

# Assessment and Accountability in Education in Ontario<sup>1</sup>

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In recent years, Ontario has joined many other provinces in grappling with the issues of assessment and accountability. Although Ontario does not have a long-standing history of standardized assessment or testing, a ferment of activity has occurred since the mid-1980s. This activity has included a number of program reviews (in different subjects areas, using sampling techniques), a literacy assessment in grade 9, and examination reviews in the final secondary year. The next few years will be important ones as Ontario tries to juggle the critical issues associated with changing social, economic, and political conditions; with the role of teachers in assessment; with the complexity and difficulty of communicating with a widely varied audience; and with interpreting and using assessment results wisely.

Au cours des dernières années, l'Ontario s'est penché, à l'instar de nombreuses autres provinces, sur les questions d'évaluation et de responsabilité. Bien que l'Ontario n'ait pas une longue tradition en matière d'évaluation ou de tests standardisés, des activités en ce sens ont commencé à surgir depuis le début des années 80. Elles comprennent bon nombre d'analyses de programmes (dans différentes matières, à l'aide de techniques d'échantillonnage), l'évaluation des capacités de lecture et d'écriture en 9e année et des analyses des résultats d'examen à la fin du secondaire. Les années qui viennent seront importantes puisque l'Ontario tentera de faire face aux questions essentielles associées à l'évolution des conditions sociales, économiques et politiques, au rôle des enseignants dans l'évaluation, à la complexité et à la difficulté de communiquer avec un auditoire très varié et à l'interprétation et à l'utilisation judicieuses des résultats des évaluations.

## THE CALL FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability has become the watchword of the 1990s. In Ontario as in the rest of the world, the realities of economic and political uncertainty have contributed to a climate of concern about the quality of education. School systems are under pressure to provide the public with information about what they are doing in schools and how well their efforts are working. At the same time, educators and policy makers are discovering that they need better information to make good decisions—to describe the quality of education, to monitor efforts at reform, and to identify areas for corrective action. These two forces have led to increased interest in statistical information about schools and school systems in the form of “accountability indicators.”

Generating and providing educational indicators is a relatively new experience in Ontario. Over the years, the Ministry of Education has produced some routine reports (e.g., *Education Statistics*, *Ontario Directory of Education*; commissioned special reports to provide information about particular policy issues (e.g., patterns of school attendance, enrollment by subjects and guidelines, achievement of grade 13 students in university, a provincial review of grade 6 mathematics and reading); and participated in a number of international studies (e.g., Second International Mathematics Study, International Assessment of Educational Progress). The reports from all these studies were distributed to schools and, although they were available to the general public and were often publicized via press releases, they rarely received much attention beyond, and perhaps even within, education circles.

The evolution of Ontario's approach to assessment is very informative in this regard. Until recently, there has been no tradition of standardized assessment or testing since the mid-1960s, at which time departmental exams were used primarily for decisions about university entrance. In the 1970s and early 1980s, when many other provinces and American states were expanding their assessment programs, Ontario left assessment in the hands of educators at the district level. Teachers were expected to develop evaluation procedures and examinations that measured the achievement of students in specified courses and programs based on provincial curriculum guidelines, as outlined in a provincial policy document covering grades 7 through 12:

For most purposes, it is recognized that the most effective form of evaluation is the application of the teacher's professional judgment to a wide range of information gathered through observation and assessment. In order to help teachers evaluate student achievement, curriculum guidelines will describe appropriate evaluation techniques. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1988, p. 35)

Pressure has mounted, however, to report the quality of education in Ontario schools, particularly about student achievement. In the early 1980s, there was some evidence that Ontario's public was beginning to lose confidence in the education system. A biennial opinion poll found that about two-thirds of respondents believed there should be province-wide testing (Livingstone & Hart, 1984). A provincial study in 1983/84 showed there was considerable diversity across the province in Ontario Academic Credit (OAC) English examinations, a key element in university entrance (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1991). At the same time, universities began asking for a return to province-wide examinations. These early indications of public concern prompted the Provincial Advisory Committee on Evaluation Policies and Practices and the Ministry of Education to begin exploring a variety of issues related to student assessment.

