



Standardized Testing in Ontario

– Politicizing Quality and Accountability in Public Education

Gary Fenn, Domenic Bellissimo

Photo: Other education Blog

In 1995, the people of Ontario elected a conservative government whose platform was based on a simple slogan – the Common Sense Revolution. After five years of economic decline in Ontario and in much of North America, citizens had started to buy into the conservative agenda of cutting government spending, getting public servants to do more with less, and sharply increasing the need for accountability for every public dollar spent.

The new conservative government was quick to attack public education and alter the working conditions of all public education workers, including increasing class sizes, making teachers teach more classes, cutting the number of workers in schools, making what were voluntary activities part of education workers' mandatory job duties, and more "measurable" accountability for teachers when it came to learning outcomes. Education workers protested these changes and launched a two week protest that closed schools, and won some

support from the public. As a result, the government backed down from most of these changes.

However, what didn't change was the government's agenda of "greater accountability" for education workers through standardized testing. In 1996, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was formed as an arm's-length government agency that would produce, administer and evaluate a regime of standardized tests at different grade levels for students, specifically in the areas of mathematics and literacy. Initially, there was broad public support for these tests—assuming that the results would be used to assist students and direct resources to the proper community schools.

EQAO tests are conducted at four grade levels:

Grade 3 (8-9 year olds) – Mathematics and Literacy

Grade 6 (11-12 year olds) – Mathematics and Literacy

Grade 9 (14-15 year olds) – Mathematics

Grade 10 (15-16 year olds) – Literacy

The Grade 3 and 6 tests are conducted over a period of one week. The Grade 9 Mathematics test and the Grade 10 Literacy test were done over two days, but that was reduced to one day after 2004. The Grade 3 and 6 tests are not part of a student's final assessment in terms of their progress within class. However, the Grade 9 Mathematics test is often used as part of a student's final course assessment.

The Grade 10 Literacy test is a mandatory graduation requirement for students in secondary schools. If a student fails to reach the 75% mark to pass the Literacy test, then the student must either write the test again the following year, or complete a full Ontario Literacy Course in order to graduate. Pressure is also placed on the educators, whether they are teachers or support personnel that provide one on one help to students, to prepare them specifically for that test. The outdated approach of *teaching-to-the-test* has been resurrected as standard practice, as many schools engage in practice sessions, or teaching students how to better answer multiple-choice questions, which are often found on the EQAO tests.

The high stakes nature of these tests has led to significant stress in the lives of students. Education workers in schools have frequently reported that on the day of the Grade 10 Literacy Tests, many students, especially those who have struggled with academics or are students identified with disabilities, are stressed and upset. This was most clearly demonstrated on October 20, 2016 when EQAO piloted an online version of the Literacy test across Ontario.

The online test ran into technical difficulties across the province. A small number of students were able to complete the test before most of the problems started. Some students were almost finished the test only have it freeze on their computer screen. Many could not even log in to the test. As a result, the entire online test was cancelled, affecting tens of thousands of students. Those who managed to complete the test were told that it would not count. Students who wanted to avoid taking the traditional paper and pen test in the spring, or who were on their second try trying to avoid taking a full Literacy course were left out in the cold. EQAO would later state that the entire system fell prey to computer hackers, which caused the test to not load onto many computers.

What are the results misused for?

What has become a more significant issue is what is done with test results. EQAO test results are reported to the public annually on a school by school basis. This results in schools being compared to each other, creating demographic divides between neighbourhoods and communities. Comparing schools with trends of weak results with other schools in the area has led to parents to move their children away to another, higher achieving school. For those parents that face issues of poverty, moving their child may not be an option. What results is the further ghettoization of neighbourhood schools stigmatized by standardized test scores.

It goes further. Conservative think tanks, such as the Fraser Institute of Canada, which has been seen as fostering an agenda of privatization, publicly ranks schools annually across the country based on stan-

standardized test score data as reported by Ministries of Education. Real estate brokers have now taken to using EQAO test data in Ontario to provide potential home buyers with rankings of neighbourhoods based on school test results. One Toronto real estate agent has prominently advertised on her website that “It’s not just a great ranking that makes a school district the right choice for your family, but it’s a good start.” Once again, this further perpetrates the division of communities and promotes greater discrimination. It reinforces the class based differences in school results as well.

One significant challenge is that governments have actively convinced parents that standardized testing is both reliable and necessary when it comes to keeping the education system, and more specifically the teachers that work within it, more accountable. A single snapshot in time on a high stakes test created by a group of people that know nothing about the student who is forced to write it has become the acceptable practice for parents. In a 2016 poll conducted by Vector Research, almost 9 out of 10 Canadians saw standardized tests as reliable and accurate measures of student performance.

Yet, when asked if teacher evaluations including tests that teachers design are reliable alternatives to standardized tests, **57% of Canadians said that teacher evaluations were more reliable than standardized tests.** Therefore, by showing the value of the work that teachers and all other education workers do for students around assessment and evaluation, standardized testing shows some weakness in public support. Rather than calling for testing’s complete abolition, authentic school-based assessment and evaluation needs to be promoted as the best way to identify progress.

Since its creation in 1996, EQAO has actively investigated expansion of high stakes standardized testing in other subject areas. However, enough resistance has been mounted by unions, educators and other education stakeholders to put a stop to additional testing. There is room for optimism that EQAO and its standardized tests may be on the way out, or at least will not to grow any further than the current \$33 million annual budget.

But, EQAO announced this year that it is looking to expand its testing regime. The next area of testing will not be on a particular subject area, nor will it be



*"The new
**conservative
government** was
quick to attack
public education and
**alter the working
conditions of all
public education
workers...***"

on a particular learning skill. Instead, EQAO wants to start testing students on their "well-being". In a recent document published by the Ontario government, called *Ontario's Well-Being Strategy for Education*, the government stated, "we can work together to develop ways to measure our progress in promoting well-being, from the early years to Grade 12." The agency that would conduct this testing on student well-being is EQAO.

While a broader strategy on promoting student well-being is both welcomed and encouraged by educators everywhere, moving to quantify it with a standardized test and have the results made public by school and district could be disastrous. Further divisions of neighbourhoods and communities will occur. Conservative

and neo-liberal forces will further exploit the results to fuel their own agendas of privatization and cost cutting.

The quantification of student success and well-being is part of the continuing trend of greater accountability in the public sector. This obsession with accountability has allowed anti-public sector groups to cloud the real issues that impact children. "We can fix it ONLY if we can measure it," has become the call of the conservative and the neo-liberal. Standardized testing is here to stay, unless those in education can convince the public that they know their children best, and some test created by someone with little to no understanding of your child is not the best measure of their success and well-being.