

Tests fail students: professor

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tlatchford@yrmg.com

While the Ontario Elementary Teachers' Federation is calling for a moratorium on standardized testing, education expert Joel Westheimer says that's not enough.

Instead of dropping the testing, administered by the Education Quality and Accountability office for Grade 3 and 6 students, for two years to examine its impact on the education system, as the federation has suggested, the University of Ottawa education professor says the process should be thrown out completely.

"I'm not against all forms of testing, but the way EQAO has been implemented has created this myopic focus on what it means to be successfully educated," he said. "The result is catastrophic."

The danger of standardized testing is it focuses only on two aspects of academic performance — mathematics and literacy — rather than taking into account the entire education system, including history, arts and science, he added.

Teachers begin to focus on teaching what is on the test to improve achievement scores, which, to Mr. Westheimer, makes the results of the testing unreliable markers of school performance.

"Our society loves having numbers to attach to things. Sure the percentages go up for the school, but the rest of the curriculum is lost," he said. "Could you imagine an Ontario without the arts, history or even science, which tend to get pushed aside to make room for test preparation."

This is also dangerous for students as schools and boards across the province tend to dedicate more and more resources to students who are not expected to achieve the provincial standard, possibly leaving other students without the use of those resources.

"I fear for all the students, as the whole system is hijacked to target the students who aren't performing well on these tests," he said. "We need to think about a different kind of testing, because, right now, we can measure two plus two, but we can't measure critical thinking."



EQAO unfair some say. The Ontario Elementary Teachers' Federation wants a two-year moratorium on standardized testing. One education expert says it would be better to ban them altogether.

While the province continues to move toward a no-student-left-behind model, similar to that in the United States, Mr. Westheimer is more inclined to refer to it as “no child left thinking”, as students are drilled to achieve on the standardized tests.

“Not only are the children panicking because of these tests, but I have seen gifted teachers looking to transfer to other grades to avoid the stress of the whole thing,” he said. “It’s a system that just doesn’t work.”

It costs about \$32 million annually to test some 125,000 Grade 3 and 136,000 Grade 6 students in reading, writing and math. More than 101,000 Grade 9 students are also tested for mathematics and another 142,000 in Grade 10 are tested in literacy.

Mr. Westheimer thinks the money could be better spent on resources to teach a well-rounded curriculum.

This is not the first time the teachers’ union has expressed its opposition to the province-wide testing, claiming the practice takes away from valuable teaching time. It sparked the production of a 10-minute video of teachers talking about the impact of the tests they hope will be shown at home and during school meetings.

“Teachers told us EQAO testing does little to improve learning. It was originally set up to test the system as a whole, but now it is driving what gets taught in the classroom,” federation president Sam Hammond said.

Ontario Education Minister Leona Dombrowsky, who addressed the teachers earlier in the week at the federation’s annual meeting in Toronto, said freezing the testing for two years isn’t part of the ministry’s plan.

Provincial testing came into about after parent demanded an independent body to track their children’s progress, she said, noting the data helps educators identify how to better support students, especially those scoring below the provincial standard.

Teacher concerns were taken into account in 2005 when changes to the test, including halving the testing time and shifting to later dates in the school year, were made.