

A Testing Time for Ontario's Schools

By Andy Hargreaves

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The Ontario government has announced [a new review](#) of the province's EQAO testing system. It will be led by the CEO of the C.D. Howe Institute. The last [comprehensive review](#) of student assessment was in 2018. This involved two of us on a team of advisors to the Premier and the third as an assessment expert. Collectively, the advisory team engaged more than 5,000 participants through regional meetings, public consultations, webinars, written submissions, and an extensive online survey, alongside discussions with education organizations and other assessment experts.

The message was consistent: assessment matters, but its purpose must be clear. Large-scale tests like EQAO should provide a **system-level snapshot of how well Ontario's schools are serving students**, not become tools for ranking schools, evaluating teachers, or pressuring young learners.

Participants expressed particular concern about the unintended consequences of testing — including excessive test preparation, curriculum narrowing, and student anxiety — which converge with [decades of research](#) on this topic, including in Ontario. Many questioned whether province-wide tests in Grade 3 made sense developmentally. Our conclusion was to reduce the frequency of provincial assessments, modernize their design, and place greater emphasis on classroom-based assessment that supports learning.

The Premier accepted all our recommendations, but the incoming government then buried the report — relegating it to the archives.

We are not suggesting the new review should just exhume our old one. But it shouldn't keep it buried either. Some of what was learned endures, and a lot has happened since. What are the implications for students in a post-COVID world with new digital technologies?

First, don't dispense with public participation. The [C.D. Howe Institute](#) is driven by business values and economic interests, including in relation to school competition and bureaucratic accountability. Its experts don't include specialists in learning or mental health. The Advisory Board for the review should not only amplify its own perspectives but engage public and professional interest in young people's learning and wellbeing.

Second, remember the lessons of COVID-19. The pandemic taught us a lot about how high-stakes testing affects student well-being. Assessment systems that become overly rigid intensify stress and undermine mental health. Two of us were involved in a review of Ireland's assessment practices during COVID-19. Our data revealed that sit-down exams were unpopular because of the extreme stress they caused, along with a vast industry of after-hours "grind schools" that prepped kids for the exams. So, the [Irish government](#) then announced it would reduce the final sit-down exam from 100% to 60% of students' leaving grades.

Third, pay attention to cross-provincial and cross-national comparisons. Among other Western systems, BC, Ireland, Estonia, and Finland, all outperform Ontario on international assessments but have no systems of high-stakes standardized testing. [Finland](#), for example, tests samples of students, not everyone. We don't need to remove the blood from everyone's body to see if the entire population is OK. Likewise, we just need reliable scores from a representative sample of schools, not from every student. Systems that do test everyone and have high levels of parent choice and school competition in open markets – like the US, England, and Australia – perform far more poorly than Ontario on international assessments and have the highest levels of educational inequality in the English-speaking world. Equity along with achievement levels are the [two pillars of excellence](#) in the OECD's measurement of quality education. Excessive emphases on sit-down testing weakens both pillars.

And a single number just gives us an average of everything that students can and cannot do. If someone puts their right foot in a bucket of ice, and their left foot in a bucket of steam, they are not, on average, comfortable. We need sophisticated assessments that capture the range of what young people can and cannot do so we then know how to help them and intervene.

Last, but not least, is AI. This is rapidly reshaping how students learn, write, and demonstrate understanding, as well as how fast and how well teachers can give personalized, just-in-time feedback to every child. There are [huge opportunities to think outside the factory-age testing box](#). Let's not try to solve digital-age challenges with analog-era testing.

So, let's have a review - by all means. But let's make it inclusive, balanced and focused on children's needs and the public good, rather than on economic interests. Create a diverse advisory body. Involve the public, learners, and the education profession. Compare with similar systems, internationally. And follow educational evidence - not political or free market ideologies.

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