

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



Assemblée  
législative  
de l'Ontario

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# STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

## THE EDUCATION QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

(Section 3.04, 2009 Annual report of the Auditor General of Ontario)

2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament  
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The Honourable Steve Peters, MPP  
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly

Sir,

Your Standing Committee on Public Accounts has the honour to present its Report and commends it to the House.

Norman W. Sterling, MPP  
Chair

Queen's Park  
November 2010

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS\***

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2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament

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Lorraine Luski  
Research Officer

\*Rosario Marchese served as an ongoing substitution.

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**  
**LIST OF CHANGES TO COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

MARIA VAN BOMMEL was replaced by WAYNE ARTHURS on September 22, 2010.

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## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| PREAMBLE   | 1  |
| Acknowledgements   | 1  |
| OVERVIEW   | 1  |
| Objectives and Scope of the Audit                            | 1  |
| Background   | 2  |
| Agency and Mandate   | 2  |
| Assessments  | 3  |
| Legislation and Guiding Instruments                          | 3  |
| ISSUES RAISED IN THE AUDIT AND BEFORE THE COMMITTEE          | 3  |
| Test Development and Administration—Ensuring Consistency     | 3  |
| Exempted Students  | 5  |
| Quality Assurance  | 6  |
| Large Fluctuations in EQAO results                           | 8  |
| Use of Grade 9 Math Results                                  | 9  |
| Reporting on EQAO Assessment Results                         | 10 |
| English and French language Students                         | 11 |
| Gender   | 14 |
| EQAO’s Relationship with Educators—Outreach                  | 15 |
| APPENDIX: A – EQAO GRADE 9 ASSESSMENT OF MATHEMATICS 2009-10 |    |
| STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE:                                       | 17 |
| CONSOLIDATED LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS                         | 18 |

## PREAMBLE

In March 2010 the Standing Committee on Public Accounts held public hearings on the Education Quality and Accountability Office (the Office or Agency), the subject of an audit by the Auditor General in 2009.<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education witnesses appearing before the Committee included the Deputy Minister, Assistant Deputy Minister and senior staff. Witnesses from the Office included the chair, the CEO and others.<sup>2</sup> This report highlights the Auditor's observations and recommendations contained in Sec. 3.04 of his *2009 Annual Report* and presents the Committee's own findings, views, and recommendations.

## Acknowledgements

The Standing Committee endorses the Auditor's findings and recommendations. It also thanks the Auditor and his team for drawing attention to the important issues stemming from the EQAO process in Ontario. Finally, the Committee would like to acknowledge the assistance provided during the hearings and report writing by the Office of the Auditor General, the Clerk of the Committee, and staff of the Legislative Research Service.

## OVERVIEW

### Objectives and Scope of the Audit

The audit objective assessed whether the Education Quality and Accountability Office had adequate systems, processes, and procedures in place to ensure that:

- student assessment results were comparable from year to year and accurately reflected student performance in regard to the Ontario curriculum;
- legislative and policy requirements were being fulfilled; and
- goods and services were acquired and programs delivered in an economic and efficient manner.

The scope of the audit included research on student assessment practices in other jurisdictions, review and analysis of EQAO administrative directives, policies, and procedures, as well as interviews with agency board members and staff, including two psychometric experts. Other interviews included personnel from four school boards—Peel District, Halton District, Hastings and Prince Edward District, and Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District; and personnel from the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, the

<sup>1</sup> See Section 3.04 of Ontario, Office of the Auditor General, *2009 Annual Report* (Toronto: The Office, 2009), pp. 128-142, Internet site at

[http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports\\_en/en09/304en09.pdf](http://www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_en/en09/304en09.pdf) accessed on September 7, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For a transcript of proceedings, see Ontario, Legislative Assembly, Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session (31 March 2010), Internet site at [http://www.ontla.on.ca/committee-proceedings/transcripts/files\\_pdf/31-MAR-2010\\_P002.pdf](http://www.ontla.on.ca/committee-proceedings/transcripts/files_pdf/31-MAR-2010_P002.pdf) accessed on September 7, 2010.

Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, and the Council of Ontario Directors of Education.

## **Background**

### *Agency and Mandate*

The Office was established in 1996 following upon a recommendation of Ontario's Royal Commission on Learning. After extensive consultations with teachers, parents, students, and the public, the Commission concluded that province-wide testing of students was necessary to monitor student achievement and respond to the public's demand for clarity and greater accountability with regard to student achievement.

Created as an independent operational service agency to conduct province-wide assessments of students, the Office has administered about 600,000 tests annually since 2000/01. It employs approximately 140 permanent staff complemented by approximately 1,700 seconded or temporary staff during marking periods. It spent \$31.7 million in the 2008/09 fiscal year, all of it funded by the Ministry. Agency officials note that the cost of the EQAO averages about \$15 per student out of a \$20 billion dollar education budget for elementary and secondary education in Ontario.<sup>3</sup>

The Office is mandated to develop, administer, mark, and report on province-wide tests of student achievement. The results are intended to provide reliable, objective, and high-quality data that can be used as a tool by the Ministry of Education (the Ministry) and the province's 72 school boards to enhance student learning and improvement planning.