This period was also characterized by increased concern about "equity" and about young people who were already disadvantaged being further disadvantaged by their schooling and denied opportunities to learn (Radwanski, 1987). The

Ontario system has historically shown commitment to equity of opportunity and recent policy initiatives have aimed at removing established barriers and biases in school policies, programs, and practices so that intended learning outcomes may be achieved by students, including those traditionally disadvantaged (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1993).

At the same time, unease was growing that at the end of their schooling many young people had not adequately mastered basic skills and lacked adequate preparation for entry into the work world (Premier's Council of Ontario, 1990).

In Ontario, although officials recognize that student performance is only one potential indicator of the quality of an education system, assessment of student achievement has moved to the forefront of the accountability agenda; other initiatives are following more slowly. In this article I describe only the assessment-related activities.

#### ASSESSMENT IN ONTARIO

In 1986, the Ministry of Education embarked on a series of program reviews, using sampling, to evaluate the effectiveness of various programs and to provide information for focusing program improvement efforts. The Ministry of Education adopted a review model, based on the Second International Mathematics Study, that included assessing *intended* curriculum (analysis of curriculum documents), *implemented* curriculum (teacher report of resources used, time use, instructional strategies, concepts covered, etc.), and *attained* curriculum (student performance on tests and performance tasks) as a basis for identifying program weaknesses that can influence reforms in curriculum and instruction. Nine such reviews have occurred since 1986/87 (grade 9 geography, senior chemistry, senior physics, grade 6 reading, grade 6 mathematics, grade 8 mathematics, grade 10 mathematics, grade 12 mathematics, and grade 12 writing).

At the same time, the ministry began a program of examination reviews and teacher inservice in the OAC (final secondary) year as a quality control device to ensure consistency across the province and to meet the need for greater accountability while assisting the assessment and evaluation of student achievement and directing guideline implementation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1992). The examination reviews are intended to provide a routine check on the adequacy of examinations and the marking that teachers use with graduating students. To date, the OAC exam review has occurred in 10 subject areas (English, visual arts, calculus, economics, accounting, Français, physics, chemistry, geography, and French as a second language).

Throughout implementation of the program reviews and the OAC examination review, the focus and philosophy of the assessment agenda was gathering and providing information to inform the program and improve education. Assessments were *not* directed at evaluating individual schools or school boards and the ministry had no intention of using the results to rank schools.

In 1993, the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training modified its review process to demonstrate accountability on a broader scale and signal the government's intention to set high standards and ensure they are taken seriously. A planned grade 9 reading/writing review became a test taken by all 140,000 students in grade 9. A second grade 9 reading/writing test is occurring in 1994/95, again for all students in the province.

Assessment activities in Ontario were historically closely linked with the underlying purpose for the assessment. A clear distinction was drawn between assessments that have, as a major purpose, the improvement of programs and accountability to the public and assessments designed to contribute to decisions about individual students. This distinction is embodied in two of the principles of assessment in *The Common Curriculum: Grades 1–9* (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1993):

- The evaluation and reporting of student achievement is the task of the teacher, who must consider the special requirements of individual students and work in consultation with them and their parents.
- The evaluation of school programs should effect improvement and should be based on school board and provincial standards. (pp. 3–4)

These principles continue Ontario's tradition of honouring the classroom assessment done as a daily part of teaching and learning. This kind of assessment is still the basis for decisions about individual students, and, as such, is arguably the most important kind of assessment.

The program and the OAC examination reviews has addressed the accountability and program improvement purposes. Stated purposes for program reviews were to determine how well students were performing and to provide data for program improvement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1990). The purpose of the OAC examination reviews is to achieve consistency in assessment and evaluation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1992).

Recently, the grade 9 test has extended the role of provincial assessment by moving beyond a sample to a census testing and by returning to students and their parents the central markers' judgements about students' level of performance. This approach includes influencing decisions about individual students, and aims to provide information to students and parents about each student's level of performance compared to provincial standards.

