



Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, October 2003

Report of Provincial Results

Highlights

April 2004



Education
Quality and
Accountability
Office



Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), October 2003

Highlights

Background

As recommended by the Royal Commission on Learning, the OSSLT was introduced to provide greater confidence in the literacy skills of students graduating with a high school diploma.

For the purpose of the OSSLT, literacy is defined as having the reading and writing skills required to understand reading selections and to communicate through written forms as expected in *The Ontario Curriculum* in all subjects, up to the end of Grade 9.

The OSSLT is administered at each publicly funded Ontario secondary school in Grade 10 to provide information on students' attainment of literacy skills.

Where students have not demonstrated the required reading and writing skills, the OSSLT provides an alert to parents, students and teachers that interventions should be provided and that improvement is needed to ensure the students meet the fundamental reading and writing skills required for an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).

Assessments for Learning: Using Data for Improvement

The goal of EQAO's assessments is to ensure greater accountability and to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of education in Ontario. This is done through assessments that gather objective, reliable and relevant information, and through the public release of that information along with recommendations for system improvement.

The OSSLT measures student performance and contributes to educational improvement by

- ensuring that students have acquired the reading and writing skills they are expected to have learned by the end of Grade 9. These skills are outlined in *The Ontario Curriculum*.
- providing student achievement information, beyond regular in-school testing and classroom observation, that can support decision making and leverage improvements for students.
- encouraging parent–teacher and school–community dialogue, so that successful strategies can be identified and implemented.
- providing contextual information that allows teachers, parents and the community to interpret results in a constructive and responsible manner.

Good assessment is a key ingredient in improved student performance; students, parents and teachers need informative, reliable feedback to measure learning outcomes. High-quality assessment is integral to improving student performance.

—Donna Wishart, Literacy Coordinator and Head of the English Department, John L. Forster Secondary School, Greater Essex County District School Board

The Role of Literacy

Many studies point to the relationship between literacy skills and a student's future success, suggesting that the better developed a student's literacy skills, the better his or her chance to achieve success beyond his or her scholastic career.

- The Canadian Council on Social Development published *Still Struggling: An Update on Teenagers at Work*, which states that students are staying in school longer because they recognize they need a good education to get a good job.
- Statistics Canada's report *Youth in Transition Survey* found that a lower literacy score in reading was a factor associated with 15-year-olds' leaving school within two years. The report indicates that young people who do not finish high school have lower levels of self-esteem and less confidence in their ability to achieve.
- A report by Human Resources Development Canada, *The Costs of Dropping Out of High School*, found that students with lower literacy levels are at greater risk of failing to integrate into the labour market.
- The Royal Commission on Learning identified reading, writing and communicating as essential tools for learning and called for a universal literacy test that would be a literacy guarantee and "a promise to the public that any high school graduate in Ontario can read and understand, and can write and convey information."

The OSSLT assesses the reading and writing skills that students are expected to learn in all subjects, to the end of Grade 9.

The following pages highlight the results from the October 2003 administration of the test.