The Office develops test questions based on the Ministry's school curriculum expectations and designed to provide an objective appraisal of student achievement. It aims to ensure that tests have a similar level of difficulty from one year to the next so that results can be compared over time. The Agency is responsible for providing specific guidelines for school boards, principals and teachers to follow in delivering the tests to students. It oversees test scoring, and must publicly report test results and make recommendations to the Ministry. These pertain to any matter related to the quality or effectiveness of elementary and secondary education in Ontario.

Since the tabling of the Auditor's *2009 Annual Report*, Agency officials have taken steps to address all of the relevant recommendations and in some cases have already implemented some of the actions required. Officials take the view that the EQAO program of assessments, which focuses on measuring the achievement of every student, has been a catalyst for improvement of thousands of students across Ontario.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 33.



## *Assessments*

Each year there is an EQAO assessment of students in all Ontario publicly funded schools in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. Grade 3 and 6 students are tested in reading, writing, and mathematics while Grade 9 students are tested only in mathematics (applied and academic). As a condition of high school graduation, all students, including those in private schools, must pass the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). The OSSLT is usually written in Grade 10 and it determines if students are meeting the minimum standards for literacy. Provincial EQAO assessments provide Ontarians with a snapshot of student achievement at a particular point in time. The assessments developed by EQAO must include five different assessments in both French and English. The agency prints, delivers, administers, collects, marks, and reports the assessments given at approximately 4,300 schools across Ontario.

## *Legislation and Guiding Instruments*

The Agency's governing instruments are legislation (the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act*), the Agency Establishment and Accountability Directive, and a Memorandum of Understanding.

## **ISSUES RAISED IN THE AUDIT AND BEFORE THE COMMITTEE**

Significant issues were raised by the audit, and before the Committee. The Committee attaches particular importance to those issues discussed below.

### **Test Development and Administration—Ensuring Consistency**

The Auditor found that the Agency had adequate procedures and controls for ensuring that its tests accurately reflected the Ministry's curriculum expectations. To ensure comparability of the tests' level of difficulty between years, the Agency had imposed strict criteria for the development and field testing of questions, and thoroughly reviewed test content. It was observed that the Agency employs a number of quality assurance measures to ensure consistency in the level of test difficulty from one year to the next.

The audit team interviewed two of the psychometric experts who advise the EQAO on matters related to testing models and the more technical aspects of assessments known as Item Response Theory (IRT). IRT provides a framework for evaluating how well an assessment works and how well it measures student achievement by allowing comparisons of assessment results over time. Both experts agreed that the EQAO process is thorough and ensures consistency from one year to the next.

Ministry officials indicated to the Committee the progress that public education is making in the province. For example, more students are graduating from high school. In the past five years, the graduation rate has risen from 68% to 79%. In addition, literacy and numeracy skills have steadily improved. According to the Ministry, EQAO results show that in 2003-04, 54% of students were achieving at

or above the provincial standard.<sup>4</sup> In 2008-09, 67% of Grade 3 and Grade 6 students were achieving that standard—a gain of 13 percentage points since the earlier date.<sup>5</sup>

During the public hearings, Members commented on that same observation. The rising EQAO assessment scores suggest that student achievement is on the rise. Yet, Members are hearing anecdotally from university professors that the quality of students entering university appears to be lacking. Members were told by faculty that university students cannot properly write sentences. These comments do not match what Members are hearing about rising assessment results.

Some Members asked if the EQAO scores might be rising because—in addition to all the good work that the Ministry's achievement division is doing—teachers are teaching to the test.

Agency officials clarified that the test reflects measures of student achievement in relation to the Ontario curriculum. Moreover, when the EQAO assessments were first administered in Ontario, the curriculum was quite new. Today, teachers are much more familiar with the curriculum which might account for the rising scores.

While Agency officials could not comment on the concerns of university teaching staff about the quality of students entering university, they referenced a recent study of mathematics. It suggested that about 58% of students arriving at university had a mastery of mathematics. Officials also observed that a similar percentage of students leaving Grade 6 are also judged to be competent in mathematics. Another Agency official, and former college president, noted that historically universities have faced the challenge of accepting students who have moved through the education system without the required competencies. On the other hand, the prospect of remediation of competency gaps is significantly enhanced through early identification through EQAO assessments.<sup>6</sup>

Members also asked officials about the makeup of the tests to ensure year to year comparability. They wondered if the Office had the capability of analyzing the past scores of only the multiple choice component of the assessments. Some Members queried if an analysis of the results of multiple choice questions—which are less subjective than open response questions—might yield a steady rise of EQAO scores. Agency officials responded that they undertake an established statistical procedure for equating from year to year which includes both multiple choice and open response items.<sup>7</sup> Although the Agency has not analyzed just the

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<sup>4</sup> The provincial standard is Level 3 which roughly corresponds to a B.

<sup>5</sup> Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Hansard*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29. The Student Achievement Division of the Ontario Ministry of Education is headed up by an assistant deputy minister who works closely with the Education Quality and Accountability Office. During the public hearings she explained the types of interventions and strategies utilized at schools and with school boards and individuals to improve student achievement. For examples see pp. 29, 32, 34-35, 36-37.

