

# The Power of Ontario's Provincial Testing Program

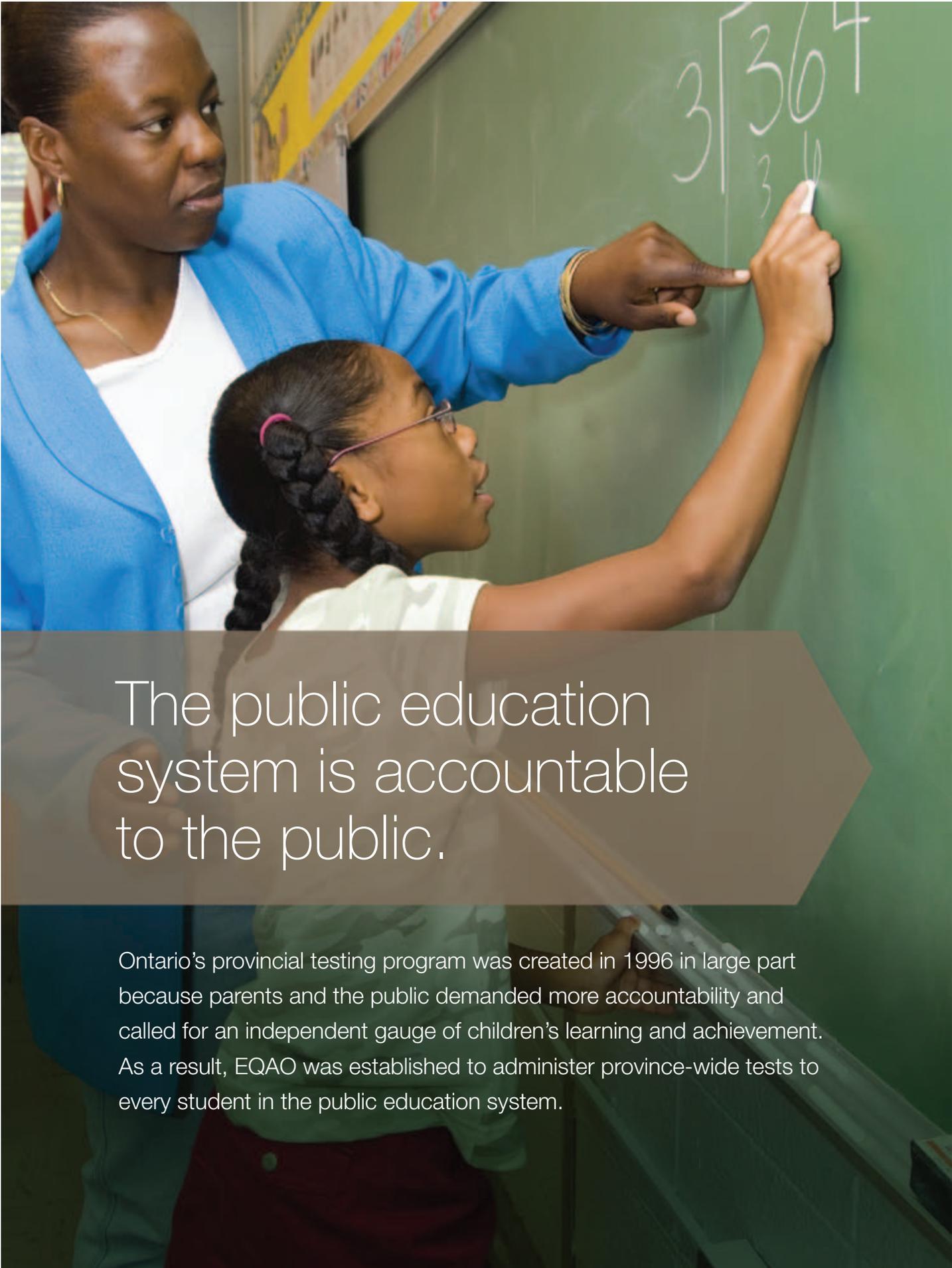


**Education Quality and  
Accountability Office**



Ontario conducts province-wide tests of students' literacy and math skills at key stages of their education. This contributes to public accountability and to the continuous improvement on the part of every student in Ontario's publicly funded education system.

