

Volume 13 Issue 3 • January 13, 2010

The great testing debate

The pros, the cons, and the alternatives to standardized tests

More than 250 participants listened to a lively debate about the pros and cons of testing at our annual conference. Four panelists presented their points of view, and very brief summaries of their presentations are set out below. To hear more of the discussion, watch a video of the debate on our website at

www.peopleforeducation.com/conference09/testingpanel.

Kathleen Devlin, *Director, Policy and Public Affairs, Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF)*

Kathleen presented a new approach to testing in Ontario. Improving EQAO scores has become the focus of Ontario's educational policy, but the OTF argues that there are other ways of ensuring accountability and assessing quality. It can be done just as effectively, and at a much lower cost, through random sample testing. Random sample tests have a much lower cost, and are already in use when Ontario students participate in international tests. Kathleen pointed out that the large scale assessments conducted by the EQAO take a great deal of time out of classroom instruction and teachers are 'teaching to the test' to improve test scores and test-taking skills, leaving little time for improving learning or critical thinking skills.

David Johnson, *CD Howe Institute, School of Business and Economics, Wilfred Laurier University*

David presented the findings of his research paper, which used EQAO results to examine school quality in Ontario. By measuring the social and economic background of the children

attending each school, he determined that assessment results vary widely among schools where children have similar backgrounds. He said EQAO testing has a number of benefits, including: the direct feedback it provides to a parent when the individual EQAO grade does not match the teacher's grade; the direct feedback it provides to the principal for the same reason; school feedback on specific curriculum issues; and the measure of how a school does relative to its peer schools.

Marguerite Jackson, *CEO, Education Quality and Accountability Office*
Marguerite stated that EQAO testing was implemented in response to a call from the public and parents for both more clarity about what we expect children to know at certain stages, and more confidence that children are actually learning what they should. The assessments are tests of the curriculum, and they provide diagnostic information for parents, schools and school boards. She said the tests and the curriculum are directly related, and that when teachers teach the

Continued on page 2

in this issue...

The testing debate	1
Progress slow for early learning	1
Annie Kidder: New Year resolutions	2
Tech help for parents and school councils	2
Queen's Park notebook	3
School council survey deadline	3
Around the province	4
Hot tips for you	4

Progress slow for early learning

There is *some* progress on the early learning front. Some boards have announced which schools will have full-day programs for 4- and 5-year-olds, a new early learning division has been created in the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry has released some details about the new policy.

But many of the recommendations from the Premier's Advisor on Early Learning are far from being implemented.

The programs for 4- and 5-year-olds will only be funded for the 188 days a year that schools normally operate, and will not be available for PD days, school breaks or over the summer. As well, there has been no mention of extended day and summer programs for 6 to 12-year-olds, though this was a key component of the vision. The province has not allocated sufficient funding to provide a living wage for the Early Childhood Educators working with teachers, which may make it difficult for boards to cover the costs for the all-day programs.

It was always understood that the new vision for early learning would have an impact on existing child care programs. But it was anticipated that the new plan would also generate savings that municipalities could use to re-structure those programs. Without funding for year round school programs, these savings will not materialize.

Overall, there appears to be little progress integrating all programs for children from birth to 12, including child care, under one roof. A single policy framework was described in the report to the Premier as essential to

Continued on page 3



from Annie Kidder's desk



New Year Resolutions

Happy 2010!

It's at this time of year that many of us promise to do things better – more exercise, fewer late night snacks, and maybe a tidier desk. I hope the province is making some promises too: full implementation of the recommendations on early learning, funding to support community schools so fewer of our schools close this year, and maybe a bolder vision for education – one that goes beyond targets for test scores and acknowledges we're in the 21st century.

Report cards

Report cards are one of the tools parents use to initiate conversations about school with our children and their teachers. These kinds of conversations are one of the most important ways we can help our kids succeed in school. Fall re-

ports can act as a great early warning system as well as provide a foundation for parent-teacher interviews early enough in the school year to solve emerging problems. They may not need to have marks on them, but they are definitely important. Since report cards are used most by parents, it's vital that parents be widely consulted as the new fall "progress reports" are developed.

No formal review of funding planned

In 2003, and again in 2007, the Premier promised to review the funding formula by 2010. In one 2007 interview, he said: "We've set 2010 as the date for formal review but we will continue to make changes between now and then..."

It is now 2010, and no review has been announced. Instead, the Ministry's process will "refine the funding formula with due consideration to fiscal challenges..."

Despite patches, adjustments and refinements over the years, the funding for-

mula has not kept up with all of the changes that have occurred since 1997. Enrolment has declined dramatically since then, but we still have funding that is, in many cases, based on 1997 school sizes. Much of the funding for students at risk is based on 1991 and 2001 census data. And everyone agrees schools would be more effective if they acted as hubs of their communities, but there is **no** funding for hubs in the formula.

Stay involved

Now, more than ever, it's vital that all of us stay engaged, continue to participate, and remember that policy isn't something that lives in Queen's Park. Policy eventually has a direct effect on us, our children and the health of our communities, province and country. So keep talking in your school, your board and to the province. I hope 2010 is the year Ontario's education system emerges as the core of new policy for kids, families and communities.

