

# STANDARDS-BASED REFORM: CAN WE DO BETTER?

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TODAY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND EXTERNAL TESTING ARE LIVELY AND CONTROVERSIAL topics. Rarely does a day go by when the media does not feature an article about standards, standardized testing, and levels of student achievement in public schools. Establishing and raising standards, and measuring the attainment of those standards, are intended to encourage excellence in our schools. Proponents of standards-based reform claim that student achievement testing increases accountability and allows for greater instructional consistency.<sup>1</sup> Performance across schools, boards, provinces, and even countries internationally can be compared and contrasted with the aim of identifying exemplary teaching practices.<sup>2</sup> Teachers can also use external tests for diagnostic assessment to see where students need more study and possibly remedial assistance.

Yet skepticism is increasing about the fairness of large-scale assessment and its accuracy. In Canada, grades given as a result of external testing can be highly deceptive despite their cachet in today's achievement-oriented education system.<sup>3</sup> Standardized testing often narrows the curriculum since teachers over-emphasize tested subject matter at the expense of other areas of the curriculum – particularly when high stakes are attached to test performance.<sup>4</sup> Large-scale assessment also detracts from authentic forms of teaching and learning within tested subjects since worksheets, drills, practice tests, and similar rote practices consume greater amounts of classroom time.<sup>5</sup> While these test preparation practices result in higher test scores, research suggests that student learning often does not change.<sup>6</sup>

Large-scale assessment also adversely affects student motivation and contributes to a higher dropout rate – particularly in contexts where the external tests serve as graduation requirements. This tendency to push students out of school and ultimately deter them from applying to post-secondary institutions has been found within both Canada and the United States, as evidenced by recent statistics reported by the Alberta Teachers Association<sup>7</sup> and the National Center for Educational Statistics.<sup>8</sup> Ontario has also recently experienced a rise in the high school drop-out rate since the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) was introduced as a graduation requirement beginning in 2000/2001. Although the high school completion rate was steady in the mid-90s to 2001 at 78 percent, there was a sharp drop in 2001 to 71 percent, which has remained relatively unchanged.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, unintended negative consequences on student engagement and retention disproportionately affect various multicultural student populations – suggesting external testing is culturally biased and favors middle class white students.

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## CANADIAN EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

In spite of these valid criticisms, the view that standards-based reform and external testing are the chief ways to improve our schools has become entrenched in Canadian society. Currently, every province and territory (with the exception of Prince Edward Island) administers some form of large-scale student assessment. The approach of individual provinces and territories varies according to the grades tested, sample size, test format, and frequency of administration. These measures play a central role for accountability purposes and act as a lever for educational change through the development of provincial, district, and school achievement targets. Rather than dismiss these reform agendas outright, this article provides some overarching considerations to ensure Canadian educational systems are properly positioned to focus on school improvement.

In order to achieve meaningful system improvement, standards-based reforms and the targets that typically accompany their implementation should be based on a collective process, encompass objectives that are comprehensive in scope, strike a balance between the utilization of classroom and large-scale assessment, focus on both short and long-term goals, and be part of a broader vision that affirms the importance of all children – regardless of their academic aptitude or achievement. By respecting these design and implementation considerations, Canada has an opportunity to avoid some of the problems that have characterized other educational jurisdictions that have embarked on similar educational reforms. Indeed, Canada should lead, not follow, the less than exemplary reform models that have characterized other Western countries.

### COLLECTIVE PROCESS

Large-scale educational reforms are typically conceived and implemented as a top-down process by government leaders and their policy-makers. Unfortunately, these individuals have little understanding of the daily challenges that teachers and students face in schools. By utilizing a collective process that incorporates the perspectives of a diverse range of primary stakeholders, educational reforms are more likely to receive broad-based support. Essentially, a collective process improves the likelihood that teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members become partners, not adversaries, of the reform agenda. No reform, in the field of education or elsewhere, can be realized if it is not embraced by those directly affected in practice. Research across North America and parts of the Western World (i.e., England, Australia, New Zealand) has consistently demonstrated the importance of balancing top-down and bottom-up input for sustaining large-scale reform initiatives.<sup>10</sup> Policy-makers, who ignore the concerns of teachers and students, not only create a backlash with the testing process; they undermine the prospect of implementing their own reforms with an acceptable degree of consistency.

### COMPREHENSIVE TARGETS

To be effective, educational reforms and targets must encompass knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are comprehensive in scope. Too often, tests come to define what is critically important, despite the limitations that

**EN BREF** Pour viser l'excellence chez les étudiants et leurs enseignants, nous devons élaborer une vision de la réforme de l'éducation beaucoup plus globale que celle qui caractérise présentement le Canada et la majorité des pays industrialisés. Notre capacité de promouvoir efficacement les réformes en éducation dépend de l'abandon du cadre rigide des examens normalisés à grande échelle pour faire place à la promotion de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage authentiques. Il est possible de faire du Canada un chef de file de l'amélioration des écoles en utilisant un cadre de travail basé sur les cinq aspects suivants : établir un processus collectif de réforme des méthodes d'évaluation; privilégier des objectifs globaux pour la salle de classe; offrir un équilibre entre les évaluations à grande et à petite échelle; distinguer nos objectifs à court et à long terme; ainsi qu'élargir notre vision à tous les élèves. Ces aspects peuvent permettre de transformer les réformes actuelles basées sur des normes provinciales et axées sur des examens normalisés de façon à les établir sur des indicateurs mesurant vraiment la qualité de l'éducation.

