Dear colleagues,

I am writing in light of recent media commentary around student assessment policies in our secondary schools. Some have suggested, entirely incorrectly, that the achievements of Ontario students are inflated or that students are being given credits or diplomas they did not earn.

There is a kind of double standard operating in the current debate. If too many students fail to graduate from high school, the school system is accused of failure. Yet if the number of graduates increases, we are accused of lowering standards. In most enterprises, a high success rate would be celebrated and a high failure rate would be a sign of system failure and, indeed, a step on the road to bankruptcy. Education must surely be one of the few fields anywhere where some believe that having a lot of failure is a sign of quality.

It is important to correct and clarify the facts, and I have attempted to do so below.

Assessment policy
At present, Ministry student evaluation policy is contained in The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9-12 "Program Planning and Assessment," which was issued in 2000. It provides general guidance on most assessment issues. Boards are free to issue additional policy or guidance, as long as it is consistent with Ministry policy.

In addition, last fall the Ministry issued a draft document on student assessment, “Growing Success,” for discussion. It provides much more specificity on many assessment issues. Consultations on the document are continuing. As this process unfolds, we are hearing widespread agreement on many elements of “Growing Success” and especially on the principles of student assessment outlined in it. At the same time, there are some areas where there is quite a bit of disagreement. A number of these areas are also being mentioned in the media, such as the use of "zero" as a mark, or the practice of deducting marks for late assignments. A thorough discussion of these issues is itself important, and despite persistent media reports, no “new policy” on assessment has been released. Further, no decisions have been made about the status of “Growing Success.”

Let me clearly state that the Ontario Ministry of Education agrees with educators, parents and students that the awarding of credits and diplomas must be based on the real achievement by students of legitimate learning objectives. To give students credit they did not earn is to cheat them of the education to which they are entitled. Nothing in any Ministry policy should be understood as detracting from this principle.
What research says about assessment

Education policy and practice should be guided by research wherever there is strong and consistent empirical evidence. Over the 10 years since the current Ministry policy was issued, we have learned a great deal from research about effective student assessment. Indeed, some of the top international experts on student assessment are from Ontario. Some of what we have learned from research, however, is inconsistent both with common current practice and with what might be called conventional wisdom. For example, almost everybody sees schools as places where students are given grades for their work, and those grades reflect both performance and behaviour. However, the decision to separate reporting of performance from behaviour was made a decade ago and is reflected in current Ministry policy.

Since then, a large body of empirical research has shown the power of formative assessment to improve student outcomes. For example, evaluating work without grades, with an emphasis on specific and timely educational feedback, has been shown to improve students’ subsequent work. We also have very clear evidence that punitive use of assessment depresses students’ effort and motivation, and that course failures lead to less future effort, not more. A student’s belief in his or her own ability is very strongly associated with future achievement and success. Although these ideas have strong empirical support, they are not widely believed by the public, or even by all educators.

While we want practice in schools to be consistent with research, the Ministry recognizes that this goal is generally not best achieved through enforcing mandates that people do not see as reasonable. Rather, education practice changes through discussion, dialogue and the gradual development of new skills and understanding across the system. Educators, students, parents and others need opportunities to discuss assessment policies and to become familiar with the powerful new research on student assessment. That is a primary reason behind the creation of the draft “Growing Success” document.

We also recognize that education is a contextual enterprise, and that guidelines that apply in most circumstances do not apply in every case. This is also true of student assessment; what is generally good practice would not be so in every instance. The concepts of “never” or “always” do not fit with good educational practice, as teachers know very well.

We believe that school is about helping students learn to do and be better, and that improvement through learning requires multiple opportunities to learn and multiple ways to demonstrate skills and knowledge. We must assume that students will make mistakes, have false starts and will sometimes be their own worst enemies. Students should be rewarded, not penalized, for improving over time. We are committed, not only to high student outcomes but also to students’ growth and progress in learning over time. The dominant ethos of the school should be to encourage effort by providing meaningful feedback and clear guidance on how improvement can occur. As the “Growing Success” document puts it, assessment and evaluation should: “...provide feedback that is clear, specific, meaningful, and timely to support improved learning and achievement” (p. 1).

All of that being said, let me respond to some of the suggestions being made in the media around student assessment.
Failure

The notion that students in Ontario schools are not failing is completely contrary to the evidence. Our graduation rate stands at 77 per cent, which means that nearly one-quarter of our students are not gaining the credits needed to graduate. We also know that many students – well over 30 per cent – fail or withdraw from at least one course during high school.

We also know that failing a course is highly predictive of failure to graduate from high school, even when one controls for ability. One of the clearest findings in psychology is that success based on effort is the greatest motivator for further effort. We are most inclined to work harder when we see ourselves making progress and getting better. Outright failure, on the other hand, tends to reduce effort and cause people to avoid their area of weakness. The implication for educators is that we should be seeking ways to help students improve and experience real success.

Some critics appear to believe that only so many students are capable of completing high school or being successful in postsecondary education. Yet everything we know denies this supposition. We have massive evidence from many areas of human activity that, with the right motivation and support, most people are capable of doing much more than they or others thought possible. Schools are about liberating this ability and energy by providing lots of encouragement, good feedback and holding students to high standards, but also by providing constant opportunities to improve.

Missed assignments and deadlines, plagiarism, cheating

A focus on helping students succeed does not mean that we should ignore or condone the mistakes students make. Schools have a goal of helping students learn the dispositions they need for life in our society, including good work habits and honesty. Schools cannot and should not ignore habitual disregard for deadlines and should certainly not accept plagiarism or other forms of cheating in any way. At the same time, the goal of schooling is not to punish students, but to help them learn and develop. So our response to poor choices or decisions by students should be consistent with that educative purpose and take into account the realities of students’ lives, both in and out of school.

Low Standards?

The complaints we are hearing today about low standards are nothing new. For centuries, each generation seems to feel that the next one is not up to standard. Complaints from professors about the poor preparation of new university students, for example, go back at least two hundred years. In the U.S., a famous paper by Gerald Bracey documented the recurring nature of these complaints, under the compelling title “Why can’t they be like we were?”

At the same time, Ontario and Canadian students perform extremely well by international standards on international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). For example, in the 2006 PISA results, among 57 countries only Finland and Hong Kong scored significantly higher than Ontario in science and in reading. Why would our high school graduation rate be lower than other countries when our students at age 15 outperform those in most other places?
**Public Confidence**

Although these complaints about students happen over and over, and usually with little or no supporting evidence, they cannot be ignored. Left unchallenged, these allegations have the potential to undermine public confidence in education – one of our three core priorities. As leaders in education, we all have a role to play in speaking up publicly on these issues in our communities. I encourage you to talk about Ontario’s high standards. Use examples from your experience to illustrate your students’ hard-won success. Highlight how you are using data and evidence to sharpen your focus and improve student outcomes. And give your students, especially those experiencing success for the first time, opportunities to share their views.

The improvement in graduation rates in Ontario in the last four years is the result of a very substantial effort by thousands of people. It has nothing to do with giving students grades they do not deserve. Our students’ success — here at home and on international assessments — is something that everyone can and should be proud of. I look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you to help our students succeed and to ensure that the public understands and supports our efforts.

Sincerely

Ben Levin