

# Using Data to Promote Student Success



**A Brief Guide to Assist School Administrators  
in Interpreting Their Data**

Education Quality and  
Accountability Office



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Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Getting Started</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>I. Guiding Principles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>II. Useful Resources</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>III. Questions to Consider in Examining Data</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>A. Contextual Data</i>	<b>5</b>
<i>B. Achievement Data</i>	<b>7</b>
<b>A Final Note</b>	<b>12</b>

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*Learning from data is central to our overarching responsibility as educators—being accountable for the success of each and every student.*

Marguerite Jackson, CEO, Education Quality and Accountability Office

### Introduction

Every student deserves to be successful in his or her public education. Understanding and acting upon contextual as well as achievement data allows a school learning community to focus attention on ensuring that students thrive in their schooling.

Examining the data summarizing student performance on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) is one step that administrators and teachers take in the process of reflecting on their professional practice and identifying strategies to improve student achievement and close the gap between low- and high-achieving students.

The primary purpose of analyzing data is to identify areas of strength as well as areas for improvement that, when addressed, will lead to greater success for students. This guide outlines some questions that school administrators and teachers might find helpful in the examination of their data. In most cases, you will not be able to answer all of the questions just by looking at the results. You will need to examine other information available in your school; talk to other people in your board, such as curriculum staff, administrators and teachers in other schools; and read current literature on best practices in other jurisdictions.

## Getting Started

This guide is divided into the following areas of focus:

- I. Guiding Principles
- II. Useful Resources
- III. Questions to Consider in Examining Data
  - A. Contextual Data
  - B. Achievement Data

### I. Guiding Principles

The following are principles to keep in mind as you begin to examine your data.

1. Large-scale assessment provides comparable year-to-year data on student achievement that can be valuable for schools and boards in improvement planning. The OSSLT assesses the literacy (reading and writing) skills that students are expected to have learned by the end of Grade 9 through study in all subjects, as outlined in *The Ontario Curriculum*.
2. The OSSLT captures performance at a specific point in time. Results should be considered together with other school information about student performance.
3. Each school is unique, and to appreciate the distinctive character of a school or a board, it is necessary to understand the features and characteristics of the community it serves.
4. It is important to exercise caution when interpreting percentage changes where the numbers of students are small. For example, in a group of 30 students, a difference of 10% represents only three students.

## II. Useful Resources

The following are reports and documents that may be useful during the process of examining your school’s contextual and achievement data and identifying goals for improvement.\*

### Curriculum, the OSSLT and Improvement Planning

- *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 and 10.*
- The *Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test Framework* provides a definition of literacy, an overview of the components of the test and an explanation of how it relates to *The Ontario Curriculum*.
- Released OSSLT Items. Each year, test items are released. Administrators and teachers may find these helpful in understanding the nature of the items students were asked to complete.
- Released OSSLT Answer Key, Rubrics and Responses. Each year, EQAO releases the answer key for multiple-choice items along with the rubrics and sample student responses for open-ended items. This document includes the criteria on which the test was scored.
- “Characteristics of Successful and Unsuccessful Student Performance on the OSSLT” is a resource that is presented as a user-friendly summary table.
- *EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning.* Examining data to develop understanding and to begin to establish a focus for school improvement is one step in the full school improvement planning process. This document provides detailed descriptions of all the steps to be followed.
- OSSLT provincial report. Refer to the “Strategies for Success” section in the provincial report for suggestions and recommendations related to specific areas identified for improvement. Refer to the “School Success Stories” section for a brief look at the strategies used by some Ontario schools and boards to improve literacy.

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\* These materials are available on the public portion of EQAO’s Web site, [www.eqao.com](http://www.eqao.com).

## School, Board and Provincial Results

Results for first-time eligible and for previously eligible students are available in the following reports and files:

- School Report\*
- Detailed Results<sup>†</sup> (Note that only school and board data are provided for the first release of results; provincial data are added for the second release.)
- Results for Students with Special Needs (Excluding Gifted) and Students Receiving Accommodations<sup>†</sup> (Only board results are provided.)
- Skill-Focused Reports:<sup>†</sup>
  - Profile of Strengths and Areas for Improvement (Only results for first-time eligible students are provided.)
  - Item Information Report: Student Roster, Unsuccessful Students
- Individual Student Data File, which includes achievement and demographic data for each student in a format that allows for further analysis.<sup>†</sup>

## Additional School Data

Administrators and teachers may find they can achieve a fuller understanding of their OSSLT results if they consider them in the context of other information available to schools, such as report card marks and credit accumulation, attendance and mobility data.

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\* The School Report, with suppression rules applied, is available on the public and secure portions of the EQAO Web site.

