

# Tests a study in location, location

## Suburbs score high, but all boards climb up the graph

By SARAH GREEN  
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Success and the suburbs.

A provincewide report card, released today by the Fraser Institute, shows suburban high schools in the GTA are among the best in Ontario.

For individual report cards on 260 GTA high schools, see the 16-page special pullout section in today's paper.

Halton's public secondary schools earned the highest rating in the province, according to the report card which ranks high schools using standardized test scores. Halton earned a 7.73 out of 10. (A rating of 0 means no school had poorer results; a 10 rating means no school performed higher.)

The York public and Catholic boards earned ratings of 7.57 and 7.37, respectively, with the Halton Catholic board reaching 6.87. The provincial average was 6.2.

Both Durham boards lagged below the provincial average, according to the Fraser Report, as did the two Toronto boards.

The Toronto District School Board, the largest board in the province, earned a 4.95, which was among the lowest of the 70 boards in Ontario. Only three others earned lower rankings, according to the report card.

'QUITE A RANGE'

"Within the GTA, there's quite a range," said Peter Cowley, director of school performance studies with the Vancouver-based Fraser Institute, a think tank which produces annual school report cards for five provinces.

"(The report card) is focused on how's my school doing. Is it improving? Is it declining? How is it comparing to other schools in the neighbourhood?"

The provincial report card ranks 725 Ontario high schools using Grade 9 math test scores as well as the Ontario Secondary Schools Literacy Test (OSSLT), a graduation requirement written in Grade 10 and taken last Thursday by students across the province. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) administers the tests.

Critics of the report card -- one group dismisses it as "drive-by rankings" -- say the standardized test scores paint only part of the picture.

While boards in Durham and Toronto posted test scores below the provincial average, according to EQAO, there has been a steady improvement in results over the past five years.

"I get a little frustrated when I see ratings -- this program is better than that program. It's just not so," said Melanie Parrack, executive superintendent of student success with the Toronto District School Board. "We need everybody to be successful in his or her own way."

Parrack doesn't make excuses for the lagging EQAO scores in the large urban board, but students have made significant gains over the past five years, she said.

Academic math scores are up 9% with 66% of students last year meeting the provincial standard -- a B grade or higher -- and applied math results have increased 6% to 17% of students making the grade. The Ontario average, according to the EQAO, is 71% in academic math and 35% in applied math.

English-language learners saw their scores jump 16% in academic math and 6% in applied math while special needs students have also seen increases.

Parrack noted 41% of TDSB graduates go on to university, compared to about 33% provincially.

The board is focusing efforts to help English-language learners and to engage applied students who may have lost interest with traditional lessons, she said.

"We really focus on experiential learning, making these skills come alive for students," Parrack said.

Success is also measured in more than EQAO scores, Parrack said, citing students who go into good jobs after high school graduation or earn spots in demanding apprenticeship programs.

"If they're maximizing their potential, they're very successful," Parrack said.

Other educators see the EQAO results and Fraser Institute reports as a proactive tool to help them identify problem areas.

St. Elizabeth Catholic High School in Thornhill, for example, is one of the most improving schools in the GTA, according to the Fraser Institute report card.

#### PERFECT 10 RATING

The school has taken on a wide range of initiatives, from using the EQAO results to pinpoint where students are struggling to ensuring kids are enrolled in courses appropriate for them, principal Catherine Rosenberger said.

Four schools, including Toronto's St. Michael's Choir School, shared the No. 1 ranking in Ontario with a perfect 10 rating. The other top-ranked schools include a St. Michael's in Kemptonville and two international schools, one in Hong Kong and one in Bangalore, India, which follow the Ontario curriculum.

The boys' choir school -- initially founded in 1937 as a private institution, although it is now part of the Catholic board - was also ranked the top Ontario school over the past five years.

The report card showed 30% of high school students writing the math and literacy tests last year didn't meet the provincial standard, an improvement from five years ago when nearly 38% did not make the grade.

There has also been significant gains in literacy test results with 84% of students taking the OSSLT for the first time last year making the grade, compared to 72% five years earlier, according to EQAO figures.

In the past couple of years, there has been no change in the math and literacy test results.

"There's no way of knowing what the trend is here," said Richard Jones, director of assessment and reporting with the EQAO.

He strongly cautioned against using the EQAO results to rank schools, calling the tests a "one-moment-in-time look at how the schools are doing."

A number of factors can affect the test scores, Jones said -- the size of the school, the number of students new to the school as well as those with special needs or English as a second language.

"This is one really important indicator of how students are doing," Jones said. "We really oppose the use of data to rank schools. It's an oversimplification of the results."

Ken Coran, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, said standardized tests are unnecessary because students are routinely evaluated with exams and projects. Testing takes away time from a "very demanding" curriculum.

"What people see is a score. It doesn't tell anything else about what's going on in a school. You don't get a full profile of the school. It's very easy to be misleading," Coran said. "We think it paints an unfortunate picture. A lot of it could be related to socio-economic status.

"If you speak to kids, it puts them under a lot of pressure."

There have been extreme cases in the U.S. where standardized test scores were used to determine custody in divorces cases -- did the mother or father live near the better school, Coran said.

He hasn't heard of test scores being cited in Ontario divorce cases, but "I'd be surprised if some realtors don't use EQAO scores."

Maria Vlahos, a real estate salesperson for Sutton Partners, says the local school's academic rating is definitely a top consideration for prospective homebuyers.

"Parents ask me everything from what test scores are, athletic programs ... (to) how involved parents are in the school, what blended programs might be in the school," she said. "They want to make sure that they're close to many different things -- transportation, work -- but school is at the top of the list."