the focus is on what you learned rather than where and how the learning occurred. Students should be encouraged to continue with their learning outside of the classroom, throughout the school year and during the summer months. One would anticipate this would motivate students to consider out of school activities as learning opportunities. Doing so may boost confidence and self-esteem.

At the university and college level, educator Nan Travers from SUNY Empire State College (NY) indicates studies have shown that “students who are participating in PLA(R) have greater reflection skills, better problem solving skills, more tacit knowledge, more self-regulated learning, more self-direction, better study skills, and a better understanding of the role of teachers.” The benefits for students to experience this earlier in their education are obvious.

According to education author, Anya Kamenetz, “PLA(R) credits bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world; like independent study, they allow for customization of the curriculum. For students, the right to supplement their education with prior learning credits has obvious advantages. First, it means they can finish faster because they’re not starting at the beginning. Second, according to those who run these programs, the process of reviewing credits for prior learning, especially when students put together a portfolio that demonstrates that learning, is valuable in intangible ways. Students take the time to reflect on, assimilate, and integrate what they’ve learned and to think about how it fits with their future goals.”

This PLAR activity of maintaining a learning portfolio is well-aligned with the Student Graduation and Transition Planner project currently underway in the ELSB. And PLAR is consistent with the Senior High School Working Group, who made the case in 2013 for increased flexibility in how students gain credit.

We encourage the Board to look to other jurisdictions for best practices and metrics of success. For example, Ontario has a well-developed PLAR process where the evaluation and assessment procedures are carried out under the direction of the school principal. In addition, the Canadian Association of Prior Learning and Assessment offers strong, nationally-based best practices at the post-secondary level.

Finally, with PLAR the teaching and assessment functions in education are more separable much like education programs through the Royal Conservatory of Music, where the teacher facilitates the learning and the assessor ensures that the education

standards are met. Education 20/20 sees great value in such a model as it would focus teachers on student instruction and engagement. The summative assessment of learning based on determined standards could be organized at the Board level and, hence, may provide for improved consistency in student assessment across the Board. At this stage, Education 20/20 is certainly willing to partner with the ELSB to help with any background research on PLAR programming.

In conclusion, PLAR offers students the opportunity to think more broadly about their education, it places value on learning experiences outside the school, it puts students clearly in the driver’s seat of their learning journey, it helps place students at appropriate levels within educational programs, and, as such, may lead to greater student engagement in education. We hope you agree that the benefits of prior learning assessment recognition for our students warrant further exploration.

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