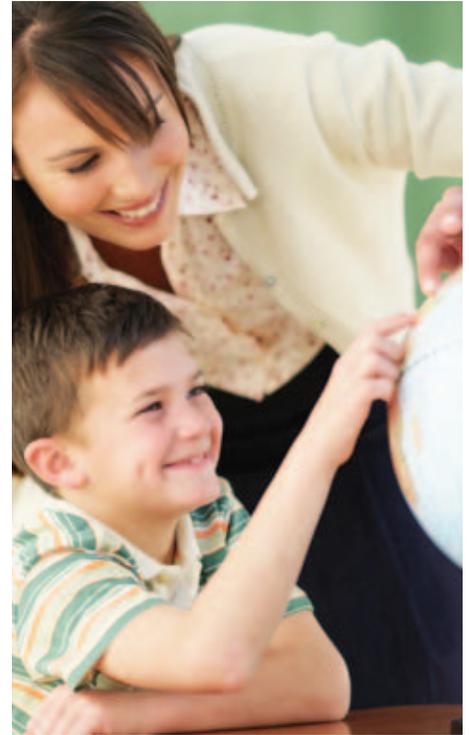
These tests are conducted by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), an agency of the Government of Ontario.



The public education system is accountable to the public.

Ontario's provincial testing program was created in 1996 in large part because parents and the public demanded more accountability and called for an independent gauge of children's learning and achievement. As a result, EQAO was established to administer province-wide tests to every student in the public education system.

“ 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.<sup>1</sup> ”



Ontario’s Royal Commission on Learning

There is “broad-based and long-standing public and parental support for [province-wide] testing as a mechanism of system accountability.”<sup>2</sup>

**OISE study: Public Attitudes Toward Education in Ontario (2009)**

According to the OISE study,

- 65% of the public supports province-wide testing at the elementary level and
- 69% of the public supports province-wide testing of all students at the secondary level.

Parents value the provincial testing program and believe it contributes to higher quality and accountability in the public education system.<sup>3</sup>

**EQAO study: Parents’ Perspectives**

According to the EQAO survey of Ontario parents,

- 88% of parents consider the provincial testing program important,
- 74% believe EQAO results are used to improve education quality and
- 69% believe provincial testing makes the education system accountable to parents and taxpayers.

<sup>1</sup> Royal Commission on Learning. (1994). *For the love of learning: Short version*. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/abcs/rcom/short/short8.html>

<sup>2</sup> D. Hart & D. W. Livingstone. (2010). *The 17<sup>th</sup> OISE survey of educational issues: Public attitudes toward education in Ontario 2009*. p. 19. Retrieved from [http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/UserFiles/File/OISE%20Survey/17th%20OISE%20Survey/OISE\\_SURVEY\\_17\\_FINAL\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/UserFiles/File/OISE%20Survey/17th%20OISE%20Survey/OISE_SURVEY_17_FINAL_PDF.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2010). *Parents’ perspectives: The importance of provincial testing and the information it provides about children’s learning*. Retrieved from [http://www.eqao.com/Research/pdf/E/Parent\\_Research\\_Findings\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.eqao.com/Research/pdf/E/Parent_Research_Findings_ENG.pdf).

# Ontario's provincial tests make local schools and school boards accountable for student achievement



Since results are available for every student, provincial test data have become a key ingredient in helping schools, school boards and the province identify students' strengths and target areas where attention and resources are needed.

Ontario educators value the information provided by the provincial tests to help improve student outcomes.

Of the more than 3400 elementary school principals and the more than 8500 Grade 3 teachers and 7300 Grade 6 teachers surveyed in 2011,

- 96% of principals said they use EQAO achievement results and questionnaire data to guide school improvement initiatives for reading, writing and mathematics;
- 96% of principals also said they use EQAO data to identify program strengths and areas for improvement in these subjects;
- 82% of Grade 3 and 80% of Grade 6 teachers use EQAO data to identify areas of program strength and areas for improvement in these subjects and
- 80% of Grade 3 and 78% of Grade 6 teachers said they use EQAO data to identify how well students are meeting curriculum expectations.

"I'm a big believer in data. It can be very helpful, especially when looking at data over time. Unless you're talking about data, you're just talking. It's a great direction setter."

**Jim Rielly, principal, Crestwood Secondary School, Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board**

Ontario school boards use the information provided by the provincial tests to support and demonstrate accountability.

The *2009 Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act* clearly articulates the roles of school boards, trustees, board chairs and directors of education in improving student achievement. EQAO data are one important source of information for trustees to include in the school board plans mandated under this Act.

In addition, Directors of Education are required to produce annual school board reports for their school communities. EQAO data are a central source of student-achievement information for these reports.

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education recently identified using EQAO data to develop and monitor school board and school improvement plans as an effective practice that contributes to student achievement and program quality.

