

# LOSS OF LEARNING EDUCATION VERSUS EVALUATION

Report of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association –  
Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de  
l'Ontario

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This report was carried out by the 2005–2006 Executive Council

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Special thanks to the Student Trustees and student leaders that provided resources opinion and commentary.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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We would also like to thank the students of the province who provided input, opinion and experience that was essential to the accuracy of the report.

# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

April 2006

Minister of Education  
The Honourable Sandra Pupatello

On behalf of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association – l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario, I am pleased to present you with our report, entitled "Loss of Learning: Education versus Evaluation". This report offers a students' perspective on the evaluation system used in Ontario's public education system and its effect on classroom learning.

Ontario's education system is changing its focus; shifting from learning to achieving a certain student success rate. Some evaluation processes do not measure the ability intended in the assignment; for example, writing ability is assessed rather than the content or ideas. Educators who are pressured to reach certain levels of achievement have worked to ensure that students succeed on tests; however, they are not necessarily prepared to succeed in life. Students are more concerned about getting high grades than developing a fundamental foundation of knowledge.

Ontario has promised to deliver "excellence for all" through a strong public education system; this has been a difficult statement to measure. Achievement of success has been described as reaching standards in standardized testing and graduation rates. Students deserve an education that will prepare them to be competitive after graduation, whether they enter university, college, an apprenticeship or the workplace. Attaining high marks or certain levels of achievement does not ensure educated graduates.

This report is divided in three sections: Testing and Evaluation, Standardized Testing and Post Secondary Implications. Each section addresses the specific issues that contribute to the current flawed view of education. They propose recommendations to amend the situation that will assist in developing a healthy and nurturing educational environment.

The students of Ontario have learned how to achieve. However, students deserve an education that involves learning not only the curriculum, but develops a passion for life long learning.

Pursuing Excellence in Education,

Nathan Lachowsky  
OSTA-AÉCO President

## **PREFACE**

Although reports frequently assess provincial programs and policies on education, few are written on larger issues that touch on a number of educational sectors. One of these issues is the unfortunate discrepancy that has come to exist in the Ontarian system between learning and grading. With increasing frequency, the latter impedes the educational process through misdirected evaluations, standardized testing, EQAO teacher evaluations, the bell-curve and university entrance averages.

It is important that we keep in mind the definition of what schools strive to accomplish and the reasons students attend them: they are to prepare students for the world of work through teaching. It is disheartening that what students learn in school has become eclipsed by evaluation and grading. Within the walls of a school, nothing should impede student learning.

To address these issues requires an in-depth look at the very core of the systems currently in place. It is time to seriously re-examine the way grading is being carried out and find practical solutions to improve the accuracy with which these procedures indicate students' actual knowledge and understanding.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

“Loss of Learning: Education versus Evaluation” focuses on the challenges of evaluations methods in Ontario’s public education system as well as outlining areas where improvements need to be made in order to properly evaluate a student’s knowledge and their grasp of a concept.

This report is divided in three sections: Testing and Evaluation, Standardized Testing and Post Secondary Implications. It contains 8 recommendations for consideration by the Ministry of Education that address the issues surrounding the goal and purpose of education in Ontario.

This report offers a student perspective on the importance of fair evaluation and the flawed direction it has taken as a result of misdirected evaluations, standardized testing, EQAO teacher evaluations, the bell-curve and university entrance averages.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that teacher education include recognition of cognitive skills versus communication skills.
2. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education allow teachers the flexibility to opt for tests and activities that measure the grasp of concepts as a whole, minimizing the instances of test formats that emphasize memorization.
3. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education provide teachers with funding and resources to vary the type of evaluations they use in the classroom.
4. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education thoroughly examine the use of the EQAO tests in Ontario and specifically assess their affects on the learning environment within schools.
5. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education discourage educators from teaching students to the specific questions on EQAO tests in order to ensure that Standardized Testing does not begin to supersede the importance of actual learning in the classroom.
6. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education cease all evaluation of teachers and tracking of the specific test scores of teachers' classes in order to alleviate the amount of stress and level of importance of EQAO testing.
7. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education discourage all District School Boards from the practice of Bell Curving students' marks.
8. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities work with the Ministry of Education to ensure that the courses students follow in secondary school are relevant to their post–secondary goal by evaluating their role in preparing students for their post–secondary education or entry into the workplace.



