



The Trillium

Recognized as ASCD's *Most Improved Affiliate Newsletter* in 2001

December 2001

Ontario Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Standardized Testing

President's Message

The current issue of our newsletter furthers the debate on an important topic, that of standards and standardized testing. Given the global nature of this debate, our own history with standardized testing here in Ontario and recent government pronouncements indicating that more and not less testing is on the horizon, this issue is certainly timely. While authors like James Popham and Alfie Kohn urge us to fight against standardized testing, pointing out their unfairness and unreliability as assessment instruments, others argue the inevitability of these tests and their soundness as one measure of student and system achievement. Many point out the positive results of such testing, including greater attention paid to areas like literacy and numeracy across the curriculum. Many educators and parents, however, express concern over a perceived narrowing of the curriculum and the added stress being placed on all students beginning in the primary division. Still others urge educators to focus not on the testing but on the standards themselves, that while the testing can be problematic if overdone, standards that are implemented as part of an approach to assessment that represents validity, reliability and fairness to students, are the cornerstone of a system of student improvement and accountability.

Enjoy the articles in this issue and the inevitable debate among your colleagues that will ensue.

Mary Nanavati
President, Ontario ASCD

Take Note!

Membership Fee Increase

January 1, 2002

Ontario ASCD's membership fee increases to \$30. *Sign up now and save a bundle!!*

Alfie Kohn in Ottawa

*Standards and Testing:
Challenging the Myths*

see p. 2 for details

The Learning Consortium's Links to Learning Conference

February 22 & 23, 2001

Sheraton Centre, Toronto

fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~learning/

Ontario ASCD's Second International Conference

coming in the Fall of 2003

Web Sites

Ontario ASCD: www.ascd.ca

ASCD International: www.ascd.org

Ontario ASCD, a diverse learning community that promotes excellence in education, is dedicated to supporting the growth and success of all learners.

ASCD in Action

ASCD Networks

<http://www.ascd.org/aboutascd/cr/networks/network.html>

On occasion we highlight some of ASCD's many "Networks" that serve to bring educators together. Each Network is concerned with a particular theme, issue, or purpose. They are wonderful opportunities to exchange ideas, share resources, solve problems, grow professionally, and establish collegial relationships. Extensive information about ASCD Networks can be found at the website noted above.

Teaching Thinking

This Network provides a link between educators who are planning, implementing, and assessing curricula that stress a cognitive focus. It provides a forum for the exploration and exchange of organizational ideas and promotes the sharing of research, resources, and references. For more information, please contact:

Esther Fusco (in NY) at efusco@is.netcom or (631) 751-8972
Sandra Parks (in FLA) at thnkgwks@aug.com or (904) 824-0648.

Upcoming Conferences

Alfie Kohn

Standards and Testing:
Challenging the Myths

The Schools our Children Deserve

Ottawa Congress Centre

February 22nd, 2002
7:30 PM

Ontario ASCD has 30 **free tickets** available to members on a first come, first served basis. Please send an e-mail to Nicola.Benton@ascd.ca if you are interested.

ASCD's 57th Annual Conference

*Choosing to Dance:
Taking Bold Steps for the Sake of Our Children*

March 9 - 11, 2002

San Antonio, Texas

www.ascd.org/trainingopportunities.html

***Building and Growing
Your Online School***

February 14 - 15, 2002

The Durham DSB Education Center
Whitby, Ontario

www.eclassroom.com/cvhs/

Standardized Testing

Earlier this year the Fraser Institute released its *Report Card on Ontario's Secondary Schools: 2001 Edition*. Over the past two years the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) has been testing and rating students and publishing the results of some of their tests. Both of these initiatives are indications of a resurgent movement to make schools more accountable. The Harris government, at least in part, has been swept into power on the coat tails of standards and accountability rhetoric, but there has been vocal criticism of the new initiatives. In this issue of *The Trillium* we offer two positions on this movement. University of Toronto/OISE professor John Myers says that we should "beware of school rankings". On the other side of the debate, James De Monte, Senior Policy Analyst at EQAO argues that standardized testing is an integral part of an education system interested in improvement. Both articles are informative and thought-provoking.

