Is the new evaluation and assessment policy in Ontario schools fostering a generation of sluggards and dopes?

BY TIM JOHNSON

dangerous waters

AREN LYONS KNEW THAT HER TEACHING career was over the morning that she sat at her desk and placed a wake-up call to one of her students. "It was exam time, and I was phoning the kid to get him out of bed to come and write the exam. That's the expectation now. Because if kids don't turn up, they'd be writing it later anyway," she remembers. "Ten years ago, it was the students' responsibility to be there for an exam. Now it's the teacher's job to give them a wake-up call."

More than just wake-up calls, a growing number of teachers across Ontario are sounding the alarm that the system of evaluation and assessment that's being instituted in the province's high schools is hopelessly broken. Policies vary from school board to school board, but teachers across the province all seem to be saying the same thing: that their board, at the behest of the Ministry of Education, is making it impossible for them to enforce deadlines, assign late marks or grades of zero for work that is not handed in (or is woefully unsatisfactory when it finally is), that they can no longer require students to be in attendance for tests, that kids who deserve a failing mark are being passed through anyway, and that Ontario's universities, colleges and workplaces will soon face a generation that lacks the necessary skills to succeed.

Frustrated to the point of complete resignation, Lyons and four of her colleagues at central Ontario's Owen Sound Collegiate Vocational Institute—with 115 years of teaching experience among them—formed MendEd in 2007, a nonprofit advocacy group promoting public dialogue for public education, which has since become a thorn in the side of the education ministry. "I taught perfectly capable students in the senior academic program who just didn't get their work in on time, not because they weren't capable, but because the system allowed it," observes Brad Morley, a former English teacher and one of MendEd's founding members. "The system didn't instill in them the necessary skills that one needs in college and university programs and indeed in many workplace situations. Things like getting over yourself and working to a deadline. Too many weaknesses are allowed to flourish."

Ontario's evaluation and assessment policy—formally established back in 2000, but applied with increasing gusto in recent years—has begun to impact today's crop of incoming university students. A survey of almost 2,000 Ontario university professors and librarians, released by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) this past spring, revealed that only five percent of respondents agree that first-year students are now less prepared for university education than just three years ago. Professors noted a lack of required writing, mathematical and critical thinking skills, an expectation of success without putting forth the requisite effort, and a lower level of maturity amongst students. University of Windsor visual arts professor and OCUFA president Brian E. Brown notes that parents and students alike are taken aback when they emerge
from the province’s high schools to face very stiff challenges. “We have parents saying, ‘I know that my son or daughter isn’t out partying every night, and I know they’re studying, so what’s the problem?’ The problem is that they’re just not prepared for university.”

**From zeros to heroes**

Proponents of the policy explain that this is simply a part of the larger shift toward differentiated education, the prevailing educational philosophy in Canada, where teachers design lessons and methods of evaluation based on students’ strengths and weaknesses and highly individualized data. The primary concern in today’s classrooms is to ensure that a student has learned the material; handing something in late may be bad behaviour, but it says nothing about a student’s comprehension. A more appropriate course of action than giving a zero, explains Hon. Kathleen Wynne, Ontario’s minister of education, is to actually make the student do the work, rather than simply letting them off the hook. And while she insists that her ministry has no desire for late assignments—and maintains that the ministry has never actually precluded teachers from giving a zero—she points out that today’s system is geared toward ensuring that students are given every opportunity to be successful. “We want kids to learn from the consequences, and to be able to go on to correct those behaviours,” she says. “What we know from research is that success motivates. Failure doesn’t. So let’s find the thing that kids are going to succeed in, and let’s make them do lots of it, and then they can be re-engaged and do the stuff that’s tough for them.”