The testing debate, continued from page 1

curriculum, the tests should take care of themselves. She argued that for this reason it is never necessary to 'teach to the test'.

Joel Westheimer, Faculty of Education, University of Waterloo

Joel said that EQAO has driven curriculum and classroom practices in a direction that is a threat to critical thinking and democracy. His concern was that the tests measure a technocratic skill – they measure only whether the child can read in the sense of decoding sentences. They are not an effective way to measure whether students have any deeper understanding of, or any critical sense about, what they're reading. A myopic focus on test scores pushes out broader instruction and limits tolerance for other discourse and debate in classrooms. He argued that ultimately all school machinery is geared to make sure students achieve on the test.

Tech help for parents and school councils

Technology offers new ways for parents to connect with one another. According to a recent study by Ipsos Reid, 82% of Canadians have broadband Internet access at home, and 87% of 35- to 54-year-olds can log on at home.

So it makes sense for parents and/or school councils to connect with other parents using technology. The good news is there are all kinds of free tools to use.

Training available

People for Education is offering support to parents who want to learn more about using these tools, including a *Tech Communication Help for Parents* workshop. There will be webinars (workshops over the internet), and there is help available through our online community website. Just visit <http://schools-at-the-centre.ning.com/group/techhelpforparents> for



more information!

We can teach you how to create:

- your own school website,
- a space for online conversations,
- a survey of your school community, and
- a listserv for your school.

It's a way to build community and to ensure that everyone in your school community knows what's happening in the school. Sharing experiences, exchanging ideas, and supporting one another through difficulties are the ties that bind us together. The internet allows people to connect and respond on their own time (even late at night). So even if you don't like Facebook, or you're a bit nervous about learning something new, consider exploring some of the options. If you can use email and you can type, you have all the skills you need! Still shy? For more information, email gay@peopleforeducation.com.



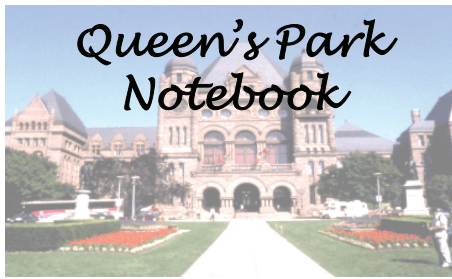
The People for Education Newsletter **Editor:** Kathryn Blackett

Contributors: Annie Kidder, Gay Stephenson, Jacqui Strachan, .

People for Education is an independent parents' group working to support public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.

You can reach us at: P.O. Box 64, Station P, Toronto, ON M5S 2S6 ♦ phone: 416-534-0100 / 1-888-534-3944 ♦ fax: 416-536-0100 ♦ e-mail: info@peopleforeducation.com ♦ or visit: www.peopleforeducation.com





Queen's Park Notebook

This notebook is a new feature for the newsletter. It will allow you to be among the first to know about upcoming policy changes, and to have your say about them in our online community.

Eliminating fall report cards

The Ministry of Education has decided to replace the fall report card for elementary school students with a "progress report."

The Ministry has said the new fall reports will not contain letter grades, but that they will contain information about learning skills and work habits. The new reporting policy is being developed this winter for implementation in the fall of 2010, which provides an opportunity for parents to offer their advice about what should be included in the progress reports.

New parent engagement policy coming

In late 2009, the Ministry of Education distributed a draft parent engagement policy. The policy is divided into actions at the school, school board and provin-

cial levels. It is based on the premise that parents play a vital role in education, and that everyone benefits from effective parent engagement – students, parents, families, teachers, schools and communities.

The new policy includes plans to measure the effectiveness of boards' parent engagement strategies. Boards will have to report to the Ministry of Education on their progress in increasing the level of parent engagement. It will be interesting to see what methods boards will use to measure parents' engagement with their children at home, one of the forms of engagement that has been proven to have the greatest effect on students' ability to succeed in school.

No formal review of funding formula

The Minister of Education has announced the province is looking for "suggestions on how to improve the education funding formula in 2010-11 and future years in the context of limited government resources and a projected deficit of \$24.7 billion."

Among the questions the province is asking about education funding:

- Are we getting it right?
- Have our changes had the desired results, and, if not, what should we be doing differently, or perhaps, not at all?
- Are there other structural changes that might better support our objectives for education?

- In light of the Province's fiscal challenges, are there measures that could reduce expenditures or make the system more efficient and effective?

New guidelines for fundraising and fees

The Ministry of Education is in the process of developing province-wide guidelines for school board policies related to fundraising, corporate partnerships and fees for learning materials and activities. The questions they are asking include:

- What are some key principles that should guide boards' policies related to fundraising, corporate partnership and fees?
- Should there be restrictions on major capital donations?
- How can fundraising benefit schools?
- What criteria or ethical guidelines should govern the selection of corporate partners?
- What limits should be placed on corporate advertising, and what are appropriate ways to recognize corporate donations?
- How should boards determine what activities, programs or courses could be eligible for fees?