currently exist in large-scale student achievement testing. For example, although literacy is related to four domains – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – provincial and territorial assessment programs typically only measure the first two areas. Although speaking and listening skills are more difficult to assess through a standardized approach, they are essential competencies for the current knowledge economy. By focusing on what is easily measurable, we ensure the continued narrowing of the curriculum that inevitably follows external testing and detract from the teaching of important higher-order thinking skills. Recent research indicates that of the 47 American states that have created standards for student learning, only those that utilized a comprehensive approach to student assessment realized improvements in student achievement.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, comprehensive achievement targets that include more than performance on traditional paper-and-pencil standardized measures are essential not only to avoid a myopic vision of educational excellence but also to spur teaching and learning improvements within our schools.

### CLASSROOM VERSUS LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT

The limitations of current provincial and territorial testing programs, provide part of the impetus for balancing classroom and large-scale assessment. By utilizing classroom assessment data (also known as curriculum-embedded assessment) for accountability purposes, Canadian educational jurisdictions can avoid the oversimplification of student learning that often accompanies large-scale assessment. Just as a doctor relies on a number of interrelated pieces of information before rendering a diagnosis, so too should governments utilize a range of student achievement data before accessing the health of our schools. Ironically, by providing a more equitable balance between the two main types of assessment, policy-makers help decrease teaching to the test techniques that undermine the predictive validity of the large-scale measures they hold in such high regard. In pockets of the United States, England, and Australia, both traditional and curriculum-embedded assessments have been successfully integrated into accountability frameworks that assess a broad array of student knowledge and skills. In the Australian context, state and territorial governments have explicitly stated that many key aspects of student learning cannot be assessed centrally and require teacher judgment at the classroom level.<sup>12</sup> Essentially, it is teachers – not external testing agencies –

who are the primary assessors for classroom and broader accountability purposes. In many respects, these pockets of success have acted against the grain by reaffirming the central importance of classroom assessment data for system improvement.

### SHORT-TERM VERSUS LONG-TERM GOALS

Educational reforms also need to strike a balance between short-term and long-term goals. Short-term targets must be malleable to change and based on what is in the best interest of the school system as a whole. Consider two large provinces such as Ontario and Alberta; both have seen recent improvements in provincial test scores at the same time their high school completion rate has fallen. Obviously, both high scores and student retention rates is the most desirable outcome, but a conscientious policy-maker must be willing to accept lower test scores in light of improvements in other areas such as student retention, not vice versa. By focusing on long-term development over short-term "success," politicians have the opportunity to spur improvements that go beyond their four-year mandate. Educational researchers the world over have shown that meaningful large-scale reforms usually take much longer to achieve. Ironically, it is countries that focus their efforts on longer-term progress that have achieved the highest literacy and numeracy scores on international tests such as the Programme in International Student Assessment.<sup>13</sup> The previous researchers argue that it is highly qualified teachers – not a top-heavy short-sighted preoccupation with targets and standardized testing – that deliver strong student achievement results.

### BROADER VISION

The focus of education should always remain on all segments of the student population. The tendency to overemphasize large-scale assessment results has alienated large portions of the student population who have difficulty in testing situations. Although school districts are charged with educating any child who resides within their boundaries, not all these children will possess the academic skills to pursue post-secondary education. Educational reform models need to be cognizant of the different functions of schools and affirm the importance of these non-academic stream students within our society. By focusing too heavily on achievement targets, we compel schools to overlook these student populations. For example, in Ontario, schools are often ranked in relation to the percentage of students who achieve at or above the provincial standard (level 3). Thus, schools are naturally inclined to focus excessive instructional attention on students who are close to the cut score of proficiency – just above (i.e., level 3) or just below (i.e., level 2) the accepted standard.<sup>14</sup> Students unlikely to reach the provincial standard (i.e., level 1) become an acceptable causality of the war to raise scores. A broader vision of educational reform recognizes the need for diverse targets that go beyond performance on discrete external tests.

### CONCLUSION

Improving the quality of schools and student learning requires more than the implementation of large-scale assessment programs and testing targets. Our ability to promote meaningful educational reform depends on breaking out of this narrow mindset to position schools to promote authentic teaching and learning. Collectively, the five considerations offered here provide a framework to achieve this objective and position Canada as a leader in school improvement. Essentially, these considerations turn current standards-based reform agendas and the testing targets that typically accompany them on their heads to reflect a broad, rather than narrow, scope of educational quality indicators. Certainly, if we are going to expect excellence from our students and teachers, we need to provide a more comprehensive educational reform vision than is currently characterizing Canada and much of the Western World. |

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### Notes

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