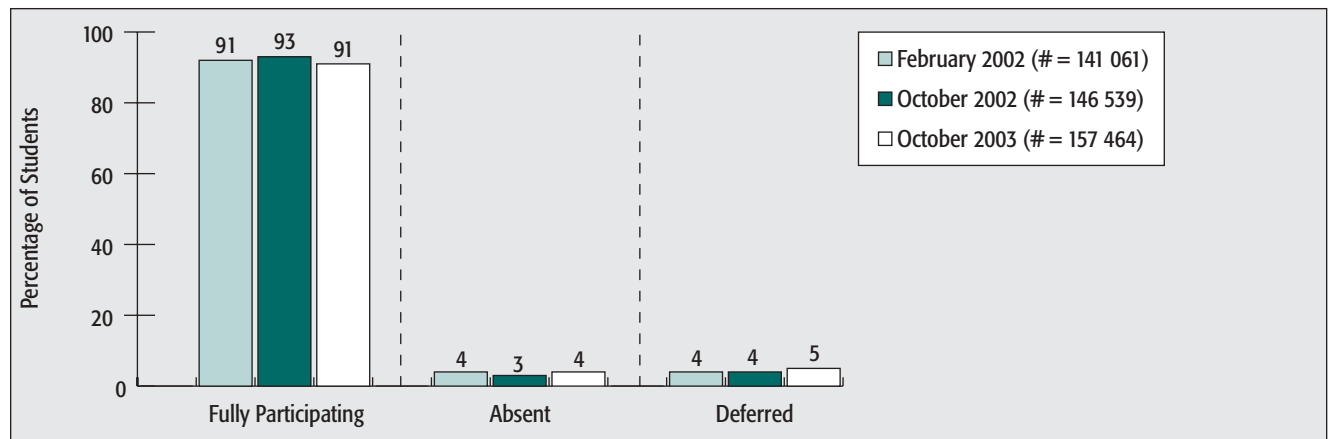


First-Time Eligible Students

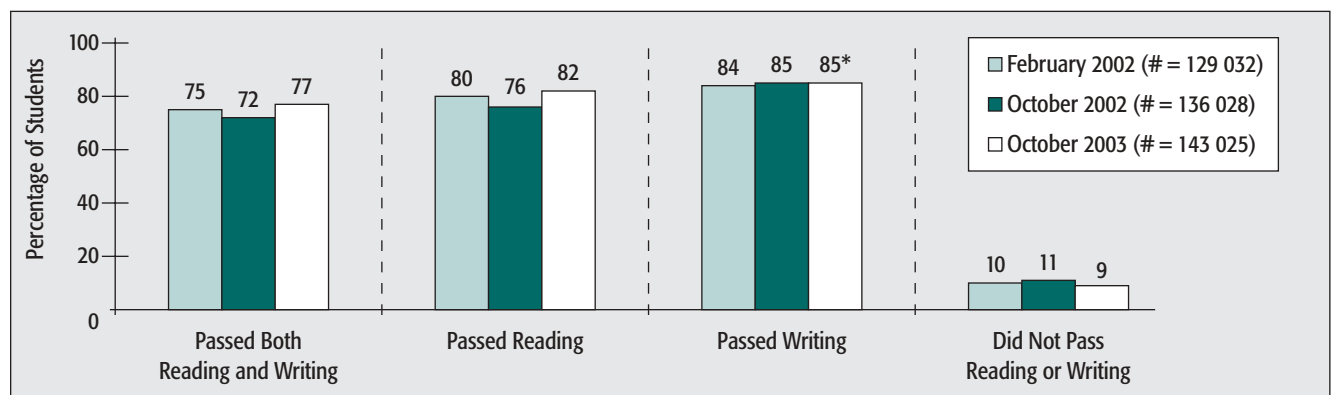
Results at a Glance

- In 2003, 91% of first-time eligible students wrote the OSSLT, a slight decrease from 2002 (93%).
- In 2003, 77% of English-language students passed both the reading and the writing components, while 14% passed one component.
- There has been a 5% increase over last year in the percentage of English-language students who successfully completed the OSSLT.

Participation Data



Achievement Results: Participating Students Three-Year Comparison



* The 1% difference between this percentage and the combined percentages of those who passed writing only and those who passed both components (from the report tables) is attributable to double rounding effects associated with adding the percentages.

