

Education Quality and
Accountability Office



Submission to the Public Consultation on Education

Supporting Student Learning Through Assessment and Accountability

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“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.”

– The Royal Commission on Learning (1994)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) seeks to support the Government of Ontario's consultation on education by outlining a proposal for what improved and modernized assessments could look like—and how they could better support students, parents, guardians, educators and the rest of Ontario. As part of its consultation, the government is asking, “What measures can be taken to improve provincial standardized testing?”

EQAO's vision for the modernization of our assessments is founded on the belief that independent feedback on student achievement is critical to the continuous growth of student achievement and the improvement of Ontario's education system. Our modernization project will provide assessments that better reflect student experiences in the classroom, incorporate digital tools to foster engagement and accessibility and make the information derived from the assessments more useful to parents, guardians, students, educators and the rest of Ontario. The vision for change and the initiatives already underway will also make the agency more efficient and effective.

At a time of evolving learning environments and constant technological advancement, it's appropriate to reflect on how EQAO administers assessments, provides reports and delivers data. In this submission, we provide more specific detail about our vision for large-scale assessments, including EQAO reporting, and research. Key components of our vision:

- Providing parents and guardians with independent feedback about their children's achievement more quickly.
- Providing clearer results through more descriptive feedback.
- Aligning large-scale assessments more closely with students' regular classroom experience.
- Providing teachers with independent feedback about their students' achievement more quickly.
- Empowering educators to leverage large-scale assessments more easily for formative purposes. This can be done without diminishing the usefulness of EQAO results for summative or accountability purposes.
- Expanding the use of technology, to provide more flexibility in selecting assessment modes and more choice in selecting assessment content.
- Expanding windows of assessment, to provide educators more flexibility in administration.
- Being more responsive to the needs of the province.

In order to measure the impact EQAO's modernization can have on the immediate and long-term future of student learning, the agency has taken into consideration multiple areas of the provincial education landscape and also reflected on its mandate when defining its larger vision for modernization. Key observations in this document:

- The principles of quality and accountability are complementary and mutually beneficial.
- The independent reviews conducted on Ontario's large-scale assessment program have all endorsed the province's use of census-based assessments.
- Independent data at the elementary level are important to support student learning and foster accountability (e.g., through the primary-division assessment, currently administered in Grade 3).
- Ontario's large-scale assessment program could be expanded to areas beyond reading, writing and math (e.g., transferable skills, science, technology).
- Classroom assessments will always have the most direct impact on student learning.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2018, the Government of Ontario announced a province-wide consultation on education. As part of its consultation, the government is asking, “What measures can be taken to improve provincial standardized testing?”

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) welcomes feedback about its role and activities, and is listening as Ontarians share their perspectives. This submission seeks to support the government’s consultation by outlining a proposal for what modernized large-scale assessments could look like—and how they could better support students, parents, guardians, educators and the rest of Ontario.

EQAO’s vision for its modernization will enable us to meet the needs of the province in matters of education quality and accountability more effectively. To implement this vision, our modernization project focuses on five distinct areas: assessments, reports, research programs, engagement with Ontarians and internal business processes.¹ This vision will lead to assessments that better reflect student experiences in the classroom, incorporate digital tools to foster engagement and accessibility, and further enhance the usefulness of the information offered to promote reflection and growth. In a balanced system of assessment, large-scale and classroom-level assessments are coherently linked through their common learning outcomes. With two decades of experience, EQAO has built considerable expertise in the field of large-scale assessment, and the agency can provide evidence-informed assessment resources aligned to curriculum expectations.

We believe our proposals reflect feedback from many parents, guardians, students, educators, members of the education community and other Ontarians. Changes already underway include updating accommodation and assessment policies and renewing the agency’s approach to research.

EQAO is on a path to modernization to better meet the current and future needs of Ontario. By offering independent and reliable information on student achievement and attitudes, we’ll always help measure quality, contribute to continuous improvement and foster accountability in our publicly funded education system. In addition, our vision is to

- provide parents and guardians with independent feedback about their children’s achievement more quickly;
- offer students more choice as well as assessments that are better aligned with their regular classroom experience (e.g., flexibility in timing, choice in reading selection);
- empower educators with greater flexibility and timely feedback and
- be more responsive to the needs of the province.