“Through review and careful analysis of district results, boards can make general conclusions as to how they are progressing in relation to other districts in the province, and whether they are in line to meet provincial standards. The data that individual schools gather around student achievement provide the most current information that teachers need in order to plan for student-centred programming, assessment, evaluation and reporting.”<sup>4</sup>

**Council of Ontario Directors of Education**

“

EQAO’s provincial tests provide our schools with information they need to deliver effective teaching strategies and support each one of their students. Planning for improvement without reliable data would be like aiming for a target with your eyes closed.

”

**Warren Kennedy, Director of Education, Greater Essex County District School Board**

Before the establishment of EQAO, provincial reviews were conducted using random samples of students. This approach was found to be lacking because it did not provide school boards with their own students’ results and, therefore, provided 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.

<sup>4</sup> Council of Ontario Directors of Education. (2011, June). *CODE Advisory 11*. p. 3. Retrieved from [http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/CODE\\_Advisories/Downloads/CODE%20Advisory%20No%2011%20WEB.pdf](http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/CODE_Advisories/Downloads/CODE%20Advisory%20No%2011%20WEB.pdf)

Information about local student achievement has proven essential for effective system-improvement planning.



Ontario's provincial test results help the province identify student strengths and target areas where attention and resources are needed.

Government initiatives that have been developed based on EQAO's full-census data have had measurable results for tens of thousands of Ontario students, as evidenced by the significant improvement in achievement in schools across the province.

Data collected from EQAO tests have enabled the Ministry of Education to establish such successful initiatives as Learning to 18, the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership and Schools in the Middle. EQAO data provide evidence for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of these initiatives.

“The information provided by Ontario's provincial tests for each school in the province can be used by curriculum and instructional specialists in the Ministry of Education to help assess how well students are learning the curriculum and to identify the need for change. Without this information, it would be difficult for policy-makers to accurately determine where progress is being made and where improvement is still needed.”

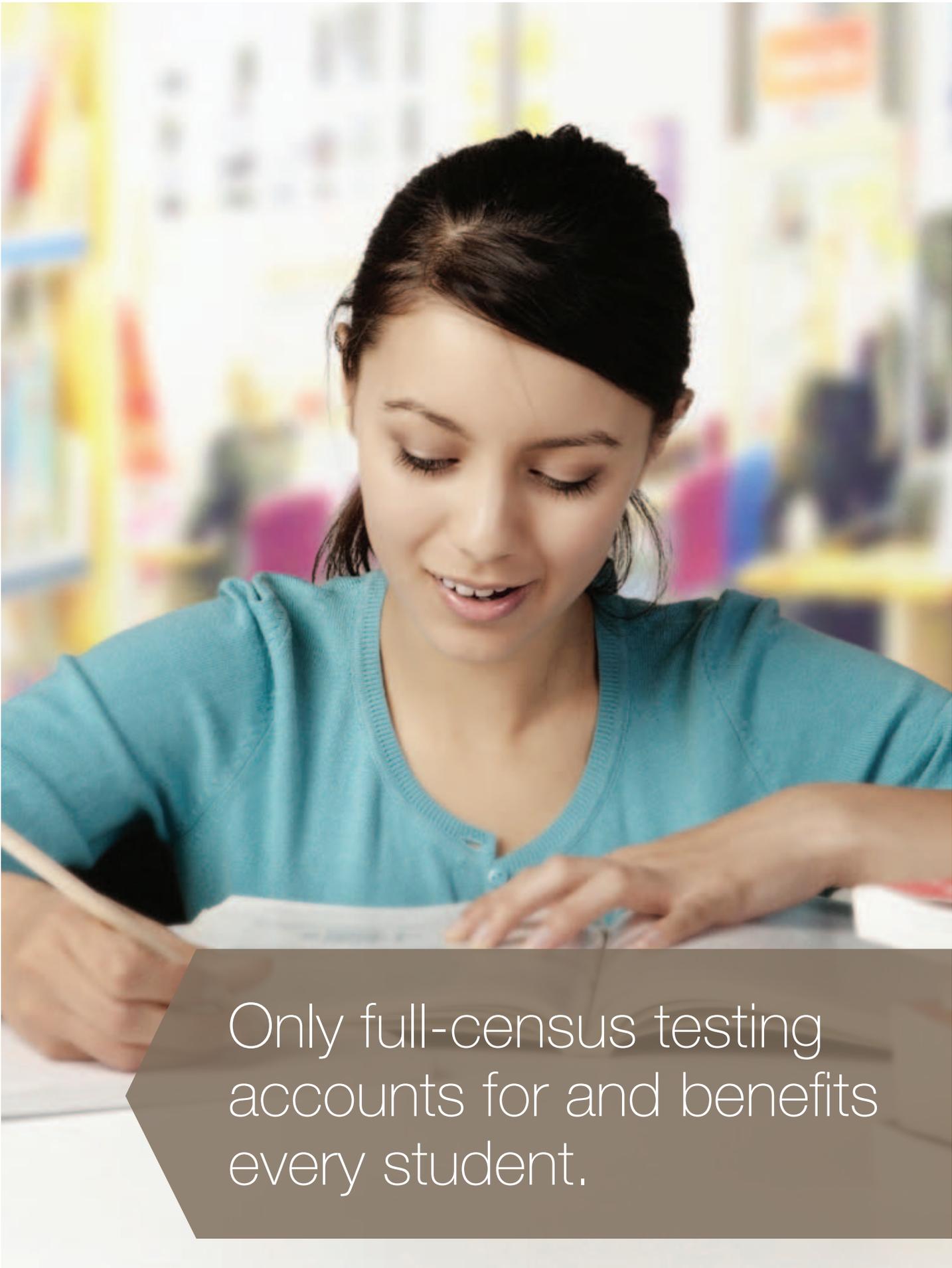
**Dr. W. Todd Rogers, professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta, member of EQAO's Psychometric Expert Panel and EQAO scholar-in-residence**

