

Constructing the Way Forward for All Students

By Joan M. Green

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL DETERMINANTS OF A USEFUL ASSESSMENT SYSTEM WHICH CAN CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVED TEACHING AND LEARNING?

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PREOCCUPIES everyone involved in education, whether as a policy maker, educator, parent, student or taxpayer.

Around the world, the job of educators in the nineties is huge and complex. Sometimes we feel that we live and work in the eye of the storm. Educators' challenges are acute, the demands high. Never has the scrutiny been more intense, or the fiscal pressures more fierce.

In Canada and in many other places around the world, the context in which educators work and live is profoundly different than it was twenty, ten or even five years ago. The parents in our communities and the students in our classrooms are more informed, more involved, more skeptical about accepted wisdom, more questioning of authority, and more intolerant of ambiguity. More is expected from teachers and schools than ever before.

From the outset, we must acknowledge that students want and need to know how well they are doing and where they stand, as well as what they need to do in order to improve. Teachers need informed and timely feedback on how their students are doing and on what teaching practices

are working well. Parents need to be aware of the content taught and standards expected in our schools, and they need specific information about their children's performance and progress. Taxpayers need evidence that education of a consistently high quality is available in all schools and that resources are being used effectively to maximize student learning. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was established in 1995 as a considered response to the desire expressed by all of these stakeholders for better quality and greater accountability.

In my former life as the Director of a large urban school board with approximately 170 schools, I helped to develop a system of performance-based benchmarks for student achievement. Like many teachers and school administrators, I had grown skeptical about some large-scale assessment schemes, which often seemed wretchedly earnest but spectacularly out of context. As "standards" became a rallying cry for those who decried what they saw as the inadequate performance of public schools, I was reminded of the entertainer Groucho Marx's comment: "I have my standards and someday I

hope to live up to them." Research and popular commentary pointed out how rarely the imposition of standardized tests actually brought about improvement and how often it served merely to focus parent and community attention on test scores as the ultimate arbiter of student worth and school performance. Too often, public attention gravitated to which schools had scored high and which ones had scored low, leading to invidious rankings and little insight into why scores were low and what could be done to improve them. People seemed to forget the caution of one commentator that "We throw all of our attention on the utterly idle question of whether A has done as well as B when the only significant question is whether A has done as well as A can."

At the same time, I knew that the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning had identified accountability as a "burning" and "legitimate" issue for many Ontario parents and citizens. In addition, my own experience as a teacher, principal and district administrator had made me aware that many conscientious and able teachers needed a clearer sense of direction in classroom assessment. A surprising number were unsure about how to measure the extent

capturing student intent but quite successful, unfortunately, at producing anxiety among students and teachers. Some argue that small doses of anxiety can be helpful. Left unchecked, however, and compounded by narrow media coverage and uninformed public pressure, anxiety can undermine student performance and teacher confidence. Recognizing this dilemma, EQAO declared from the outset that we would not simply generate assessment results in order to assign a number to the past performance of schools or school systems — as though spectators at a horse race. Rather, we committed ourselves to ensuring that our assessment processes and results served as catalysts for the improvement of teaching and learning.

In the spring of 1998, we tested over 145,000 grade 3 students from across Ontario in reading, writing and mathematics over a ten-day period. We also tested a province-wide sample of nearly 10,000 grade 9 students in mathematics. This was our second round of province-wide assessment, having assessed all grade 3 students and a sample of grade 6 students last year. We spent over a year laying the groundwork for our first round of assessments by consulting with thousands of educators, parents, students and taxpayers. While visiting one school, I asked a grade 3 student how we could improve learning for him and his classmates. He gave me this wise advice: “You could make schools better if you tell us what good work looks like and what comes next.”

The Education Quality and Accountability Office was established by the Government of Ontario in 1995 to help bring that little boy’s wishes to fruition. His advice was consistent with the recommendation given to the provincial government by the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning a year earlier. The Royal Commission held province-wide discussions with educators, policy makers, parents, students and tens of thousands of citizens in what became one of the most extensive public consultations ever undertaken in the history of Ontario. Here is a small

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sampling of what the Commission said in its report:

We’re concerned that too many citizens oversimplify the testing process. It’s the simplest thing in the world to test what a student is able to remember today from yesterday’s lesson, but it’s also of strictly limited value. ...Testing for real understanding, for a student’s capacity to think and reason, takes far more sophistication than this; in the trade, it’s called authentic assessment, and mostly it’s done by teachers. That’s why people who emphasize standardized tests almost exclusively, which they believe are teacher-proof, are missing a crucial truth. In the end, no one knows the student’s capacities, or is in a position to assess them in all their nuances and complexity, better than the classroom teacher. That’s why we make several recommendations designed to build teacher expertise in assessment, with a view to improving teaching and learning, and to making more information available to parents and the public about what’s being taught and learned.

