

Putting Learning First

Classroom-based
assessment in Ontario's
K-12 Education System



2026

A position paper of the Ontario Teachers' Federation and its Affiliates

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Association des enseignantes et
des enseignants franco-ontariens

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INTRODUCTION: LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT DEFINED

Learning in Ontario K-12 education is multi-dimensional. Learning could be conceptualized as progress towards meeting a learning outcome, growth within a learning outcome, and the achievement of a learning outcome.

As a result, assessment of student learning must be equally as dynamic and substantive with the purpose of “...improv(ing) student learning.”¹ This type of assessment is a human process in which teachers are, over time, continually applying their professional judgment to describe where students are in their learning, where they are going in their learning, and how to improve in their learning. In Ontario, this type of assessment is led by teachers and is classroom based.

In contrast, large scale assessments administered in Ontario serve a very different purpose. Large-scale assessments are one-time measures conducted at the provincial, national, or international level. They are primarily designed to provide an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of education systems at a singular point in time. The outcomes of these large-scale assessments are intended to inform larger scale plans to improve education systems.

¹ Ontario Ministry of Education. (2010). *Growing Success*, p. 6.

Since OTF and its Affiliates published *More than Dots on a Chart: Setting a New Course for Assessment in Ontario (2017)*, the provincial landscape of assessment has continued to evolve. These shifts are due to several factors. These include the release of independent reviews of Ontario's K-12 education assessment and reporting. Converging with these reviews are scholarship about the value of large-scale, mid-stakes assessments. But perhaps most significantly is the affirmation of teachers' engagement with professional learning that enhances their practices to ensure that classroom assessment is inclusive of, and responsive to, the diversity of learners in their classrooms.

This paper re-asserts the positions on assessment and evaluation with recommendations on how Ontario must center and value classroom-based assessment to realize comprehensive system improvement as classroom-based assessment remains the most valid and comprehensive source of evidence for student learning.

PAPER POSITIONS ON ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

1. Assessment and evaluation of student achievement is the domain of the teaching profession.
2. Teacher professional judgment is the cornerstone of assessment and evaluation.
3. Authentic assessment and evaluation of growth and learning cannot be standardized.

Assessment and evaluation of student achievement is the domain of the teaching profession

The assessment of student learning is a core responsibility legislated to qualified teachers. They should have the autonomy to decide what constitutes as evidence of students' learning progress, growth, and achievement. The evaluation and reporting of student achievement is a point in time that sits within the ongoing process of guiding student learning progress and growth towards and within learning expectations.

Classroom-based assessment of student learning provides the clearest picture of student progress, growth, and achievement. Teachers bring together various data sources to provide insights into student learning. By combining conversations with students, observations of students at work and student learning products (e.g., performance tasks), teachers can ensure that assessment of student learning is consistent, accurate, and learning-focused. These, in concert with assessment tools like tests, exams, and quizzes, create a fuller understanding of student achievement in schools.

As relationships between teachers and students are developed over the course of a semester or year, meaningful assessment cannot be replicated or replaced by any other means. Positive human relationships reinforce the reciprocal relationship between improved learning and well-being. Although generative AI products are marketed as useful for classroom use, the authentic and continuous work of assessment can only be entrusted to qualified human teachers who value and center student learning and well-being in their everyday practice.

Teacher professional judgment is the cornerstone of assessment and evaluation

Professional judgment is defined as “judgment that is informed by professional knowledge of curriculum expectations, context, evidence of learning, methods of instruction and assessment and the criteria and standards that indicate success in student learning. In professional practice, judgment involves a purposeful and systematic thinking process that evolves in terms of accuracy and insight with ongoing reflection and self-correction.”²

Professional judgment could be further understood as the exercise of an informed decision-making process used to advance and improve student learning as well as protecting and nurturing student well-being. This decision-making process allows teachers to decide what, when, and how students learn, as well as how and when they will assess and evaluate student learning.

“It is worth noting, right from the start, that assessment is a human process, conducted by and with human beings [...]. However crisp and objective we might try to make it, and however neatly quantifiable may be our ‘results’, assessment is closer to an art than a science. It is, after all, an exercise in human communication.”
(Sutton quoted in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 29)

“...we must be vulnerable and open to seeing ourselves through the eyes of students. There’s power in listening to students and allowing their voice to be a guide in decisions that advance equity. Every lesson constructed and systems developed should be crafted to the benefit of students. We need to remember the human aspect of this work.”
(Buchanan-Rivera, p. 98)

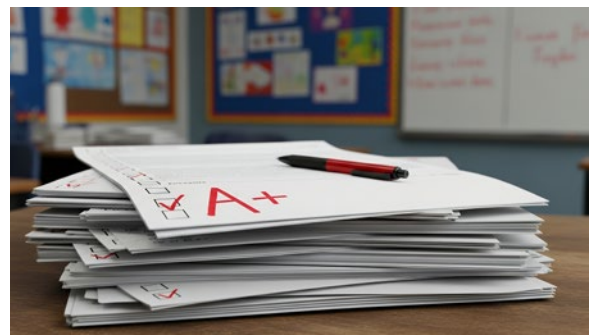
² Ontario Ministry of Education (2010). *Growing Success*, p. 152.



