

## Large-Scale Assessment: Supporting the Everyday Work of Schools

**Article by Chief Executive Officer, Marguerite Jackson**

*In December 2006, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) brought together key experts in large-scale assessment and leaders in Ontario's education system for a conference entitled *Large-Scale Assessment: Supporting the Everyday Work of Schools*.*

Over the past 10 years, EQAO has become a catalyst for student achievement in Ontario by measuring student learning in the foundation skills of reading, writing and mathematics according to the expectations established in Ontario's curriculum.

As partners in Ontario's public education system, we share the mutual challenges of finding effective strategies to support improved student learning. It is in all of our interests that students maximize their potential and become active, productive contributors to society. Knowing that students are accomplishing their potential calls for evidence. Collecting this evidence has been central to EQAO's role over the past decade.

During this time, there has been increasing attention given to the value of data to inform teaching practices. We've seen an increased understanding that data from large-scale assessments, such as those that we conduct, can contribute to improved student learning. In this respect, data rests at the heart of good teaching. Linking classroom instruction to tangible evidence leads to purposeful improvement. In other words, the data generated through our assessments help teachers identify the next steps in their students' learning. Our province-wide assessments provide a consistent external benchmark—a common lens through which to view students' progress.

At EQAO, we recognize that data are valuable only when they move us to action—action that focuses on learning and achievement across every grade in our schools. Data can be the foundation of progress for every child if they are used in this way. They beg the questions: What did I plan for children to learn? How well did they learn it? Now that I have this information, what do I do?

By reviewing the test results in conjunction with the expectations outlined in the curriculum, you'll see clearly that the skills our assessments measure are those described in the curricular documents that teachers use to plan their programs. At EQAO, our intent is that educators will move quickly from viewing and analyzing data to discussing their implications for teaching and learning in schools.

We all understand that achievement and success are cumulative. Although EQAO's assessments are administered at particular points in students' education, they really monitor progressive growth over the full span of that education. In recognition of this reality and to encourage all members of a school's team to work together, we now refer to our assessments as follows: Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Primary Division (Grades 1–3); Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Junior Division (Grades 4–6). We hope that this new terminology will make it easier to discuss the curriculum-related expectations at all levels in a division. We also hope it will end the feeling in some schools that demonstrating students' achievement through the EQAO assessment is the sole responsibility of the teachers of a particular grade.

Of course, EQAO data are but one factor in determining strategies that can be used to support students' success. Ongoing classroom evaluation is the richest source of information about students' progress. Combining the results of provincial assessments with those of evaluations administered by teachers in the classroom gives parents and schools a reliable picture of how much children have learned and understood.

It is essential that the results of EQAO assessments be used to seek excellence and equity for *every* student in the system. Doing so requires a willingness to analyze the data and determine where inequities lie, within each school and each school district, and then to focus efforts on those who are not mastering the foundational skills.

Using the results in this way—to identify skills requiring additional classroom attention or students who require support—will allow us to close the gap between those who are meeting the expectations of the curriculum and those who are not. To this end, EQAO provides several ready-to-use reports. These reports contain

comparative data about a school and its students to supplement the school's own view of its priorities and performance.

These reports are meant to spark discussion, in the home and the school, about topics including the expectations specified in the curriculum; how students demonstrate mastery of these expectations; how the school serves all of its students; how teaching has offset any demographic limitations; what the school offers as a full and balanced program; and priorities to act on for improvement.

When data from all sources are used effectively—as a means of identifying skills that require attention or students who need support—they can be the most valuable currency in Ontario's schools. They can support schools' efforts to set clear targets based on rigorous self-evaluation and local needs. They can enable us, together, to tackle the gap between students who are thriving and those who are not.

Our ongoing commitment to you is that EQAO will provide information that is both meaningful and useful, and will support your ongoing efforts to bring about the best achievement from every student in your classroom.