

Ontario to launch review of how students are tested

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By [Andrea Gordon](#) Education Reporter

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Premier Kathleen Wynne is set to announce a sweeping review of how students are assessed in Ontario, including possible changes to EQAO tests in math and literacy and what skills are measured on report cards.

Sources told the Star Wynne will unveil plans Wednesday to create a panel of experts who will report back to the government this winter with recommendations. The announcement comes a day after the province's 2 million students headed back to class after the summer break.

The panel of experts will explore ways to more effectively assess whether students in kindergarten through Grade 12 are learning the skills they need for their futures, in both the workplace and as citizens, sources said.

That means looking at the role, relevance and timing of standardized tests administered by the province as well as what parents read on their children's report cards.

The shakeup comes at a time of growing concern that the system is too focused on EQAO tests which critics say don't broadly reflect the many skills students need to keep learning — such as creativity and critical thinking.

The debate erupted again last week in the wake of [dismal scores](#) in province-wide math tests for elementary school students conducted by the Education Quality and Accountability Office, or EQAO.

For the second straight year, only half of Grade 6 students met the provincial standard, despite the introduction last year of a \$60-million math strategy aimed at boosting those results. Among Grade 3 students, 62 per cent met the standard.

While some parents and educators blame a curriculum that doesn't focus enough on the basics, others argue the test is too narrow and not a fair gauge of how and what children are learning and the skills they need.

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Every year Ontario students in Grades 3 and 6 are tested for reading, writing and math. They are tested again for math in Grade 9 and take a mandatory [literacy test](#) in Grade 10.

Those in favour of standardized tests argue they are a valuable benchmark for how the province and individual schools are performing. But concern has been building about how the tests can drive education policy and narrow the focus of classrooms.

Teachers may feel pressured to “teach to the test” to boost scores, while other important and less easily measured skills are overlooked.

The new panel will also consider how to update and broaden the scope of report cards by assessing skills considered essential for the current environment. That might include, for example, a student's ability to distinguish fact from opinion, how they use and interpret social media and the Internet, and their ability to formulate and confidently ask questions, sources said.

Groups like People for Education have long called for an overhaul of what the province considers critical skills for

today's students, along with how those skills are taught and assessed.

"It is definitely time to move beyond the traditional three Rs," says executive director Annie Kidder.

The research and advocacy group has been working in partnership with the Ministry of Education for the past four years on Measuring What Matters, a project aimed at defining other key "competencies" children need to master such as imagination, perseverance, innovation and collaboration.

"All of those things are skills you need for life, for jobs, to be an engaged citizen and that's what the school system is supposed to be doing," says Kidder.

When asked to comment in general on provincial assessments, education expert Charles Pascal said curriculum, report cards and tests need to encourage creative problem-solving and nourish emotional intelligence.

"But you don't start with how to change grading, report cards or EQAO; you start with clarity about what learning objectives are key for our future," says Pascal, a professor at University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and a former deputy minister of education who advised the previous Liberal government on its early years strategy.

"When it comes to documenting this learning, the easily measured usually isn't worth measuring," he says.