¹ For more information about the rationale and scope of modernization, please see Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2017). *Modernizing EQAO to better support student learning*. Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario. http://www.eqao.com/en/about_eqao/modernization/Communication%20Documents/information-paper-modernizing-eqao.pdf

MODERNIZED LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENTS

The improvement and modernization of large-scale assessments and EQAO reporting is a multi-faceted endeavour. For the purpose of this document, we focus on the following six areas:

- benefits of large-scale assessments;
- primary-division assessments;
- census-based assessments;
- assessed subject areas;
- assessment modes and student choice and
- accommodation and assessment policies.

1. Benefits of Large-Scale Assessments

Aim: Create an assessment program that is more student-centred and accessible, while contributing in a more timely fashion to quality, continuous improvement and accountability.

Ontario's large-scale assessments, which provide objective and reliable data on student performance in relation to curriculum standards, have typically been used for summative purposes. Through this approach—and with the understanding that the principles of quality and accountability are complementary and mutually beneficial—Ontario's provincial assessments have helped to

- identify strengths and areas for improvement at the student, school, school board and provincial levels;
- inform next steps in the learning journey of each child and
- inform public confidence in our publicly funded education system.

Today, shifts in thinking have created an opportunity to expand the use of large-scale assessments in Ontario. In particular, it's conceivable that the results of these assessments could be leveraged more easily for formative purposes (i.e., to assess the knowledge and skills of students while they are still learning). Using EQAO assessments in a formative manner toward the beginning of the school year can give teachers, parents and guardians additional insights into how each student is grasping provincial expectations as outlined in *The Ontario Curriculum* and developing skills during the school year.

To maximize the benefits of provincial assessments, EQAO proposes the following changes:

- Assessments currently administered in Grades 3 and 6 could be administered at the beginning of Grades 4 and 7 respectively (e.g., September to October). When assessments are administered digitally at the beginning of the school year, results can be generated and disseminated quickly (e.g., digitally through a secure portal) to parents, guardians and educators within the same school year. This change would increase the assessments' formative value, and results could be more easily leveraged to benefit students. The assessments would continue to evaluate the reading, writing and math skills students are expected to have learned by the end of Grades 3 and 6, and, so long as the assessments are census-based, provide the same degree of accountability.
- Assessments could provide clearer results through more descriptive feedback.
- The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) could be shortened and have multiple administration dates during the Grade 10 school year. This would allow students to write when they're ready and enable them to rewrite the test as needed starting in Grade 10. It would also enable students who are struggling with their literacy skills to continue to access the specialized

course (the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course) to improve their literacy skills prior to graduation.

- Administration periods for the primary- and junior-division assessments could be expanded to four- to six-week windows.
- Through technology, each assessment could leverage more multiple-choice and matching questions (e.g., drag and drop, fill in the blank, ordering). It would then be possible to shorten the time needed to score these portions of the tests and provide assessment results and feedback. Well-crafted multiple-choice and matching questions can yield valuable insights into student comprehension, while providing consistent, reliable and cost-effective data.

These changes would further empower educators to determine how to use assessment data best at the student level, and give parents and guardians access to their child's assessment data quickly. Such flexibility maintains the accountability function of the data at the provincial level and increases the types of insights that help teachers meet their students' needs. This would also enable parents, guardians and educators to discuss individual student achievement during the same school year in which the assessment took place.

In a comprehensive system of assessment, large-scale and classroom assessments are coherently linked through their common learning outcomes. With two decades of experience, EQAO has built considerable expertise in the field of large-scale assessment, and the agency can provide evidence-informed assessment resources aligned to curriculum expectations. In fact, EQAO has already started to offer educators access to more resources, for instance in math.

Teachers know their students best, and classroom assessments will always have the most direct impact on student learning and well-being. While provincial assessments yield multiple benefits, they can't replace teachers' assessments and observations. Classroom and large-scale assessments are complementary and enrich each other. In addition, it will always be important for parents, guardians and educators to analyze large-scale assessment data alongside information from other sources (e.g., report cards, other questionnaires, attendance records, teacher observations) to get a full understanding of student learning.

2. Primary-Division Assessment

Aim: Provide a primary-division assessment to safeguard Ontario's ability to detect learning challenges early and measure students' performance over time.

