

Sponsored Content: Time to Rethink Standardized Testing in Ontario

[22.11.2017 Liz Stuart O](#)



In September, Premier Kathleen Wynne and Minister of Education Mitzie Hunter announced a review of Ontario's assessment practices, including the annual standardized tests administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). The stated goal is to ensure that the tests are culturally relevant, measure a wide range of learning, and reflect student well-being and equity. But rather than merely looking to tinker with the tests by substituting questions or adding new sections, this review should serve as an opportunity to fundamentally rethink the EQAO testing regime, with an eye toward eliminating it entirely.

Catholic teachers have been arguing since EQAO's inception that the tests are counterproductive, even harmful. In the meantime, the body of research showing the inefficacy of high-stakes achievement testing has only grown. There are serious, well-founded concerns about the impact these tests have on the learning environment and student well-being, as well as doubts about the legitimacy of the data yielded. While the government and EQAO have always argued that the tests provide essential information to improve student achievement and ensure the education system is accountable to taxpayers, it should be clear by now that they do little to support what is, or should be, happening in our classrooms.

Teachers are incredibly troubled by the amount of time, energy, and resources that must be spent preparing for the tests. Although EQAO assessments are supposedly not meant to be used to rank or compare schools, and administrators say that students should not fret about their performance, it is easy to see how subtle forms of stress play out in schools: trustees and superintendents feel nervous about how their schools will measure up, which leads to pressure being exerted on principals, who pass it on to teachers, who then have to spend weeks focusing on the specific types of questions and answers that will be found on the tests. If results in one year are deemed unsatisfactory, the anxiety is only heightened the following year. We also know that some boards and schools are diverting precious funds that could be used for books, events, or equipment toward test preparation materials.

To make matters worse, EQAO tests do not give an accurate reflection of students' learning: they only capture a moment in time, while failing to account for the variety of skills and factors that affect achievement. Concentrating on standardized measurements results in a narrow focus on the types of knowledge and ability that lend themselves to being measured. Qualities such as empathy, humility, self-control, and resiliency, highly valued both in school and society at large, are not captured. Moreover, the many social and environmental factors that influence student performance – poverty, nutrition, or mental health, for example – do not figure in the analysis; in fact, the stress caused by the

high-stakes testing only serves to exacerbate the negative impact these issues can have on student well-being and success.

As Catholic teachers, we are committed to ensuring that students are excelling in literacy and numeracy, but we also strive to create safe, welcoming classrooms for students of all backgrounds and abilities. We provide a holistic education guided by core values such as fairness, compassion, respect, and concern for social and environmental justice. Our goal is to help students develop a wide range of knowledge and competencies that will enable them to make positive contributions to their communities. These are important life lessons that no standardized test could encapsulate.

The good news is that all of these problems can be easily addressed. EQAO tests are not only irrelevant and unhelpful, they are unnecessary. Although the government has maintained that these measurements provide an overview of whether the publicly funded education system is working, the reality is that we already have ample evidence of how students are faring with subject matter, and what kinds of support are needed. Teachers regularly use our professional knowledge and judgment to conduct assessments for, as, and of learning – that is, to determine what students know, to help them practice and grow, and to gauge how they are progressing. We use these records and observations to refine our lesson plans and decide where more individual attention is required, as well as to complete provincial report cards.

It is our sincere hope that all options are on the table for this review of EQAO. Teachers, students, parents, and trustees around the province agree that standardized testing does not benefit our classrooms, nor our society. At the very least, the government should look to implement a random sampling model, which would alleviate some of the burden. However, our ideal scenario would see high-stakes achievement testing done away with altogether, and teachers fully empowered with the time and freedom to prepare our students for the ultimate test: life.

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