

# Submission to the Ontario PC Caucus Education Consultations

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Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario  
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The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) thanks the Ontario Progressive Conservative Caucus for organizing a forum for consultation with education stakeholder organizations. An open and ongoing discussion about issues is an important element of policy development. ETFO would welcome further opportunities for discussion with the PC caucus as the party works towards developing its education platform for the 2011 election.

Based on the policies included in the February 2006 party discussion paper and the June 2007 election platform, we are anticipating that the party will continue to focus on accountability measures connected to standardized testing. The 2007 platform proposed expanding the use of standardized tests as a tool to gauge student performance and rewarding those schools that meet performance targets with additional funding. The 2006 party discussion paper suggested introducing merit pay for teachers and principals based on test results. ETFO would like to use the opportunity provided by the caucus consultations to outline our concerns with these proposals.

### **The History of Merit Pay**

Education performance pay dates back to the mid-1800s when British teachers were paid on the basis of student examination results. The practice was abandoned thirty years later when the public reacted to evidence of cheating and cramming which rendered the examinations an invalid measure of teacher performance. Teacher

performance pay was introduced in the US in the 1960s and again in the mid-1980s following the *Nation at Risk* report. Both experiments had similar negative results and led to the abandonment of merit pay.<sup>i</sup>

More recently, a number of jurisdictions in the United States have experimented with merit pay schemes as a means to promote improved student achievement measured by standardized testing. Currently merit pay is being pushed by the Obama administration through its \$4.35 billion Race to the Top incentive plan for state educational “reforms”. While some states have signed on for the incentive funding with commitments to introduce merit-based teacher compensation, others have not done so. Teachers do not embrace the concept of merit pay. In Florida, in response to a strong reaction from the state’s teachers, the Republican governor vetoed a bill that would have adopted merit pay.

### **Why Merit Pay is Problematic**

The US administration’s focus on merit pay is not based on successful experiments with the policy. A 2009 report by the Manhattan Institute, for example, showed that merit pay had no impact on test scores in 200 schools New York City. In fact, test scores went down in the larger schools which were part of the pilot project.<sup>ii</sup> In 1999, in Denver Colorado, there was a merit pay project jointly sponsored by the school board and the teachers. The researchers involved concluded that the measures of student performance were still inadequate, that connections to teacher performance were hard to establish, and that the standard measures of student learning were not applicable to more than half of the teachers, including gym, art, and music teachers.

Further, the Denver pilot project didn't address incentives for teachers to work in difficult situations and didn't assess other aspects of teachers' work such as supporting the school beyond classroom instruction, mentoring younger teachers, and outreach to individual students and their parents.<sup>iii</sup>

A recent literature review of American research conducted by an independent Canadian non-profit education research agency<sup>iv</sup> found that merit pay

- sets teacher against teacher to compete for a limited fund of money and is open to subjective evaluation and possible abuse.
- places teachers in an environment in which they vie against each other for recognition which is contrary to fostering the collegial and supportive culture necessary for effective schools.
- is based on individual teacher performance and fails to capture the combined effort of the whole school.
- is problematic for school administrators because the tenuous association between stated criteria and effective teaching makes it difficult to justify why certain teachers receive merit pay and others don't.

### **Why Linking Teacher Compensation to Standardized Tests is Problematic**

Tying teacher compensation to the results of students' performance on standardized tests is problematic because it

- creates an incentive for teachers to teach only what is on the test which results in a narrowing of the curriculum taught. In Ontario the EQAO focus on literacy and numeracy means that other subjects and skill areas valued by employers and required for being productive citizens are neglected.
- is based on the assumption that standardized test scores accurately measure student achievement whereas, in Ontario, EQAO tests can only provide a

snap-shot measure of certain aspects of student competency in literacy and numeracy.

- encourages “gaming the system” i.e. cheating and excluding low performing students.
- is based on the assumption that schools are failing. By all accounts, Ontario students perform well when compared to students in other jurisdictions.

### **Alternative Accountability Models**

Ontario has a rigorous accountability system in place for teachers. A standardized teacher performance appraisal process was proposed by ETFO in 1996 and ultimately introduced by the previous Conservative government. The Ontario College of Teachers provides another level of public accountability for the teaching profession.

As an alternative to testing every grade 3 and 6 student, ETFO recommends a number of options including

- Imposing a two-year moratorium on EQAO grade 3 and 6 tests;
- Administering the tests every two or three years;
- Replacing the current testing with random-sample testing of grade 3 and 6 students.

These options would create savings that could be reallocated to support classroom education. They would give teachers more time to reflect on what they've learned about effective classroom assessment and enable them to provide a more balanced program for elementary students.

Communications is a large part of public accountability. More emphasis and support should be provided for school- and board-level reports to the public about school activities, student progress, and initiatives to support teaching and learning.

## **Conclusion**

ETFO believes that the overarching goal of education is to assist students to become critical thinkers, be capable of working constructively with others, and become engaged citizens. Schools therefore need to foster more than test-taking skills and to go beyond the basics to provide students with a broad understanding of the arts, science, and the humanities. Ontario's narrow focus on literacy and numeracy and its reliance on large-scale assessments work against this goal. Introducing merit pay to teacher compensation would be equally counterproductive.

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<sup>i</sup> Gratz, Donald B. The Problem with Performance Pay (2009, November). *Education Leadership*, 67 (3), pp. 76-79.

<sup>ii</sup> Diane Ravitch (2009). "What's Wrong with Merit Pay". *Hoover Digest*.  
[www.hoover.org/publications/digest/63615522.html](http://www.hoover.org/publications/digest/63615522.html)

<sup>iii</sup> Gratz, *Op. cit.*

<sup>iv</sup> Raham, Helen, Guppy, Neil, Phillips, Susan M. and Bennett, Kirsten (2008). *Beyond the Grid: A Canadian Look at the Terrain of Teacher Compensation*. Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE).