



# REAL ACCOUNTABILITY OR AN ILLUSION OF SUCCESS?

A Call to Review Standardized Testing in Ontario

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**Action Canada** is a national fellowship program for promising young Canadians. The program enhances fellows' leadership skills, broadens their understanding of Canada and its policy choices, and builds an exceptional network of leaders for our future.



The 2012-13 Action Canada theme challenged its Fellows to determine how to ensure that Canada has the education systems it needs to meet the economic and societal challenges of the future. This Task Force report seeks to spark public dialogue and reflection on the merits and challenges associated with large-scale standardized testing initiatives in our Canadian schools.

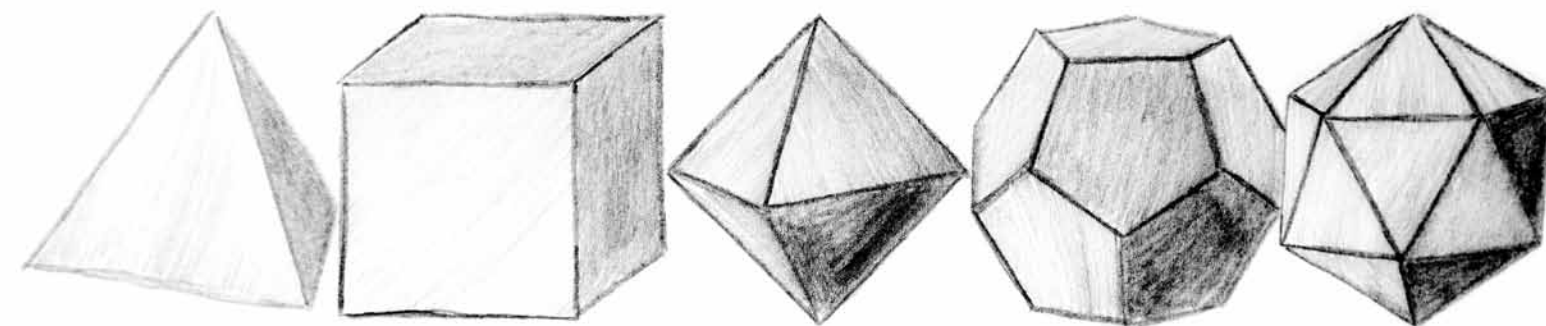
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## About the Fellows



**Steven Kuhn** is a senior economist at the federal Department of Finance, where he oversees the World Bank Group and works to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Canada's international assistance spending.



**Pauline Ngirumpatse** is a Ph.D. Candidate in Applied Human Sciences at the Université de Montréal. Her research has addressed international development cooperation as well as the expression of plurality of world visions in culturally diverse societies.



**Marie-Josée Parent** is an art historian and the general director of “Les Territoires”, a not-for-profit visual art center in Montréal dedicated to emerging visual art practices and to supporting up-and-coming artists in their professional careers.



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## Artwork Credit

**Josée Pedneault** is a Montreal-based professional artist who teaches photography at Concordia University. Through photography, video and installations, Josée explores the delicate structure of human relationships and the emotional ties that bind us to the world. Her ideas spring forth from both personal experiences and observation: attachment and detachment, transitional moments, and uprootings. Intimate and delicate images often hide a sobering nostalgia for the inaccessible and a disillusionment stemming from lost hopes. Exploring contemplative and poetic worlds, and often consisting of an important number of images, the artist's projects are typically presented as installations. Travel, the existential quest, and wandering are central themes explored in her works, which offer a reflection on human experience, our desires, our failures and our utopias.

## Summary

Education is serious business. It is fundamental to the continuing development of a citizenry that drives Canada's global competitiveness and social and economic prosperity. Recognizing this importance, Ontarians have, over the past two decades, called for standardized testing as a means of ensuring accountability for education results. In some circles, this accountability measure has become controversial, as stakeholders – and the public as a whole – are polarized as to whether standardized testing is an appropriate way of evaluating students and the overall quality and effectiveness of the education system in light of its objectives and curriculum. The following report includes an analysis of the current situation in Ontario and recommendations for a comprehensive review of standardized testing. Lessons learned and insights gained from this review could inform consideration of similar questions across Canada.

## Summary of Task Force Recommendations

We recommend that the Ontario government establish a suitable panel with a balanced and diverse set of experts to conduct a follow-up review of its standardized testing program. In particular:

### A. Structure of the tests relative to objectives

- i. The panel should review whether the scope of the current testing system continues to facilitate achievement of education system objectives.
- ii. The panel should review whether the scale and frequency of testing remains consistent with the Ministry of Education's objectives for EQAO testing.

### B. Impact of testing within the classroom

- i. The panel should review the impact on learning that results from classroom time devoted to test preparation and administration.
- ii. The panel should review the impact of testing methods and instruments on broader skills and knowledge acquisition.
- iii. The panel should review the appropriateness and impact of the pressure exerted by standardized testing on teachers and students.

### C. Validity of test results

- i. The panel should review whether or not standardized testing provides an assurance that students are performing according to the standards set for them.
- ii. The panel should review the impact of measuring progress by taking a limited number of samples throughout a student's career.

### D. Public reporting and use of test results

- i. The panel should review the impact of the potential misinterpretation and misuse of testing results data, and methods for ensuring they are used as intended.
- ii. The panel should review supplemental or alternative methods of achieving public accountability of the educational system.

# REAL ACCOUNTABILITY OR

## A Call to Review Standardized Testing in Ontario

### The Objectives of Ontario's Education System

*Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.*  
-William Butler Yeats

The objectives of Ontario's public education system are enshrined in the first sentences of the province's *Education Act*. As "the foundation of a prosperous, caring and civil society," the role of the public education system is "to provide students with the opportunity to realize their potential and develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring citizens who contribute to their society." The Act outlines the importance of "enhancing student achievement and well-being, closing gaps in student achievement and maintaining confidence in the province's publicly funded education systems."<sup>1</sup>

Education serves as an enabler of social mobility and a mechanism for ensuring that children become well-rounded and engaged citizens deeply rooted in our culture's values and aspirations, and able to work collectively towards a better society. It also serves to inspire, motivate, stimulate thought, broaden perspectives, transmit moral and ethical standards, teach empathy and compassion, and build character.

### The Re-Introduction of Standardized Testing in Ontario

In 1995, the Province of Ontario's Royal Commission on Learning released a set of recommendations for the province's education system.<sup>2</sup> Through a series of public consultations, the Commission heard Ontarians asking for more information about the performance of their education system. The report noted that standardized tests are perceived as being objective and fair, and therefore an accurate measure of what students have learned.<sup>3</sup> However, the report also expressed reservations about the widespread adoption of standardized testing: "[W]e want to be very clear about our lack of enthusiasm for extensive, expensive, universal testing."<sup>4</sup> Balancing these considerations, the Commission recommended that

*some system-wide testing should be built in, as a check on student learning at a few critical transition points, and as a vehicle for assuring people that, at those points, all students are being assessed according to the same yardstick.<sup>5</sup>*

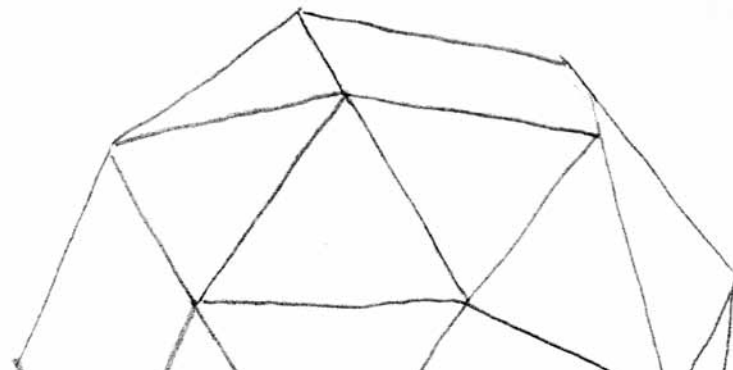
Our Task Force reached out to Gerald Caplan, co-chair of the Royal Commission on Learning, to contextualize these recommendations and attempt to understand how the Commission balanced competing perspectives within the report. Mr. Caplan indicated that the report's recommendations for "a small amount of testing" were to some degree intended to secure political support from "the vocal back-to-basics constituency" for the adoption of the remainder of the report's recommendations.<sup>6</sup>

The Royal Commission on Learning led directly to the creation of the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) in 1996 and the re-establishment of the practice of standardized testing in Ontario for the first time since the 1960s. At the same time, standardized testing was re-emerging as a prevalent feature of educational systems across Canada and around the world. Most provinces and territories in Canada now administer some form of large-scale student assessment, although the specifics of each assessment regime differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction (see Annex 1).

As implemented, EQAO testing involves:

- A focus on literacy and numeracy skills;
- Census-style methodology that measures the entire population of students, allowing for analysis of results down to the level of the individual student;
- Tests in grades 3, 6 and 9, the results of which do not form part of the teacher's assessment of a student's advancement to the next grade level;<sup>7</sup> and,
- A literacy test, usually written in Grade 10, success on which is required for graduation.

The assessment process is a large and complex undertaking. Each year, five different assessments are prepared, each in both French and English, and administered 600,000 times at 4,300 schools.<sup>8</sup> The budget of the EQAO was \$32.9 million in 2011-12.<sup>9</sup>

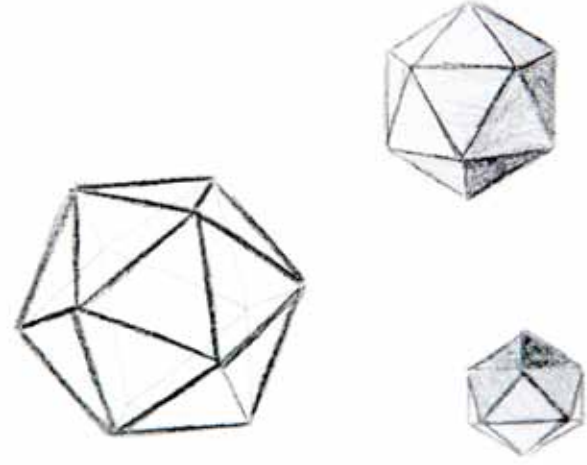


# AN ILLUSION OF SUCCESS?

### International Assessments

Rankings of countries according to large-scale standardized assessments have become shorthand for international competitiveness, since they offer quantitative results that permit easy comparison. Canada does very well on these measures: by international testing standards, Canada's education system is achieving excellence, with Ontario taking a leading position. In the OECD's most recent *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) rankings, Canada's primary and secondary education systems placed in the top five in all three major measures of reading, math and science, with less dispersion based on socioeconomic status and at a lower cost than OECD countries' average spending.