Have your say

Go to www.peopleforeducation.com to find out more and to join in the discussions on each of these topics. Or write directly to the Ministry of Education at MinistryofEducation@ontario.ca.

Deadline extended!

School Council Surveys make a difference to policy

People for Education has extended the deadline for school council surveys to January 31st.

The results from the survey provide valuable data that not only help school councils in their work, but also help all of us to keep track of how well Ontario's parent involvement strategies are working. We'll know more about fundraising, we'll gain insight into what school councils see as their purpose and we'll have useful information about communication between parents and the school system.

All schools should have received a survey in the mail, but it's also easy to do online at www.peopleforeducation.com/school_survey.

Early learning, *continued from page 1*

eliminating the parallel and often conflicting systems of education and child care that families find so frustrating.

So far, the province has allocated \$200 million for 2010/2011 and a further \$100 million for 2011/2012 which they estimate will support full-day learning for 20% of Ontario's 4 and 5 year olds. Estimates for the total cost are approximately \$1.5 billion, and full implementation is planned by 2015.

For more information and an up-to-date progress report on the new policy go to www.peopleforeducation.com.

New outdoor education program

Scouts Canada is offering an innovative outdoor education program for students in Grades 4, 5, 6 and 7. The program includes a combination of eight in-classroom sessions and a residential two-and-a-half day camp. All sessions embody elements of outdoor ethics and range from Team Building, Camp Cooking and Fire-building, Pioneering and Shelter Building, Map Reading and Orienteering, Outdoor Safety, and more. There is a cost of approximately \$90 per student, but it may vary across the province. For more information please call 1-888-SCOUTSNOW or visit their website at www.scouts.ca/dnn/schoolsandscouting.



New website for children's mental health resources

Kinark Child and Family Services has

introduced a new website to provide mental health resources and support to parents, educators and professionals. For details, please visit www.speakingofkidsmentalhealth.ca.

Partnerships at work

The Renfrew County Child Poverty Action Network, in partnership with Renfrew's public and Catholic school boards, KidActive, and Jumpstart is starting a pilot program in two schools to encourage active outdoor play and teach the benefits of getting out and getting active. The program will involve over 700 children in the Pembroke area, which has the highest child poverty rate in the county.

Eco-Kids Challenge

Earth Day Canada's Great EcoKids Challenge urges teachers and students

from Kindergarten-Grade 8 to participate in projects that result in positive environmental change. The deadline for registration April 30, 2010. For details and to register your project on-line, please visit www.ecokids.ca.

Town hall meetings with the Minister

Education Minister Kathleen Wynne is travelling across the province to participate in town hall meetings with parents and school communities. In the fall, she visited Ottawa, Thunder Bay and London. Participants talked about parent involvement, the important role that principals play in making schools more welcoming, and the challenges of school closings. More meetings will be held in other communities in the new year. The next town hall will be held in Orillia on January 19th at 5:00. For more information go www.ontario.ca/EDUparents.

Psssst, we've got some hot tips for you!

"The teacher says my child needs an IPRC – what does that mean?"

"How am I supposed to help my child with homework when I don't get it?"

"What is the difference between academic and applied courses in high school?"

The school system and the world of 'education-speak' can be confusing for many parents. People for Education has developed a series of tip sheets to help explain the education system in Ontario and answer some of the most common

questions parents have. The information provided in these tip sheets will help guide parents right through their children's education – from kindergarten registration to high school graduation. The tip sheets are available in twelve languages, and are posted on our website. They are a great resource for both individual parents and school councils.

- Use them as resources for parent workshops and events.
- Make them available to parents during kindergarten and high school registration.

- Include them in school information packages for newcomer parents.
- Include some of the tips and information in school council newsletters.

Tip sheet topics include: Who Does What in Ontario's Education System, Starting School, Homework, Parent-Teacher Interviews, Special Education, EQAO Testing, High School Courses and Choices, and Solving Problems at School. Check them out in the Parents section of our website at www.peopleforeducation.com.

Become a member of People for Education! Together, we can make public education in Ontario great!

When you become a member you will:

- receive a subscription to the People for Education Newsletter, and first notice of People for Education events.
- receive information about Ontario's publicly funded schools, new education policy, and the latest education research.
- join a dynamic organization with 14 years experience advocating for strong public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.
- help bring parents' voices to government education policy tables.

Annual membership rates

Individuals

- Individual \$25
- Seniors, students, unwaged \$10

Organizations

- School councils \$50
- Parent Involvement Committees \$100
- Organizations with budgets
 - under \$500,000 \$100
 - from \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 \$300
 - over \$1,000,000 \$500

Name _____
Address _____

Phone # _____
School _____

Email address _____

I am enclosing a cheque for \$ _____ payable to People for Education, P.O. Box 64, Station P Toronto, ON M5S 2S6

Please charge my VISA MasterCard

Card #: _____

Name on Card _____

Expiry Date: _____

Signature: _____