Overall Results by Contextual Factor for Participating Students

Contextual Factor	Number Participating	Passed Both Reading and Writing	Passed Reading	Passed Writing	Did Not Pass Reading or Writing
Gender	Female # = 69 529	80%	84%	89%	7%
	Male # = 71 961	73%	80%	82%	11%
Language	ESL/ELD* # = 4677	42%	45%	69%	28%
	ESL/ELD receiving special provisions # = 3468	43%	46%	70%	27%
Special Needs	Special needs (excluding gifted) # = 17 183	46%	54%	65%	27%
Accommodations	IEP* only # = 3361	50%	58%	69%	23%
	IEP and IPRC* # = 12 021	43%	51%	63%	29%
Program	Academic # = 98 709	90%	93%	94%	2%
	Applied # = 36 545	49%	60%	68%	22%
	Locally developed program # = 3262	18%	26%	38%	55%

* English as a second language and English literacy development (ESL/ELD), Individual Education Plan (IEP), and Individual Placement and Review Committee (IPRC).



Overall Findings for Participating Students

- There has been a 5% increase over last year in the percentage of students who successfully completed the OSSLT.
- A larger percentage of students passed reading in October 2003 (82%) than in October 2002 (76%).
- Students' achievement in writing has remained relatively stable for the three test administrations (84% passed in February 2002, and 85% passed in October 2002 and October 2003).
- As in previous years, a larger percentage of students enrolled in the academic program than in the applied and in locally developed programs successfully completed the OSSLT.
- Overall, more students passed the writing component than the reading component. This trend was also evident among students in the following subgroups: ESL/ELD learners, students enrolled in the applied and in locally developed programs and students with special needs.
- Females generally performed better on the OSSLT than males, especially in writing. In writing, the gender gap was 7%, compared to 4% in reading.

Contextual Information Provided by Schools

- 49% of the participants were female; 50% were male.
- 3% of the participants were identified as ESL/ELD learners.
- 74% of ESL/ELD learners received special provisions.
- Of the ESL/ELD learners who were eligible to write, more than half participated this year. This is a 9% increase over last year's participation rate for ESL/ELD learners.
- 12% of students (excluding gifted) were identified as having an IEP; 9% of students (excluding gifted) had been identified through the IPRC process.
- 90% of students with special needs were provided with accommodations.
- 69% of students were in the academic program, 26% in the applied program, and 2% in a locally developed program.
- 2253 students were exempted.
- 4% were absent one or both days, 5% were deferred and 91% fully participated.

Facts About the Test

- The OSSLT was administered for two and a half hours each morning on October 22 and 23, 2003.
- Successful completion of the OSSLT is one of 32 graduation requirements for students who are part of the cohort that began Grade 9 in September 2000 or later. Students graduating in 2004 must meet this requirement in order to receive their OSSD.
- The OSSLT consists of a reading component and a writing component. In the reading component, students were asked to complete a total of 12 reading selections, divided into three different types (information, graphic and narrative). In the writing component, students were asked to complete four writing tasks (a summary, a series of paragraphs expressing an opinion, a news report and an information paragraph).

- Students with special needs may receive accommodations such as extra time, assistance with pacing, a quiet work place, test items in a different format (e.g., Braille text) or the use of various technological resources (e.g., a voice-activated computer).
- Students who pass one component (either reading or writing) are required to rewrite and pass only the other component in order to meet the diploma requirement.
- EQAO policies and procedures provide for consistent testing across the province.
- In 2003, the Ministry of Education announced the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC), which is an alternative means of meeting this diploma requirement.

Contextual Information Provided by Students

- The majority of students (65%) indicated that they do not read outside school for more than three hours a week. This was also true of writing: the majority of first-time eligible students (73%) reported that they do not write for more than three hours a week. This has been a consistent trend through the years.
- A larger percentage of females than males reported that they read and write outside school for more than three hours a week.
- A larger percentage of males than females reported that they read each of the following most weeks: newspapers, comics and manuals or instructions.
- E-mail messages and chat-room conversations were the types of writing in which the largest percentage of students engaged most weeks.
- A larger percentage of females than males reported that they read each of the following most weeks: Web sites, e-mail or chat messages; magazines; novels, fiction or short stories; poetry or song lyrics; and letters.
- A larger percentage of females than males reported writing each of the following most weeks: letters, journals or diaries; song lyrics or poems; and notes, directions or instructions.
- Electronic communication and popular media were the reading materials that both genders reported they read most weeks.
- A large percentage (97%) of students reported having a computer at home; 31% of students reported using a computer almost every day for school work.
- 24% of students indicated that the first language they learned at home was a language other than English.
- 75% of students indicated that the language they speak most often at home was only or mostly English; 17%, another language (or languages) as often as English; 8%, only or mostly another language.