### *Program Reviews*

Levels of attainment are measured through the program reviews based on samples of 100 English- and 100 French-language schools, usually using matrix sampling. Assessment procedures have varied, depending on the program under consideration, from multiple choice to performance tasks to full units of work.

This process has showed what percentage of students reached the expectation for a particular grade or program.

#### *OAC Examination Review*

Consistency of application of the examination procedures and expectations for students are monitored at school leaving through the OAC examination review process and the concomitant teacher inservice (OAC-TIP). This process involves the development of a handbook that describes examination design and marking procedures for teachers and details procedures for inservice of teachers. The ministry also monitors consistency through province-wide sampling of examinations and marked student papers; when their examinations are not acceptable teachers are alerted and required to produce a plan for corrective action.

#### *Grade 9 Reading/Writing Test*

The grade 9 reading/writing test is a two-week integrated unit of work, including assessment activities that model good assessment practices. Teachers consider the students' work throughout the unit as part of their term mark, and the writing portfolio and the reading test booklets are submitted to the ministry for scoring against a set of consistent standards developed from the provincial standards. These scores are summarized in a provincial report, similar to the reports from prior reviews. In addition, the scored student submissions are returned to students, their teachers, and their parents, as a basis for discussion about each student's performance level in reading and writing and for further classroom follow-up. It is interesting to note that although this test counted for 10% to 15% of a student's term mark, classroom teachers made the decision about how they would use the material. The external marker's statements of performance levels were not to be used for student marks, nor were they to be used for promotion purposes (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1994).

#### *School Achievement Indicators Program*

In the early 1990s, Ontario and eight of the nine other provinces as well as the two territories agreed to participate in national assessments by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), which represents all of these jurisdictions. These assessments of 13- and 16-year-olds in mathematics, reading, writing, and science use a process similar to that of the Ontario reviews (e.g., the assessment tools are developed by teachers, are curriculum-based, and involve sampling). Each of these national assessments is planned by a pan-Canadian team and parallel assessments are conducted in both official languages. The mathematics assessment was completed in 1993, reading and writing in 1994, and science is planned for 1996. These tests are marked by teams of teachers drawn together

from across Canada using specified criteria. Particular attention is paid to inter-language comparability. The results are reported for Canada as a whole and for each province.

### *Classroom Assessment*

Classroom assessment by teachers plays a central role in Ontario in making decisions about program, placement, promotion, and certification of individual children. It is the sole basis for these decisions and sometimes involves a number of teachers who are working with the same students, as well as parents. Classroom assessment is seen as a critical element of school reform and teachers are encouraged to improve their assessment procedures and to align their instruction and assessment with the stated outcomes and standards. Over time, teachers are expected to internalize the expectations for student performance expressed in the outcomes and the standards in *The Common Curriculum: Grades 1–9* (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1993) and to use them as reference points for a wide variety of assessment tasks.

### REPORTING RESULTS

The ministry has reported the results of the reviews for the province as a whole, but the officials clearly have never intended to use the review data as an indicator of school quality or to rank schools. In fact, the sampling procedure used precluded breaking the data into smaller blocks and making statements about boards and schools. The results of provincial reviews are reported publicly in several forms—an extensive full report, a 5- to 6-page provincial report card, press releases, and board reports for participating boards.

The *Provincial Report Card* summarizes the results in plain language, with highlighting, a description of the review process and questions, tables and/or graphs to show achievement in the areas assessed, a description of student attitudes and of classroom practice, and a statement about how the results will be used.

The OAC examination review is reported both as a provincial summary report and as individual reports to schools and boards. Schools with non-conforming examinations or marking are required to take corrective action.

Because the ministry allowed school boards to use their materials and scoring service to do their own board-wide reviews, many boards received results for their district and for the schools within the district. This option made board-level reporting more common. In fact, the ministry required any boards that decided to participate in a full board review to report publicly. This reporting, however, was to be presented within a local context and not to be used for comparisons with others. The information was distributed to boards and to schools with the following policy proviso:

School boards will be required to report publicly on their board results and to use the information for program planning and implementation. Public comparisons of individual school or board results are not appropriate. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1988, p. 3)

Educators, who were very aware of the many potential misuses of test results that had been discussed in American education journals, have heartily supported this policy. They agreed that results would be valuable for teachers and administrators in their school planning and that they would focus improvement efforts, but were nervous about the possibility of public reporting.

