

## **Is EQAO actually working for students? This is what needs to change, educators say**

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EQAO is going to be put to the test.

With less-than-impressive gains in the provincial assessments of reading, writing and math - and with results that vary among schools, boards, and the public, Catholic and French systems - Education Minister Paul Calandra has ordered a close examination of what's behind the numbers.

Experts and educators in the system say the review is a chance to look not only at the so-called EQAO tests - administered by the arm's-length Education Quality and Accountability Office - but also what changes could be made to better support teachers, principals and students.

"As Ontarians, we all want the very best for our kids, so the best possible thing to do would be to try and understand better what accounts for the differences," said Kelly Gallagher-Mackay, an associate professor at Wilfrid Laurier University who studies education policy.

"If there are things we can learn, let's try and learn them."

Veteran educator Avis Glaze, who was part of Ontario's Royal Commission on Learning in the 1990s, which led to the creation of the EQAO, said there are a number of things the province should be looking at beyond the test to boost numeracy.

"I think we have to look at our timetables and not have that very stringent sense of 'x number of hours of math.' We cannot give all the subjects the same kinds of timeframes as we have been doing - mathematics is a major issue" here as it is around the globe, she added.

"I would love to see more time spent on mathematics."

EQAO scores from the 2024-25 school year, released last week after Calandra asked for a delay so he could do a "deep dive," showed math to be of particular concern, given that half of Grade 6 students and 42 per cent of Grade 9s did not meet the provincial standard (equivalent to a B grade or better).

In Grade 3, 64 per cent of kids met the standard in math, 74 per cent in reading and 65 per cent in writing.

Literacy results were stronger in the upper grades, with 85 per cent meeting the writing expectations and 86 per cent in reading in Grade 6. Some 85 per cent of Grade 10s passed the mandatory literacy test.

## Numeracy focus needed

Glaze said the province cannot create a "shame and blame environment" because some schools do need more help than others. But, she added, factors like poverty, even COVID, cannot be used as excuses for poor results.

"If we say we want to be a world-class system, we have to spend money on capacity building when we're not getting the results we want, and especially in mathematics," she said.

Principals need to spend time at successful schools to see what works, and teachers need more math training before hitting the classroom - the province has already introduced a competency test - and she likes the math leads that Ontario already has in place.

Grade 12 math whizzes could even be called on to tutor elementary kids.

"There has to be a lot more intensity around how we're going to do professional development around mathematics," Glaze said. "Math has to now be a focus."

## A parent's perspective on EQAO

Katrina Matheson, co-chair of the parent involvement advisory committee at Toronto's public school board, said the new curriculum wasn't implemented with sufficient curricular materials, funding or plans for teacher training and retraining.

"We do know that having math learning specialist instructors in our schools boosts math scores - this has been shown decisively by the TDSB's Math Learning Partner pilot program that is currently in its third year," she said.

"A good use of the EQAO would be to urgently prioritize extra math and literacy coaching to all low-scoring schools. This can and should be done immediately, before a study gets under way."

The Toronto District School Board, the country's largest, said in a statement that "staff are already looking at best practices, including those from across the province, to implement strategies to move results upward in a meaningful way."

## School systems' performance gaps

Last week, Calandra noted concerning gaps among Ontario's school systems, pointing out that, overall, French-language boards outperform English ones, and within the English system, Catholic boards score higher than public ones, and that sometimes results can vary significantly even within the same geographic region.

"We have to find out why that is, and that's what this assessment will help us do," the education minister said. "From board to board, English to French, the same levels of funding have very, very different results. And that's what I think we've got to get to the bottom of."

Catholic schools have long outperformed public ones - a pattern that extends beyond Ontario - said Gallagher-Mackay, adding there are several theories for why.

While not always the case, research has shown that Catholic school students may come from families with slightly higher education levels and incomes, both strong predictors of academic success. And families who actively choose a particular educational path - such as opting into a Catholic or French-language school rather than attending the default local public school - tend to have children with stronger outcomes.

Another possible factor is trust. She noted studies suggest trusting relationships across a school community - between teachers and principals, teachers and parents, and teachers and students - create conditions where people take risks, communicate openly and feel supported.

While the EQAO tests are "technically proficient," it's unclear why differences may exist between schools or systems, she added. That's partly because Ontario lacks consistent public data on key "inputs" that shape learning, including students' socio-economic backgrounds, teacher retention, staff absenteeism, program availability, resources and supports for special education and well-being.

Without that broader context, she said, it's difficult to know what's driving the variation in performance.

The stronger performance of Catholic and French-language schools is "statistically significant," said David R. Johnson, an emeritus economics professor at Wilfrid Laurier University who analyzes EQAO scores for the C.D. Howe Institute.

His latest report, released a few months ago, examined three years of elementary results, which were adjusted for socio-economic factors such as family income, parental education, recent immigration and single-parent households. Even when controlling for these factors, Catholic and French schools were still stronger.

One outlier, notes Johnson, is the Niagara public board, which performs very well, he said, noting, "I don't think we have any clear idea why. I assume they get similar funding to everybody else. So they do something different."

Johnson said it's "very sensible" for the province to try to better understand what some schools and boards are doing, to see if it can be duplicated elsewhere.