Previously Eligible Students

Results at a Glance

	Number	Percentage	
		All Previously Eligible Students	Participating Students
Successfully Completed the OSSLT	27 950	50%	61%
Wrote the OSSLT But Were Not Successful	18 145	32%	39%
Number Fully Participating in the OSSLT	46 095	82%	100%
Absent One or Both Days	5 182	9%	
Deferred	785	1%	
Planning to Fulfill Requirement Through OSSLC	3 972	7%	
Total Previously Eligible Students (those working toward an OSSD)	56 034	100%	
Number of Students Exempted	221		

Overall Results by Contextual Factor

Contextual Factor	Number Participating	Successfully Completed the OSSLT	Wrote the OSSLT But Were Not Successful
Gender	Female # = 19 587	63%	37%
	Male # = 26 008	59%	41%
Language	ESL/ELD # = 1927	42%	58%
	ESL/ELD receiving special provisions # = 1330	44%	56%
Special Needs	Special needs (excluding gifted) # = 13 285	48%	52%
Accommodations	IEP only # = 2700	56%	44%
	IEP and IPRC # = 9377	47%	53%

Overall Findings for Participating Students

A larger percentage of students successfully completed the OSSLT than did last year.

- Approximately three out of five previously eligible students successfully completed the OSSLT.
- A larger percentage of students successfully completed the OSSLT than did last year.
- There were higher success rates in writing than in reading. This was also true of ESL/ELD learners and students with special needs. This pattern is similar to that observed among first-time eligible students.
- 7% of this year's previously eligible students were reported as enrolled in the OSSLC. The course was offered for the first time in the 2003–2004 school year.
- Only 3% of ESL/ELD learners were enrolled in the OSSLC, which was a smaller percentage than the other subgroups (6% of students with special needs, 7% of females and 7% of males).
- Of the ESL/ELD learners eligible to write, more than four-fifths participated this year. The participation of ESL/ELD learners increased by 19% from last year.
- Females and males did similarly well in reading, whereas females were more successful than males in writing.

Contextual Information Provided by Schools

- 42% of the participants were female; 56% were male.
- 4% of students were identified as having been in an ESL/ELD program.
- 69% of the ESL/ELD students received special provisions.
- 29% of students (excluding gifted) were identified as having an IEP; 22% of students (excluding gifted) had been identified through the IPRC process.
- 91% of students with special needs were provided with accommodations.
- 221 students were exempted.
- 9% were absent one or both days, 1% were deferred, 7% were planning to fulfill the requirement through the OSSLC, and 82% fully participated.



Contextual Information Provided by Students

- The majority of students (77%) indicated that they do not read outside school for more than three hours a week. This was also true of writing: 77% of students reported that they do not write outside school for more than three hours a week.
- A larger percentage of females than males reported that they read and write outside school for more than three hours a week.
- Electronic communication and popular media were the reading materials that both genders reported they read most weeks.
- A larger percentage of females than males reported that they read each of the following most weeks: magazines; Web sites, e-mail or chat messages; poetry or song lyrics; novels, fiction or short stories; and letters. A larger percentage of males than females reported reading each of the following most weeks: comics and manuals or instructions.
- A larger percentage of females than males reported writing each of the following most weeks: letters, journals or diaries; song lyrics or poems; and notes, directions or instructions.
- E-mail messages and chat-room conversations were the types of writing in which the largest percentage of students engaged most weeks.
- A large percentage (93%) of students reported having a computer at home; 30% of students reported using a computer almost every day for school work.
- 29% of students indicated that the first language they learned at home was a language other than English.
- 68% of students indicated that the language they speak most often at home was only or mostly English; 20%, another language (or languages) as often as English; 11%, only or mostly another language.