The administration of the reading, writing and math assessment at the end of the primary division (in Grade 3 currently) enhances parents', guardians' and educators' ability to measure student achievement in the early grades. The assessment is another tool that helps detect learning challenges early, and provides an opportunity to have important discussions sooner and intervene if necessary to assist students who need extra support. Data from this period support targeted interventions at a time when they can have significant long-term impact.

EQAO's primary-division assessment acts as a benchmark that helps measure progress during the academic career of a student and cohort. This assessment also contributes to accountability in elementary schools.

3. Census-Based Assessments

Aim: Ensure Ontarians continue to receive reliable information about the quality of the province's publicly funded education system, to support the principle of accountability.

Ontario's approach has always been to administer census-based provincial assessments, which ensure representation of the full diversity of Ontario's student population by assessing every student. The Standing Committee on Public Accounts has endorsed the continuation of census assessments.²

This approach yields multiple benefits:

- providing independent data to parents, guardians and teachers to support the education of each child;
- providing independent data on all groups of students across the province;
- evaluating progress over time at the student, school, school board and provincial levels;
- fostering accountability at the school, school board and provincial levels;
- enabling discussions about improvements to learning programs in schools and boards across the province and
- allowing policy-makers to better understand system-wide trends, and make student-focused and evidence-informed decisions accordingly.

Sample-based assessments are an alternative to the census approach. By comparison, sampling would

- eliminate parents' and guardians' access to an independent measurement of their child's achievement;
- eliminate teachers' and principals' access to independent data about their students;
- eliminate Ontarians' access to independent data about the quality of education at the school and school-board levels;
- diminish policy-makers' ability to understand trends across the province and
- diminish our understanding of specific student groups (e.g., children with Autism Spectrum Disorder).

At a time when communities' expectations for their school board is to provide more disaggregated data specific to the identity of different populations, a sampling approach would undermine their desire to understand patterns of achievement, as well as perceptions within the groups. Currently EQAO is working with school boards committed to providing their community with data that allow for strategic planning, resource allocation and better monitoring.

In addition, a sample-based model would affect the French-language school system differently. To have a large enough sample from which to derive reliable data, the number of French-language schools and boards included would need to approach the full population. Currently, each school and school board benefits equally from having its own data that illuminate its specific cohort trends and circumstances.

Based on EQAO's experience in coordinating both census-based and sample-based large-scale assessments (both national and international), it's not clear that a sample-based assessment would generate significant savings, particularly once more technology is introduced into the assessment process. Additionally, a sample-based program would necessitate the same time and logistical considerations as a census-based model.

² Legislative Assembly of Ontario. Standing Committee on Public Accounts. *The Education Quality and Accountability Office (Section 3.04, 2009 Annual report of the Auditor General of Ontario)*. 39th Parliament, 2nd Session. (2010). https://www.ola.org/sites/default/files/node-files/committee/report/pdf/2010/2010-11/report-2-EN-EQAO_S3.pdf

Census-based provincial assessments are the best means of measuring quality, contributing to continuous improvement and fostering accountability across Ontario.

4. Assessed Subject Areas

Aim: Confirm that EQAO data are pertinent to the information needs of parents, guardians, the education community and the rest of the province of Ontario.

The Government of Ontario has identified the importance of reading, writing and numeracy as core skills students must develop to ensure success later in life, which is why EQAO administers assessments in these areas.

In recent years, there has been increased interest in measuring different aptitudes, such as transferable skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving, financial literacy). If these are to become areas of focus, educators should have an opportunity to adapt pedagogy to pertinent curriculum expectations. Because EQAO measures achievement in relation to curriculum expectations, it's understood that some updates are dependent on curriculum revisions.

There may also be interest in expanding the scope of EQAO assessments to other subjects, perhaps through some form of cyclical testing model. If the agency is resourced accordingly, it would be possible to expand Ontario's large-scale assessment program to facilitate the understanding of trends in student learning in additional subject areas (e.g., science, technology).

Caution should be exercised about the potential usefulness of "one-off" assessments that don't provide insight into trends or growth in learning over time. The investment necessary would be significant, and it would be important to consider a cost-benefit analysis before moving forward with such assessments.