Despite often being used for these purposes, the results of such international comparison testing are not meant to measure whether specific provincial curriculum objectives are being met, nor do they reflect whether or not our education systems are performing effectively against their full range of stated objectives. In this respect, they are qualitatively different than testing conducted by the EQAO, which is the focus of the present report.



### Good Assessment and Accountability is Difficult

Standardized testing is premised on the idea that measuring successes and shortcomings will result in greater accountability and drive continual improvement amongst teachers and students. Results are typically intended to communicate standards, focus instruction, provide feedback on curriculum strengths and weaknesses, and motivate educators and students to improve their performance.<sup>10</sup> The results of large-scale standardized testing are intended to be used by school boards and governments to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the education system, to inform and develop education policies and to allocate resources.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike jurisdictions in the United States, Ontario does not provide funding to schools or teachers as a reward for superior test scores. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recognizes Ontario as having done an “admirable” job of balancing administrative and professional accountability through its testing program, noting that Ontario’s response to weak performance “has consistently been intervention and support, not blame and punishment.”<sup>12</sup>

That said, standardized testing practices are not universally accepted as being the only or best means of achieving accountability within the education system. Divergent views on standardized testing are understandable, given that good assessment and accountability practices are difficult to design and implement. The range of issues expressed about the value of standardized testing can be categorized into four groups which provide a framework for analysis.

#### A. The structure of the tests relative to objectives

This category of issues includes the gap between what is tested (specifically, literacy and numeracy) and the broader set of education system objectives set out in Ontario’s *Education Act*. It also includes whether the scale and frequency of testing is consistent with the objective of the testing system, which is to compare education system results over time.

#### B. The impact of testing within the classroom

This category of issues includes the amount of classroom time that is devoted to test preparation and administration, and the effect on teaching techniques and practices that result from preparing students to face the tests. It also includes the effects that standardized testing may have on the classroom environment.

#### C. The validity of test results

This category of issues includes whether or not standardized testing actually ensures that students are performing according to the standards set for them, including recognition that test results reflect performance at a single point in a student’s year.

#### D. Public reporting and use of test results

This category of issues includes consideration of how testing results are used and interpreted within the educational system and how they are disseminated to the broader public.

### The Way Forward

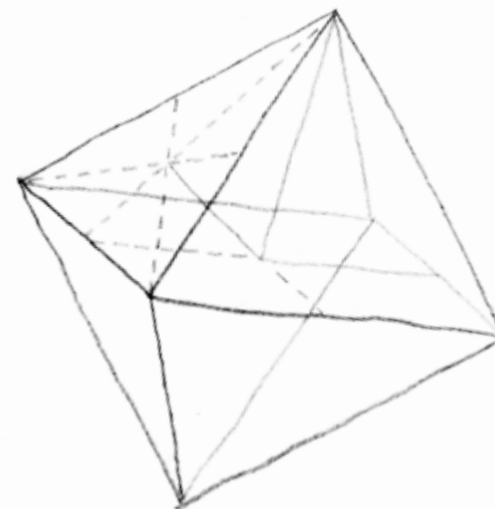
Nearly two decades ago, the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning recommended the introduction of standardized testing for Ontario, while expressing reservations about its widespread adoption. As a safeguard, and indicating that “it is entirely plausible that its responsibilities might need to be revised,” the Commission recommended a review of the mandate of the EQAO and standardized testing after five years to ensure that standardized testing was appropriately designed and implemented and that the Commission’s reservations did not come to pass.<sup>13</sup> Despite a solid foundation of experience with and academic research focused on standardized testing in Ontario, debate about its effectiveness continues. As such, there is value in conducting a follow-up review as proposed by the 1995 Commission.

#### The 2009 Auditor General’s Review of the EQAO

In 2009, the Auditor General of Ontario conducted a review of the Educational Quality and Accountability Office. The objective of the audit was to assess whether the EQAO had adequate systems, processes and procedures in place to ensure that its tests accurately reflected curriculum expectations. By contrast, this Task Force recommends a broader policy review of the effects of standardized testing on education system objectives as defined in the *Education Act*.

### We recommend that the Ontario government establish a suitable panel with a balanced and diverse set of experts to conduct a follow-up review of its standardized testing program.

The review panel should set out recommendations for student assessment and system accountability that flow from the objectives in the province’s *Education Act*. In conducting this review, the panel should be open to the consideration of new models of assessment and accountability, including those practiced by other international jurisdictions that are recognized as being strong performers. Finland, as one example, holds the distinction of topping international rankings without having an extensive battery of standardized testing.



#### Another Route to Sustained Improvement: The Finnish Experience

The experience in Finland demonstrates that standardized testing is not a necessary condition for developing an internationally-competitive education system. Finland consistently ranks at or near the top on PISA surveys, and has demonstrated sustained improvement from survey year to survey year. They have achieved this success while limiting the extent of standardized testing, surveying only 10 per cent of students each year and assessing particular subjects using 3- or 4-year cycles.

*Source: Pasi Sahlberg, (2011). Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland? New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press.*

The terms of reference for the panel should include examining a range of intended benefits and unintended effects of standardized testing as it is currently being implemented in Ontario, giving voice to the breadth of research and perspectives that are available.