Electronic communication and popular media were the reading materials that students most commonly reported reading most weeks.

Overall Recommendations

Assessment is important in education because it provides students, families, educators and policy-makers with information about students' strengths and weaknesses. Everyone should use this information to acknowledge students' strengths, while developing strategies to improve students' learning.

—Linda Henshaw, Grade 10 Teacher, John Fraser Secondary School, Mississauga

EQAO commends the work of the panels of education leaders from across the province who have devoted their expertise to the development of the significant and thoughtful Ontario Ministry of Education publications listed below. EQAO supports and encourages the use of

- *Think Literacy Success, Grades 7–12: The Report of the Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario* (2003)
- *Building Pathways to Success, Grades 7–12: The Report of the Program Pathways for Students at Risk Work Group* (2003)
- *Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grades 7–12* (2003)
- *Preparing Students for the OSSLT: Best Practices from Ontario School Boards* (2003)

Another important reference is the *EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning*.

EQAO recognizes that school boards, student-success leaders (at-risk initiatives), school principals and teachers have made literacy instruction a priority. Based on the October 2003 OSSLT achievement results; the patterns and trends emerging from the February 2002, October 2002 and October 2003 administrations of the OSSLT; the data collected from the Student Questionnaires and comments from the educator markers, EQAO recommends that **school boards, student-success leaders (at-risk initiatives), school principals and teachers** continue to do the following:

1. Planning and Using Information

- Use information to support decision making and to leverage change
- Gather and analyze data from a variety of sources, including provincial test scores, to set literacy goals and develop improvement plans at the board and school levels
- Develop, implement and renew systematic kindergarten to Grade 12 improvement plans, especially for students at risk, that span subjects, grades and elementary and secondary panels

2. Building Capacity, Building Expertise

- Provide professional development that supports educators by supplying them with current information on reading and writing research (e.g., journal summaries, abstracts and information on trends)
- Provide training and resources for teaching cross-curricular reading and writing skills
- Support innovative initiatives and effective practices to promote literacy in schools, particularly for students at risk



3. Targeting and Supporting Students at Risk

- Focus on
 - students at risk, as defined by *Think Literacy Success, Grades 7–12: The Report of the Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario* (2003)
 - students who have been unsuccessful on the OSSLT
 - students enrolled in locally developed programs and ESL/ELD programs
 - students making the transition from elementary to secondary school who need additional support in acquiring reading and writing skills
 - applied level students who need specific remedial interventions
- Make use of the range of Ministry of Education supports available to Ontario secondary schools, including locally developed (essential) courses and the following curriculum courses: the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course, Learning Strategies, and Literacy Skills: Reading and Writing
- Use subject content and the classroom context to provide explicit literacy instruction that relates reading and writing skills to practical and purposeful situations and to daily life
- Review the accommodations being provided to students with special needs to ensure that the accommodations are appropriate to the student's needs, familiar to the student, used by the student on a regular basis for in-school assessment, and in the student's IEP

EQAO data has been useful in developing strategies for students.

—Lesleigh Dye, Student Success Leader, Ottawa Carleton District School Board

4. Implementing Technology

- Support access to and implementation of technology as a tool for developing reading, writing and research skills in the classroom
- Integrate traditional text forms with electronic forms of information and communication and popular media

5. Collaborating with Education and Community Partners

- Encourage board and school literacy committees and teachers across panels and subjects to share effective cross-curricular instructional practices and to engage in professional discourse as they analyze assessment data and plan adaptations to instruction that will improve students' reading and writing skills
- Collaborate with families, school councils and community partners, including workplace mentors, to develop projects to provide students with academic support services, “real life” contexts for the application of literacy skills, and access to communication technology, including the Internet, outside school

Strategies that focus on literacy skills can have a significant effect on student learning.

