



Statement – Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test

March 10, 2021

Each year, Ontario's Grade 10 students write the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) as one of the province-wide assessments administered by the EQAO. The test is meant to measure whether students are meeting the minimum standard for literacy across all subjects up to the end of Grade 9. Successful completion of the test is one of the requirements of high school graduation.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the literacy requirement for students graduating in 2021 has been waived. Instead, EQAO will be field testing a new online OSSLT for students who are learning in-person or those learning remotely who choose to take the test in person. As this is a pilot, school boards have the option of choosing whether or not to participate. Some boards have decided to go ahead with the test, while others have opted not to. This has led to inconsistency and inequities across our schools.

The Ontario Principals' Council and the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario, representing 7,000 elementary and secondary principals and vice-principals across the province, are calling on the government to cancel the pilot test for this year. We are strongly recommending this course of action for the following reasons.

1. In light of the global pandemic, the top priority for all schools should be student well-being. Principals and vice-principals continue to deal with ongoing changes to policies, procedures and protocols. Students are learning in-school, remotely or a combination of both. Principals, vice-principals, teachers and support staff have gone to extraordinary lengths to try to keep the learning environment as "normal" as possible; however, this has been extremely difficult. Any processes that are not necessary at this time, such as the pilot of a new OSSLT, should be cancelled. It is not in the best interest of students to pursue an assessment, let alone one that uses a new instrument, that may lead to unnecessary anxiety for any of them, particularly given all the research that has highlighted the additional stress our students are under as a result of the pandemic.
2. The preparation and administration of this pilot will result in a loss of instructional time for students. It will be particularly challenging for students who would need extra time to prepare for and write the test. As well, school boards typically cancel classes for students in other grades not taking part in the test on that day, in order to administer the test in an appropriate environment. This will mean loss of instructional time for those students as well. This lost instruction will be significantly compounded for

students currently learning in quadmester or octomester systems. Instead of preparing for a pilot assessment, schools should be focussing on instructional time, putting all our efforts into teaching and learning.

3. Providing only those students who are attending in-person schools, and those in virtual schools who may be permitted to come into a school, with the opportunity to take part in the pilot is inequitable. Students who are learning in a virtual setting – due to personal circumstances, medical conditions or mandated lockdown restrictions – should not be treated differently than students who can or are able to attend school in person.
4. Given the increase in variant cases and the threat of a third wave, schools have continued to move between in-person and virtual learning with very short notice. If schools have transitioned to virtual learning including on the day of the test administration, the preparation work and loss of regular instructional learning will have been in vain. Moreover, if only some students/schools are impacted by an emergency move to virtual learning, this would again create an equity issue.
5. In some boards, the administration of this test requires the use of many Occasional Teachers to assist with supervision, set-up and support. With an ongoing teacher shortage, schools are already struggling to find enough teachers for daily classroom instruction. Many schools have unfilled classrooms every day. The shortage has been exacerbated by the new provincial guidelines requiring self-isolation that recently came into effect. There are simply not enough Occasional Teachers available this year to assist with administering the OSSLT.

EQAO has acknowledged that the instructional needs of students is a priority right now, especially since this is a field test and no school or board data will be gathered. We are calling on the government to cancel the pilot of the OSSLT this year. The emotional, instructional and operational impacts on our students and staff far outweigh the benefits of pursuing such a test, particularly if some boards have already chosen to opt out.

Finally, we are also recommending that our current Grade 11 students be exempted from the OSSLT graduation requirement for 2022. We believe that the expectations measured by the test will surely have been met since their Grade 9 year given their literacy learning in all subjects through to and including their successful completion of Grade 11. Past experience also demonstrates that almost all students would have passed the test, had they taken it last year. Not only is there no pedagogical rationale to justify the resource commitment of administering the test to this cohort, but it also represents added stress that no student or family needs at this time or even next year when the student is in grade 12.

We know that the Premier and Minister place a high priority on student well-being. Principals and vice-principals, who are in schools everyday with these students, strongly believe that it is not in the best interest of students to take on new and voluntary initiatives, such as piloting a new assessment, at this time. Daily literacy instruction must remain the key focus of learning, and every secondary school has a cross-curricular literacy plan in place that achieves this goal.