<sup>7</sup> The purpose of equating is to ensure that valid comparisons of test results over time can be made. The Education Quality and Accountability Office aims to construct assessment forms of equal

multiple choice items in a systematic way, it would be possible to do. However, they also cautioned that one does not usually see large differences by analyzing only multiple choice items. Officials expressed confidence that if they evaluated only multiple-choice items one would see a similar pattern across the years.

The Chair of the Standing Committee has written to officials of the Education Quality and Accountability Office seeking supplementary data analysis on the testing results for Grades 3 and 6—reading, writing and mathematics—and the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics (applied and academic), as well as the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literary Test (OSSLT).

### **Exempted Students**

While all students are expected to write the EQAO assessments, school principals may exempt those with special needs as well as students for whom English is a second language. Public reporting of the overall scores on EQAO tests include exempt students, but such students are counted as not having achieved the provincial standard in the assessment scores. Thus, schools with a disproportionately high number of exempt students would receive lower overall scores than otherwise comparable schools. Teachers and principals claimed that this policy distorts EQAO reported results.

The Auditor recommended that the Office assess the equity of including exempt students in the overall assessment results as having not met the provincial standard. He also recommended that schools and school boards where the number of exempt students appears to be relatively high be followed up by the Office to ensure that the exemptions are justified.

In response the Ministry noted that principals, together with parents, make the determination about which students are unable to write the assessment even with accommodations or special provisions. If the Office were to exclude exempted students when reporting a school's results, schools that work to ensure that all students are included would view the Office's practice as inequitable. In the Ministry's view, it is important that all students have the opportunity to demonstrate their achievements.

### **Public Hearings**

Ministry officials informed the Committee that when looking at the achievement levels of Ontario students, the Ministry has successfully reduced the number of students exempted from the tests over the last number of years. Members asked

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difficulty each year, but its assessments might differ slightly in difficulty from year to year. The equating process adjusts for such differences. It ensures that the skills and knowledge required for students to be classified at Level 3 are equivalent from year to year and that changes in achievement results across years are due to differences in students' knowledge and skills and not to differences in test difficulty. See Michael Koslow, Director, Data and Support Services, "A Comparison of Four Test-Equating Methods," *EQAO Research Bulletin #3* (January 2010), p. 1, Internet site at [http://www.eqao.com/Research/pdf/E/ResearchBulletinCrb3\\_ne\\_0110\\_web.pdf](http://www.eqao.com/Research/pdf/E/ResearchBulletinCrb3_ne_0110_web.pdf) accessed on October 4, 2010.

the witnesses about the types of students who would likely be exempted from the EQAO assessments.

Agency officials responded that generally, a principal may exempt students with special education designations as well as newcomers. On the other hand, many special education students do participate in the EQAO assessments. The general guideline that principals adhere to is this: if the student is following the Ontario curriculum, there is little justification for exempting such students from the assessment, which is based on the Ontario curriculum. Moreover, in no case should a student be exempted without the parent being consulted.

The Agency's CEO noted that she has had conversations with the Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education and the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario. Both have strongly advocated that special needs students be included in the assessments because parents want to know how their children are achieving relative to the curriculum.

### **Committee Recommendations**

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

- 1. On the matter of principals exempting students from EQAO assessments for acceptable reasons and then assessing such students as though they did not achieve the provincial standard, the Standing Committee asks that the Ministry of Education and the Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee as to whether they have considered other options, in particular, for those schools where a disproportionately large number of students have been exempted.**
- 2. The Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee the numbers of exempted students over the past five years with an explanation for any trends that have occurred over that timeframe.**

### **Quality Assurance**

Many teachers and principals commented to the audit team that as EQAO results take on broader acceptance, there is ever-increasing pressure to improve results. The EQAO assessments carry some risk of irregularities or non-compliance with administrative procedures. In the assessments involving the lower grades (Grades 3 and 6) the primary risk involves teachers or principals. For instance, teachers must not do or say anything to influence students to alter their responses during testing. In high school (Grade 9 and OSSLT), the risk shifts to the student where there is greater potential for collusion and other forms of cheating. Yet, rather than using a varied quality assurance approach that considers the unique risks associated with each assessment, the audit team found that the Agency used substantially the same approach for all assessments.

The audit team learned of British Columbia's approach to potential cheating by its students. It initiated a formal complaints process that outlines the responsibilities of students, schools, and school boards, and includes the completion of standardized forms describing each incident and the actions taken. The Auditor also noted that some jurisdictions, such as Massachusetts, may go so far as revoking a teaching license if a teacher is found to have violated testing policies.

The Auditor recommended that the Office enhance its quality assurance procedures by implementing a formal complaints process to help determine whether there are any trends. As a further deterrence to non-compliance with assessment guidelines, the Office should consider more complete disclosure when test results at a particular school are withheld. Lastly, the Auditor recommended that the Office tailor its quality assurance processes to address the unique risks associated with each of the different assessments (primary, junior, high school).