—Stephen Blake, Principal,
Sinclair Secondary School,
Whitby

In recognition of the effective training in learning strategies and assessment practices they provide, EQAO recommends that **faculties of education**

- continue to assist pre-service teachers in gaining a thorough understanding of strategies for integrating literacy skills into subject-based curricula and of ways in which assessment, including large-scale assessment, informs instruction.

EQAO continues to collaborate with the **Ministry of Education**

- in using the accumulated OSSLT provincial assessment data along with other information to inform current curriculum initiatives for at-risk students.

Strategies for Instruction

The OSSLT is aligned with the expectations that require reading and writing skills in all subjects, in *The Ontario Curriculum* up to the end of Grade 9. The data from the OSSLT provide an additional link to practices recommended in *Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches*.

Based on the data from the October 2003 OSSLT, EQAO has developed the following specific suggestions for instruction.

EQAO suggests that, *because*

- *students have been more successful on the writing component than on the reading component of all three administrations (84% passed writing and 80% passed reading in February 2002; 85% passed writing and 76% passed reading in October 2002; and 85% passed writing and 82% passed reading in October 2003), teachers* in all subject areas encourage students to develop their vocabulary, practise determining meaning from context, identify main ideas and learn to identify organizational patterns in texts.
- *only 35% of first-time eligible students indicated that they read more than three hours a week outside school, principals, teachers and parents* collaborate to identify approaches that will encourage students to read a variety of materials for school, leisure and life-related purposes.
- *only 31% of first-time eligible students indicated that they use a computer almost every day for school work, while 97% indicated they have a computer at home, teachers and parents* collaborate to encourage students to use word processing and online resources for school work at home.
- *students have the most difficulty in passing reading, teachers* of all subjects focus on developing subject-specific vocabulary, using tools such as word walls, subject-specific crosswords, personal glossaries, word banks, concept maps and online and print dictionaries, and strategies such as examining context to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words, decoding unfamiliar expressions by reading past then going back and guessing, visualizing words divided into syllables and considering roots, prefixes and suffixes.



- *informational selections presented the greatest challenge for all students, teachers* of all subjects emphasize identifying the main idea, distinguishing fact from opinion, drawing conclusions and recognizing sequencing patterns such as cause and effect in expository texts.
- *a large proportion of students offered irrelevant, off-topic and off-task responses to the writing tasks, teachers* emphasize the importance of writing in the correct form and reading topics carefully.
- *a large proportion of students did not respond to the summary task, teachers* increase instructional attention on building the ability to write summaries with confidence.
- *the difference between students who were successful at writing the summary and those who were not appears to be the ability to identify the main idea of a text, teachers* of all subjects focus their instruction on assisting students to identify the main idea in a variety of types of text.
- *the difference between students who were successful at writing the opinion piece and those who were not seems to be the ability to choose one side of an issue, to provide a sufficient number of supporting details and to organize them coherently, teachers* provide opportunities for students to write opinion pieces using graphic organizers for prewriting and linking ideas with transitional words and phrases.
- *the difference between students who were successful at writing the information paragraph and those who were not seems to be the ability to identify a main idea, to select relevant details and to present them in an organized paragraph, teachers* encourage students to categorize information according to its relationship to a common main idea and to express the main idea and supporting details in a coherent, well-structured paragraph.
- *a large number of markers were concerned about the students' spelling and syntax, teachers* of all subjects encourage their students to spell accurately and to use proper syntax.

A large number of markers were concerned about the students' spelling and syntax.



References and Links

Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, October 2003, Report of Provincial Results
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Building Pathways to Success, Grades 7–12: The Report of the Program Pathways for Students at Risk Work Group (2003)
www.edu.gov.on.ca

Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grades 7–12 (2003)
(available to school boards only)

Preparing Students for the OSSLT: Best Practices from Ontario School Boards (2003)
www.edu.gov.on.ca

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