Grounding professional judgment is the professional knowledge of students' lived experiences and backgrounds, curriculum expectations, and evidence of student learning. These collectively inform the accurate selection and application of appropriate instructional and assessment approaches.

The application of professional judgment is dynamic as teachers take on a cyclical reflective stance to ensure that the evidence of learning they collect are relevant, sufficient, and valid. This involves teacher understanding of assessment purposes, namely, *assessment for*, *assessment as*, and *assessment of* learning. Professional judgment distinguishes the types of assessment purposes from the nature of assessment (e.g., diagnostic, formative, summative). When professional judgment is applied, information gathered from assessments reinforces the notion that learning is not a static state but rather a process of growth, progress, and achievement.

"The assessment and grading process needs to be learning-focused...We want students to understand that school is about learning." (O'Connor, p. 10)



Authentic assessment and evaluation of growth and learning cannot be standardized

The merits of large-scale standardized assessments have always been debated. Since the results of large-scale assessments have been used to craft the narrative of Ontario's capacity to self-improve, the value of large-scale assessments has been overestimated. Large-scale assessments, in turn, have run the risk of becoming the sole metric in describing the picture of student learning and achievement across the province. Central to the debate is the overemphasis of large-scale assessments eclipsing valuable classroom-based, student-growth and progress-centered assessment.

Since teacher professional judgment informs classroom-based assessment and instructional decisions, then the accurate description and guidance of an individual student's learning growth, progress, and potential over time is possible. Classroom-based assessment more powerfully paints a complete picture of student learning and well-being. As a result, the myriad of factors that affect student success can be addressed by teachers in a timely way.

It is important to note that assessment policies and practices should recognize the realities of multilingual learners in Ontario's French-language schools. Large-scale assessments should be designed and interpreted in ways that minimize linguistic and cultural bias,

"Promoting well-being while continuing to perpetuate ill-being through large-scale, standardized assessment practices, runs contrary to the goals of achieving systemic coherence, and corrodes the sense of moral purpose that high performing systems proclaim and promote. At the same time, attempts at curriculum innovation and personalization are being limited or undermined by a testing system that promotes standardization."
(Hargreaves, p. 415)

"Classroom assessment in schools with culturally and socially diverse students requires careful thinking about the needs of students from a wide range of backgrounds."
(Taylor, p. 19)



"What we do in school is support students' development as whole human beings, teach them to learn, and keep the options of the world as broad and accessible to them as possible, so they can dream big and have the self-efficacy to make their aspirations happen." (Jung, p. 15)

ensuring they measure students' disciplinary learning rather than their stage of French language acquisition.

Results obtained from large-scale, at-a-glance assessment tools can gauge student achievement broadly. However, those results still require classroom-based assessment to account for how those results were achieved.

CONCLUSION

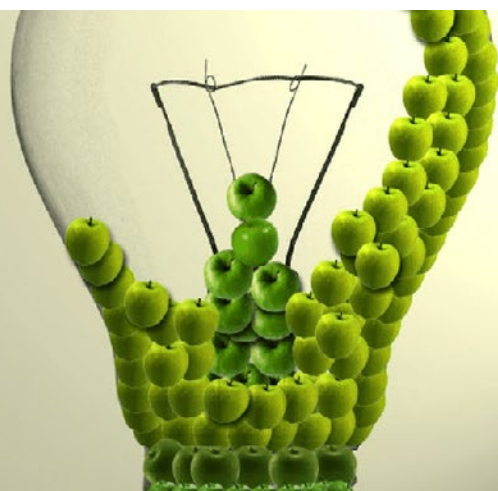
OTF and its Affiliates believe that if Ontario is to realize the promise of public education, then assessment must reflect the dynamic nature of classroom learning and the diversity of Ontario students. Equitable and authentic learning in school should help students better understand who they are and who they can become. Identity, belonging, and purpose are foundational to this learning and are powerfully addressed in responsive and relevant classroom-based assessment.

Improvements to student learning may be enabled by system changes and policy levers but must recognize that learning growth, progress and authentic achievement are brought to fruition through the daily work and relationships of teachers and their students in classrooms. By ensuring that the purpose of assessment is to improve learning, then students strengthen their self-perception and self-efficacy to persist in developing their knowledge and skills.

This paper's positions on assessment and evaluation are clear:

1. Assessment and evaluation of student achievement is the domain of the teaching profession.
2. Teacher professional judgment is the cornerstone of assessment and evaluation.
3. Authentic assessment and evaluation of growth and learning cannot be standardized.

OTF and its Affiliates believe that if Ontario is to realize the promise of public education, then assessment must reflect the dynamic nature of classroom learning and the diversity of Ontario students.



This paper reaffirms the positions on assessment and evaluation which serve as the foundation for the following recommendations. These recommendations are for how Ontario must prioritize and value classroom-based assessment, informed by teacher professional judgment, to achieve comprehensive system improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In partnership with the Affiliates, OTF recommends that the Ministry of Education:

- Ensure that any revised assessment, evaluation, and reporting policies re-affirm teacher professional judgment as central to classroom-based assessment.
- Allocate funding and resources to support job-embedded, sustained, authentic professional learning opportunities that occur during the instructional day for teachers and educators to enhance and refine their assessment practices.
- Develop ways of utilizing classroom-based assessment and evidence to inform policies and programs aimed at improving student achievement.

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