**The debate over standardized testing in schools is as divisive as ever**

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 “It’s getting closer,” teacher Erin Hamilton tells her Grade 6 class at Lougheed Middle School in Brampton, Ont. “It’s becoming a reality.”

“It” is the annual series of tests administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office, or EQAO, which to the kids stands for Evil Questions Attacking Ontario. By the end of next week, they and every other student in Grades 3 and 6 across the province will have spent six hours (over three days) writing provincially mandated assessments of reading, writing and math skills.

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Just thinking about what lies ahead makes Ms. Hamilton’s crew tense.

“It’s scary,” says Maneesha Johal, 12. “I’m feeling nervous. It’s what the government sees; they look at how we’ve done.”

And the government is increasingly proud of what it sees, trumpeting a steady rise in the number of children able to meet its standards – and thus adding lustre to Ontario’s reputation in the global race to produce the best and the brightest.

But the nature of standardized testing – a constant concern to teachers and parents across the country, as well the youngsters put under the microscope – is in dispute to such a degree that at least one province is having second thoughts.

Last month, Alberta announced that next year it will begin to phase out its renowned Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs), one of the older and more comprehensive of the exams conducted in Canada.

The move by the nation’s top performer in international rankings has reignited the national debate over standardized testing, which critics accuse of encouraging rote learning and forcing teachers to tailor their efforts “to the test.” In response, supporters argue that there is no better way to ensure that schools perform properly and the education system remains accountable.

Parents are caught in the middle, trying to weigh their child- ren’s angst (and often that of teachers) against a natural curiosity to know just how well schools stack up against each other – an exercise that has caused problems in the United States and Britain, even as it provides real-estate agents with a valuable sales tool.

Stress notwithstanding, testing appears to be popular with the public at large. One survey conducted by the EQAO (which also tests math skills in Grade 9 and literacy in Grade 10) found that 64 per cent of respondents felt it helps to keep the system accountable to taxpayers as well as parents; in a second one, 69 per cent of elementary-school parents said it’s important to know how a child is faring in relation to a provincial standard.

Those who conduct the tests insist that they aren’t intended to pit schools against each other, but the Fraser Institute has no such qualms. Every year, the conservative think tank issues report cards that use results from B.C., Alberta, Ontario and Quebec to rank schools from best to worst.

Peter Cowley, director of the institute’s school performance studies, has co-written all of the report cards and insists that not only are the rankings of public interest, “it is a dereliction of duty” if ministries of education and school boards ignore them.

He has heard all the criticisms – that the rankings are elitist and biased, that they are simply tools used by real-estate agents to market neighbourhoods with “good” schools, that they provide only a narrow measure of student ability, that they stress out students and teachers, that some schools will go to extreme lengths to prep students.

In response, he says, “there should be no pressure and no stress, and no teaching to the test. If teachers are doing their job, then kids should already have the required knowledge.” The tests, he adds, are based on provincial curricula, and written, administered and graded by teachers.

Yet teachers are particularly opposed to testing, which they argue does not promote learning even as it undermines their professionalism. Rather than South Korea, which has fostered a culture of testing and rocketed to the top of the international education charts, they point to Finland, which vies for the lead without putting kids through six hours of grilling.

So some observers predict that, without standardized exams to keep its system in check, Alberta will soon find itself “in a race to the bottom,” as Michael Zwaagstra, a research fellow at Frontier Centre, a Winnipeg-based think tank, wrote recently in the Calgary Herald.

But Carol Henderson, president of the Alberta Teachers’ Association, dismisses the PATs as “30-year-old tests for 20th century learners.”

She has taught Grade 3, had her classes tested and says the results provided no information that teachers do not already have simply by observing students and assessing their regular tests, assignments and discussions.

The new Student Learning Assessment (SLA) that Alberta is developing – after years of discussion – will be computer-based and, rather than make students wait until spring, take place at the beginning of the school year. As well, the emphasis will be on such skills as problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity, rather than knowledge of specific subjects. Pilot testing of the SLA for Grade 3 will begin next year, followed by Grades 6 and 9 in 2015 and 2016.

Will the new approach overcome the fact that, given the expanding demands placed on education by revolutions in technology, transformations in the work force and the rising economic power of developing nations, the appeal of standardized tests is difficult to ignore? After all, they offer an ostensibly objective assessment to parents, concerned about their children’s future.

Charles Pascal, former chair of the EQAO and a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, says that using tests to compare schools is misguided. It creates “a lot of anxious white noise” that “comes from the fear of not being as good as the school next door.”