EQAO's questionnaires provide insight into teaching strategies and students' perceptions of themselves as learners in areas such as academic creativity and growth mindset. In the future, questions could be added to the questionnaires to help us understand topics such as students' intellectual and social engagement in school, sense of belonging and well-being.

5. Assessment Modes and Student Choice

Aim: Align provincial assessment with students' experiences in the classroom and the digital world we live in.

One of the primary goals of the agency's modernization plan is to provide multiple assessment modes (e.g., paper- and computer-based), so students and schools can have a variety of options during the administration of EQAO assessments.

To be more engaging, EQAO assessments should feature more choice for students. For example, EQAO could provide two reading passages featuring different topics, and students could pick one about which to answer questions. Their demonstration of curriculum expectations would be measured based on the same criteria.

For digital assessments, more research is required to help us understand how we could integrate adaptive technology, which adjusts the difficulty of test questions based on the student's previous responses. With adaptive assessments, items are tailored to students' proficiency levels and reflect their understanding of the material more accurately.

6. Accommodation and Assessment Policies

Aim: Create assessments with built-in customization options and accommodations for students who need them.

Large-scale assessment conditions should be as close as possible to students' regular classroom experience during assessments throughout the year; this can be achieved without affecting the integrity of the assessments' data. As part of this approach, EQAO offers as many accommodations as possible that are regularly afforded to students in classrooms (e.g., text-to-speech software, verbatim scribing)—understanding that not every accommodation can be granted in the context of large-scale assessments.

In consultation with partners across Ontario, EQAO has been updating accommodation and assessment policies to better align large-scale assessment practices with student experiences in the classroom.

Changes implemented since the 2017–2018 school year:

- Removing the requirement of an Individual Education Plan for students who require accommodations such as a quiet, individual and/or small group setting.
- Allowing English- and French-language learners taking the Grade 9 assessment to access digital or paper language resources (e.g., dual-language dictionary, translation tools).
- Granting Grade 9 students access to virtual manipulatives through Internet tools and math applications.
- Encouraging educators to make the classroom environment look as it would normally during an assessment, while providing greater clarification on which displays can remain posted on classroom walls.

And still more can be done to better align large-scale assessment practices with students' regular classroom experiences. EQAO is considering implementing these additional changes in 2019–2020 and beyond:

- Developing, in consultation with members of the education community, reporting practices and revised exemption criteria that could be applied across the province.
- Reviewing the suitability of graphic texts in assessments to support students who are blind or have low vision.
- Permitting English- and French-language learners further accommodations during the OSSLT.
- Allowing all students in Grade 6 or writing the OSSLT to use technology when completing writing sections.

RENEWED RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

EQAO's research framework enhances the value of large-scale assessments by leveraging the agency's mandate for educational accountability in support of education, health, communities, the economy and policy. Research enables evidence-informed decision making that benefits student learning. Large-scale assessment data are publicly accessible and can offer a wealth of insights to advance discussions about education.

In 2018, EQAO confirmed its priorities and approach to research when it refreshed its research framework, #DataInAction.³ Over the years, EQAO's research projects have investigated factors that influence student achievement, including the impacts of school structure and grade-level configuration. Studies such as these have identified areas that require further attention. Additionally, questionnaire data collected from teachers, principals and students during each test administration continue to provide rich contextual information about student achievement and school effectiveness.

Through its renewed #DataInAction research framework, EQAO will continue to offer valuable insights on student learning to parents, guardians, educators, policy-makers and the rest of the province of Ontario.

CONCLUSION

This submission offers EQAO's perspective in response to a question of the Government of Ontario: "What measures can be taken to improve provincial standardized testing?"

As with developments in pedagogy and student learning, EQAO understands that its modernization initiative is an evolving project—an initiative that will continuously adapt to the most recent requirements of students, and that will provide accurate and timely support to parents, guardians and the education community. Modernizing will allow the agency to fulfill its mandate using technological tools and sound research to benefit student achievement in Ontario. Like its stakeholders, EQAO advocates the success of students and believes that, through the collaboration of parents and guardians, educators, policy-makers and other Ontarians dedicated to student learning, each child and youth can look forward to meaningful achievement and full engagement in society.

³ Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2018). *#DataInAction: Research framework at EQAO*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. http://www.eqao.com/en/research_data/Research_Reports/DMA-docs/DataInAction-eqao-research-framework.pdf

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