“Ontario has managed to balance administrative and professional accountability in an admirable fashion. [The government] has consistently communicated the message to the field and the public that results matter, as defined by performance on the provincial assessments. However, its response to weak performance has consistently been intervention and support, not blame and punishment.”<sup>5</sup>

**Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development**

EQAO data also support the Ministry's work on educator professional development, 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 only come from full-census assessments.

<sup>5</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2010). *Strong performers and successful reformers in education: Lessons from PISA for the United States*. OECD Publishing. pp. 76–77. Retrieved from [http://www.oecd.org/document/13/0,3746,en\\_2649\\_35845621\\_46538637\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/13/0,3746,en_2649_35845621_46538637_1_1_1_1,00.html)



Only full-census testing  
accounts for and benefits  
every student.

“ Used validly and reliably ... standardized tests provide decision-makers useful information that no other evaluation method can provide.<sup>6</sup> ”

Richard P. Phelps, education researcher

EQAO was established to gather information from—and account for—every student in the public education system.

Only full-census tests, which gather information from every student, can

- provide students and parents with objective information about individual student achievement in relation to the provincial standard and
- provide reliable achievement information at the school and board levels and by sub-population (e.g., students with special education needs, English language learners) to inform improvement planning and resource allocation.

Assessments that gather achievement information from a sample of students could not address these priorities. Random-sample tests, by design, provide only general, high-level information about student achievement. No achievement information is available at the student, school or school board level when tests are administered to a sample of students. As a result, random-sample assessments do not allow for the same kind of strategic management of the education system as full-census assessments do.