The Office takes complaints regarding non-compliance with assessment guidelines very seriously and has rigorous quality assurance processes to ensure that the administration of the assessment is consistent across the province. Furthermore, the Office follows up complaints at the school and board level, and in 2009 introduced a standardized format for such investigations. Now, the Office has a clear protocol for investigating and withholding results when warranted. Specifically, the EQAO informs parents and the public when schools' results are withheld by noting on the school's report on the EQAO website and on the Individual Student Report (ISR) that there has been an irregularity. In addition, a letter is attached to the ISR report to advise the parents of those students who took the test.<sup>8</sup>

In September 2010, subsequent to the Standing Committee's public hearings on the EQAO, the press reported that ten public schools in Ontario have been investigated for possible cheating and irregularities on last year's province-wide EQAO assessment. As a result, the Office has withheld scores for all 10 of these schools pending completion of its probe. The press articles cited examples of some of the irregularities. It is alleged that some educators engaged in cheating, while others inadvertently broke the rules. The chief assessment officer at the Education Quality and Accountability Office told the *Globe and Mail* that it learned of the problems from parents or school officials.<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of the press articles, the Agency publicly indicated plans to supplement its existing teacher's manual with a checklist on how to administer the test in the classroom. For example, the checklist would include whether a calculator is allowed on the math test. Further, it would inform teachers to not read passages aloud on the reading test. According to Agency officials, the instructions will be made more explicit and clear.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ontario, Ministry of Education, Office of the Deputy Minister, S. 3.04 Education Quality and Accountability Office, *Summary Status Table* (March 2010), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Kate Hammer and Karen Howlett, Cheating probe ensnares educators, *Globe and Mail*, September 21, 2010, p. A1.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Alphonso and Karen Howlett, "Ontario clarifies standardized-testing rules to weed out cheaters," *Globe and Mail*, September 26, 2010.

## Committee Recommendations

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

3. **On the matter of irregularities and cheating involving last year's EQAO assessments (confirmed in the press by the Education Quality and Accountability Office), the Committee asks that the Office report to the Standing Committee summarizing the key findings or conclusions from the investigations and outline any resulting policy or procedural changes it plans to implement to help deter or combat such irregularities in future.**
4. **The Ontario College of Teachers tell the Standing Committee on Public Accounts what sanctions, if any, College officials would recommend be applied to teachers who are found to have violated EQAO testing rules.**

### Large Fluctuations in EQAO results

The audit team noted that some schools' EQAO results fluctuated by as much as 50% from one year to the next. While an improvement of this magnitude could raise suspicion, such significant swings could be caused by many legitimate factors. Yet, there was no systematic Agency follow-up of such cases to determine what accounted for such a dramatic change and whether any intervention is required.

The Auditor recommended that the Agency enhance its quality assurance procedures by investigating any abnormally large variations in school assessment results from year to year and determining whether or not they are justified.

### Public Hearings

Members asked the witnesses why the Office does not undertake a formal analysis or investigation to determine the cause of sudden or significant fluctuations in schools' EQAO assessment results.

Agency officials responded that the Office had a process for reviewing such fluctuations (up or down) among the 72 school boards. The Office CEO typically telephoned the director of education for the board in question to ask about the reasonableness of the results, ultimately examining the schools that contributed to the unusual upswing or downswing. Where there was a concern, such as a dramatic rise in scores, the Office would begin an investigation. In such cases the school board superintendent would become involved. Going forward, the Office will require the superintendent to submit a written report describing the investigation and justifying his or her opinion why the results are valid.

Members asked the Auditor whether the process as described by the CEO constituted the formal process that the Auditor had been seeking. The Auditor responded that the steps taken by the EQAO to follow up had not been formally

documented and should be. Moreover, while obtaining board feedback was useful, the Auditor also suggested that EQAO officials should consider contacting the school in question and ask the principal for a written explanation of the unusual fluctuation.

### Committee Recommendation

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

- 5. The Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee whether it has now adopted a formal process to investigate and document the steps taken by the Office when its officials become aware of unusual fluctuations in the assessment results. The Office should also report to the Committee whether it might consider adding a section to the standard *School Reports* issued by the Office to every elementary and secondary school in Ontario. This section would provide an explanation for the incidence of unusual fluctuations in the school's assessment results where these have occurred.**

### Use of Grade 9 Math Results

Ministry of Education policy states that 30% of a student's final grade will be based upon a final evaluation which may include an end-of-course exam. Consistent with this policy, and to help motivate Grade 9 applied math students who consistently fall short of the provincial standard, schools are allowed to incorporate the scores from the EQAO Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics into a student's end-of-course mark. However, in the 2008/09 school year, the audit team found these results being applied inconsistently throughout the province. EQAO scores accounted for anywhere from zero to 15% of a student's final mark at the schools visited by the Auditor.

The Auditor recommended that the Office review Grade 9 applied mathematics results to assess whether incorporating EQAO results into the student's final mark is effective in motivating students and, if so, consider adopting a more consistent approach.

The Office agrees with the recommendation that the practice of applying EQAO results to Grade 9 end-of-course marks be reviewed. Officials reported having included survey questions on the 2009-10 Grade 9 teacher and student questionnaires to determine the extent to which teachers use the EQAO tests as part of the student final term mark. The Office will share this information with the Ministry for the purpose of assessing the best course of action.

