

Ontario Moving to Standardized Online Testing for Students

TORONTO - The Ontario government is proposing to modernize large-scale provincial student testing to better prepare youth for the future, and re-build parent confidence in the education system. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), which creates and administers assessments, will procure a firm to develop an online, adaptive testing platform.

"The world is changing rapidly, and our students are learning in more technology-driven environments," said Education Minister, Stephen Lecce. "That's why we also need to modernize and enhance the way we assess

student learning. By moving to digital testing, we will have a more efficient and accountable large-scale student assessment system that students, parents, and educators can depend on - one that ensures students are ready for the jobs of the future."

Today, EQAO launched the request for bids process in an effort to source the expertise required to develop an online testing solution. This change will allow the agency to modernize its approach to assessment and data collection to be more nimble, effective and focused on student achievement.

For the 2020-21 school year, EQAO will be field-testing online and adaptive assessments for Grade 9 math. This field test will provide an opportunity for students to try this new format and will support the continued development of the assessment platform.

"Today's announcement is another way our government is demonstrating our commitment to prepare students for the future," said Parliamentary Assistant, Sam Oosterhoff. "Modernizing large-scale student assessment is an essential step in ensuring Ontario students are equipped with the skills they will need for the

modern world."

This online, adaptive testing platform will increase responsiveness to student learning needs and support student mental health and well-being by helping to make testing less stressful. Changes would ensure testing accessibility for students with special education needs, increase equity for different student populations, including Francophone, Black and Indigenous students by ensuring cultural relevancy, and provide faster results that teachers can discuss with parents right away.

QUICK FACTS
In 2019, Ontario launched a

four-year math strategy to ensure students have a strong understanding of math fundamentals and how to apply them. This strategy will improve student math performance, help students solve everyday math problems and increase students' employability for the jobs of tomorrow.

For the 2020-21 school year, Grade 3 and 6 students will not participate in EQAO assessments as EQAO aligns the assessments with the new elementary Math curriculum.

A formal RFB has been launched by EQAO on Ontario Tenders Portal, JAG-GAER.

A contract will be granted to the vendor through a trans-

parent and competitive procurement process.

The ministry is working with school boards through the Broadband Modernization Program to deliver access to reliable, fast, secure and affordable internet services for all Ontario students and educators. As of August 31, 2020, broadband modernization has been completed at 2,475 schools, including 842 rural schools and 475 northern schools. Work is currently in progress at 2,462 schools, including 251 rural schools and 26 northern schools.



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SCHOOL CHOICE KEY TO IMPROVING EDUCATION

By Matthew Lau
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The Ontario government recently announced a new elementary school math curriculum. It's likely a positive step but more fundamental funding changes are necessary to truly improve the province's education system.

The province will return to a "back to basics" approach to math aimed at improving standardized test scores. It will also introduce lessons on financial literacy and coding.

Whether these changes will improve math education remains to be seen. What's certain is that the new

approach can't be much worse than the path Ontario's public schools have been going down for almost two decades.

From 2003 to 2018, math scores on tests administered by the Programme for International Student Assessment have steadily fallen in Ontario. The program evaluates the performance of 15-year-old students around the world. Science test scores have similarly deteriorated and there has been a modest drop in reading scores.

The decline in educational outcomes can't be blamed on a lack of government spending on teachers. According to public school boards' financial statements, as a result of significant increases before 2015,

total teacher salary costs per student, excluding benefits and after adjusting for consumer price inflation, rose by 46 per cent from 2002-03 to 2017-18.

It's no surprise that Ontario test scores have gone down while costs have gone up. Government policies help maintain a near monopoly for public schools and the teachers' unions, so there's not much pressure on them to improve.

Any family wanting to send their children to a private school must pay twice for education - first with their taxes and then through tuition. For many families, the cost is prohibitive, so they have no choice but to send their children to public school even if

they find the quality of education unsatisfactory.

In other jurisdictions, however, school choice policies have greatly benefited families and improved educational outcomes. For example, last month Florida significantly expanded its school voucher program, which provides a subsidy of around \$7,000 per student, to help low- and middle-income families send their children to a private school.

The result is that tens of thousands of families dissatisfied with the public school system have access to alternatives - a clear benefit to those families. Despite the gains it provides to low- and middle-income families, however, school choice is

generally met with enormous opposition from progressive circles.

A common objection - raised most loudly by public sector unions, especially teachers' unions - is that government funding to help families afford alternatives to the public school system will weaken public education by depriving the public system of funds. Yet the evidence from Florida shows just the opposite.

"A National Bureau of Economic Research study this year," the Wall Street Journal recently reported, "found higher standardized test scores and lower absenteeism among students, especially low-income ones, who attended Florida public schools in areas

where more students had access to private-school choice."

So expanding access to private schools, instead of making the public schools worse, puts pressure on them to improve. Competition forced Florida public schools to deliver better education or else risk losing students, and therefore funding, to private schools. Competition is always better than monopoly and the education system is no exception.

Ontario's new math curriculum might be better than the old one. But if Ontario really wants a proven way to achieve widespread improvement in the quality of education, it should provide families with more school choice.

HUGE JUMP IN COVID-19 CASES IN SCHOOLS AND CHILD CARE, INCREASE IN WORKPLACE OUTBREAKS: HEALTH COALITION RELEASES UPDATED TRACKING OF THE VIRUS SPREAD IN NON-HEALTH CARE INDUSTRIES

Toronto - Since June, the Ontario Health Coalition has been tracking COVID-19 outbreaks in non-health care industries, adding to its regular updates on the spread of the virus in health care settings. Both sets of reports are available on the Coalition's website here.

In the most recent period (end of August to current) including all reporting that the Coalition has been able to find up to Wednesday September 23, the following trends are emerging:

In our research for this update, we found 162 active outbreaks in non-health care workplaces (including schools and child care centres) as of September 22 as compared to 87 active outbreaks as of August 29 2020. The number of outbreaks in non-health care workplaces has almost doubled since the end of August.

The number of cases in schools has risen by more than 521 percent in the last week and in daycares it has risen by 142 percent. In the last week, the first clear in-school transmissions of the virus have been reported. We have included cases that are not being reported by the province of Ontario (cases in administrative staff and private schools) and an explanatory note about the way in which Public Health Ontario is defining school outbreaks, which is different than how outbreaks in long-term care and retirement homes have been defined.

Since the end of August, we found that the rate of increase in agricultural workers has slowed with only nine new cases reported. However, our members working with migrant workers have reported that there has not been any testing at the farms in Windsor-Essex in two months and many workers cannot access testing.

We have found additional information about workplace outbreaks prior to the end of August as well as new outbreaks from the current reporting period, August 25 to September 18 that are included below.

We have summarized new information (with sources) about the working conditions that resulted in the spread of COVID-19 in some of the workplaces.

The number of workplace outbreaks in this period may be underreported due to high wait times at assessment centres where they have seen a huge increase in demand since schools reopened. These high wait times may be discouraging people from getting tested and are also slowing test results as the province's labs are overwhelmed.