#### A. Structure of the tests relative to objectives

*i. The panel should review whether the scope of the current testing system continues to facilitate achievement of the full range of education system objectives.*

The education system aims to build a learning environment based on a strong, early foundation of critical skills, including literacy and numeracy. By specifically testing literacy and numeracy, standardized tests intend to offer a clear indication of the success of the system in “delivering a program that brings all or nearly all children to a point, by about age 9, that enables them to build on dependable foundation skills so they can acquire more sophisticated knowledge and understanding.”<sup>14</sup> Towards the end of high school, the assessment assures “the public that a high school diploma signals adult literacy; that no high school graduate is incapable of reading and writing well enough to communicate in a post-secondary classroom, on the job or in order to meet the demands of everyday life as a citizen and voter.”<sup>15</sup> Uniformly applied to every student at specific points, standardized testing is intended to provide a comparable measure of student achievement in the tested subject matter.

However, literacy and numeracy are only a sub-set of the range of curriculum topics prescribed (see table below), and this range of curriculum topics is only one element of the education system's objectives. The panel should review whether the scope of testing as implemented facilitates achievement of the full range of objectives for the education system, and identify the methods best suited to providing accountability for those education objectives that are not measured or measurable through standardized testing.

#### Curriculum Covered in Ontario

##### Primary

- The Arts
- Language
- Mathematics
- Social Studies
- Native Languages
- Science and Technology
- French As a Second Language
- Health and Physical Education

##### Secondary

- Science
- English
- The Arts
- Mathematics
- Native Studies
- Business Studies
- Native Languages
- Computer Studies
- Interdisciplinary Studies
- Technological Education
- Canadian and World Studies
- French As a Second Language
- Health and Physical Education
- Social Sciences and Humanities
- Guidance and Career Education
- Program Planning and Assessment
- Classical and International Languages
- English As a Second Language and English Literacy Development

*ii. The panel should review whether the scale and frequency of testing remains consistent with the Ministry of Education's objectives for EQAO testing.*

In Ontario, every student of a particular age must complete standardized testing in literacy and numeracy each year. An alternative could be to test a statistically significant sample of students each

year within a particular age cohort, which would provide a scientifically sound basis for evaluating the degree to which the education system is performing in the tested areas. Similarly, each tested area could be assessed on a rotating three- or four-year cycle instead of each year, as is done in Finland. The panel could examine the extent to which such methodological adjustments would allow teachers and administrators to continue to have meaningful data for making system and curriculum adjustments while significantly reducing the classroom time and administrative expense associated with testing.

Reducing the scale or frequency of testing would still permit achievement of the Ministry of Education's objective for standardized testing, which is to be able to compare education system results over time.

Reducing the scale or frequency of testing would not permit results to be used for assessment of individual students. This is not a significant drawback, given that the current system is not conducive to this practice either. Standardized testing results are disseminated at the beginning of the following school year, reducing their effect-iveness as an instrument for identifying and correcting weakness at the level of the individual student. The 1995 Commission noted that standardized testing would not be very useful to individual students because the results do not come quickly enough and when they do come, they do not include sufficient feedback, including an analysis of strengths and weaknesses.

#### B. Impact of testing within the classroom

*i. The panel should review the impact on learning that results from classroom time devoted to test preparation and administration.*

The amount of time devoted to preparing for and administering tests is significant. In the extreme, some teachers have indicated that they focus much of the second half of the school year on test preparation activities,<sup>16</sup> making less time available for non-tested subjects and for depth and breadth within tested subjects. The Ontario Teachers' Federation characterizes this as a "difference between instruction for improving student learning and instruction for improving student test scores."<sup>17</sup> One study has shown that in the wake of "No Child Left Behind," 70 percent of US school boards scaled back time on teaching subjects other than literacy and numeracy in order to improve test scores.<sup>18</sup>

By design, the focus on improving test scores takes time away from instructional time that could improve student learning in other domains. The EQAO promotes the view that what gets measured gets attention and, by extension, gets improved.<sup>19</sup> Since the data provided by standardized tests forms the basis of policy decision-making, there is a risk that increased attention and educational initiatives geared towards literacy and numeracy could come at the expense of other curriculum areas. The panel should ensure that this balance remains appropriate or, if necessary, recalibrate efforts devoted to testing to ensure that they do not overly distract from the acquisition of the range of abilities, skills and knowledge prescribed by the *Education Act*.

*ii. The panel should review the impact of testing methods and instruments on broader skills and knowledge acquisition.*

Learning entails the acquisition of knowledge, skills and other cognitive abilities: creativity, problem-solving, understanding, analytical thinking and the development of critical thinking skills, among others. However, standardized testing tends to measure a more limited set of functional knowledge and skills within the tested subject areas. As momentum was building for standardized testing in Ontario in the 1990s, one researcher was encouraging policymakers to remember the lessons of the American experience:

*As early as the late 1970s, evidence began to accumulate showing that high-stakes standardized testing policies were highly corruptible... and that the use of standardized tests for accountability had actually narrowed curricula and driven instruction increasingly towards... memorization and basic skills rather than improving educational quality.<sup>20</sup>*

This effect may occur in part because of the methods required to implement standardized tests on a large scale and evaluate results in an efficient manner. For example, tests tend to use multiple choice questionnaires and short open-ended written responses, which favour convergent thinking (i.e., correct responses versus incorrect responses) and short-term memory and recall. By contrast, such tests are not readily adapted to fostering the development of creativity and higher-order thinking skills supporting instructional techniques such as discovery-based learning, which encourages students' discovery of solutions through interactions with their environment, wrestling with multifaceted and ambiguous questions, and the performing of experiments.<sup>21</sup>