### Public Hearings

It is generally perceived that students tend to take more seriously those evaluations that count in their final term mark, and less seriously those that do not. Therefore, Members asked the witnesses whether the students might take the

EQAO Grade 9 math assessments more seriously if it was generally known that some portion of it were to be included in their final grade. Members asked whether the Ministry is planning to analyze this possibility further.

Agency officials responded that using or not using parts of the EQAO test as contributing to that final term mark is a local policy—either a decision of the school or of the board. The Office has, therefore, included the following question to teachers in its survey: “Are you using any part of this EQAO assessment as part of your term grade?” The purpose of this survey question is to determine whether using the assessment as a part of the final term mark influences student achievement on the test, particularly for those in Grade 9 applied math.

### Supplementary Information

The detailed provincial results of the EQAO 2009-10 student survey about counting some or all of the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics as part of students’ class marks are attached as Appendix A. When students were asked whether having the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics count as part of their final term mark motivates them to take the assessment more seriously, 69% of Grade 9 Applied students and 72% of Grade 9 Academic students responded that it did.<sup>11</sup>

### Committee Recommendation

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

- 6. The Ministry of Education and the Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee the conclusions they have drawn from the published results of the EQAO survey questions posed to Grade 9 teachers and students that asked whether using the EQAO assessment scores as part of the final term mark influences student achievement on the test. The Committee also requests that the Ministry report back as to whether it has considered having a prescribed minimum percentage (as well as the 30% maximum) of the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics that may count as part of the student final term mark.**

### Reporting on EQAO Assessment Results

The Agency must report to the public and to the Minister of Education on the testing results, and, generally, on the quality and effectiveness of elementary and secondary school education. For both English and French language students, EQAO assessment results for each subject area are reported by school, school

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<sup>11</sup> Education Quality and Accountability Office EQAO, Provincial Results, Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics, 2009-2010, Student Questionnaire (Toronto: The Office, September 29, 2010), pp. 15-16, Internet sites at (applied) [http://www.eqao.com/pdf\\_e/provquestionnaire/0910/G9\\_2010\\_SQap\\_P01.PDF](http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/provquestionnaire/0910/G9_2010_SQap_P01.PDF) and (academic) [http://www.eqao.com/pdf\\_e/provquestionnaire/0910/G9\\_2010\\_SQac\\_P01.PDF](http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/provquestionnaire/0910/G9_2010_SQac_P01.PDF) accessed on October 22, 2010.



board, and province wide; and by gender, by English language learners, and by special needs students. The results are compared with prior years' results. More detailed contextual results are available to schools and school boards through a secure website. Parents also receive an individual report detailing their child's results.

The Auditor recommended that the Office improve its policies, processes and procedures designed to produce accurate and reliable reports for use in improving student performance.

### *English and French language Students*

Members drew witnesses' attention to Figure 2 of the Auditor's *2009 Annual Report*, which shows the percentage of students achieving the provincial standard for reading, writing, and math in Grades 3 and 6 for both the English-speaking and French-speaking boards.

**Figure 2: Grades 3 and 6 – Percentage of Students Achieving Provincial Standard (Levels 3 and 4) – 1999/2000 – 2008/09**

Source of data: EQAO

| School/Year | Grade 3          |         |      |                 |         |      | Grade 6          |         |      |                 |         |      |
|-------------|------------------|---------|------|-----------------|---------|------|------------------|---------|------|-----------------|---------|------|
|             | English-speaking |         |      | French-speaking |         |      | English-speaking |         |      | French-speaking |         |      |
|             | Reading          | Writing | Math | Reading         | Writing | Math | Reading          | Writing | Math | Reading         | Writing | Math |
| 1999/2000   | 49               | 52      | 57   | 45              | 50      | 41   | 50               | 48      | 51   | 58              | 58      | 57   |
| 2000/01     | 49               | 52      | 61   | 41              | 51      | 40   | 55               | 53      | 54   | 54              | 57      | 60   |
| 2001/02     | 50               | 55      | 58   | 44              | 55      | 47   | 55               | 53      | 54   | 58              | 61      | 63   |
| 2002/03     | 50               | 55      | 57   | 47              | 58      | 47   | 56               | 54      | 53   | 58              | 63      | 66   |
| 2003/04     | 54               | 58      | 64   | 49              | 63      | 55   | 58               | 54      | 57   | 63              | 68      | 70   |
| 2004/05     | 59               | 61      | 66   | 49              | 68      | 57   | 63               | 59      | 60   | 67              | 70      | 74   |
| 2005/06     | 62               | 64      | 68   | 56              | 72      | 59   | 64               | 61      | 61   | 68              | 73      | 76   |
| 2006/07     | 62               | 64      | 69   | 54              | 73      | 61   | 64               | 61      | 59   | 68              | 74      | 76   |
| 2007/08     | 61               | 66      | 68   | 60              | 74      | 62   | 66               | 67      | 61   | 75              | 80      | 78   |
| 2008/09     | 61               | 68      | 70   | 66              | 76      | 66   | 69               | 67      | 63   | 77              | 79      | 80   |

**2009 Annual Report, OAGO, p. 132.**

Members pointed out that when one compares the Grade 3 math assessment averages for the English-speaking students with those same students moving on three years later to Grade 6, the math averages are on a downward trend.<sup>12</sup> If, however, one looks at the comparison with the French-speaking system for the same time frame, in the first year the math average rises from 41% to 66%; next it moves from 40% to 70% and then from 47% to 74%. Members asked the witnesses what might explain such a dramatic improvement among the French-speaking students in their math scores vis-à-vis the English-speaking students in the same grades over the same time frame.

