

# At a Loss for Words

*Approximately one out of three Ontario grade 10 students struggles with literacy.*

**By Malkin Dare**

| Rank | School Board           | Passed     | Change     |
|------|------------------------|------------|------------|
| 1.   | Huron-Perth CDSB       | 88%        | +13%       |
| 2.   | Wellington CDSB        | 83%        | +3%        |
| 2.   | Huron-Superior CDSB    | 83%        | +8%        |
| 4.   | Halton CDSB            | 81%        | +3%        |
| 4.   | Halton DSB             | 81%        | +5%        |
| 4.   | Ottawa/Car CDSB        | 81%        | +6%        |
| 7.   | London CDSB            | 79%        | +7%        |
| 8.   | Niagara Catholic DSB   | 78%        | +3%        |
| 8.   | Durham CDSB            | 78%        | +5%        |
| 10.  | Brant/Hald/Nor CDSB    | 77%        | +5%        |
| 10.  | York CDSB              | 77%        | +6%        |
| 10.  | Thunder Bay CDSB       | 77%        | +14%       |
| 13.  | CDSB of East/Ontario   | 76%        | +4%        |
| 13.  | Bruce-Grey CDSB        | 76%        | +5%        |
| 15.  | Renfrew CDSB           | 75%        | -3%        |
| 15.  | York Region DSB        | 75%        | +2%        |
| 15.  | Avon Maitland DSB      | 75%        | +3%        |
| 18.  | Ottawa-Carleton DSB    | 74%        | +1%        |
| 18.  | Pet/Vic/Nor/Cla CDSB   | 74%        | +1%        |
| 18.  | St. Clair CSB          | 74%        | +1%        |
| 18.  | Upper Grand DSB        | 74%        | +3%        |
| 18.  | Durham DSB             | 74%        | +4%        |
| 18.  | Waterloo CDSB          | 74%        | +5%        |
| 18.  | Lamb/Kent DSB          | 74%        | +6%        |
| 25.  | Nipissing/PS CDSB      | 73%        | +5%        |
| 25.  | Ham/Went CDSB          | 73%        | +8%        |
| 27.  | Renfrew County DSB     | 72%        | +2%        |
| 27.  | Trillium/Lake DSB      | 72%        | +3%        |
| 27.  | Greater Essex DSB      | 72%        | +5%        |
| 27.  | Windsor-Essex CDSB     | 72%        | +8%        |
| 31.  | Bluewater DSB          | 71%        | +3%        |
| 31.  | Kawartha/PineR DSB     | 71%        | +3%        |
| 31.  | Limestone DSB          | 71%        | +3%        |
| 31.  | Hast/PrinceEd DSB      | 71%        | +4%        |
| 31.  | Simcoe/Musk CDSB       | 71%        | +6%        |
| 31.  | Dufferin-Peel CDSB     | 71%        | +7%        |
| 37.  | Lakehead DSB           | 70%        | +2%        |
|      | <b>Province</b>        | <b>70%</b> | <b>+3%</b> |
| 37.  | Rainy River DSB        | 70%        | +6%        |
| 39.  | Sudbury CDSB           | 69%        | -1%        |
| 39.  | Upper Canada DSB       | 69%        | +4%        |
| 39.  | Ontario NE DSB         | 69%        | +12%       |
| 42.  | Thames Valley DSB      | 68%        | 0%         |
| 42.  | Peel DSB               | 68%        | +2%        |
| 42.  | Rainbow DSB            | 68%        | +1%        |
| 42.  | Simcoe County DSB      | 68%        | +5%        |
| 42.  | Toronto CSB            | 68%        | +8%        |
| 47.  | Waterloo Region DSB    | 67%        | -5%        |
| 48.  | Algonquin/Lake CDSB    | 66%        | -12%       |
| 48.  | Grand Erie DSB         | 66%        | 0%         |
| 48.  | Superior/Green DSB     | 66%        | +7%        |
| 48.  | Kenora CDSB            | 66%        | +16%       |
| 52.  | Near North DSB         | 65%        | +3%        |
| 53.  | Ham/Went DSB           | 64%        | 0%         |
| 53.  | Niagara DSB            | 64%        | 0%         |
| 55.  | Algoma DSB             | 62%        | 0%         |
| 56.  | Northeastern CDSB      | 61%        | -9%        |
| 57.  | Keewatin/Pat DSB       | 59%        | 0%         |
| 58.  | Toronto DSB            | 58%        | +2%        |
| 59.  | James Bay Lowlands DSB | 18%        | +3%        |

The table on the left ranks the major Ontario English-speaking school boards on the basis of the percentage of students who passed last year's grade 10 literacy test on their first attempt. The second column (labeled "Change") indicates the difference from the previous year in the percentage of students who passed on their first attempt.

This is the fourth year that the grade 10 literacy test has been administered. The first year, 61% of students passed the test; the second year 69%; the third year 67%; and this year 70%. An improvement in the second year of any test is typical, due mostly to test familiarity. It seems likely that the pass rate has reached a stable range of 67% to 70%. This means that something like two-thirds of Ontario students can't pass a test of basic literacy. How basic is basic?

This year, the EQAO released annotated samples of student responses (available at [www.eqao.com](http://www.eqao.com)). The sample reading passage, "Get Rid of That T-Shirt", is written at roughly a grade 9 level. Most of the 16 sentences in the passage are fairly simple, for example: "The most recent trend seems to be toward slogans or messages that are increasingly meaningless." The vocabulary is at an appropriate level. The ideas are straightforward, and they are well summed up by the title.

The two sample multiple-choice questions are also quite straightforward. The first question ("In this selection, the T-shirt is compared to ...") requires the student to be able to read the words in the passage: "T-shirts became great democratic portable billboards." The second question asks the student to describe the purpose of the selection ("to state an opinion"), something that most readers could probably surmise from the title.

The samples of student writing appear to have been evaluated solely on the basis of their content — that is, whether they answer the questions adequately. No weight is given to incorrect spelling, grammar, or punctuation — and mistakes abound! For example, a 163-word essay that rated a passing grade contains 15 errors. In short, judging by the EQAO's published sample, the grade 10 literacy test is not particularly rigorous.

We have data from five years of EQAO testing. So far, there has been essentially no improvement in student achievement, despite thousands of meetings, annual improvement plans from every school board and every school, and heroic efforts on the part of teachers and students. Yet student achievement remains low.

There are two possibilities. Either the intellectual capacity of Ontario grade 10 students is such that one out of three is incapable of reading grade 9 material — or else Ontario schools are not educating their students adequately in reading and writing.

There is a wide variation among school boards (for example, 88% of Huron-Perth CDSB students passed, versus 67% of neighbouring Waterloo DSB students). It seems unlikely that the academic ability of students with such similar backgrounds would vary so widely. Could Huron-Perth teachers be using superior teaching methods? If so, let's find out what they're doing!