The panel should review the extent to which standardized testing is influencing the teaching of higher-order thinking skills in classrooms, and may wish to draw on the work of the 2013 Action Canada Task Force report, "Future Tense: Adapting Canadian Education Systems for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

*iii. The panel should review the appropriateness and impact of the pressure exerted by standardized testing on teachers and students.*

There is a fine balance between the countervailing forces that pressure teachers, students and administrators to attain better test scores. Some proponents of standardized testing argue that this pressure is exactly what is required in order to improve Ontario's performance in literacy and numeracy. Other proponents, including Ontario's testing administrator, argue that standardized testing should not create additional pressure since its tests focus on elements that are already part of the curriculum.<sup>22</sup>

Pressure within a classroom may interfere with the development of an atmosphere of positive learning and discovery, particularly amongst the youngest students. Researchers have also argued that pressure to achieve results can undermine teaching as a profession.<sup>23</sup> An over-emphasis of results can diminish teachers' role in determining the content and methods of instruction, making them into "efficiency experts" who "[carry] out instruction determined by someone else."<sup>24</sup>

The 2009 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario noted this pressure for improved results, and linked this pressure to the adverse effect of rankings for non-educational purposes (which is discussed in Section D below). Specifically, the Auditor General stated:

*Many teachers and principals commented that as EQAO results take on broader acceptance, there is ever-increasing pressure to improve results that form the basis of ministry and school board interventions and private organization rankings.<sup>25</sup>*

The review panel should consider the appropriateness and impact of the pressure exerted by standardized testing on teachers and students and, if necessary, what adjustments could be proposed.

### C. Validity of test results

*i. The panel should review whether or not standardized testing provides an assurance that students are performing according to the standards set for them.*

The value of standardized testing stems from the perception that testing results have a higher “aura of scientific respectability and rigor” than teachers’ own assessments.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, standardized tests have become familiar to, and trusted by, the public as a means of establishing accountability over educational quality. According to one study, two-thirds of Ontario’s parents support standardized testing and believe that it makes the education system more accountable to taxpayers and parents.<sup>27</sup> Standardized testing provides parents with another opinion on the assessments conducted by teachers, giving parents an assurance that their child is performing according to set standards.<sup>28</sup> On a system-wide basis, administrators can use the results of the tests to target remedial action programs aimed at improving areas where weaknesses have been identified. Schools and school districts can also use the results to inform discussions of best practices.

However, the Royal Commission on Learning suggested that this perception of better results may not be borne out in reality when compared with what can be accomplished by professional and well-trained teachers. The report notes that “large-scale testing is unlikely to be a more fair and accurate representation of student learning than the best judgment of the well-trained teacher-assessor.”<sup>29</sup>

A related issue is what success on a particular test actually says about the amount of learning that has taken place. Any test is a sample taken from a larger set of information. If a teacher or student knows ahead of time what part of the domain will be tested, and focuses learning on that part, the resulting test score will no longer be representative of the full set of learning objectives mandated within the Ontario curriculum for the tested subjects. Focusing on the tested elements of the curriculum may cause non-tested elements to languish in some instances, narrowing what is presented to students from the prescribed curriculum. The panel should investigate the possibility that, rather than providing an assurance that students are performing according to the standards set for them, an increase in test scores could actually signal a reduction in the achievement of the broader educational objectives set out in the *Education Act*.

*ii. The panel should review the impact of measuring progress by taking a limited number of samples throughout a student’s career.*

In Ontario, standardized tests are conducted four times in a student’s career: at grades three, six, nine, and ten. As a result, these tests may not fully account for the non-linear process that learning entails or for external factors that may influence results in a positive or negative direction on particular testing days. The Commission noted this risk and further cautioned that resolving this issue by expanding the amount of testing creates its own challenges:

*A test that would give reliable information... would have to be administered over several sessions, [and] would probably take on a significance in the minds of teachers and students that exceeded its value.<sup>30</sup>*

