

Fraser Institute deserves failing grade for report on schools

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An article in the Feb. 12 Record, Lourdes Ranked As Best Local School, suggests once again that schools can be evaluated based on the Ontario Education Quality and Accountability Office testing.

The Fraser Institute has once more presumed to use these test scores to prepare a "report card" for Ontario's elementary schools, and has published each school's scores and ranking. Their spokesperson, Peter Crowley, is quoted as saying, "The report card, by making comparisons between schools easier and by showing everybody who's up in the top echelons, allows people a better idea of what can be done."

This statement by itself should be fair warning as to where the economic and political priorities of the Fraser Institute lie. While the article calls the institute a "think tank," no one should think for a minute that it is impartial or open-minded.

Heather-Jane Robertson, in her book *No More Teachers, No More Books*, reports that in 1997 the Fraser Institute "targeted education for a lead role in its new five-year plan, with particular emphasis to be placed on charter schools." By creating an "index of school effectiveness," it clearly planned to work with other groups to promote "the privatization of education."

The elementary teachers of Ontario, individually and through our federations, have been expressing our concerns about the way that EQAO testing is administered and reported for many years. Some of these issues have been addressed by the provincial government, but there is still a lot of political pressure, at Queen's Park and locally, which keeps the testing in place.

To the good, the amount of time used for this annual event has been reduced and we've seen some funding coming to school boards to provide support for students and schools identified as needing extra resources.

Ministry of Education programs like the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership can potentially improve learning opportunities for students and teachers by providing funding for materials and professional development in high needs schools. However, most teachers, administrators, trustees and parents could probably have identified these needs before the expensive and controversial process of provincial tests began, and could certainly tell you that there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution.

In their introduction, the authors of the Fraser Institute's report rationalize their efforts by saying, "The act of publicly rating and ranking schools attracts attention, and this can provide motivation. Schools that perform well or show consistent improvement are applauded. Poorly performing schools generate concern, as do those whose performance is deteriorating."

This falls right in line with the institute's vision of " a free and prosperous world where individuals benefit from greater choice, competitive markets and personal responsibility." Unfortunately, the Fraser Institute's philosophical view of an ideal world overlooks some key issues.

For the winners, their approach may not seem like a big problem, but competition doesn't always produce the best or fairest results. Many teachers at high-achieving schools question the strict emphasis placed on literacy and numeracy, sometimes at the cost of other social or curriculum goals.

Another problem with this kind of scorekeeping is that it doesn't give enough credit to the most improved players. When public school board trustees reviewed test results last fall there was concern about our students' performance.

Fortunately, the trustees and staff were also able to see in the statistics that there had been significant improvements when they looked at specific groups of students in the time between Grade 3 and Grade 6.

Further, real success could be seen in that the numbers of students scoring at levels one and two had decreased considerably.

It's unfortunate the Fraser reports don't also celebrate and congratulate the schools that have increased the numbers of students performing at the provincial levels by up to 25 per cent in the past five years.

Finally, we need to remember that these statistics don't really "take into account factors such as family background," as the report's authors would suggest.

Scanning the data for the 2,812 schools whose results are printed in the complete report, it's not difficult to see a direct correlation between students' scores and the numbers given for parents' average years of education. It's also not difficult to imagine the economic and social factors that can be linked to this single statistic.

Every school and teacher in this region wants to believe theirs is the best local school and they want to treat every student like the best student. No report card can tell the whole story about a child, and the Fraser Institute's version of a report card doesn't even come close to measuring and appreciating all of the excellent things that are happening in our schools.

**Second Opinion - John Payne is communications officer for the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, Waterloo Teacher Local.*