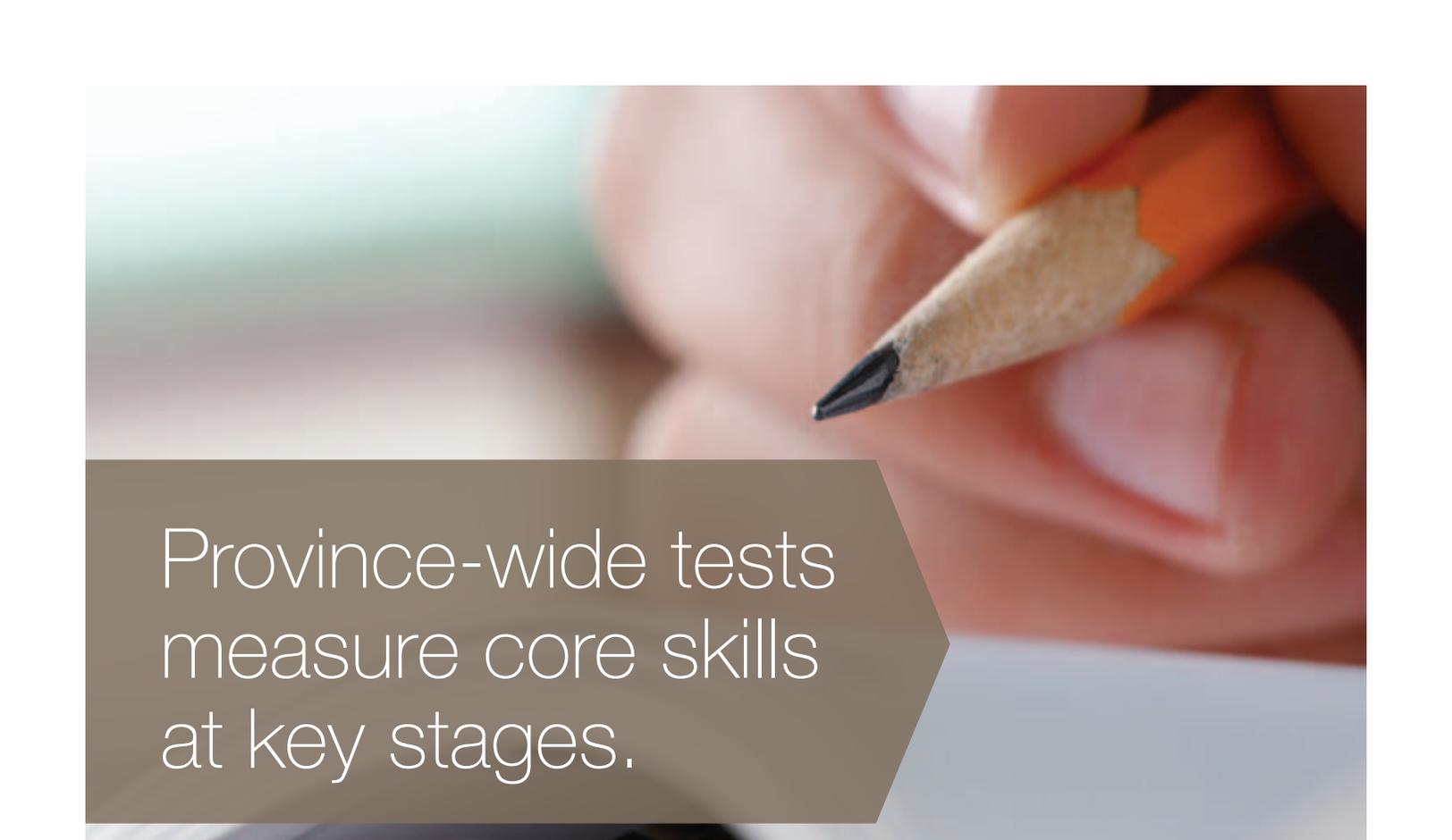
In December 2010, following a review and public hearings, the Ontario government’s Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommended that EQAO “continue its policy of every-child testing.”<sup>7</sup>

Random-sample assessments have a legitimate role to play in Ontario’s large-scale assessment framework—as a complement to full-census assessments.

EQAO currently administers several national or international random-sample assessments on behalf of the Government of Ontario. Results from these assessments show the achievement of Ontario students in relation to that of their peers across the country and around the world, and education policy-makers and the public benefit from having this glimpse. However, beyond this high-level comparison of student achievement, the usefulness of the data from such assessments is limited in terms of actual improvement planning and it provides no local accountability for student achievement and progress.

<sup>6</sup> Phelps, R. P. (2008). The role and importance of standardized testing in the world of teaching and training. *Nonpartisan Education Review/Essays*, 4(3). Retrieved from <http://www.nonpartisaneducation.org/Review/Essays/v4n3.htm>

<sup>7</sup> 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)*. 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session. (2010). p. 16. Retrieved from [http://www.ontla.on.ca/committee-proceedings/committee-reports/files\\_pdf/EQAO\\_S3.04AR2009\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ontla.on.ca/committee-proceedings/committee-reports/files_pdf/EQAO_S3.04AR2009_EN.pdf)



## Province-wide tests measure core skills at key stages.

The provincial tests measure core reading, writing and math skills based on the expectations in *The Ontario Curriculum*. These skills are the foundation for success in all other areas of learning and in life beyond school.

Ontario's province-wide tests assess cumulative knowledge and skills at four key stages:

- Grade 3 (literacy and math tested at the end of the primary division);
- Grade 6 (literacy and math tested at the end of the junior division);
- Grade 9 (math tested in the first year of secondary school) and
- Grade 10 (literacy tested as a graduation requirement).

As with classroom assessments, all students who are able to do so are expected to complete Ontario's provincial tests. For students with special education needs, some accommodations that are consistent with regular classroom assessment practices are permitted. Special provisions may also be permitted for English language learners.

For each of the provincial tests, every student receives a report that describes his or her achievement on the test. After every assessment, schools and school boards receive detailed reports that show how each student answered each test question, point to curriculum areas that may need more attention and provide specific strategies to guide instruction.