The Case for Standards

by James De Monte

It is vital that our youth receive the highest quality education possible, to enable them to acquire the knowledge and skills to succeed in a knowledge-based economy and to achieve a level of intellectual development that will enable them to contribute to society as knowledgeable and productive citizens. Sound education policy, which puts the student first, is essential to achieving this aim. Periodic, universal, standardised assessment is one policy which has been recognised as a critical ingredient of a successful and pro-active education system. It is designed to achieve two major objectives: enhancing the *accountability* of the education system, and facilitating *improvement* by identifying problem areas. History has shown that without a system of education accountability, leading to a sustained culture of individual and system-wide improvement, students are often deprived of the quality education they deserve.

Effective assessment provides students, parents and educators with valid, reliable and consistent information about student performance and education quality that creates a sound footing for improvement efforts at the individual, local and provincial levels. Criteria-based assessments have changed the nature of the assessment process, and allow us

The Risks of Ranking

by John Myers

In his poem *Arithmetic*, Carl Sandburg wonders, "If you ask your mother for one fried egg for breakfast and she gives you two fried eggs and you eat both of them, who is better at arithmetic, you or your mother?" It reminds me how much we take comparing for granted in our fact-driven, information-rich culture.

This is surely no truer than in that popular extra-curricular activity: ranking schools. The Fraser Institute grades high schools in several provinces. School websites in Ontario display their own rankings on recent provincial tests, if they do well. And the Americans and the British have ranked schools for a number of years.

Earlier this fall I did a piece for CBC Radio Commentary (Oct. 2, 2001) about this. I would like to expand on some of my points based on feedback from a variety of folks.

I argued then and do so now that such rankings hurt education.

Arguments that rankings give parents accurate information so they can choose the school best suited for their children are phony because most of us don't have a real choice. My daughter is a single mom living in rural British Columbia. Even if she followed the rankings, my grandson, Julian, can only go to the nearest school. Rural parents, even in relatively prosperous stable families, have little choice. In cities with open enrollments most parents can't afford to take their children across town to the so-called "best" schools, or they don't have the time to do it.

Arguments that public rankings will force schools to improve is not supported by evidence.

The Case for Standards (continued)

to test more than just the ability of a student to recall facts. Understanding, application and other thinking skills can also be assessed objectively and scientifically using established assessment standards and methodologies. Regular reports to parents, educators and the public measure levels of student achievement against common objective standards, and thereby enable us to assess the effectiveness of Ontario's education system and to identify benchmarks. It is especially important that parents become better informed about their children's achievement and about the expectations and standards in the provincial curriculum.

This gathering and reporting to the public of information to describe the performance of students

and the educational system as a whole is

Large-scale assessment serves as a catalyst for positive change.

subsequently used to make judgements about how well individuals or the system is performing, to identify areas where change is needed, and to plan action leading to improvement. Large-scale assessment therefore serves as a catalyst for positive change in both learning and teaching, by engaging teachers, parents, students and policy-makers in thought and discussion about what takes place in the classroom. Teachers and parents can use assessment results to provide additional instruction and support for individual students. Administrators and policy-makers can use them to evaluate programs and make sound strategic policy decisions. For instance, annual assessment results allow the testing agency to make recommendations to government on system-wide improvement. By measuring students' learning at key stages in their schooling, large-scale assessment also promotes dialogue and co-operation among educators, parents and all other partners in the educational community, enhancing co-operation and connectivity between teachers

The Risks of Ranking (continued)

Instead, those parents in urban school districts who have high achieving children at the elementary level, will send them to the school they perceive to be better. The rich get richer and the poor make do.

Instead of sterile rankings, good assessment is what's needed. Schools need to see where they're doing well, where they need to improve, and how to do it.

In the case of the Fraser Institute a ranking of a 9.6 or 6.9 provides no such feedback, even when you look at the criteria for determining the marks. When they speak of "core" courses they do not look at history, geography and social science courses: a glaring omission given the world since September 11. Surely an understanding of the world offered by courses in world history and world issues is pretty important. Moreover, some understanding of how cultures around the world express their values through their religious, artistic and musical traditions might promote intercultural understanding: a

Instead of sterile rankings, good assessment is what's needed.

quality surely lacking in many parts of the world today.

