



PROVINCE-WIDE TESTING IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS

In 2003, the Ontario Principals' Council developed a paper outlining our recommendations for the improvement of standardized testing in Ontario, administered by the EQAO. As front-line school leaders, principals and vice-principals have been in the unique position of seeing firsthand the rollout of province-wide testing over the past decade.

In our view, the mandate of any testing program, be it school-based or province-wide, should be to assess the student's understanding of the material, determine areas that require further remediation and use the data collected to refine the learning plan. Testing must focus on the best interest of the student, as well as the accountability needs of the public.

The OPC continues to support testing and accountability. However, testing must provide schools with current data that can be used to benefit students in a timely manner, taking into consideration the significant variation in learning abilities and the differences among students from diverse regions, backgrounds and cultures. Accountability should be focused on ensuring that every student is receiving quality instruction, is continuing to progress with the curriculum and is getting the help they need. It should not be about ranking schools, programs or students.

The province-wide testing process must consist of more than just a collection of data; it must address the needs of students while being an appropriate use of the time and resources it demands.

2003 Position

Our 2003 paper recommended shifting the emphasis from primarily system monitoring to one of improved student learning. We recommended an altered model that would integrate the provincial tests into ongoing classroom assessment, as opposed to them being an "add on" to the curriculum.

Such a model would provide immediate results to classroom teachers, allowing them to give students the help they need to perform better in school. Without any increased workload, this model would provide consistency and accountability in a more cost effective way, significantly reduce the onerous and time-consuming administrative burden on schools and meet the government's objective for public accountability.

We proposed that the EQAO establish baseline standards of achievement, provide training and resources to schools for marking the tests, audit schools to ensure consistent administration and marking, and collect results from a sample of students to ensure reliability of marking and the compilation of reports.

Schools would administer the tests within regular classroom assessment; mark the tests within the instructional day; and use the data in a timely manner for ongoing student assessment, remediation and school improvement planning.

Improvements to the System

Since 2003, there have been improvements to the system, for which we credit the efforts of the EQAO:

- Cohort comparisons have been provided for marks received in grade 3 versus marks the same students received in grade 6 (although there are still difficulties tracking a transient population).
- For the grade 9 Math Assessment, while schools are still required to send results to the EQAO office, the test is now being “marked” in the school. This has allowed teachers to work as professional teams to assess student work, see where students are performing well and where they need improvement, align instruction and assessment to address the areas where students did not perform well, embed the assessment of the test within the course assessment and identify areas for additional professional development for teachers.
- The shortened OSSLT has been beneficial. The half day assessment is far more manageable for students and for the implementation of the test.
- The math assessment is less stressful due to flexibility in timelines, the ability to assess at the school level and it’s non-requirement for graduation.
- In 2003, we noted that schools and classroom teachers were not receiving the results in a timely manner so that remedial action, where needed, could be taken immediately. Progress has been made in this area. The Primary and Junior Assessment results are now provided more quickly, albeit over the summer after the students have been organized into their new classes.
- The reporting mechanism for both secondary assessments is better and far more detailed than it was originally. Timelines and information received for each student is better and allows educators to see where students need additional help.

Ongoing Issues

Despite some improvements, Ontario's school leaders are still frustrated with certain aspects of the testing procedure:

1. The tests, as an add-on to the regular classroom assessment process, are creating multiple challenges for schools in terms of timetabling, resource needs, disruption of school schedules, budgeting and additional work for staff.
2. Chronic absenteeism is a significant problem in some schools. It is unfair to include in statistics the results of students who never or rarely attend school. Doing so skews results, is unfair to schools in challenging neighbourhoods and further lowers the public image of such schools.
3. Providing results and rankings without the demographic context being taken into account is troubling and unfair to those schools where the barriers to learning are evident and the staff is working hard to help students overcome them.
4. There needs to be a better alignment between daily accommodations provided for Special Needs students and what is permitted during an EQAO test. Students who receive accommodations on a regular basis should not be denied those same accommodations during such high-stakes tests.

We think it would be appropriate at this point for the EQAO to be adapting different versions of the test for students with special education needs.

Schools with a small sample group size should not be accountable for the community class of students with developmental delays. These students may add up to five results in a class of only 22 students in total, unfairly skewing the results.

5. The reporting and comparing of test results by school remains of tremendous concern. Such rankings tend to draw students and parents away from the "weak" schools into the "high performing" schools, further exacerbating the equity problem.
6. If the results are to be useful to the classroom teacher (the only place they can be used to inform instruction), the teacher needs to have the results before the first day of the next school year, so that the planning undertaken during the summer will be based on current data. By using our suggested model – integrating the provincial tests into ongoing classroom assessment – the Grade 3 or 6 teacher could use the results for reporting in June and the Grade 4 or 7 teacher could use the data for long range planning. The assessment would become part of the school program, with real meaning for students and parents.

7. The only results that should be published are the method 2 results, reflecting only those students who actually write the test. This is the only accurate reflection of performance. Students who do not meet the criteria for writing the test should not be included in the published results.
8. When a new school is opened, there is little a school can do to review EQAO data for the students, since they have often come from a variety of other schools. We would like to see a way for data to be transferred and collated for new classes.
9. In order for the testing process to be effective, additional resources must be allocated to the lowest achieving students. There needs to be a collaborative effort among all education partners to focus on improving the results of the lowest achievers. This requires an in-depth understanding of issues suggested above around attendance, special education and ESL supports and their subsequent impact on student learning.
10. Schools need to be able to see the actual test once it has been evaluated. Without it, no valuable improvements can be made to teaching and learning strategies. Communicating that a student has dropped from a level 3 to a level 2 does not help the teacher if that teacher cannot see the test to understand why this drop occurred.

Conclusion

While we acknowledge that improvements have been made, the provincial testing process remains burdensome and problematic and is not, in our view, being used in the most effective way to improve student achievement. We continue to advocate for an altered model that would meet the needs of students, government, parents and taxpayers, and would result in better student achievement for all.