<sup>12</sup> For example, in 1999/00 Grade 3 English-speaking students moved to Grade 6 in 2002/03. The math average fell from 57% down to 53%. In the following year it moved from 61% to 57%. The next year it rose, 58% to 60% and then 57% to 61%.

Under questioning, witnesses from the Ministry and the Education Quality and Accountability Office indicated the following:

- The French language boards have had full-day learning for about 10 years and evidence shows that early learning does pay off in terms of children being ready to learn in Grade 1.
- The French-language curriculum is a curriculum for the francophone community. While the core principles are the same, the expectations of the French language math curriculum are different from the English language math curriculum.
- The French-speaking community—although spread across the province and very diverse—has a smaller cohort of students and teachers and may benefit from more focused opportunities to bring all of the educators together. As a group they have the same discussions, share the same understanding, and use common approaches along with similar implementation of practices. In other words, the francophone community may have a bit of an edge in terms of getting their entire teacher body “on the same page” at the same time.
- The French and English tests are different and they are developed separately. The core principles are the same but there are differences in sequencing and emphasis of curriculum. The different curriculum and expectations therefore yield different tests and possibly results.
- The French language schools, however, share the same features as English language schools. For example, the Grade 3 elementary teacher teaches English and math. In the secondary schools they specialize. The French secondary schools are very small, and often teachers will teach outside their specialty. But for languages and math, they try to keep those teachers teaching in their specialties to ensure that they provide the best programs possible.

Committee Members expressed surprise on learning that the English-speaking and French-speaking curriculum and assessments differ—not only for mathematics in Grade 3 and 6 but for reading and writing skills as well. For example, French language educators in consultation with the Ministry have decided to introduce the poem in Grade 4 as opposed to Grade 3. By the end of Grade 8, however, both French-speaking and English-speaking students will have basically covered similar material except that it is covered at different times.

### Supplementary Information

Subsequent to the hearings, the Standing Committee asked the Ministry and the Agency to summarize the key differences in the curricula and assessments between the French language system and the English language system for Grades 3 and 6 in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Ministry officials noted the key differences in the curriculum as follows:

The English-language and French-language elementary school curricula have equivalent learning expectations and high standards. Both are developed

according to the same principles and guidelines. During curriculum review, Ministry of Education teams work to ensure consistency and alignment between the expectations in both the English and the French curriculum documents.<sup>13</sup>

In its curriculum, the English-language Boards use *Language* while the French-language Boards use *Français*. While oral communication, reading, and writing strands are the same, the two curricula differ in the contents of the strands. The curriculum *Français* integrates media literacy in three strands—oral communication, reading and writing—whereas it is a separate strand in the *Language* curriculum.<sup>14</sup>

In Mathematics, both curriculum documents cover the same content in each grade level thereby allowing all Ontario Grade 8 students to acquire the same knowledge and skills in Mathematics at the secondary level. As with *Language* and *Français*, however, the contents of the strands are organized differently. In Grade 3 for example, the strand Number Sense and Numeration is broken into four elements for French-language students and three for English-language students. This variation may be related to the language, the acquisition of vocabulary, or the need to sequence the elements slightly differently for pedagogical reasons.<sup>15</sup>

In the Ministry's view, the English-language and French-language curricula, as well as the learning and teaching approaches used by teachers, reflect the needs of the students. Moreover, culturally-sensitive pedagogical resources, ongoing teacher training, and an integrated approach to teaching, constitute the main differences between French and English-language curriculum implementation. These allow for differentiation of both instruction and learning environments thereby contributing to students' success.<sup>16</sup>

The key differences in the EQAO assessments between the English language and French language systems are as follows:

The EQAO tests are based on the overall expectations for the French language (FL) and English language (EL) systems. The structure by level of difficulty is the same in the FL and the EL assessments in reading, writing and mathematics. However, in math, the proportion of questions may vary by strand, and in language, by skill type.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Correspondence from Mr. Kevin Costante, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education (May 26, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> The information requested by the Standing Committee on the EQAO assessments, notably the key differences between the EL and FL systems, was provided by EQAO officials. Correspondence from Marguerite Jackson, Chief Executive Officer, Education Quality and Accountability Office (May 21, 2010).

The EQAO French language test is not a translation of the English test. However, criteria used to develop the test as well as the validation process of the test are equal in terms of rigour and quality.<sup>18</sup>

The Committee was also interested in knowing whether the FL EQAO assessments for Grades 3 and 6 in reading, writing, and mathematics have, in all cases, the same number of multiple-choice questions and open-response questions as the EL EQAO assessments.

