

A ROAD MAP FOR SUCCESS

TESTING IN OUR SCHOOLS

A REPORT BY THE ONTARIO STUDENT
TRUSTEES' ASSOCIATION – L'ASSOCIATION DES
ELEVES CONSEILLERES ET CONSEILLERS DE
L'ONTARIO

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Background

In elementary and secondary schools, students of Ontario are required to write several province-wide tests designed by the Education Quality and Accountability Office. Helping ensure the students of Ontario are receiving the best possible education, and helping district school boards determine which areas of education require more support, are among the goals of these tests.

The tests, often dubbed “standardized tests”, are currently written by students in grades 3, 6, 9 and 10. The grade 3 and 6 tests encompass both literacy and mathematics, whereas the grade 9 test focuses specifically on math and the grade 10 test focuses on literacy. The grade 9 math test counts towards students’ final marks in their math course. Students must pass the grade 10 literacy test in order to receive their high school diploma. Plans have been set by the government of Ontario to introduce more standardized tests into schools for the “core subjects” between grades 3 and 11.

As these tests have significant impact on students, the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association - l’Association des élèves conseillères et conseillers de l’Ontario (OSTA-AECO) has consulted with its members to determine areas where students feel overhaul is needed for the standardized testing system. This report is a compilation of common concerns students have around the province with the current method of testing, and contains recommendations for improvement. The contents of this report reflect the concept of our motto: a student vision and a united voice.

Challenges

OSTA-AECO recognizes the importance of re-evaluation and improvement in order to ensure Ontario’s students are getting the best possible education. Most Student Trustees understand the need for standardized tests in order to ensure equity, fairness and accountability.

There were a number of different challenges outlined by our membership towards the current methods of administration, preparation, and the reporting of results of the tests.

- • Different factors attribute to students feeling a large amount of unneeded anxiety while preparing for, and writing the tests. These emotional stress factors are over-burdensome to a student, especially in the younger years of testing.
- • As the education system becomes more accustomed to the tests, focus has shifted more toward result-oriented aspects and away from process-related aspects of learning (ie: teaching to the tests, spending an excess amount of class-time learning how to write the tests).
- • Students often do not know what is expected of them for the test, including how it will be marked, or why they are writing it.

- • Some of the tests are written over several full school days. This amount of time is too long.
- • The results of the standardized test are the most important part of the process.
Currently the system is inefficient and slow.
- • The diploma requirement of the grade 10 tests has implications that need to be re-evaluated.
- • The inconsistency between the test and the evaluation of the curriculum needs to be addressed. Students who pass their grade 9 English or French courses should be able to expect to pass the literacy test.

Explanation and Recommendations

Emotional Factors: Anxiety and Stress

Students take their education very seriously. It is understood that success in school and learning will lead to a solid future for individuals, their family and the community. Therefore, students put a lot of pressure upon themselves to succeed in school. The EQAO testing process puts a lot of undue stress upon students as a result of the manner in which it is executed.

Well in advance, students know that they will be writing province-wide tests. Consequently, students are continually questioning their preparedness. Stress and doubt are a large part of this questioning. Most of this stress comes from outside factors, and OSTA-AECO believes that steps need to be taken to reduce the stress and anxiety felt because of the tests.

Teachers understand the importance of the tests on students' education, especially when it comes to grade 9 and 10 where the tests begin to count towards diplomas. However, in many instances teachers are not well prepared for the tests themselves, and do not know how to properly prepare for, and administer the tests with low stress procedures. Some teachers take too much time in preparing for the tests, which makes students feel like it is bigger than necessary. Others "talk up" the importance of the test far too much, which leads to certain students thinking the tests are more than they are. Resources must be established so confusion among teachers and students can be minimized.

Recommendation #1:

THAT resources be developed for teachers which outline low-stress methods for preparing students for province-wide tests.

Much of the stress that students feel while going through the testing process comes from the lack on information that is available to them. This stems from a lack of understanding as to why the tests have been implemented, but other aspects relate simply to the fact that students do not know what to expect with the tests.