Dr. Charles Ungerleider, director of research and knowledge mobilization for the Canadian Council on Learning and a UBC professor who has written about assessment policies, likens the Ontario learning process to the one most of us followed when we obtained a driver’s licence: you went and got that little booklet with all of the pictures of signs and explanations of the rules of the road. You took the booklet home and studied it, and then you wrote the exam when you felt sufficiently prepared to demonstrate enough knowledge to pass it. In many ways, it’s now the same today in Ontario’s high schools. “The Ministry of Education wants to make sure that the standards remain the same, but that there’s some flexibility with respect to the amount of time students have to demonstrate mastery of the material.” Ungerleider concedes that this presents logistical difficulties for teachers, but scoffs at the notion put forth by critics that having to meet a deadline is actually, in itself, a major part of the learning process. “Well, come on—I was 11 or 12 years old when I realized that if I didn’t show up to my paper route, I no longer had a paper route.”

**Missing the mark**

But many teachers maintain that the explanations given by academics and the ministry show an unmistakable detachment from the realities of the classroom. “You can have all of these wonderful policies, but if they don’t work, they don’t work,” says Lyons. Hugo Richardson, an Ottawa-area high school teacher, is quite certain that these policies aren’t working in the classes that he teaches. At his school, the protocol is as follows: When a student doesn’t hand in an assignment on time, Richardson speaks to him about it and gives him a new due date, a few days later. When that deadline is missed, Richardson must call home and speak with the student’s parent, explain the situation, and ask the parent to encourage her child to complete the assignment. If the student misses the next deadline, Richardson then speaks with the vice-principal, outlines the steps he has taken, and together they create a detention period which the student must attend until the work is complete. But if the student chooses to skip the detention, there are no repercussions. Extra help is available at all times, and the assignment has potential for full marks, whenever it comes in. If the work is still not complete at the end of a semester, the student is given an additional week to—-with the help of a “student success teacher”—demonstrate learning and earn their credit, something called “credit recovery.” But that only happens if absolutely necessary—Richardson notes that if, say, a student has only five of eight assignments completed at the end of the year, the teacher is forbidden to assign a zero to the three outstanding assignments, and is instead instructed to make a judgment call on the whole scope of the year, whether the student demonstrated enough learning, overall, to earn the credit. “It’s ridiculous,” says Richardson. “It’s tougher to fail a class than to pass it.”

Richardson has observed that this policy not only reinforces the poor study habits of weaker students, but also drags down the stronger ones. “My students say that this is extremely unfair. They say, ‘Why should I bust my ass to get a project done on time, when I know it really doesn’t matter?’”

And for at-risk students, a landscape where there are few boundaries is potentially devastating. Abigail Lewis’ worries about her son, Sam, who she says has been pushed through despite minimal efforts on his part toward his academics. Lewis feels that Sam, who is entering Grade 12, would actually benefit from failing. Based on her own observations, she has concluded that attendance and handing in assignments are not priorities, cultivated by his school, noting that it’s up to her to push Sam to attend classes. She remembers one class where Sam struggled with the work, decided not to do it, and passed anyway. “It’s a sad system. He does as little as he has to,” observes Lewis. She’s worried about his future. “My concern is that when he goes to college or gets a job, that he won’t be prepared. I don’t think he understands the importance of being on time, getting things done and, more than anything, making an effort.”

**Going back to the future?**

Ottawa’s Richardson says that he understands and even agrees with parts of the theory behind the policy. He suspects that it was designed to help students that might otherwise slip through the cracks, and believes that it is indeed useful for supporting those who might otherwise give up and drop out. The downside, however, is that it leaves the door wide open for students across the board to exploit the system—something that happens routinely. While Richardson does not advocate a wholesale return to the harsh practices of decades past, he feels that certain elements—such as late marks, and even zeros—-need to be available to teachers, when necessary. Most high school students need to be motivated, and teachers need to be given tools to help them. “We need to somehow make students take responsibility for their own learning,” he explains.

Not surprisingly, teachers are often left feeling demoralized by this system, a reality that undoubtedly has a negative impact upon the educational environment. It was this demoralization that spirited Lyons into early retirement. “It’s this whole thing that, no matter what, these kids are going to be successful. Well, it doesn’t work that way— I wish it did,” she says. CF