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Don't drop EQAO tests

John Bachman

Before Ontarians seriously consider the suggestion by the province's elementary school teachers for a two-year moratorium on the annual Grade 3 and Grade 6 tests, we would be wise to review the history of these tests.

In the early 1990s, education in Ontario was a mess. The curriculum was so ambiguously defined that what was taught in one classroom was often wildly different than what was being taught at the next school. Core subject matter in many courses was not covered at all. The report cards going home to parents were jammed with impenetrable jargon and, as a result, most parents had no clue what their children were learning. The tests and other evaluation tools being used by teachers also varied significantly from classroom to classroom, so that work earning an "A" in one classroom might only be graded a "C" in another.

Many people forget that the major reforms generated by this sorry situation were all started under Bob Rae's NDP government. True, much of the implementation, often needlessly confrontational, occurred during the reign of the Mike Harris Tories, but the underlying sentiment for these reforms was non-partisan.

Regular, province-wide testing was a key ingredient of this reform package. It gave parents a better idea of how their children were doing. Perhaps more importantly, by facilitating comparisons between schools, it provided teachers and school administrators with the data they needed to identify areas for improvement.

Our teacher unions and faculties of education have made no secret of their opposition to province-wide standardized testing and the open reporting of test results. **Most educators insist that schools drawing students from households with lower incomes will always score worse on tests than those serving affluent neighbourhoods.** Because of this, they say, comparisons between these schools are unfair.

This position reveals a patronizing attitude toward parents who are smart enough to know which comparisons are fair and useful and which aren't. It also reveals a profound ignorance of what the EQAO (Education Quality Accountability Office) results have taught us the past several years. Studies of EQAO data have shown that some schools in affluent areas do very poorly while some in poor areas do very well.

Rather than calling for a moratorium on testing, teacher unions should be encouraging the detailed analysis of results to find out what the higher-achieving schools from lower-income areas are doing differently so these methods can be applied to underperforming schools.

Rather than calling for a stop to the tests, teachers would be better advised to suggest ways they can be improved and to get better at using the data the tests provide to improve their teaching.

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