Throughout high school, on most exams, students are given an outline of topics that will be covered on the exam. For province-wide tests, nothing of this manner is given to students, which is a large obstacle when undergoing preparation. When topic-lists are available to students, they are able to review the list and ensure they are ready for each of the areas. As well, the methods of marking for the tests have not been made clear to students. Students do not know what is expected of them when giving an answer and therefore cannot be sure that their answer is sufficient.

By giving students background information leading up to the tests, stress levels can be decreased. When students are working in a low-stress environment, they are more likely to do well on the tests and more likely to accurately convey their knowledge on paper.

Recommendation #2:

THAT information be given to students prior to the province-wide tests which outline reasons for the tests, topics to be covered on the tests, and how the tests will be evaluated.

The Focus Shift

Since standardized tests have become a large part of Ontario's education system, a focus shift has been seen in how students are taught. More and more time is being devoted to test preparation while in the classroom. Teachers have begun to get better accustomed to the testing process, and they feel they can help students succeed on the tests by teaching them methods of answering questions which will get them higher scores.

“Teaching to the test” is a phenomenon examined widely among education stakeholders. This is the process by which teachers place a marked emphasis on testing materials in order to do well on province-wide tests. OSTA-AECO is fundamentally opposed to teaching to the test, and believes that tests should be a compliment to the curriculum.

Classroom time is beginning to be devoted to skills and methods that will help students do well on the tests. Although it is good that these types of lessons are being taught to students, OSTA-AECO believes that class-time is better spent learning the curriculum rather than learning test-writing skills. While such skills are necessary and useful in life, OSTA-AECO recommends that after-school clinics be held for students interested in test-preparation so that the focus of class-time can remain on learning the curriculum.

Recommendation #3:

THAT steps be taken to ensure that the phenomenon of “teaching to the test” is avoided.

Recommendation #4:

THAT test preparation be held in after school clinics rather than during class time.

The Length of Tests

In elementary and secondary school, tests are usually written in the span of one period, or about 70 minutes. Final exams for secondary schools can range anywhere from 60 minutes to 180 minutes, usually not any longer. The grade 3 and 6 EQAO testing takes place over a period of five days. The grade 9 EQAO testing takes 4 days. The grade 10 literacy tests incorporate two full days of test writing. This outline shows a big shift in how tests are being administered to students. The government tests take a significantly longer amount of time to write than any of the regular tests students write in school.

It takes a lot of energy to write a test or an exam. With high stress-levels and a large workload, it is easy to get worn-out while writing a test. The large change from writing short tests and exams to suddenly having to write for days at a time can be a change that students meet with limited success. In order to ensure proper evaluation of the students, OSTA-AECO recommends that province-wide tests be modeled in similar fashions of regular tests that students write in their classroom.

Recommendation #5:

- a) a) **THAT the length of the grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 EQAO tests be re-evaluated and**
- b) b) **THAT the length of the grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 EQAO tests be modeled after regular tests that students write in their classrooms.**

Reporting of Results

The most important part of the testing process is evaluation to assess those areas in need of improvement. By looking at the results and seeing common areas where improvement is needed, boards and the Ministry of Education can work together to ensure programmes are installed to address the areas of need.

Many of OSTA-AECO's members have addressed concerns regarding the rate at which students, teachers, parents and school boards receive the results of the testing. Thus far, the EQAO does not have a good record in ensuring results are released early (it has often taken many months before any results are seen). The faster results are released, the faster boards can begin to work on improving student achievement.

Recommendation #6:

THAT the EQAO take steps to speed up the reporting process from standardized tests.

The results of the grade 10 literacy tests have often been criticized as being not useful to students, boards or teachers. Currently, students only receive a pass/fail grade on the test; they are not aware of those areas upon which improvement could be made. OSTA-AECO strongly believes that in order for students to be able to learn from the test-writing process, they need to get detailed information about their results.

Recommendation #7:

THAT students who write the grade 10 literacy test be given more in-depth feedback into their results.

