

## EQAO's Provincial Assessment Program: The Power of Good Information

“It seems obvious to us that the public school system is responsible to the public, and owes it to the public to demonstrate how well it’s doing with our children. So we take a stand on behalf of close monitoring of every child’s progress right from the earliest years, and of the system itself at every level, in order that both can learn to be even better.”

—Ontario’s Royal Commission on Learning (1994)

With the establishment of EQAO in 1996, the Government of Ontario declared its commitment to monitoring and accounting for all students in elementary and secondary school through province-wide assessments.

The publicly funded education system is accountable to the public. It has a responsibility to demonstrate the achievement of its students and meet the legitimate information needs of parents, guardians and the Ontario public with regard to education outcomes.

Ontario’s provincial testing program, which measures the achievement of every student across the province in key grades, was created in part because parents called for an independent gauge of how their children are achieving in relation to a provincial standard.

Reading, writing and math are foundational skills upon which all other learning relies. While EQAO tests are only one measure of literacy and numeracy achievement, they have proven to be a driver for positive change for young people across the system and the curriculum, through improved teaching strategies in all subjects.

A key strength of the provincial tests is the fact that they are directly based on *The Ontario Curriculum*, which is what teachers are teaching in the classroom every day. Indeed, after an extensive review in 2009, the Auditor General of Ontario confirmed that EQAO assessments reflect the provincial curriculum expectations fairly and accurately, are consistent in difficulty from one year to the next and are administered and marked so as to ensure that their results are valid, consistent and reliable indicators of student achievement. EQAO test results help teachers and administrators identify large-scale issues and focus their attention where it’s needed.

“EQAO has been a catalyst. It has made teachers more aware of the curriculum. Now all teachers share. This is not just about students doing well on the testing, but about students doing well in education. We are teaching children how to be better learners.”

—Lois Dale, Teacher  
Kenora Catholic District School Board

### EQAO’S PROVINCE-WIDE ASSESSMENTS ALLOW FOR LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY

“It is very beneficial to have the [testing] data because it forces people to take a long hard look at what they’ve been doing and to see if what they have been doing has had the desired effect.”

—Tom Durran, Principal  
Halton Catholic District School Board

Since every student in key grades is being tested, parents, guardians and the public have access to detailed information on student achievement in their schools and boards, which creates strong, local accountability in the publicly funded school system.

EQAO data on student achievement allow for local accountability through many means, including

- ▶ **EQAO’s public reports.** EQAO provides independent, reliable and transparent information about student achievement. Results are aggregated and reported on at the provincial, school board and local school levels. EQAO reports not only provide a snapshot of student achievement but also give contextual descriptions of the school community, so that the results can be interpreted appropriately. Collectively, these data promote local accountability and enable positive parental involvement in supporting the school’s learning objectives—a priority for both EQAO and the Ministry of Education.
- ▶ **Public Ministry of Education reports on school board progress.** Four of nine progress indicators in the Ministry’s School Board Progress Reports are related to student results on EQAO assessments.
- ▶ ***Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act, 2009 (Bill 177).*** This bill, enacted in December 2009, addresses school boards’ responsibilities for student achievement and requires school boards to develop plans stating goals and describing steps aimed at achieving them. EQAO

assessment results are one of the reliable measures available to track student achievement.

- ▶ **School board annual reports.** Each year, Directors of Education report the results of EQAO assessments, as well as other information on accountability unique to their own board. The annual school board reports, mandated by the Ministry of Education, include board-level results on each EQAO assessment for the past five years, in relation to the provincial results and also in relation to the highest and lowest board results in the province. These reports break down results by gender, by special needs (excluding gifted) status and by English Language Learner (for English-language boards) and ALF/PANA (previously ALF/PDF, for French-language boards) status.
- ▶ **Communication within school communities.** Of elementary-school principals surveyed, 93% said they communicated information about EQAO assessments and results to parents and guardians through newsletters and to school councils through presentations and discussions.<sup>1</sup>

“We look at data as a benchmark. We look at how we deliver the curriculum, how our students are achieving, whether they are meeting with success, whether there is something we need to review and take a different approach on.”