## TESTING AND EVALUATIONS

Evaluations are a practical and efficient way to gauge how well students are learning. Too often, the measurement of this goal becomes confused with the goal itself – emphasis is placed solely on the results of tests and assignments. Therefore, when these evaluations are flawed, the students are unfairly rewarded/penalized on a basis that has little to do with their knowledge and grasp of the subject in question. Prime examples of this include: evaluations that mistakenly assess thinking as opposed to writing or vice versa, short-term memorization rather than long-term internalization, and finally, stress management rather than preparation.

The first of these cases is a frequent problem in language classes and can be painfully difficult to discern. In order for teachers to assess writing skills, students are often given assignments that address a specific topic. In cases where students do not have a strong understanding of the concept on which they are writing, they are not able to write a coherent answer. These students, who may write extremely well on other subjects are penalized on the basis of cognitive maturity. The process also works inversely. Students with strong analytical skills and those who understand the concept being tested receive poor grades on questions and tasks designed to evaluate their understanding of the concept simply because they struggle to clearly communicate their ideas. This second scenario applies not only to language courses but to the social sciences and humanities as a whole. It is difficult to recognize when writing skills are preventing students from proving their understanding.

Another example of misguided evaluations are those rewarding students who merely “cram” fragmented information without the slightest understanding of the concept as a working entity. Meanwhile, students with a broader, holistic knowledge of the idea or event are punished for not being able to give particular names and dates – information that is certainly useful up to a certain point, but becomes irrelevant and immediately forgotten if too specific. This second type of student has the best and most practical knowledge of the subject at hand, will be able to connect it to other concepts or to his or her own life. He or she is more likely to internalize it on a long-term basis after he or she has left school. This is consistent with education’s object to give students a lasting understanding of the world around them. Again, the measurement of the goal becomes as misconstrued as the goal itself.

Finally, there is the matter of stress and anxiety adversely affecting students’ ability to perform. Oftentimes, students who study diligently and have a strong comprehension of the subject matter are unable to demonstrate their ability in stressful situations such as tests and final examinations. Although the ability to perform under pressure is not an unreasonable expectation in itself, it is not that skill being evaluated.

Accommodations must be made whenever possible for those who become uncomfortable to the point of mental paralysis. This is yet another problem not easily resolved, as tests are a viable option for student assessment. However, it is imperative to vary the type and format of student evaluations. Oral examinations, group assignments and creative work are all excellent alternatives to the standard test environment. Also, variation ensures that a wider range of skills are being developed by students.

In short, formal evaluations have always been our most viable option for the ascertainment of student learning, but often end up measuring the wrong abilities. In order to ensure the effectiveness of testing, OSTA-AÉCO believes the following must be taken into account:

1. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that teacher education include recognition of cognitive skills rather than writing abilities.
2. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education allow teachers the flexibility to opt for tests and activities that measure the grasp of concepts as a whole, minimizing the instances of test formats that emphasize memorization.
3. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education provide teachers with funding and resources to vary the type of evaluations they use in the classroom.

## STANDARDIZED TESTING

Many of the province's traditional evaluation methods were completely overhauled, after the 1995 release of the report from the Royal Commission on Learning in entitled "For The Love Of Learning" in order to ensure that the needs of students were always being considered in evaluations of learning. Several of the recommendations within this wide sweeping report were to formalize the implementation of standardized tests, as well as the creation of a non-government organization to carryout these standardized tests across the province. These recommendations included:

50. That all students be given two uniform assessments at the end of Grade 3, one in literacy and one in numeracy, based on specific learner outcomes and standards that are well known to teachers, parents, and to students themselves;
51. That the construction, administration, scoring, and reporting of the two assessments be the responsibility of a small agency, independent of the Ministry of Education and Training, and operating at a very senior level, to be called the Office of Learning Assessment and Accountability;
52. That a literacy test be given to students, which they must pass before receiving their secondary school diploma;<sup>1</sup>

After the submission of these recommendations to the Ministry of Education in 1995, the Ministry of Education created and implemented four standardized tests across the province: one occurring of students in grade 3 (assessing reading, writing and mathematics), one occurring for students in grade 6 (assessing reading, writing and mathematics), one occurring for students in grade 9 mathematics classes (first and second semester) and a Literacy Test occurring for students in grade 10.

