

# The political uses of standardized testing in Ontario: implications for teachers' **professional autonomy**

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## **Summary**

*Ontario initiated its province-wide system of standardized testing in the early 2000s, within an emerging global context of standardized testing as a form of 'accountability'. The tests have since been administered under governments of varying ideologies. Public attention has waned when times were good and test scores rose reliably, and refocused with greater intensity when they dipped. What has remained constant is their usage as the quantifiable metric which governments, opposition parties and media have held, alongside high school graduation rates, to be the definitive means of assessing the state of K-12 education in Ontario. This has had serious implications for the professional autonomy of the province's teachers.*

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According to Verger, Parcerisa and Fontdevila (2019), the usage of National Large Scale Assessments (NLSAs) has more than doubled globally since the mid-1990s. The initial adopters were predominantly Anglo and developing countries like Chile that were early implementers of neoliberal education policies. Since the mid-2000s they have spread rapidly, particularly in states affiliated with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This growth has been propelled in considerable part by the expansion of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Its tests of the math, science and literacy abilities of 15 year olds grew from 28 participating countries in 2000 to 72 in 2015 (Addey and Sellar 2017). Participation in PISA has become a marker of a modern education system. The criteria it uses to assess students increasingly influences governments worldwide, keen to 'teach to the test' and reap the political rewards of rising scores.

Verger, Parcerisa and Fontdevila (2019) and Addey and Sellar (2017), have probed the largely political rationales for why governments turn to standardized testing. Past the rhetoric of ensuring 'quality' and 'excellence', the explanations are far more mundane. Within a national or local context in which education is popularly perceived to be in 'crisis', standardized tests are a relatively easy and quick way to signal something is being done. Pressure is then shifted from the government to individual schools and teachers through 'accountability' to 'standards' which can then be monitored at a distance through the scores. In the context of managerial authority over teachers being decentralized to school principals through 'school autonomy', teachers' professional autonomy is undermined as principals are tasked with ensuring their staff prioritize preparation for the tests. A key claim of the neoliberal discourse of the Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg 2011) is that funding levels aren't the problem with education, teachers' performance is, and they must therefore be held accountable. This is fiscally convenient for austerity-driven states, as both testing and creating new 'standards' tend to be cheaper

than lowering class sizes, hiring more support staff or repairing schools.

As will be seen in Ontario, 'test-based accountability' can be used for different ends by different governments, as evidence of progress or failure. As Steiner-Khamsi explains:

"The terms 'international standards', 'twenty-first century skills', and 'best practices' greatly resonate with politicians and policy makers, and they resort to them at particular moments of agenda setting: whenever there is a need to generate reform pressure. These terms effectively function as catalysts for change even though there is no agreement what they actually mean... they serve as empty vessels that are, whenever needed, filled with local meaning. Nevertheless, they are politically powerful because they generate fears of falling behind on a global market place..." (2016: 383-384)

First proposed in Ontario by a Royal Commission on education under a centre-left New Democratic (NDP) government in the early 1990s, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was established in 1996 by the Conservative government that followed. The EQAO tests the literacy and math skills of grades 3 and 6 students, the math skills of grade 9 students, and the literacy skills of those in grade 10. Unlike higher stakes testing elsewhere in North America, failing these tests does not have direct consequences for individual students, with the exception of the grade 10 test, which must be passed as a condition of graduation (with multiple forms of second chances). More significantly, test results have been used to assess the performance of both individual schools (and subsequently to rank schools by various groups from right-wing think tanks to real estate agents), and of the larger system as a whole. Teachers are not subjected to 'value-added measurement' schemes, as is common in the US or under Mexico's former ENLACE exam, where algorithms attempt to calculate how much an individual teacher added or



subtracted from a student's score. However, the scores are used as a definitive means to assess school (and by extension, teacher) performance, and justify subsequent interventions.

The Liberals who succeeded the Conservatives in 2004, largely retained the EQAO testing structure, promoting the results as one of the primary means by which to demonstrate to the public that their subsequent education policies were effective. EQAO (and high school graduation rates) became the key quantitative metrics to which other policies were tied. Under influential academics including Michael Fullan of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the use of test scores to guide intervention was part of the model of 'pressure and support', portrayed as a progressive alternative to

contemporary 'name and shame' policies in the UK, or the threat of school closures and mass firings of teachers associated with No Child Left Behind legislation in the US (Fullan & Doyle 2014). Nevertheless, as I argue in my dissertation from interviewing grade 10 English teachers in Toronto, considerable top down pressure exists to raise scores and improve the standing of their school, and that of the school board and ultimately of the provincial education system (Bocking 2017). This has impacted professional autonomy, to the extent that teachers are obligated to allocate increasing classroom time to test prep, at the expense of teaching the curriculum itself.

The use of EQAO test score results worked well politically while scores rose steadily. As annual scores

began to stabilize by the early 2010s, public and media attention generally declined. In this context in which the political value of the scores was waning, the Toronto-based research and advocacy group, People for Education launched the 'Measuring What Matters' project in 2013. Garnering government interest and collaboration from seven school boards, Measuring What Matters sought to broaden government and public conceptions of how the effectiveness of the overall system, as well as the experience of individual students, should be assessed, challenging the fixation on EQAO scores. People for Education maintained the accountability discourse, but in a milder fashion that emphasized the responsibility of the broader system (People for Education 2018). The project issued a report in early 2018 urging the prioritization of measuring citizenship education, creativity, health, social-emotional learning, and quality learning environments.

Less than two months before the 2018 Ontario election, the Ministry of Education released a review it had commissioned of the EQAO. It was lauded by the Liberal government, which presented it to the media and EQAO, but without committing to its recommendations to phase out the grade 3 and 9 tests, and replace the grade 10 literacy test with something not mandatory for graduation. The remaining grade 6 test would be substantially revised to ensure it could not be used to rank schools (Rushowy 2018). Meanwhile the opposition NDP adopted the stance of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation and the Elementary Teachers' Federation, vowing to abolish the EQAO and reallocate its \$36 million budget to schools.

However beginning especially in 2017, the EQAO tests were re-politicized as news headlines screamed about declining math scores. The issue was primarily exploited by the opposition Conservatives. Drawing on 'back to basics' tropes, they claimed the Liberal government had introduced a confusing 'discovery math' curriculum (emphasizing critical thinking and applied problem solving), and that a return to a focus on rote memorization was necessary. Math teachers

were not asked for their perspectives. Conservative leader Doug Ford further charged that the decline was evidence that teachers generally had poor math skills themselves, vowing to introduce an exam for future faculty of education graduates (Abedi & Patton 2018). Immediately following his election victory in June 2018, the report urging the scaling back of EQAO testing was removed from the Ministry of Education website.

The Conservative agenda for standardized testing is yet to be seen. If they are consistent, we can expect a raising of the stakes, perhaps with new measures of 'accountability' targeting teachers. In the months since the election of Doug Ford's Conservatives, education in Ontario has been defined by a conflict over his government's replacement of a recently created health curriculum with an earlier version. The newer version had earned the ire of social conservatives, with its discussion of sexual consent, gender and sexual diversity. Its removal drew protests from teachers and concerned parents, and tens of thousands of high school students walked out of schools to protest. Results of a public consultation obtained by the media indicated overwhelming support for retaining the modern curriculum (Canadian Press 2018). While placating a committed minority of right-wing voters, the conflict has drawn the concern and opposition of the large majority, particularly parents with children in school, creating the basis for a natural alliance with the teachers' federations. There will surely be many more aggressive interventions by the Conservative government in the coming years, directly confronting teachers' professionalism and the integrity of public education as a whole.

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