—Frank Dalla Corte  
York Catholic District School Board

<sup>1</sup> Assessments of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Primary Division (Grades 1–3) and Junior Division (Grades 4–6), 2008–2009 Provincial Results, Principal Questionnaire

## INFORMATION ABOUT EVERY STUDENT IS ESSENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVE SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT PLANNING

“In the past, EQAO data were used to confirm student results in a general sort of way. We now do a deeper analysis of these data, which allows us to obtain precise information on where students are having difficulty so that we can define appropriate improvement strategies.” (Translated from the French)

—Philippe Séguin, Principal  
Sainte-Marguerite-d’Youville, Conseil scolaire  
de district des écoles catholiques du Sud-Ouest

EQAO was created to monitor and account for all students in the province. Before the agency’s establishment, provincial reviews were conducted using random samples of students. This approach was found lacking because there was no information for the local schools and boards; hence there was no opportunity for local reflection and focused intervention for improvement. Many boards began to request that all their students participate in assessments so that more useful data could be obtained.

Provincial assessments that gather information from every student provide an essential foundation of data that educators, policy-makers and researchers rely on to plan for student progress. Those throughout the education field—from the Minister of Education to classroom teachers—recognize the importance of reliable data as a tool that informs improvement planning. Initiatives on the part of government, boards, schools and individual classroom teachers are now regularly informed by EQAO data and the tracking of student progress over time.

Data collected from assessments has enabled the Ministry of Education to establish such successful initiatives as Learning to 18, the Turnaround School Program and the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership. EQAO data provide evidence for tracking the influence of these and other Ministry initiatives as well as supporting the

Ministry’s work on professional development for educators, targeted funding and collaboration with boards on local strategies to ensure each child learns effectively. The success of these and future initiatives relies on the close monitoring of every student and the availability of data that can come only from province-wide assessments.

## EDUCATORS APPRECIATE THE VALUE OF USING EVIDENCE TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

“We’ve become much more accomplished, and more comfortable, in using the data to drive instruction. Now the data identifies the areas that we need to develop in order to take our next steps, and then we devise the strategies needed to achieve our goals.”

—Clyde Orr, Principal  
Kenora Catholic District School Board

Every year, EQAO surveys school principals and teachers at the time of the assessments, and their survey responses confirm the value and importance they place on student achievement data generated by the assessments. (More than 3400 elementary-school principals and more than 7000 teachers responded to the 2009 survey.)<sup>2</sup>

- ▶ Of elementary-school principals, 95% used the previous year’s EQAO achievement results and questionnaire data to communicate with teachers about student achievement and to guide school improvement initiatives for reading, writing and mathematics.
- ▶ Of elementary-school principals, 91% used EQAO data to identify program strengths

<sup>2</sup> Assessments of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Primary Division (Grades 1–3) and Junior Division (Grades 4–6), 2008–2009 Provincial Results, Principal Questionnaire

Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Primary Division (Grades 1–3), 2008–2009 Provincial Results, Teacher Questionnaire

Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Junior Division (Grades 4–6), 2008–2009 Provincial Results, Teacher Questionnaire

and areas for improvement in reading, writing and mathematics. Seventy-six percent used the data to pinpoint where resources were needed.

- ▶ Of Grades 3 and 6 teachers, 78% and 74%, respectively, used student and school EQAO achievement results and questionnaire data to identify areas of reading, writing and mathematics program strength and areas for improvement. Survey responses over the past few years show that teachers are using EQAO results for these purposes with increasing frequency.
- ▶ Of elementary-school principals, 44% had participated in EQAO-related professional development concerning data management and analysis, and 46% had participated concerning school improvement planning.

“We take EQAO data very seriously. We look at it as a means to gauge how we’re doing, how our students are learning, where we can improve our teaching practice and how we will inform our practice. It’s something we focus on throughout the year.”