Agency officials note that the two assessment programs are identical in form. They contain the same number of open-response and multiple-choice questions at each of the different grades. The items selected reflect a defined curriculum for each population, and assessments follow a pattern of building test challenges on curriculum that teachers have been expected to cover at specific points on a student's journey through school (the end of the primary division in Grade 3; the end of the junior division in grade 6; Grade 9 math; and the OSSLT representing minimum literacy expectations at the end of Grade 9 and administered in Grade 10.)<sup>19</sup>

The population sizes and characteristics of English-language boards and French-language boards vary significantly. The government does not intend to compare English- and French-language EQAO results.<sup>20</sup>

### Committee Recommendation

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

7. **Because of the differences between the Ontario English language and French language curriculum expectations and the related EQAO testing, the results are not comparable. However, these differences are largely unknown to the public and ought to be made clear. The Standing Committee seeks the views of the Ministry of Education and the Office as to whether this can best be accomplished through the public websites of the Ministry of Education and the Education Quality and Accountability Office, or through other public reporting.**

### *Gender*

#### Public Hearings

Agency officials explained that individual schools receive a very detailed EQAO report from the Agency that provides aggregate information over time for their students. They also receive sub-reports on gender—how well boys and girls did on each curriculum expectation.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ontario, Ministry of Education, Responses to Committee's Questions following EQAO presentation to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. Correspondence from Deputy Minister's Office (June 7, 2010), p. 1.

There is a perception that girls are superior in reading and writing but weaker in maths and science. One Member spoke of teachers' concerns that the Grade 3 assessment of reading, writing, and mathematics may be gender biased in that it may be more difficult for male students. He asked officials whether that perception is consistent with EQAO assessment results.

Some witnesses spoke of developing the test so as to weed out gender bias in the reading selections and actual test questions before they become part of the assessment. Ministry officials spoke of the achievement gap between female and male students in Ontario, and of officials visiting schools where the gap is less pronounced to see what the schools are doing right. For example, in one northern Ontario school for special needs elementary students, children were learning how to engage in writing using a laptop which seemed an amenable intervention both to the gender issue (boys like gadgets and technology) as well as the special needs.

Referring to the other historical perception that female students tend to be weaker than male students in maths and science, one Member asked the witnesses if female students are showing improvement in their math skills. In response the Committee was told that through Grade 9, female students are head-to-head with male students in mathematics. For example, across the province in last year's Grade 3 EQAO assessment, 69% of female students and 67% of male students met the standard on the mathematics portion of the test. Initiatives and interventions that started 15 to 20 years ago to encourage female students in maths and sciences appear to be paying off. Some educators think that similar initiatives might work for male students who are struggling with reading and writing.

#### *EQAO's Relationship with Educators—Outreach*

As noted earlier, the Office provides a series of annual provincial reports that include a summary of high level trends, school success stories, and strategies for student improvement. These reports include the results of questionnaires filled out by students, principals, and teachers. Many of the teachers interviewed by the audit team stated that they found the questionnaires repetitive from year to year; and that they lacked the scope for general feedback or the chance to raise other issues. In 2009 the Office initiated a pilot communications strategy, seeking open feedback from a number of school staff on the EQAO student assessment process.

The Auditor recommended that the Office consider formalizing its pilot initiative to provide more open-ended questions for principals, teachers, and students to obtain better feedback as to any concerns, and as to ways to improve the assessment process.

One of the suggestions made by the teachers' federations is that the standard every-child testing in Grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 be scaled back to a random sample due to its cost and intrusiveness. Members asked the witnesses about the rationale behind the EQAO policy of every-child testing.

It was explained that the policy originates from the Royal Commission on Learning which was of the view that it was reasonable to have a check on student learning at a few critical transition points and that parents should know how their child is doing relative to a provincial standard; If only aggregate data is examined, one would find much to celebrate. But one cannot provide detailed feedback to every school. It is only when the data is disaggregated that a picture emerges of the 30% of schoolchildren who are not achieving. Without every student's data, that kind of analysis cannot be done, according to Agency officials.

During the public hearings, Members asked witnesses how the Office seeks to address the public "push and shove" of some of the teachers' federations toward the EQAO mandate.

Ministry and Agency officials responded that they take a series of actions. Teachers are invited to symposia where data training sessions are conducted. They are also invited to sit on advisory councils to examine EQAO processes and provide feedback. EQAO officials work hard at listening and responding to teachers' concerns. For example, the Office shortened the assessments substantially. As well, a commitment was made to the teachers to link the tests to the curriculum. Officials try to put a face to the Agency. A group of five within the Office travels the province meeting with principals, teachers, and parents in order to help stakeholders see that the evidence generated by EQAO assessments can be helpful to them.

Ministry officials also pointed out that thousands of teachers are engaged with the EQAO process through activities such as test development, administration, assessments, and expert panels at all levels—an extraordinary achievement, in the Ministry's view. At the same time, the Office understands that the schools belong to a wider group of stakeholders. Others—students and parents—deserve to have confidence in Ontario's education system. Witnesses added that they have great relationships with teachers; they just happen to have a different point of view on the value of the EQAO.

The Committee is aware that EQAO testing continues to be a concern among some Ontario teachers. The Committee is also aware that in 2009, the Agency initiated a pilot communications strategy to obtain more open feedback from a number of school staff on the EQAO's student assessment process.