# Teaching the curriculum *is* preparing students for the tests.

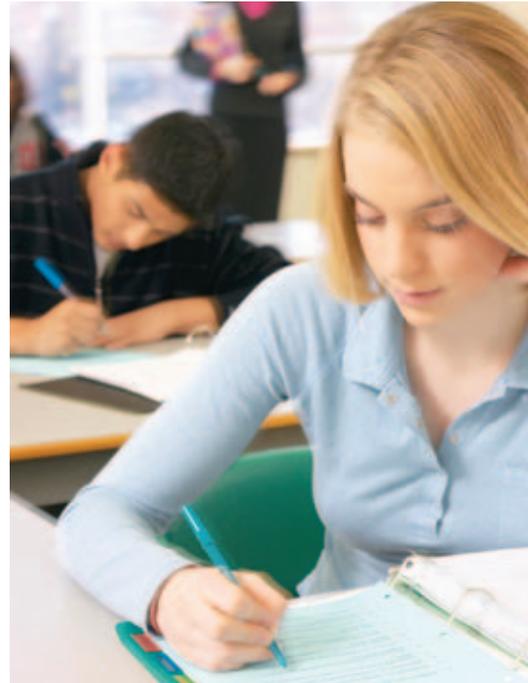
Each question on every EQAO test is based on learning expectations set out in *The Ontario Curriculum*, which is what teachers are responsible for teaching in classrooms every day.



[EQAO] is an independent audit of *The Ontario Curriculum*, and, if you are teaching curriculum in the proper order, at the proper rate, at the proper depth—your students will do well.



**Jim Costello, Director of Education,  
Lambton Kent District School Board**



**P**reparing students for the tests means teaching them

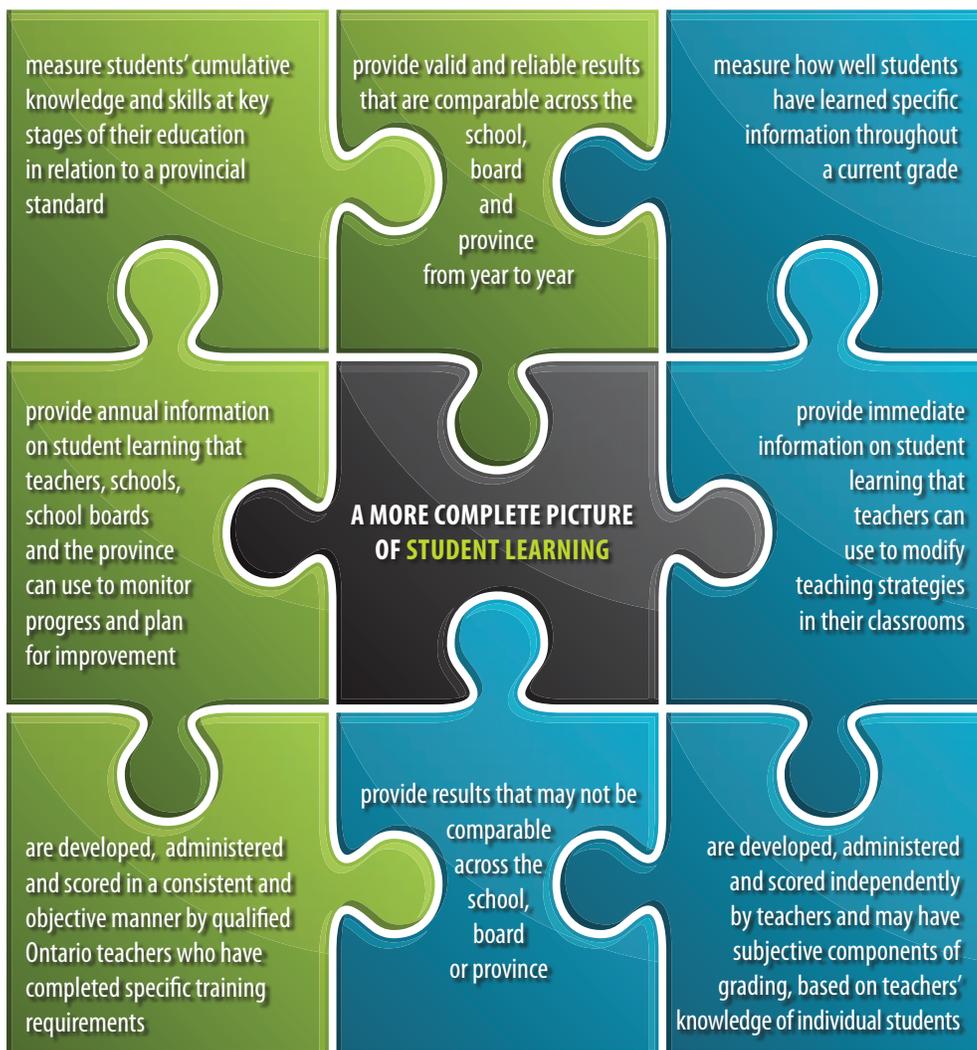
- to understand what they read;
- to communicate their thoughts clearly in writing and
- to use appropriate math skills to solve problems.