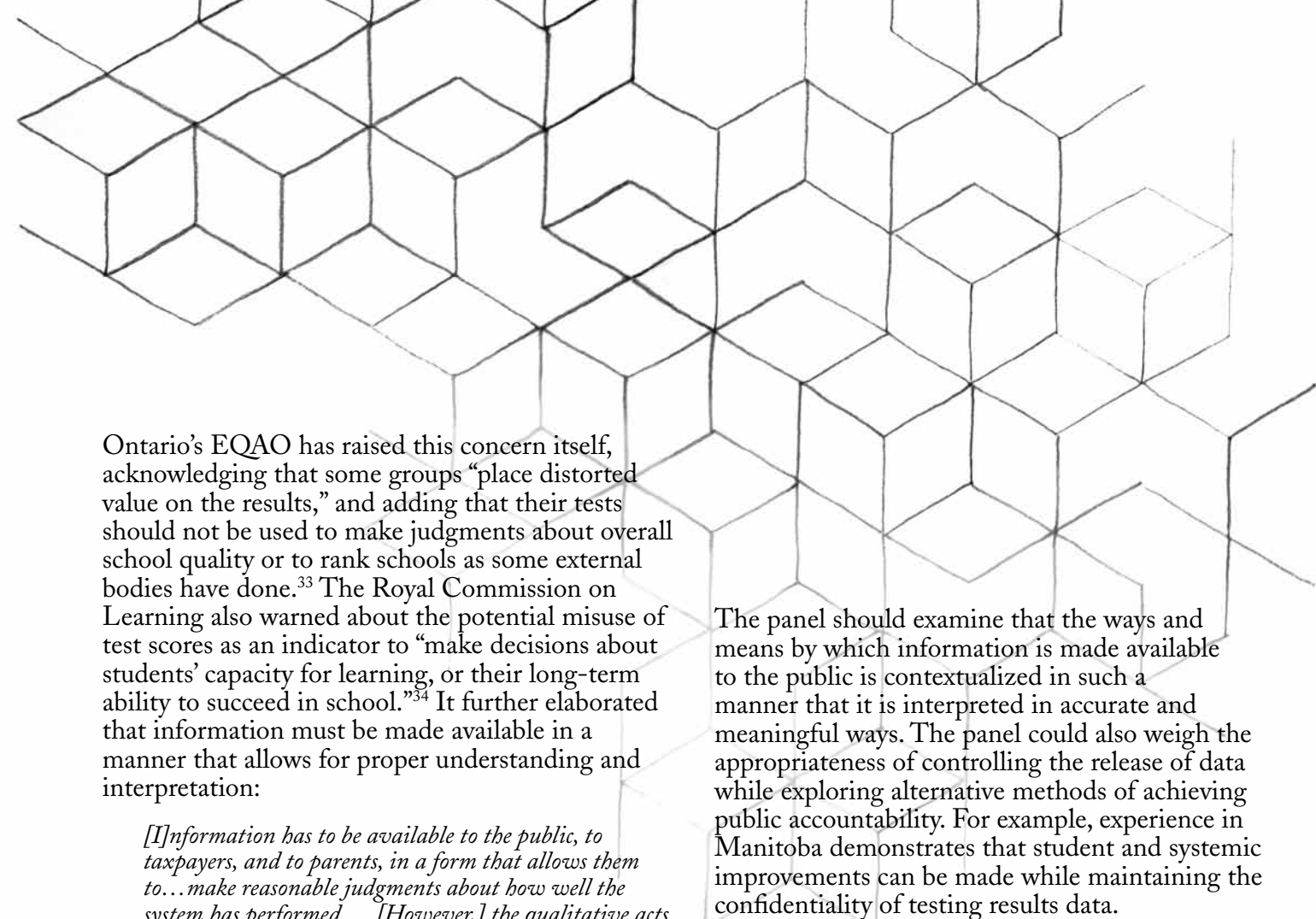
Effective assessment is an essential part of learning, with successful examples of formal and informal assessments being fully integrated, and even indistinguishable, from instruction. As the Royal Commission on Learning identified, frequent and cumulative assessments that occur daily have much greater potential to increase and enhance learning relative to large-scale standardized testing.<sup>31</sup> Teachers who are well-trained in assessment techniques and are observing children’s progress on a daily basis are able to provide a more nuanced and representative picture of student performance than a typical standardized test.

### D. Public reporting and use of test results

*i. The panel should review the impact of the potential misinterpretation and misuse of testing results data, and develop methods for ensuring they are used as intended.*

Given that standardized testing results are often the only data available for accountability purposes, they have become used and interpreted in ways that go beyond what test makers say are their intended use. The Commission noted that

*any single test used for large-scale assessment and reporting assumes a distorted importance, and can – and often does – have long-term, frequent negative consequences for students and for the learning system, because of the inappropriate ways the information is used.<sup>32</sup>*



Ontario’s EQAO has raised this concern itself, acknowledging that some groups “place distorted value on the results,” and adding that their tests should not be used to make judgments about overall school quality or to rank schools as some external bodies have done.<sup>33</sup> The Royal Commission on Learning also warned about the potential misuse of test scores as an indicator to “make decisions about students’ capacity for learning, or their long-term ability to succeed in school.”<sup>34</sup> It further elaborated that information must be made available in a manner that allows for proper understanding and interpretation:

*[I]nformation has to be available to the public, to taxpayers, and to parents, in a form that allows them to... make reasonable judgments about how well the system has performed. ... [However,] the qualitative acts of teaching and learning do not easily lend themselves to quantitative measures of efficiency and effectiveness; judging schools on the basis of inappropriate tools does not contribute to public knowledge.<sup>35</sup>*

As implemented in Ontario, standardized testing is intended to demonstrate how students are performing on literacy and numeracy at a given point in time in order to inform and develop education policies and to allocate resources to shore up deficiencies in these areas. It is not intended to be used to draw conclusions about the overall performance of students or their schools. However, commentators and the media often publish results in a format that ranks schools, sometimes without necessary contextualization (such as demographic factors and community characteristics). This practice can have an impact on behaviours such as how some teachers choose schools and how some parents decide in what neighbourhoods to live.<sup>36</sup> The Auditor General of Ontario recognizes this tendency, noting that real estate agents use the results of these tests to attract parents to areas with high performing schools.<sup>37</sup> This kind of application is inconsistent with the objectives of Ontario’s public education system, which aims to close gaps in student achievement.<sup>38</sup>

The panel should examine that the ways and means by which information is made available to the public is contextualized in such a manner that it is interpreted in accurate and meaningful ways. The panel could also weigh the appropriateness of controlling the release of data while exploring alternative methods of achieving public accountability. For example, experience in Manitoba demonstrates that student and systemic improvements can be made while maintaining the confidentiality of testing results data.