He concedes that, as a result, “there are people at school boards who put pressure on schools to up their test scores.”

South of the border, this kind of pressure led to a recent scandal in Atlanta that left 35 educators facing criminal charges after standardized test results were falsified. Similar incidents have taken place across the United States, spurred by the use of student scores in teachers’ performance reviews and merit-pay decisions.

According to a joint statement by the presidents of the state and national teachers’ federations, the scale of the Atlanta incident “crystallizes the unintended consequences of our test-crazed policies.”

According to Prof. Pascal, the EQAO – founded in 1996 – is a means to an end. He cites a number of successful schools, including those with socio-economically disadvantaged student populations, that have used their results to galvanize the leadership to secure more resources and to develop new programs.

“The importance for me is not in ranking or comparing schools,” he explains, “but rather in finding out how children are faring and then putting information into action.”

Marguerite Jackson, the EQAO’s chief executive officer, agrees. “Data is stimulus for action,” she says. The province supports schools that want to improve their math and literacy performance by providing grants for such resources as technology, peer mentors for teachers and principals, and enhanced curriculum.

As well, EQAO results indicate that student performance is improving: For instance, 73 per cent of Grade 6 students met the standard in writing in 2010 – almost a 40-per-cent rise from 2000, when the figure was just 53 per cent.

Others remain unconvinced. Large-scale tests “are asked to assess too many things,” argues Daniel Laitsch, an associate professor of education at Simon Fraser University. He feels that, no matter what the stated purpose, they are meant to measure, along with student achievement, that of teachers, schools, curriculum and entire jurisdictions as well, which stretches their validity in appraising any of them.

In fact, Prof. Laitsch calls testing students “an atrocious way to evaluate teacher effectiveness, without any research to support the theory.”

Toronto resident Maxeen Paabo agrees and has decided that her son will not participate in this year’s Grade 3 tests. She researched the issue, and reached her conclusion even before the school year began.

“I think the way it is now and the way it’s being used politically is wrong, and it’s a misuse of resources,” she says.

“What the ministry [of education] said is that it is used on a student level, on a class level and on a school level to make improvements. But my understanding on the ground is that that isn’t really happening, that teachers’ regular classroom assessments are doing all that work.”

But the sixth graders at Lougheed (coincidentally named for the Brampton-born grandfather of Alberta’s late premier Peter Lougheed) are not staying home on test day.

To help them take the “evil questions” in stride, Ms. Hamilton leaves candy on their desks, lets them play outside and, by far the biggest treat, gives no homework for three days.

She feels one of the testing’s shortcomings is the fact that it is standardized and so treats everyone the same even though children learn at different rates and on different levels. “In the classroom, we’re modifying and accommodating where needed,” she says. “EQAO doesn’t give them that same nicety.”

And does it really keep the system on track? In fact, the correlation between standardized testing and achievement appears to be fuzzy. With myriad factors affecting the education system – among them demographic and economic changes, fluctuation in education budgets, shifts in curriculum – it’s impossible to say unequivocally that where scores have gone up, it’s in any way because of standardized tests.

For example, others assess Canada’s schoolchildren. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada administers cyclical tests across the country to determine levels of performance in math, reading and science. And international bodies, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), compare millions of secondary-school students in about 70 countries.

In both cases, the assessments are based on random samples of students, rather than putting everyone to the test. Despite the EQAO’s positive signs, the most recent OECD results released in 2009 showed Canada to be slipping both in reading and math.

The debate about standardized tests may soon become moot.

Alberta’s new SLAs aim to address many of the concerns of critics, by broadening the definitions of skills and capability. They are also less stress-inducing and will no longer alienate the teachers who have to administer them. It’s not even clear yet that the results will be made public.

This new model may prove to be a bellwether, but there are no plans in Canada to do without testing, like Finland. Darlings of the global education community, the Finns regularly score near the top of the OECD survey even though they emphasize autonomy in teaching, rely very little on marks in the primary years, and limit homework as well as tests. Their system is nimble, independent and decentralized – the antithesis of the rote-learning, test-obsessed education model.

Paul Taillefer, president of the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, says Canada could learn from Finland, where education is a collective responsibility, not a competition. What’s more, he says, while testing for literacy and numeracy has its place, the current model of large-scale assessments is missing “a whole gamut of 21st-century skills.”

“We’re handcuffing our teachers with the narrow focus of these assessments,” he says. “More time should be spent on individual strengths and weaknesses. We are training our students to be responsible citizens, just and caring human beings. We want to give them a bank of knowledge they can use to take on the world.

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