The Commission insisted on the creation of a new, independent, arm’s-length agency, governed by a board accountable to the public. As the agency’s CEO, I can tell you that we guard our independence fiercely since our credibility as Ontario’s education “auditor” depends on the public’s perception that our assessments as well as our results and recommendations are objective and informed. As Barbara Smith, the Chair of our Board, said at the news conference where we released our first annual *Provincial Report on Achievement*, “We have no ulterior motive, no hidden agenda, no pre-conceived notions.”

Given the nature of our mandate, I felt strongly from the beginning that the agency had to hold itself to the same standards of accountability it would be advocating for the system as a whole. I remembered W.H. Auden’s prologue to *The Dyer’s Hand*, an anthology of literary criticism. Auden set himself the task of defining his standards and values. He wrote (forgiving his single gender focus), “So long as a man writes poetry or fiction, his dream of Eden is his own business, but the moment he starts writing literary criticism, honesty demands that he describe it to his readers, so that they may be in a position to judge his judgments.” Since all education reformers are dreaming of Eden and many of us are making judgments, we took his admonition to heart and established a set of core values that would guide the work of the agency. They are:

- 1 EQAO values the well-being of learners above all other interests.
- 2 EQAO values only that information which has the potential to bring about constructive change and improvement.
- 3 EQAO values the dedication and expertise of Ontario’s educators and works to involve them in all of its activities.
- 4 EQAO values the delivery of its programs and services with equiv-

alent quality in both English and French.

These values may seem a bit rarefied but they are by no means mere rhetoric. They are the basic commitments against which we, and others, measure our performance. They form the basis of what we call *EQAO's Index to Effective Assessment*. This index is our attempt to define the essential determinants of a useful assessment system which can contribute to improved teaching and learning in all schools.

1 Large-scale assessment must give all students a chance to demonstrate what they know and can do.

Grant Wiggins has pointed out that the etymology of the term “assess” clarifies that assessment is a clinical, not a mechanical, act. Assess is a form of the Latin verb *assidere*, meaning “to sit with.” In an assessment, one sits with the learner. It is something we do *with* and *for* the student, not something we do *to* the student. We believe that efforts involved in the assessment process are only justifiable to the extent that the assessment leads to substantial educational benefits for students in the form of helpful feedback, clearer expectations, enhanced motivation and better instruction.

2 Assessment processes must provide capacity-building opportunities for teachers.

Teachers are central to any improvement initiative. Our assessments and assessment processes are designed to build teachers' skills and confidence in quality assessment as well as their understanding of the requirements set out in the provincial curriculum. Over 8,000 teachers and 4,000 principals were involved in this year's grades 3 and 9 assessments: in the development and critical analysis of assessment materials, and as teacher trainers in their own regions, board contacts, quality control monitors, and markers. These investments in professional development for educators reflect our conviction that one of the best ways to improve learning for students is to build capacity among

teachers. When asked to rate the professional value of their participation in the marking of the first grade 3 assessment last year, 98% of teachers said it was among the best professional development experiences of their career.

3 The accountability function must be active, moving beyond statistics to plans for improvement.

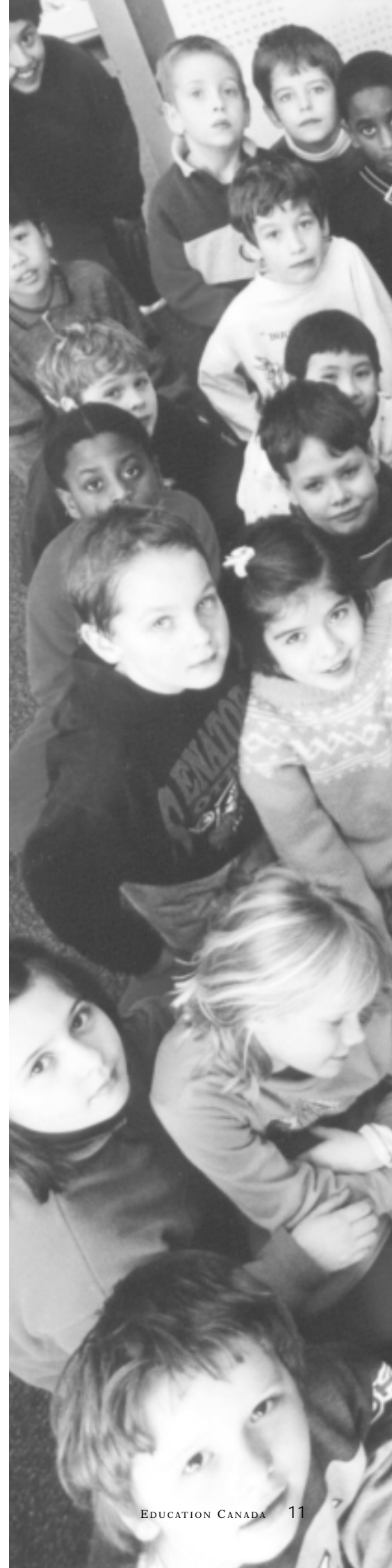
EQAO's focus is on accountability, not merely accounting. Accounting involves gathering, organizing and reporting information. Accountability is forward-looking. It involves the use of assessment data by educators and parents to make informed judgments and commitments about what is happening in the classroom today and what can, or should, be happening tomorrow. Improvement is a central component of EQAO's mandate; it is the ultimate goal of the reporting process. In the months after the results from our first assessment cycle were released, teachers in each Ontario school began working with parents and their local communities to analyze achievement data and prepare action plans for improvement, taking into account the unique factors that contribute to achievement in their school.