*ii. The panel should review supplemental or alternative methods of achieving public accountability of the educational system.*

The panel could examine supplemental and alternative methods of achieving accountability, including what precedents exist for measuring and reporting on system outcomes. For example, measuring outcomes might include examining:

- The degree of representation of students from all backgrounds and contexts across all school programs and achievement levels, as an indicator of how well the system reflects the local population it serves;
- Attendance rates and completion rates as an indicator of how well students of all backgrounds persist and succeed;
- Student, parent and teacher surveys as an indicator of how responsive the system is to the needs of the users and the local community; and,
- Achievement of acceptable standards of school safety for both students and teachers.

The measurement and public reporting of system outcomes may help to more directly assess the effectiveness of and reinforce confidence in the public education system.

## Conclusion

Assessing accountability for Ontario’s public education system should begin with an understanding of its objectives. As set out in the Education Act, the system serves as the “the foundation of a prosperous, caring and civil society,” which “provide[s] students with the opportunity to realize their potential and develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring citizens who contribute to their society.” Success in numeracy and literacy, as measured through standardized testing, provides a limited perspective on the successes and failures of the education system’s performance in relation to these broader objectives.

In the early 1990s, the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning recommended the creation of standardized testing while expressing significant reservations about its need to be appropriately designed and implemented. In summarizing these reservations, the Commission cautioned that

standardized testing “is easier to carry out poorly than well, easier to mislead than to inform with statistics, and easier to spend a great deal of money in assessing what students know than to improve teaching or learning effectively.”<sup>39</sup>

Two decades later, it is timely to establish a panel, comprised of a balanced and diverse group of experts, to review standardized testing in Ontario. The mandate of the panel would be to ascertain whether and to what extent the 1995 Commission’s reservations have or have not come to pass. More broadly, the commission should examine standardized testing with a view to ensuring that Ontario’s education system attains the full spectrum of objectives articulated in its *Education Act*. Lessons learned and insights gained from such an exercise could inform consideration of similar questions in other provinces.

