



Standardized testing (almost) comes to Saskatchewan

How being proactive can lead to positive results (for now...)

BY MARC SPOONER AND PAUL ORŁOWSKI

Standardized test scores went up? Oh no! What did you have to sacrifice from our children's education to make that happen?
(A. Kohn, personal communication, 2013)

Plans to introduce standardized testing have been put on pause here in Saskatchewan after calls from concerned parents, teachers, and other stakeholders pointed out the complete lack of ministry consultation. In conjunction with provincial-wide concern were several op-ed pieces, letters to the editor, and other awareness-raising initiatives in reaction to the ministry's surprise announcement by puzzled educators and researchers at both of the province's faculties of education. Only time will tell if and when the standardized testing drive will be rebranded, re-tooled, and redeployed.

As the rest of the world begins the long retreat from costly and ineffective standardized testing programs, inexplicably, the Government of Saskatchewan had planned to wade in head first—without a real plan and without any significant research to back its decision. It was with great fanfare that (at the time) Education Minister, Russ Marchuk, announced in mid-February, 2013 that Saskatchewan

would be testing every student, every year; it was with less fanfare, that a week later, he announced perhaps not every student, every year. As of September, 2013, the ministry's plan is still unclear, and has most recently been placed on pause for the ministry to gather, as they state it, "success stories"; also of note, both the Minister of Education and the Deputy Minister of Education have been replaced since that initial announcement.

If the Ministry's plan seems confused, one fact is not: standardized tests are being abandoned for a simple reason, because they do not work! The reasons are numerous, but here are a few: a) standardized testing diverts teaching time and monetary resources away from student supports, teachable moments, and direct teacher-student contact time (i.e., Kohn, 2000, 2011; Sahlberg, 2011); b) they are one-time snapshots that do not accurately measure how a student performs day after day, or what a student actually knows (i.e., Harris, Smith, & Harris, 2011); c) they are culturally biased, and biased against those for whom reading and/or English is a challenge (i.e., Sawa, 2010); d) they are more reflective of depressed socio-economic neighbourhood conditions than student learning or quality of teaching (i.e., VASS News, 2012); e) they often induce unhealthy anxiety in students (i.e., Gail, Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Segool, 2009); f) the results of standardized tests, when published in newspapers carry negative side effects, including a significant drop in student and teacher morale (Paris & Urdan, 2000); g) teachers teach to the test (i.e., Volante, 2004) rather than teaching students to think through complex social problems, such as dealing with climate change and a fragile global economy; and h) they run counter to Saskatchewan's stated goal of improving retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students, since these tests often serve to further marginalize and push out students whom the system disadvantages (i.e., Crandall & Kutz, 2011).

So where is the push for mandatory standardized testing coming from? This question does not have a simple answer, but one must surely identify the forces of:

the audit explosion [that are]...recasting public education as primarily a bureaucratic organization, subject to the imperatives of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, and ruled by numbers and league tables (Power, 1999; Apple, 2005). The orientation of public education is

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shifting from what used to be a focus on cultural and civic socialization, to preparation for the workforce. (Meyer & Benavot, 2013, p. 12)

A quick look at the international arena only leads to more questions. Every three years, the 34 OECD countries have their 15-year old students write exams in Reading, Math and Science as part of the Program International Student Assessment (PISA). For the last year that the results are available, 2009, it is useful to look at the exam score rankings for three countries.

	Reading	Mathematics	Science
Finland	3rd	6th	2nd
Canada	6th	10th	8th
United States	17th	31st	23rd

Source: OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results: Executive Summary

Why have we included Finland in this list of three nations? Well, one obvious reason is because Finnish students repeatedly outperform both Canadian and especially American students on these PISA exams. But the other reason is because Finland's educational policy eschews mandatory standardized testing. The only time the Finns subject their children to standardized testing is to write the PISA exams!

The United States, on the other hand, has one of the highest national frequency rates in standardized testing. From looking at the 2009 PISA results, it is clear that something rather than frequent testing is at work in determining which countries do well on the PISAs. It is noteworthy that Finland is a social democratic country, one that believes in a strong commons that includes a well-funded public education system, as well as tuition-free higher education. Finland believes in the dignity of its workers, especially teachers. In other words, rather than increasing the frequency of mandatory standardized testing, it would be more prudent to study Finnish social and educational policy. What the Americans are doing with their teachers and school system is what Saskatchewan should not do.

Standardized testing is a pedagogical tool that makes the most sense to those who are the farthest removed from actual classrooms and actual students. The dedicated teachers in each of Canada's

provinces and territories already conduct continuous assessments and evaluations of every student daily and over the course of the entire school year. Such mandatory audits and lean management schemes applied to education might, at first glance, sound good until one realizes they are based on financial checks and car manufacturing approaches. Our greatest resource, our children, are not products to be pushed through school assembly lines, but rather living, feeling, creative, vibrant kids, who just want to learn from professionals who know most about teaching, not from computerized tests and a factory model of education. Our children are not automobiles, nor are they test scores. To be continued...

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