Since the creation of the new curriculum, many students have taken these standardized tests. Some students have completed these tests with success while others, have not. However, this report aims at analyzing the impact of these tests on the learning that is taking place within the classroom outside of the time that is expended on completing these tests.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario. Royal Commission on Learning. *For the Love of Learning*. January 1995. Toronto: The Commission, 1994.

One of the strongest concerns that has developed since the implementation of these tests is that the increased importance placed on the test results has led teachers to teach the appropriate way to answer specific test questions rather than focusing on the curriculum itself. Without the knowledge the curriculum sets out, students may be capable of answering questions, but they are not equipped to apply knowledge outside the classroom setting. Due to standardized testing, students are not learning beyond the realms of the testing prescribed to them by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO).

### **Learning Beyond the Test**

The mandate of the Education Quality and Accountability Office is to “ensure greater accountability and contribute to the enhancement of the quality of education in Ontario” through “assessments and reviews based on objective, reliable and relevant information, and the timely public release of that information along with recommendations for system improvement.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that these tests are only intended to be a snapshot of a child's abilities and are not to supersede learning itself.

As the Ministry of Education and District School Boards have heightened the importance of EQAO results, students and educators both feel a burden to achieve exceptional scores on these tests. Therefore, educators begin to teach students how to complete the specific questions that will appear on the test rather than allowing the test to examine what students have learned in regular instruction throughout the year. At this point, it is evident that standardized testing has begun to take precedence over the actual education that they are set out to evaluate.

If the emphasis remains on testing results, true learning will be lost from the classroom and be replaced by government testing. The true nature of school will be misconstrued; learning through experience and teacher-created lesson plans, which incorporate essential life skills for students, will be lost.

Education within the classroom should stretch far beyond the grades, which teachers, the Government, and EQAO assign to students; it is what students can take away from the classroom and apply to everyday life. Standardized testing creates a disorientation of what learning means to students.

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<sup>2</sup> Ontario. Education Quality and Accountability Office. *About the EQAO*. Accessed April 5, 2006. <<http://www.eqao.com/AboutEQAO/02about.aspx?Lang=E>>.

4. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education thoroughly examine the use of the EQAO tests in Ontario and specifically assess their effects on the learning environment within schools.
5. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education ensure educators teach students the curriculum rather than specifically to the EQAO tests.

### **Teachers Making the Grade**

Teachers must be evaluated to assess their abilities in the field of teaching students. However, it is disheartening that Ministry of Education has taken recent initiatives with the intention of tracking the success rates of individual classes to evaluate the performance of teachers. This will only yield additional stress upon students and encourages teachers to ‘teach to the test’ rather than the curriculum, in order to insure that students are excelling on the test. Actions such as this only increase the pressure of the testing for everyone involved.

6. OSTA–AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education cease all intentions to evaluate teachers by tracking the specific EQAO test scores of teacher’s classes. This will alleviate both the amount of stress on students and the level of importance of EQAO testing.

Standardized testing has changed the focus on the school system: administrators and educators are often preoccupied with ensuring their students fare well on tests. It is not uncommon for parents to choose schools based on previous standardized testing results. Although academic success is the ultimate goal of education, this cannot be measured by the current tests that are in place.

### **The Bell Curve**

Grades remain an important component of education as they are the tool that educators use to assess progress and evaluate what a pupil has learned. However, a problem occurs when District School Boards and Educators begin to place a greater importance on the actual grading than on the learning that exists to be measured.

Bell curving student grades in order to create a conformed distribution of assigned grades is an evident example of this process. When the Bell Curve occurs, the grades of students are unfairly skewed in either a positive or a negative direction. It is clear that when educators practice the Bell Curve they are not valuing the importance of learning and attempting to spread out averages to create an image of conformity and evaluation consistency.

As stated, grades are an integral part of education, but the important fact to consider is that schooling is not designed to award students grades; it is to prepare students for the working world. By blindly rewarding students with grades, which they have not deserved through quality learning, a misleading message is sent to students.

7. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Education discourage all District School Boards from practicing a policy of Bell Curving student's marks in an effort to recognize the importance of learning in school, and not the importance of grading.