† These reports are available on the secure portion of the EQAO Web site.

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### III. Questions to Consider in Examining Data

One tip for getting started is to consider the “4C’s of Interpreting Data.”\*

Are the data you have

- ✓ complete?
- ✓ consistent?
- ✓ comparative?
- ✓ concealing?

A number of questions are presented in the following sections to promote thinking about how to use the 4C’s as a framework for examining your data.

Note: It will likely be simplest to carry out separate reviews of the data for first-time eligible and for previously eligible students. Similar information is available for each of these groups.

#### A. Contextual Data

There are three sources of information in the school and board reports that can be reviewed to set the context for your examination of achievement data for first-time eligible and for previously eligible students. They are

- the overview of demographic information available (e.g., gender, English language learner and special needs status, level of study in English, language background);
- the student participation rate for the OSSLT, including data on students who were exempted, deferred or absent and students who received accommodations or special provisions;
- the summary of responses to the Student Questionnaire for all students and for females and males; the questionnaire results provide information about students’ use of various reading materials and their opportunities to write outside school.

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\* The concept of the “4C’s of Interpreting Data” was first developed by the Research and Evaluation staff of the former North York Board of Education and was incorporated into workshops on data analysis and interpretation provided for administrators by the Assessment Training Consortium (a partnership among six Ontario district school boards).

The contextual information was provided to EQAO by the school through the **Student Data Collection** process or the **Student Information Form** or reported by students on the **Student Questionnaire**.

Consider the following questions as you begin the examination of these data:

### **Are the data complete?**

Do you have additional demographic data that complement the data gathered by EQAO and that would provide a more comprehensive picture of your school community? For example, do you have data about the socio-economic status of your community or mobility rates of your student population?

### **How do the demographic and contextual data for your school this year compare with those of previous years?**

If there are significant changes in exemption, deferral or absentee rates, in accommodation or special-provision rates, or in the makeup of your student population in terms of English language learners or students with special needs, you may need to take these differences into account when you consider trends in your achievement data over time. You may also need to consider whether any changes point to a need to review or re-evaluate decisions, policies or procedures in your school.

### **How do the contextual and demographic data for your school compare with those of your board or the province?**

How do your school's exemption rate, deferral rate and absentee rate compare to those of your board or the province? If your rates are much higher than either your board's or the province's, what are the possible explanations? What circumstances relating to your student population might account for these differences?

Similarly, how do the rate of accommodations and the rate of special provisions in your school compare with those of your board and/or the province?

How does the rate of absenteeism during the test compare with that of your board or the province? Which students in your school were absent? Did these students have the knowledge or skill to complete the test?

Does your school have a significant number of English language learners or students with special needs? If the profile of your school differs from your board's or the province's, you may need to keep this in mind as you examine your achievement data and identify strategies for improvement. Some strategies may be more effective with some groups of students than with others.

What did students report about access to and use of computers, the types of material they read outside school and the types of writing they do outside school? How does the pattern of contextual data for your students compare with those for your board and the province? Are there significant differences between the pattern of results for males and for females?

Given your review of your contextual data for both first-time eligible and previously eligible students, what are the two or three key points about each group that you need to keep in mind as you examine the achievement data?

## **B. Achievement Data**

The Detailed Results (for first-time eligible and for previously eligible students) provide participation rates and achievement data (i.e., successful or not successful on the OSSLT) for

- all eligible students;
- students fully participating in the test and
- the following groups of students:
  - males and females,
  - English language learners,
  - students with special needs (excluding gifted),
  - students with special needs (excluding gifted) receiving accommodations and
  - students taking English at different levels.

Skill-focused reports are useful for examining performance in more detail, as they provide information about variations in performance across items on the test. The following are available on the secure portion of EQAO's Web site:

- the Item Information Report: Student Roster and interpretation guide
- the Profile of Strengths and Areas for Improvement, including guidelines for interpretation

### **Have you captured the complete picture?**

Schools are rich repositories of information about their students and their achievements. Results from the OSSLT, while providing data for all students across the province with respect to a common yardstick, are a snapshot of student performance at one point in time. To develop a full understanding of your students and their achievements, it is important to include in your examination information gathered by teachers through ongoing classroom observation and assessments throughout the year. This information could include both formal and informal data, such as

- ✓ report card marks,
- ✓ credit accumulation and
- ✓ student attendance and behaviour incident reports.

In addition, you may have data from board- and/or school-administered achievement tests or surveys.

### **Are results from various sources consistent?**

One of the first questions you will want to address is: are the results of the OSSLT consistent with what you know about your students through teachers' ongoing classroom assessments, report card marks and credit accumulation?