Both the province and the boards used a process whereby the interpretation was done by interpretation panels made up of people who had a stake in the community. The provincial results of the early reviews received little attention from the media or the public. In 1990, however, when the results of the mathematics and reading review in grade 6 were released, there was considerable media focus, and since then public interest in the results has mounted; each subsequent review has received widespread publicity.

Until very recently (fall 1994), only the provincial reports and board reports for the boards participating in full board reviews were publicly released. On several occasions, individuals from special-interest groups hoping to influence education have requested more detailed information but it has not been widely disseminated. The conditions have changed, however, with the grade 9 reading/writing test. The results of this assessment are reported in the same way as prior reviews but the census approach has made it possible to report for all school boards and schools in the province. In addition, the results for each student are returned to the school with the requirement that they be shared with the student and the parents.

Given Ontario's focus on classroom assessment, there is also another important kind of reporting—the teachers' reporting to parents and students. Traditionally this is accomplished through a periodic report card that includes marks (in percentages or percentage ranges) and/or anecdotal comments, depending on the grade level. In the early grades this was augmented by regular parent-teacher interviews or conferences, but this practice was less evident in the higher elementary and secondary grades even though the policy document for grades 7 to 12 strongly suggests parent conferences as well as written results (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1984). The advent of the statements of outcomes and standards in *The Common Curriculum: Grades 1–9* (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1993) is prompting many school boards to revise their reporting procedures.

#### CRITICAL ISSUES: PRESENT AND FUTURE

Accountability and assessment are important issues in educational reform in Ontario today. They are the central elements in the reform agenda of the current

Minister of Education and Training and they are also key areas for discussion (along with such things as teacher training, curriculum, and governance) by the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning that will make recommendations to the government in January 1995. Many changes have occurred in the last decade and many more will likely come. In the following sections I draw attention to some critical issues and challenges in Ontario.

### *Diversity in the Student Population*

Ontario is a rapidly changing society. Because the province receives many new immigrants from many countries, the demographics of its urban areas especially have changed a great deal in recent years. These newcomers enter an education system already structurally complex (public/separate, French-language/English-language). In addition, Ontario serves many special education students in regular classrooms with support from specialist teachers. This diversity highlights equity as an important assessment issue for policy makers and practitioners alike and raises large questions of validity in assessment. Providing appropriate curriculum and assessment for these diverse groups is difficult.

### *Economic Conditions*

Ontario's extended recession has also led to dramatic cutbacks and reductions in education (as well as in all other public services). The department within the Ministry of Education and Training responsible for assessment has been drastically reduced. Not only does this result in more work for fewer people, but there is a significant loss of continuity and shared understanding of purpose and rationale for the policies and procedures in place. There is an interesting paradox here. When there is economic uncertainty, there is also increased public pressure for accountability and more attention on standards and assessment as solutions. Since these activities are relatively expensive, the government must find additional funds to support these efforts. Attempts to do this as efficiently as possible may lead to cost cutting, with the risk of jeopardizing the adequacy of the assessment itself. At the same time, the funds funnelled into the assessment may have to be withdrawn from other school improvement efforts. When governments face difficult resource allocation decisions, it seems particularly important that they plan carefully and identify all implications of the policy decisions they make.

### *Political Realities*

Politically, it is difficult to establish and maintain an assessment agenda over time in Ontario. Policy decisions and directions are closely tied to particular provincial governments and their platforms. It is very difficult to establish long-range plans that will withstand the next election, even for parties remaining

in power. Over time, this uncertainty has resulted in a lack of coherence and continuity in assessment policies and no clear directions for the future. Instead, decisions are more likely to be reactive and motivated by political and financial expediency. Consequently, many teachers and even whole school boards routinely adopt a “wait and see” attitude while others jump into new initiatives enthusiastically and are disillusioned when these are superseded.