Claims are sometimes made that test preparation takes time away from regular classroom instruction. The fact is, however, that if schools are teaching the curriculum through students' regular classroom work, the provincial tests should not require special preparation or cause undue pressure.

# EQAO tests have different goals and provide different information from classroom assessments.

Ontario needs both provincial tests and classroom assessments because the two types of assessment have different goals and provide different kinds of information.

Considering EQAO test results alongside classroom assessment results provides a more complete picture of how well students are meeting the reading, writing and math expectations outlined in *The Ontario Curriculum*.





EQAO test results are the only objective indicators of students' reading, writing and math achievement.

EQAO tests are developed collaboratively by psychometricians, Ontario educators, and national and international testing experts. They are subject to stringent quality assurance measures, including field testing and reviews for sensitivity and bias. The tests are then administered under consistent conditions across the province and scored by educators who have received specific training. For these reasons, EQAO test results are the only objective indicators of Ontario students' reading, writing and math achievement.

Parents have been shown to appreciate this objectivity. Based on research EQAO conducted in late 2009 with a representative sample, 69% of Ontario parents value having this objective indicator of their child's achievement.

"A balanced assessment policy includes both teacher-created assessment and standardized testing. Teacher-created assessment ensures that teachers can consider individual student needs.

Standardized testing balances this with an objective measurement tool to determine if the students are meeting provincial curriculum standards. ... The evidence is clear that standardized testing is an important component of a balanced approach to student assessment. Without the information provided by standardized tests, it becomes virtually impossible to identify how well students are doing."<sup>8</sup>

**Michael Zwaagstra, research fellow,  
Frontier Centre for Public Policy and public  
high school teacher**

# What gets measured gets attention. What gets attention improves.

“ We are all in this together. The bottom line is that we are morally obligated to improve student achievement. EQAO data helps us do this. ”

**Bernadette Gillis, vice-principal, St. Barbara Catholic Elementary School,  
Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board**

The availability of reliable achievement information from Ontario’s province-wide tests has enabled schools, school boards and the province to develop and implement targeted improvement plans.

The result of this focused, evidence-based attention has been that Ontario students have made notable progress over the years in meeting the provincial standard in reading, writing and mathematics. For example, more than 21 000 additional Grade 6 students met the provincial standard in reading in 2011 as compared to 2001.

Similarly, a number of recent national and international assessments have revealed high levels of achievement

among Ontario students. For example, Ontario was the only jurisdiction in Canada whose students were above the national average in all three subjects on the 2009 administration of the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program. In addition, fully 92% of Ontario students met or exceeded the key achievement benchmark on the 2009 administration of the Programme for International Student Assessment.

When EQAO was established, Ontario students’ scores on international assessments were not nearly as strong as they are today. The detailed data provided by Ontario’s province-wide tests have been used by the Ministry of Education and by local school boards, schools and educators to improve student learning. The focused attention on literacy and numeracy—strongly supported by Ontario’s provincial testing program—has led to demonstrated improvements in student achievement that have been confirmed on provincial, national and international assessments.



There is still some work to be done, however, to ensure that all Ontario students develop the basic literacy and math skills they need for success in school and in life.

“A positive impact on student achievement must begin with an examination of data that informs instruction, and subsequently guides school improvement planning.”

**Max Bernauer, principal, Pinewood Public School, Keewatin-Patricia District School Board**

In Grade 6 in 2011, for example,

- more than 34 000 students did not meet the provincial standard in reading;
- more than 35 000 students did not meet the provincial standard in writing and
- more than 55 000 students did not meet the provincial standard in math.

Using the detailed information that is available through these province-wide tests, schools, school boards and the province can continue to develop and implement targeted improvement plans to ensure that Ontario students continue to make progress in developing the core literacy and numeracy skills they need to be successful in the world and workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Early achievement —  
or identification of  
struggles — is related  
to future success.



It is important to track children's progress consistently throughout their schooling. Thanks to Ontario's province-wide tests, there are four key points in each student's education at which there is an independent, objective gauge of how well students are learning the curriculum. If a student's results are below the provincial standard (Level 3) at any point, it is important for parents and educators to take note and take action.

Research on the results of EQAO's province-wide tests has shown that there is a clear relationship between early achievement and achievement in secondary school. Students who meet the provincial standard in early grades are more likely to carry that success into later grades. Those who do not meet the provincial standard in early grades are at a greater risk of not having the literacy and numeracy skills they will need in secondary school and beyond.

