

EQAO Spring 2026 #DataInAction Symposium

May 14, 2026

On May 14, 2026, EQAO hosted its spring 2026 #DataInAction symposium, which featured two research presentations from the EQAO team focused on mathematics achievement and student engagement in Ontario. The first presentation examined [achievement pathways for students attending mathematics priority schools](#), and the second explored [student engagement and time spent on questions on the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics](#). The symposium highlighted how EQAO data can be used not only to report results, but also to better understand students' learning pathways, assessment experiences and opportunities for support.

Tracking Pathways in Mathematics Achievement: Mathematics Priority Schools

EQAO staff presented their findings on students' pathways in mathematics achievement from 2021–2022 to 2024–2025. The analysis compared students attending priority schools with those in non-priority schools. Priority schools are identified by the Ontario Ministry of Education as the lowest-performing 20 percent of schools in the province according to EQAO mathematics assessment in Grades 3, 6 and 9. By following students over several years, EQAO was able to better understand how achievement patterns changed as the students moved through the education system.



The analysis showed that students who attended priority schools in 2021–2022 began with a lower chance of meeting the [provincial standard](#) than students who attended non-priority schools. Over time, some gaps narrowed, suggesting progress among students attending priority schools. However, students who attended priority schools continued to be less likely to meet the provincial standard in 2024–2025 than their peers who attended non-priority schools.

A comparison with historical cohort data suggested that students who attended priority schools in the recent cohort (2021–2022 to 2024–2025) made more progress than students who attended the same schools in an earlier cohort (2015–2016 to 2018–2019), prior to the schools being categorized as priority schools. At the same time, presenters noted that these results occurred during a period of learning

recovery following COVID-19-related disruptions and alongside other system changes. As a result, the analysis cannot isolate the specific effects of priority-school supports.

Early gaps in mathematics achievement can follow students into later grades, making intervention and timely support especially important. Grades 7 and 8 in particular were identified as critical opportunities to address earlier learning gaps before students enter Grade 9. The key message of the study was that strong foundations in mathematics matter. The findings highlight the value of

- strong mathematics instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades,
- prompt intervention when gaps emerge, and
- continued support through the junior and intermediate grades.



Student Engagement and Time Spent on Assessment Questions

EQAO staff also explored student engagement in the online Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics using process data, which provides information about how students interact with the assessment, such as response time, tool usage and movement through the assessment.

Overall, the findings show that most students spent an appropriate amount of time on the assessment. Students often visited questions more than once, suggesting that reviewing or returning to questions was common. Using a response-time method to identify whether students spent enough time on a question to engage with it reasonably, EQAO found that engagement was very high overall, with some variations across student groups.

The analysis also examined engagement in relation to question difficulty. A key concept was *relative difficulty*, meaning how difficult a question is compared to a student's ability.

- ↑ Engagement increased when questions were well matched to the students' ability.
- ↓ Engagement decreased when questions became harder relative to students' ability, especially for students who achieved lower levels.

These findings suggest that student engagement is shaped not only by whether a question is difficult overall but also by whether it is appropriately challenging for the student, which has implications beyond assessment. In teaching and learning, students may be most engaged

- when tasks are challenging but still attainable, and
- when they are supported in building confidence, persistence and strategies for working through difficult mathematics tasks and other learning activities.

The presentation also highlighted the value of adaptive testing. By better matching question difficulty to student ability, adaptive assessment designs may support not only efficiency but also engagement and the validity of score interpretation.



Conclusion

The spring 2026 symposium demonstrated how EQAO data supports a deeper understanding of student learning and assessment experiences. Both presentations reinforced the importance of strong early mathematics foundations, timely support when learning gaps emerge and assessment designs that help students engage meaningfully with the questions they receive.