The Grade 10 Literacy Tests

The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) remains an area of great controversy and debate. As this test is a requirement for an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, many see it as a disadvantage to those who cannot succeed in the test for various reasons. OSTA-AECO would like to see a full review of this requirement after the test results for the 2001-2002 school year are released. A Ministry of Education committee should be created, which includes stakeholders such as students, teachers, parents, and trustees, to review the OSSLT as a diploma requirement.

Recommendation #8:

- a) a) **THAT a committee be formed by the Ministry of Education, upon the release of the results of the 2001-2002 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test to review the necessity of it as a diploma requirement and**
- b) b) **THAT this committee contain students from each of the four publicly funded education systems in the province.**

Students raised concern that there is inconsistency between evaluation methods when comparing the OSSLT and the grade 9 English and French courses that cover the curriculum on the tests. It is thought that if a student is able to pass their grade 9 English or French course which is based on the same curriculum as the test is, they should be able to pass the OSSLT. However, such is not the case due to inconsistencies in evaluation used by the teachers of the province and the markers of the test.

Recommendation #9:

THAT steps be taken to ensure that the grade 9 English and French courses have the same evaluation as the OSSLT, thereby helping students know what to expect in the test.

Future Testing

The Ontario government has plans to implement testing in the “core subjects” every year from grades 3-11. The Ontario Student Trustees’ Association – l’Association des élèves conseillères et conseillers de l’Ontario feels that if the government moves too fast with their implementation of testing, the problems outlined earlier in this report will only intensify.

Recommendation #10:

THAT the implementation of tests in the “core subjects” between grades 3 and 11 be postponed until the current testing structure has been suitably adjusted.

Conclusion

Province-wide tests have become a part of the education community. The students of Ontario deserve the best education that can be offered in low-stress, non-confrontation environments. OSTA-AECO believes that by following through with our recommendations, the government of Ontario and the EQAO can help to ensure that the testing system works better for students and all other stakeholders.

List of Recommendations:

- 1. 1. THAT resources be developed for teachers which outline low-stress methods for preparing students for province-wide tests.**
- 2. 2. THAT information be given to students prior to the province-wide tests which outline reasons for the tests, topics to be covered on the tests, and how the tests will be evaluated.**
- 3. 3. THAT steps be taken to ensure that the phenomenon of “teaching to the test” is avoided.**
- 4. 4. THAT test preparation be held in after school clinics rather than during class time.**
- 5. 5. a) THAT the length of the grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 EQAO tests be re-evaluated and
b) THAT the length of the grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 EQAO tests be modeled after regular tests that students write in their classrooms.**
- 6. 6. THAT the EQAO take steps to speed up the reporting process from standardized tests.**
- 7. 7. THAT students who write the grade 10 literacy test be given more in-depth feedback into their results.**
- 8. 8. a) THAT a committee be formed by the Ministry of Education, upon the release of the results of the 2001-2002 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test to review the necessity of it as a diploma requirement and
b) THAT this committee contain students from each of the four publicly funded education systems in the province.**
- 9. 9. THAT steps be taken to ensure that the grade 9 English and French courses have the same evaluation as the OSSLT, thereby helping students know what to expect in the test.**

10. 10. **THAT the implementation of tests in the “core subjects” between grades 3 and 11 be postponed until the current testing structure has been suitably adjusted.**

A Road Map For Success: Testing in our Schools

FEEDBACK FORM

Please take a moment to fill out the questions below and send it back to us by fax or mail at the address below.

Name:

Organization:

Position:

Date:

1. 1. Who in your organization has read this report? Who intends on reading it? Who do you intend on showing it to?
2. 2. Which of the 10 recommendations do you see as the most important? Indicate more than one if necessary.
3. 3. How do you think your organization can move towards implementing the recommendations outlined in the report?

4. 4. What ways, other than those outlined in our recommendations, do you feel the concerns of the students in the province can be addressed?

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this form. Please send it to:
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