For example, cohort tracking results for the 2011 Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics show that

- of the students who had met the provincial standard in both Grade 3 and Grade 6, 92% met it again in Grade 9 in the academic mathematics course and 77% met it again in Grade 9 in the applied mathematics course and
- of the students who had met the provincial standard in neither Grade 3 nor Grade 6, 51% did not meet it in Grade 9 in the academic mathematics course and 71% did not in the applied mathematics course.



The data also show that identifying struggling students early and providing support at school and at home can make all the difference.

For example,

- of the students who had not met the provincial standard in Grade 3 but had met it in Grade 6, 77% met it in Grade 9 in the academic mathematics course and 60% in the applied mathematics course and
- of the students who had not met the provincial reading standard in Grade 3, Grade 6 or both, 36% were successful on the 2011 OSSLT.



As with any tool or resource, the appropriate use of EQAO data is key.

Ontario's province-wide tests bring many benefits to the publicly funded education system.

Unfortunately, the availability of the data they yield has led some groups to place distorted value on the results or to use them to rank school performance and make judgments about overall school quality. EQAO both appreciates and advocates for the importance of considering a wide range of achievement data. The agency also opposes the ranking of schools using EQAO data.

EQAO has always been committed to building capacity for the appropriate use of evidence and data among education professionals, parents and the public. Such capacity building is accomplished through transparent reports that include a contextual profile of the school community, as well as through workshops, other outreach activities and new media resources.

“We continue to build the capacity of principals, teachers and school partners to gather, analyze and use data effectively in order to evaluate what is currently working and what areas require improvement. In this way, data can help predict and prevent failure and support all learners towards a successful graduation outcome ... The data allows the board to focus on areas that will ultimately lead to student improvement and an increase in overall success rates. We have been using data analysis for some time to help develop programs for our students. This data is another resource that will only benefit the process.”

**Charlotte Rouleau, principal,  
curriculum, Catholic District School  
Board of Eastern Ontario**

“When it comes to essential skills, students have either learned the skills or they have not. Those who haven't, need and should get intentional supports to help them, test or no test. To do less is to accept failure on many levels. Further, with the testing comes accountability, and eliminating accountability could eventually result in students who 'aren't performing well' being swept under the rug.”

EQAO tests provide  
value for money.



## Annual Cost per Student

\$10,000

Ministry of Education  
School-Board  
Funding

\$17

Provincial Testing  
Program



Each year, the government spends \$20 billion on the operation of school boards in Ontario. With almost two million students in the publicly funded school system, that's more than \$10 000 per student.

For only \$17 per student (about \$32 million in 2010–2011), EQAO operates the provincial testing program to determine how well students across the province are developing critical reading, writing and math skills and to inform the policies and instructional programs that will help improve learning for all students.

EQAO's budget is equivalent to 0.15% of the average per-pupil funding allocation by the Ministry of Education and represents a drop in the education bucket. It is a minimal and appropriate cost to perform an independent check on the use of tax dollars in our publicly funded education system.

The Auditor General of Ontario's 2009 value-for-money audit of EQAO confirmed that EQAO tests

- 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.

The audit praised EQAO's budgeting and procurement processes and acknowledged that the agency had reduced its annual expenditures by over 20% in five years while delivering substantially the same service. Between 2009 and 2011, EQAO continued to reduce its expenditures by an additional 2.14%.



Ontario has a balanced assessment program that needs to keep moving forward.



Over the past 15 years, since EQAO began testing all students in Ontario at key stages of their education, our education system has become more robust and more students are achieving the provincial standard.

**B**ecause of EQAO's full-census assessment program, administrators, educators, parents and the public have had access to detailed information on student achievement in their local schools and school boards.

Administrators, principals and teachers have shown that they use the information provided by the provincial tests to improve programs for all students.

Parents and taxpayers have demanded and deserve this kind of local accountability and detailed information about student achievement.

A comprehensive and well-balanced assessment program, anchored by EQAO's full-census assessments, has been a key element of the progress witnessed in Ontario student achievement.

Different assessments serve different purposes. When they are used appropriately in combination, they provide the public, parents, educators and education policy-makers with the information they need to work toward the success of all students.

“

There is no way that continuous improvement can occur without constant transparency fuelled by good data.<sup>9</sup>

”

**Michael Fullan, international leader on educational change, Professor Emeritus of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, and Special Education Adviser to the Premier of Ontario**

*The quotes in this document reflect the speakers' roles at the time the quotes were collected.*



**Education Quality and  
Accountability Office**



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