4 Large-scale assessment must be performance-based.

Performance tasks are relevant to life outside of school. They emphasize connections between assessment, learning and real-world issues. Our assessments provide a broad window on students' thinking. They tell us not only what students know but to what extent they can use knowledge wisely and effectively to solve problems.

5 Large-scale assessment must be standards-based.

When an assessment is based on standards, there are clear descriptions of what is expected and what is being assessed. With clear descriptions, teachers can organize instruction to promote the skills and knowledge that are important, without simply teaching test items. Moreover, because the



reference point for judging student performance in a standards-based assessment is the defined curriculum, not an arbitrary norm group, policy-makers and the public can more reasonably decide whether the assessment targets are defensible and worthy of attention. While multiple choice tests tend to narrow the curriculum to those items which occur on the tests, standards-based assessments are, by definition, measures of the curriculum domain. They provide evidence of student learning as it relates to all of the curriculum expectations.

The standards model rests on four key assumptions which have perhaps been most clearly articulated by Catherine Taylor:

- We can set educational standards and strive toward them.
- Most students can internalize and achieve the standards.
- Very different student performances and exhibitions can and will reflect the same standards.
- Educators can be trained to internalize the standards and to be fair and consistent judges of diverse student performances.

6 The reporting of assessment information must lead to improvement for the individual learner and for the system as a whole.

Educators have good reason to worry about how results are reported and used. Gerald Bracey of the United States said recently that if Americans outperformed the Japanese in a competition between the two countries, the headlines would read, “Japanese Near Top, Americans Second to Last.” We can’t do much about such negativity but we can report results as we find them — frankly and analytically, complete with sensible recommendations for improvement and a reminder that our results are only one part of the whole picture.

7 Each assessment must provide contextual information which allows

educators, parents and the public to interpret results in a sensible and constructive manner.

For each assessment, EQAO collects information about the learning context through detailed questionnaires completed by students, parents, teachers and principals. This information furthers our understanding of what factors relate to high achievement and permits sensible and constructive interpretations of assessment results, supported by detailed contextual information which highlights linguistic and social factors, student attitudes, teaching preferences and practices, as well as school programs and priorities. This information is a good basis for community discussion. Along with systematic student and school performance, it lessens the negative impact of spurious school-by-school rankings. After all, numerical results alone do not tell the whole story about any school. A school could have good results but its students may not be achieving their potential. On the other hand, some schools, in pure numerical terms, may not have done as well as others, but their progress, measured over time and against specific targets, may in fact be substantial.

8 A quality indicators system must be developed to provide a richer context for reporting student achievement and for assessing quality in the school system.

EQAO is now in the midst of designing an Education Quality Indicators Program (EQUIP) to ensure a detailed context for reporting student achievement and for assessing quality in the Ontario school system. This system will include both qualitative and quantitative indicators which provide a comprehensive and publicly-accessible portrait of elementary and secondary education in the province.

9 The testing agency must be independent, accountable and yet sensitive to the concerns of stakeholder groups.

We are the education auditor not the advocate for any particular position. However, we do listen to, and learn

from, the affirmations and constructive criticisms brought forward by parents, students and members of both the educational community and general public as we develop and refine our assessment policies, instruments and processes.

10 Assessment initiatives must recognize that all large-scale change is ultimately the result of local implementation.

One of our priorities as an agency has been to build a culture of assessment in Ontario where teachers, students and parents regard assessment as essential feedback, natural and necessary to learning. Good assessment develops shared responsibility and galvanizes school- and system-wide change. Often, assessment results stimulate questions which require further analysis before decisions are taken. It is essential, therefore, that we build assessment literacy and create a climate for critical analysis and constructive action among educators, parents and the general public.

Howard Nemerov, in his poem *To David about His Education*, speaks of a complex world which “is full of mostly invisible things” that children have to learn “in order to become one of the grown-ups”. All these grown-ups must work together to promote opportunity, and optimism for all of our children. We can’t afford to get it wrong. ■

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