## POST SECONDARY IMPLICATIONS

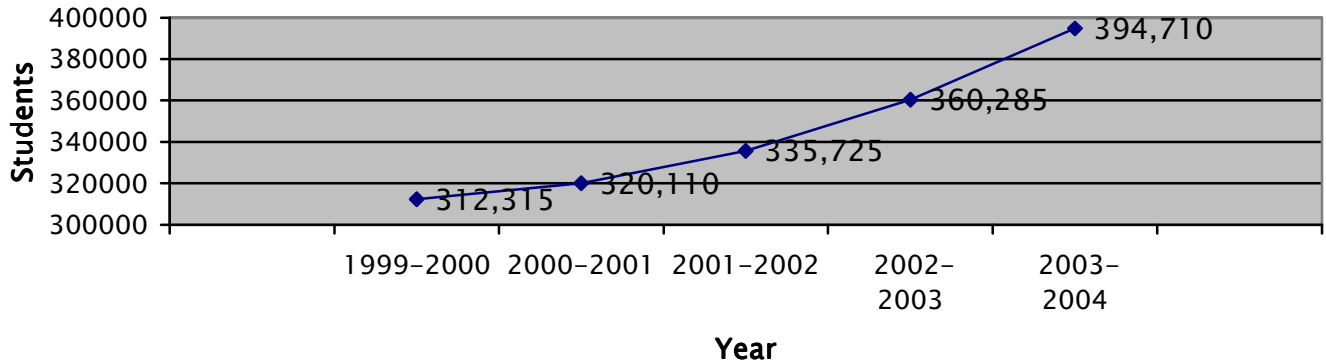
There have been many changes in the philosophies surrounding the purpose and the mission of education in today's society. Students' course selection and reasons are varied; however, it has become increasingly common for students to focus more on life after secondary school and the requirements for post-secondary school than focusing on increasing their knowledge and developing their breadth of interests and skills.

Attending a post-secondary institution has become the ultimate goal of many students in secondary school. The focus of secondary education has, in many cases, been shifted towards meeting the criteria of post-secondary institutions, in order to meet the standards of a certain program. This shift has diminished the quality of education provided and clouded the purpose of the secondary education. Many students have opted to take classes which do not specifically interest them in order to meet the requirements; they are not in the class to learn, but rather to achieve a grade that will increase their average.

The quality of education provided to secondary school students has been negatively affected because students are not necessarily taking classes that interest them. Students who are not interested in the content of the class are more likely to disrupt the classroom and take away from the experience of those who are truly interested. Disruptions and misbehaviour in the classroom require attention from the teacher and prevent the entire class from learning.

Today's society is very competitive. As post-secondary education becomes increasingly necessary in the work force, there has been a rise in applicants to these institutions. The admission requirements have become more strenuous and difficult to achieve. Enrolment in post-secondary schools has increased by 20% between 1999 and 2004 and it is believed that this trend will continue. At the same time, admission requirements are being raised; admission averages are being increased on an annual basis. To cope with this demand, students are taking courses that will earn them a higher grade instead of those with the greatest educational value.

### Ontario Post Secondary Enrolment (1999–2004)<sup>3</sup>



secondary school to learn or develop their interests. They are opting to take classes that they feel confident will allow them to achieve specific admission requirement for a post-secondary school destination. In reality, a student can attend a class and memorize the content for the test without really learning. The goal of secondary school is to help develop youth who want to contribute to society. Students who take classes in order to attain a mark minimize their potential, their interests and their future.

The decisions students make throughout high school have very really implications for the rest of their lives. The courses they take and their experiences influence their interests and what they wish to pursue in post-secondary schools. When this goal is lost, students lose the opportunity to explore their interests and increase their knowledge. It is important for all students to develop their interests and to explore their learning capacity.

8. OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities work with the Ministry of Education to ensure that the courses students follow in secondary school are relevant to their post-secondary goal by evaluating their role in preparing students for their post-secondary education or entry into the workplace.

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<sup>3</sup> Canada. Statistics Canada. *University Registration by status and sex, by province*. Accessed April 5, 2006. <<http://www40.statcan.ca/l01/cst01/educ53a.htm?sdi=enrolments>>.