### *The Role of Teachers*

One distinguishing feature of assessment in Ontario is the widespread involvement and leadership of teachers in assessment and standard-setting activities. Educators are involved in determining policy and practice, developing test specifications, writing test items and performance tasks for the program reviews, marking test papers, piloting materials, and providing inservice to colleagues. Although the Ministry of Education and Training is responsible for the provincial assessment activities, the planning and development teams are all made up of educators seconded from the field, working with internal technical support personnel. All the assessment activities have included teacher inservice as a major component. This ongoing involvement of teachers has increased teachers' knowledge of curricula and instruction, and led to the standards being applied directly to classroom practice.

Teacher involvement has also aided the development of assessments compatible with good classroom practice. Although the assessment procedures are sometimes relatively complicated and take up considerable class time, many teachers are inclined to see them as good instruction and assessment activities that are worthy in and of themselves. The assessment procedures have also been endorsed by the teachers' federations, all represented on a provincial Assessment Advisory Committee.

### *Communication*

Perhaps the most interesting and unpredictable facet of assessment in Ontario in the next few months and years is associated with reporting and using results. Good communication is more than just sharing what is known; it is the essence of accountability not only with the public but with the parents of individual students as well. Accountability implies trust, shared understanding, and mutual support—conditions that cannot happen without open, responsive, and regular vehicles for sharing information and a genuine exchange of ideas. Creating a forum for such an exchange is a massive task.

This task, in relation to large-scale assessments in Ontario, is both complicated by and aided by the lack of a provincial history of public reporting about education. Ontario educators are unaccustomed to sharing information with the public or with the media and are wary about it. At the same time, the media and

the public have received very little information from assessments until very recently, and consequently, Ontario educators have not experienced repercussions, either positive or negative.

The grade 9 reading/writing test marks the first time that the province has actually had data for each school and school board. Decisions have to be made about how these results will be reported and used and about who will be responsible for the reporting process and for interpreting the data to the public.

### *Assessment Literacy*

One challenge will be to very quickly develop what Stiggins (1991) calls assessment literacy. Very few people either within education or in the general public have any understanding of the principles or concepts that underlie assessment in schools. For the most part, scores on assessments (regardless of quality) are likely to be interpreted simplistically and viewed as absolute entities (like money in the bank). Unfortunately, because assessment has not been emphasized in Ontario, there are only a few educators and academics with the kind of technical expertise or training that would allow them to influence policy directions or help other educators extend their own knowledge.

### *Interpretation and Use*

Another challenge will be to find ways to analyze, interpret, and present the results of assessments in ways that are fair and take into account other factors likely to contribute to achievement, especially if school effectiveness is to be judged on scores from assessments. Although there are many difficulties inherent in doing "value-added" analyses (Goldstein, 1993), Ontario is hampered from the beginning by the lack of any data that would make such analyses even remotely possible.

It is also difficult to predict how the results will be used. The original purposes for assessment were quite closely tied to finding ways to improve education, not by wielding a "big stick" but rather by identifying areas where change is required. If assessment becomes a mechanism for controlling schools, it is likely that Ontario educators will react in much the same ways as educators have elsewhere: they will find ways to improve the scores, not necessarily the learning.

### SUMMARY

Ontario is at a crossroads. It remains to be seen whether Ontario will maintain a "school improvement" focus or whether intensifying public pressure will shift the focus to a mechanism for controlling schools. All of the prior conditions, taken together, have the potential to contribute to polarization and to a power

struggle between educators and other forces over control of education. Educators are beginning to feel abused and unfairly attacked, while some members of the public feel that they are being misled and denied access to important information and decisions about educating the children of Ontario.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> This article is adapted in part from L. M. Earl and N. Graham, *A Study of Performance Standards in Education: The Ontario, Canada Case Study*, prepared for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD's) study of Performance Standards in Education in 10 countries. The full report on this work will be published by OECD in 1995.

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