In other words,

- do the students who perform well on a daily basis also perform well on the OSSLT?
- do the students who perform poorly on the OSSLT demonstrate difficulty in acquiring skills and knowledge in the classroom?

- are the students who successfully complete the OSSLT more likely to have acquired at least eight credits by the end of Grade 9 than students who are not successful? Research has shown that for students who have not acquired close to 16 credits by the end of Grade 10, the chances of graduating decline.
- are the overall results for your students consistent with your expectations? Is the percentage of students successfully completing the OSSLT what you expected?

If there are inconsistencies, consider

- whether teachers have a complete understanding of the expectations outlined in *The Ontario Curriculum* with respect to literacy;
- whether teachers' assessments of the adequacy of student work are consistent with curriculum expectations and
- whether anything happened during the EQAO assessment that may have had an impact on the results.

### **How do achievement results for your school compare to previous years' results, your board's results, the province's results or similar schools' results?**

Information is often more meaningful when a point of comparison is available. Comparisons help to enhance our understanding. However, when making comparisons, keep in mind that you are searching for meaning, not making judgments.

You might consider the following comparisons:

- *comparison of results over time*: Are there any positive or negative trends? When considering variations in performance from one administration to the next, keep in mind whether the number of students is small, student mobility is high or student demographics have changed.
- *comparison of results with those of your board and the province*: Are the patterns of results in your school similar to or different from those of your board or the province? If the results are different, can these differences be explained by your school's program delivery, teacher qualifications, available resources and/or professional

development opportunities? If the differences in results favour your school, perhaps other schools could learn from your success.

Consider how your school's demographic profile may differ from that of the board or province. Identify the special characteristics of the students or community your school is serving and consider how well the range of student needs is being addressed.

- *comparison with schools similar to yours:* Comparing your school's results with those of other schools is another way to gain further insights about your results. Such comparisons will be valid only if you compare your school to other schools that are similar in terms of demographics and other contextual variables. You need to compare oranges with oranges! If schools similar to yours are achieving better results, you will want to find out why. What are they doing that has had a positive impact? Is it something that your school should consider? If your school is achieving better results than a similar school and you are clear about what is making the difference, look for opportunities to share the ingredients of your school's success.

### **Is anything concealed? (Digging deeper in the data: have you examined the performance of particular groups of students?)**

Often, further understanding of results arises from “disaggregation” of the data, that is, through examining the performance of various groups of students. This examination might consider factors such as gender, English language learner and special needs status, level of study in English, attendance and student attitudes. The following are some questions to ask:

- Are there differences in the performance of females and males?\*  
What programming might help to bridge the gap?
- Is the performance of English language learners significantly different from that of other students? Is there a relationship between performance on the OSSLT and length of time in Canada? Research has shown that it takes five to seven years to acquire fluency in the English language. What strategies might be

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\* Note that results over time by gender were provided for the first time in 2006.

considered to assist students new to Canada? (Be cautious in your conclusions when the number of students involved is small.)

- Which students were not successful on the OSSLT?<sup>†</sup> What are their characteristics? How many credits have they acquired? What supports and programs are in place to address their needs?
- Which students were successful on the OSSLT?<sup>†</sup> What are their characteristics? How many credits have they acquired? What is contributing to their success?
- Do students who are absent more than the average perform differently from students who attend school consistently?
- Are students who read and write extensively beyond school more likely to be successful on the OSSLT?

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<sup>†</sup> This information can be obtained through an analysis of the Individual Student Data file on the secure portion of the EQAO Web site.

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## A Final Note

As will be clearly evident by now, examining your data is a process of asking questions in a search for meaning and understanding. Remember this examination is **one step** in the process of school improvement planning. The careful examination and use of data give large-scale tests like the OSSLT their power to drive improvement, to provide insight into areas of strength and weakness and to help ensure the right programs are directed to the right students.

Once you have identified areas to focus on, you will need to consider strategies to help you achieve the literacy goals you have established. Principals have told us that they use a wide range of strategies to improve literacy among their students. These strategies include the establishment of literacy committees, encouraging all teachers in the school to assume responsibility for literacy, assemblies, tutoring, small-group meetings with students, communication with parents and providing opportunities for students to practise demonstrating the skills tested by the OSSLT.

The requirement to challenge all students to meet standards is not negotiable! We must provide the best education for all students. Educators get the best information about their students when they compile data from a number of sources, including classroom assessments, report card marks and the OSSLT.

We hope this guide has been helpful in getting you started on the examination of your EQAO data.

Next Step: Refer to the EQAO *Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning* for strategies for using these results in formulating your school improvement plan.

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