—Gary O’Donnell, Principal  
London District Catholic School Board

## PARENTS VALUE OBJECTIVE EVIDENCE RELATING TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

In 2009, EQAO surveyed a representative sample of parents of children in publicly funded schools across Ontario about the value they place on provincial assessments and the achievement data they generate.

- ▶ Almost nine out of ten parents (88%) considered the provincial testing program important. Almost two-thirds (62%) believed it was very important.
- ▶ More than two-thirds of parents (69%) placed high importance on having an indication of their child’s achievement in relation to the provincial standard.

- ▶ Almost three-quarters of parents (74%) believed EQAO results were being used to improve the quality of education in Ontario.
- ▶ Almost seven out of 10 parents (69%) believed the provincial testing program was making the education system accountable to parents and taxpayers.

## USING DATA IN CONTEXT: MOVING BEYOND RANKINGS

“We’ve really been focusing the last several years on how we analyze that data and what exactly that data tells us about those students as learners. Teachers take that and are able to attach it back in their instruction and teaching to help students build specific skills that will ultimately move them along, particularly in their reading.”

— Lucia Reece, Superintendent of Education  
Algoma District School Board

EQAO’s approach to working with data and other evidence has always been rooted in building understanding and confidence in the appropriate use of assessment information among education professionals, parents and the public. EQAO does not simply report results. The agency’s reports also include contextual profiles of school communities. Further, in the interest of building capacity for using data, EQAO provides consultations, workshops, learning conferences, symposia and new media resources (e.g., a webmag and webcasts).

We believe that using EQAO results to rank schools is neither appropriate nor useful. Ranking schools leads to simplistic comparisons and gives no information about why a school’s score is high or low or what circumstances are affecting achievement in that school. A school’s “rank” provides no information about what’s going on in the school.

What is important is that school communities be able to track their students’ achievement over time and learn about successful

practices from other schools with similar contextual and demographic circumstances.

### **PROVINCE-WIDE ASSESSMENTS: MINIMAL COST, CONSIDERABLE VALUE**

“We found that the EQAO had developed a good budgeting process to help control costs and had reduced its annual expenditures by over 20% during the past five years while delivering substantially the same service.”

—Report from the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2009)

In December 2009, in addition to confirming the quality of the assessment program, the Auditor General of Ontario praised EQAO’s budgeting and procurement processes and acknowledged that the agency had reduced its annual expenditures by over 20%, to \$32 million, in five years, while delivering substantially the same service.

Each year, almost \$20 billion is spent on public education in Ontario. That’s more than \$10,000 a student. For only \$17 a student, EQAO provides powerful information that contributes to strong education accountability and helps all students receive the best possible education. The cost is minimal; the value is considerable.

### **SYSTEM-WIDE QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

“There is no way that continuous improvement can occur without constant transparency fuelled by good data.”

—Michael Fullan, Special Education Adviser to the Premier of Ontario

Educational leaders outside the classroom, whether they are school principals, school board administrators or the Minister of Education, work to create the conditions that produce large-scale success and allow the best and most effective learning to take place. That work requires the kind of reliable, detailed and curriculum-based information provided by province-wide assessments.

Every student in every classroom across the province is assessed using the same yardstick, which makes EQAO assessment data both unique and valuable. This “standardization” of the EQAO tests is beneficial, because it means that no matter where students go to school they are being measured against the same educational expectations. Likewise, the data are used to help students across the system. The success of these efforts has been demonstrated by the more than 20,000 additional students meeting the standard in reading in 2009 than in 2000. (Only half [50%] of Ontario’s Grade 6 students were meeting the provincial standard in reading in 2000. In 2009 that percentage increased to 69%.)

Feedback from Ontario’s educators and the evidence provided by the data confirm that EQAO’s provincial assessments have been a key element of the progress in student achievement across the province. The assessments help to ensure that everyone involved in educating our children has information to use for continuous improvement. Student results on EQAO tests are only one indicator of achievement, but they have proven to be a catalyst for positive change for young people across the province.