## Annex 1

### Overview of Standardized Testing by Province

	Literacy	Numeracy	Sciences	Social sciences & humanities	
<b>British Columbia</b>	4, 7, 10, 11	4, 7, 10	10	11, 12	Social sciences category includes First Nations studies in grade 11. Grades 10-12 testing comprise 20-40% of final grades.
<b>Alberta</b>	3, 6, 9, 12	3, 6, 9, 12	6, 9, 12	6, 9	Grade 12 testing comprises 50% of final grade.
<b>Saskatchewan</b>	4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11	5, 8, 10	7, 10		Testing is biannual. No impact on final grades.
<b>Manitoba</b>	12	12			Does not release results to public. Testing comprises 30% of final grade.
<b>Ontario</b>	3, 6, 10	3, 6, 9			Grade 10 literacy test required for graduation. Grade 9 testing comprises 0-15% of final grade.
<b>Quebec</b>	4, 6, 11	4, 6	11	11	Grade 11 testing comprises 50% of final grade.
<b>New Brunswick</b>	2, 4, 7, 9	3, 5, 8	6		Literacy test required in grades 11 or 12 if unsuccessful in grade 9.
<b>Nova Scotia</b>	3, 6, 9, 12	3, 6, 12			Grade 12 testing comprises 30% of final grade.
<b>Prince Edward Island</b>	3, 6	3, 9			
<b>Newfoundland &amp; Labrador</b>	3, 6, 9, 12	3, 6, 9, 12	12	12	Grade 12 testing comprises 50% of final grade.
<b>Yukon</b>	3, 6, 9, 12	3, 6, 9			BC’s system is used for testing in grades 10-12.
<b>Northwest Territories</b>	3, 6, 9, 12	3, 6, 9, 12	6, 9, 12	6, 9	Alberta’s system is used for all testing.
<b>Nunavut</b>	12	3, 12	12		Alberta’s system is used for testing in grade 12.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Ontario. *Education Act*. R.S.O. 1990 (last amended 2012). ([http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_90e02\\_e.htm#BK0](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90e02_e.htm#BK0))
- <sup>2</sup>Ontario. Royal Commission on Learning (1994). *For the Love of Learning: Report of the Royal Commission on Learning. Volume 2: Learning: Our Vision for Schools*. Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario. Chapter 11, p. 19. (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/abcs/rcom/full/royalcommission.pdf>)
- <sup>3</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 19.
- <sup>4</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 21.
- <sup>5</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 19.
- <sup>6</sup>Private email correspondence between fellows and Gerald Caplan (October through December 2012).
- <sup>7</sup>Schools are permitted to include Grade 9 math results into students’ final reports. This is done inconsistently across the province, with weighting ranging from 0% to 15%.
- <sup>8</sup>Ontario. Office of the Auditor General (2009). *Annual Report*. Chapter 3: *Education Quality and Accountability Office*, p. 128. ([http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports\\_en/en09/304en09.pdf](http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_en/en09/304en09.pdf))
- <sup>9</sup>Ontario. Ministry of Finance (2012). *2011-2012 Public Accounts of Ontario*. Volume 1: *Ministry Statements and Schedules*, p. 2-142. (<http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/budget/paccts/2012/12vol1eng.pdf>)
- <sup>10</sup>Herman, J. L., J. Abedi, and S. Golan (1994). “Assessing the Effects of Standardized Testing on Schools.” *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 54: 2, 471-482.
- <sup>11</sup>Ontario. Ministry of Education, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Branch. *Public Policy Statements regarding EQAO*.
- <sup>12</sup>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010). *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States*. OECD Publishing, p. 76-7. (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/46623978.pdf>)
- <sup>13</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 19, p. 9.
- <sup>14</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 21.
- <sup>15</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 22.
- <sup>16</sup>Meaghan, D. E. and F. R. Casas (1995). “On the Testing of Standards and Standardized Achievement Testing: Panacea, Placebo, or Pandora’s Box?” *Interchange* 26: 1. See also Volante, Louis (Autumn 2006). “Toward Appropriate Preparation for Standardized Achievement Testing” *Journal of Educational Thought* 40: 2.
- <sup>17</sup>Ontario Teachers Federation (December 2011). “A New Vision for Large-Scale Testing in Ontario” ([http://www.otffeo.on.ca/english/media\\_room/briefs/new\\_vision.pdf](http://www.otffeo.on.ca/english/media_room/briefs/new_vision.pdf)).
- <sup>18</sup>Rentner, D. S. et al. (2006). *From the Capital to the Classroom*. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.
- <sup>19</sup>Ontario. Education Quality and Accountability Office (2012). “The Power of Ontario’s Provincial Testing Program.” Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, p. 11. ([http://www.eqao.com/pdf\\_e/12/PowerOntProv\\_TestingProg\\_en.PDF](http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/12/PowerOntProv_TestingProg_en.PDF))
- <sup>20</sup>S. Reardon, K. Scott, and J. Verre (1994). “Equity in Educational Assessment: Introduction,” *Harvard Educational Review* 64: 1, 1-4. Cited in Royal Commission on Learning, Chapter 11.
- <sup>21</sup>Volante, Louis (Autumn 2006). “Toward Appropriate Preparation for Standardized Achievement Testing” *Journal of Educational Thought* 40: 2.
- <sup>22</sup>The Power of Ontario’s Provincial Testing Program, p. 9.
- <sup>23</sup>Mons, Nathalie (August 2009). “Les effets théoriques et réels de l’évaluation standardisée.» Agence Exécutive d’Éducation, Audiovisuel et Culture, p. 27. ([http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic\\_reports/111FR.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/111FR.pdf))
- <sup>24</sup>Wien, C. A. and C. Dudley-Marling (1998). *Limited Vision: The Ontario Curriculum and Outcomes-Based Learning*. Canadian Journal of Education 23: 4, 405-20.
- <sup>25</sup>Ontario. Office of the Auditor General (2009). *Annual Report*. Chapter 3: *Education Quality and Accountability Office*, p. 138. ([http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports\\_en/en09/304en09.pdf](http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_en/en09/304en09.pdf))
- <sup>26</sup>Paris, S.G. et al. (June 1991). “A Developmental Perspective on Standardized Achievement Testing.” *Educational Researcher* 20: 5, p. 13.
- <sup>27</sup>D. Hart & D. W. Livingstone. (2010). *The 17th OISE Survey of Educational Issues: Public Attitudes Toward Education in Ontario 2009*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 19. ([http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/UserFiles/File/OISE%20Survey/17th%20OISE%20Survey/OISE\\_SURVEY\\_17\\_FINAL\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/UserFiles/File/OISE%20Survey/17th%20OISE%20Survey/OISE_SURVEY_17_FINAL_PDF.pdf))
- <sup>28</sup>Ontario. Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2010). *Parents’ Perspectives: The Importance of Provincial Testing and the Information it Provides about Children’s Learning*. ([http://www.eqao.com/Research/pdf/E/Parent\\_Research\\_Findings\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.eqao.com/Research/pdf/E/Parent_Research_Findings_ENG.pdf))
- <sup>29</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 19.
- <sup>30</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 8.
- <sup>31</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 6.
- <sup>32</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 20.
- <sup>33</sup>Ontario. Education Quality and Accountability Office (2012). “The Power of Ontario’s Provincial Testing Program.” Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, p. 17. ([http://www.eqao.com/pdf\\_e/12/PowerOntProv\\_TestingProg\\_en.PDF](http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/12/PowerOntProv_TestingProg_en.PDF))
- <sup>34</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 20.
- <sup>35</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 19, p. 2.
- <sup>36</sup>Delhi, K (1998). “Shopping for Schools.” *Orbit* 29: 1, 29-33; c.f. Harris, Richard and Michael Mercier (Fall 2000). “A Test for Geographers: The Geography of Educational Achievement in Toronto and Hamilton.” *Canadian Geographer* 44: 3, 210-227.
- <sup>37</sup>Ontario. Office of the Auditor General (2009). *Annual Report*. Chapter 3: *Education Quality and Accountability Office*, p. 138. ([http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports\\_en/en09/304en09.pdf](http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_en/en09/304en09.pdf))
- <sup>38</sup>Ontario. *Education Act*. R.S.O. 1990 (last amended 2012), c. 25, s. 1. ([http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_90e02\\_e.htm#BK0](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90e02_e.htm#BK0))
- <sup>39</sup>Royal Commission on Learning. Chapter 11, p. 1.