Since course levels are supposed to be appropriate for those students taking them: the term is "destination-driven", how can advanced-level courses be a "better" indication of "quality"? Some schools in large urban areas and almost all independent schools only offer courses at the advanced level and can stream their incoming students. Who can say that technical, commercial, and vocational courses are inferior? The lesson here is, if you want your school to move up in the rankings, close down the shops and offer only advanced or university-level courses. So the Fraser Institutes' rankings are a cruel hoax: mathematical chicanery designed to oversimplify, confuse, sensationalize and bamboozle a citizenry not as numerate as they ought to be. This includes us teachers.

Yes, I think mathematics, or at least some understanding of numbers and their uses is core. I also believe standardized tests have a place. So aren't rankings from well-designed—and not all standardized test are well-designed—tests helpful? If such measures focus on one or two key outcomes such as literacy or numeracy, they can provide a limited audit of the system as a whole. But they do nothing for individual children.

Why is that? In part because the feedback from even well constructed provincial tests is not timely. In

The Case for Standards (continued)

and parents and between schools and communities, and between the education system and the tax-paying public. But assessments are also a first step. After analysing scores, responses from student and educator questionnaires can provide contextual data, enabling tailored improvement plans to be developed and implemented, and resources to be more productively targeted, and allowing educators, parents and the public to interpret results in a responsible and constructive manner.

In summary, periodic, universal, standardised assessment is an essential component of an accountable, responsive, and constantly improving educational system, designed to give students the education they deserve to succeed in a competitive world. ☑

James De Monte is a Senior Policy Analyst with EQAO

The Risks of Ranking (continued)

part, because changes in the community, or in school staffs especially the principal can affect the achievement of Julian and his classmates, for better or for worse, much more profoundly than a number on a test. Such tests are mere snapshots. Their results can be easily misinterpreted, especially in small schools where a few great or poor scores can distort the school's average.

Finally schools are more than literacy and numeracy. They are, especially in these times, citizenship, thoughtfulness, and creativity, tolerance, honesty, work skills and life skills. They are about healthy minds and healthy bodies. These issues need to be tackled one school at a time. Standardized tests don't work well here. School communities do.

Beware of school rankings. The numbers seldom add up. It is up to each and every school to provide quality education for every child and grandchild, yours and mine. ☑

John Myers is a curriculum instructor at the University of Toronto/OISE

Affiliate Action

What's New with Ontario ASCD?

Peel's Portfolio Symposium a Rousing Success

The Peel Regional Chapter in partnership with Peel District School Board recently hosted a portfolio symposium featuring keynote speaker Dr. Carol Rolheiser who addressed the purpose, passion and possibilities of using portfolios in the classroom. Dr. Rolheiser is an Associate Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Her work as an international consultant has focussed on instructional and assessment innovation, teacher education reform, school improvement and managing educational change. Over 350 people were in attendance including educators not only from the Peel area but neighbouring boards, and from some private schools. After dinner, twenty workshops covering both elementary and secondary issues were offered. Each participant also received a copy of Peel's revised handbook, *Portfolio Assessment: A Practical Guide for Teachers*.

Ontario ASCD Constitutional Changes

Over the past three years Ontario ASCD has reviewed and revised its constitution to ensure that the affiliate is in synch with ASCD International, and to ensure that we are best serving our members. The proposed changes will be made public on the ASCD Canada web site ([ascd.ca](http://www.ascd.ca)) in the new year. We encourage members to visit the site, consider the proposals, and make their comments and suggestions known. The changes will be taken to a vote at the Annual General Meeting in May, 2002. The date and location of this meeting will be announced in the March issue of *The Trillium*. Information on constitutional issues concerning ASCD International and their affiliates can be found at <http://www.ascd.org/affiliates/>.

Ontario ASCD Membership Fee Increase

On January 1, 2002 our fee will increase to **\$30**.

Ontario ASCD Regionals

There are currently three regionals associated with the Ontario affiliate. For further information about a regional please contact regional chairs Nicola Benton in **Ottawa** (Nicola.Benton@ascd.ca), Rosemary Sutton (Rosemary.Sutton@ascd.ca) or Cindy Horvath (Cindy.Horvath@ascd.ca) in **Peel**, or Tom Miller (Tom.Miller@ascd.ca) in **York**.

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Ontario ASCD Membership - new or renewal

Please send this form and your membership fees (\$25) to the Membership Coordinator at the address above. This fee increases to \$30 on January 1, 2002.

Name: _____

Position: _____ School: _____

School Board: _____

Mailing Address: _____ phone and e-mail: _____