### **Committee Recommendations**

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

- 8. The Education Quality and Accountability Office continue its policy of every-child testing.**
- 9. The Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee the summarized results of feedback from the Agency's pilot communications strategy.**

**APPENDIX: A – EQAO GRADE 9 ASSESSMENT OF MATHEMATICS  
2009-10 STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE: <sup>21</sup>**

| Grade 9 Student Questionnaire Provincial Results   |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  | Applied Course<br>All Students (43,201) <sup>22</sup> | Academic Course<br>All Student (97,137) <sup>23</sup> |
| <b>10.</b> Responses of students asked if teacher will count some or all parts of the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics as part of their class mark.                           |   |   |
| yes  | 38%   | 64%   |
| no   | 3%  | 2%  |
| Don't know   | 57%   | 31%   |
| <b>11a.</b> Responses of students asked if they were told how much the assessment will count as part of their class mark.  |   |   |
| yes  | 86%   | 91%   |
| no   | 12%   | 8%  |
| <b>11b.</b> Responses of students asked how much the assessment will count as part of their class mark.  |   |   |
| 1-5%   | 26%   | 32%   |
| 6-10%  | 35%   | 43%   |
| 11-15%   | 16%   | 11%   |
| 16-20%   | 3%  | 3%  |
| 21-25%   | 2%  | 1%  |
| 26-30%   | 4%  | 2%  |
| other  | 1%  | 1%  |
| don't know   | 12%   | 6%  |
| <b>12.</b> Responses of students asked if having the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics count as part of their class mark motivates them to take the assessment more seriously. |   |   |
| yes  | 69%   | 72%   |
| no   | 13%   | 13%   |
| undecided  | 17%   | 13%   |

<sup>21</sup>The table is adapted from the EQAO Provincial Results, *Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics, 2009-2010, Student Questionnaires* (Applied and Academic) (September 29, 2010), pp. 15-16 Internet sites at [http://www.eqao.com/pdf\\_e/provquestionnaire/0910/G9\\_2010\\_SQap\\_P01.PDF](http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/provquestionnaire/0910/G9_2010_SQap_P01.PDF) (applied) and [http://www.eqao.com/pdf\\_e/provquestionnaire/0910/G9\\_2010\\_SQac\\_P01.PDF](http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/provquestionnaire/0910/G9_2010_SQac_P01.PDF) (academic) accessed on October 22, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Numbers and percentages for Questions 11a and 12 are based on the number of Applied math students who answered "yes" to Question no. 10 (16,297). Note: Numbers and percentages for Question 11b are further based on the number of students who answered "yes" to Question 11a. (14,059). See Ibid. (Applied) pp. 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> Numbers and percentages for Questions 11a. and 12 are based on the number of Academic math students who answered "yes" to Question no. 10 (62,371). Note: Numbers and percentages for Question 11b are further based on the number of students who answered "yes" to Question 11a. (57,052). See Ibid. (Academic) pp. 7-8.

## CONSOLIDATED LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts asks the Ministry of Education and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to provide the Committee Clerk with a written response to the Committee's nine recommendations within 120 calendar days of the tabling of this report with the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly.

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

1. On the matter of principals exempting students from EQAO assessments for acceptable reasons and then assessing such students as though they did not achieve the provincial standard, the Standing Committee asks that the Ministry of Education and the Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee as to whether they have considered other options, in particular, for those schools where a disproportionately large number of students have been exempted.
2. The Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee the numbers of exempted students over the past five years with an explanation for any trends that have occurred over that timeframe.
3. On the matter of irregularities and cheating involving last year's EQAO assessments (confirmed in the press by the Education Quality and Accountability Office), the Committee asks that the Office report to the Standing Committee summarizing the key findings or conclusions from the investigations and outline any resulting policy or procedural changes it plans to implement to help deter or combat such irregularities in future.
4. The Ontario College of Teachers tell the Standing Committee on Public Accounts what sanctions, if any, College officials would recommend be applied to teachers who are found to have violated EQAO testing rules.
5. The Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee whether it has now adopted a formal process to investigate and document the steps taken by the Office when its officials become aware of unusual fluctuations in the assessment results. The Office should also report to the Committee whether it might consider adding a section to the standard *School Reports* issued by the Office to every elementary and secondary school in Ontario. This section would provide an explanation for the incidence of unusual fluctuations in the school's assessment results where these have occurred.
6. The Ministry of Education and the Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee the conclusions they have drawn from the published results of the EQAO survey questions posed to Grade 9 teachers and students that asked whether using the EQAO assessment scores as part of the final term mark influences student achievement on the test. The Committee also requests that the Ministry report back as to



whether it has considered having a prescribed minimum percentage (as well as the 30% maximum) of the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics that may count as part of the student final term mark.

7. Because of the differences between the Ontario English language and French language curriculum expectations and the related EQAO testing, the results are not comparable. However, these differences are largely unknown to the public and ought to be made clear. The Standing Committee seeks the views of the Ministry of Education and the Office as to whether this can best be accomplished through the public websites of the Ministry of Education and the Education Quality and Accountability Office, or through other public reporting.
8. The Education Quality and Accountability Office continue its policy of every-child testing.
9. The Education Quality and Accountability Office report to the Standing Committee the summarized results of feedback from the Agency's pilot communications strategy.