

Chapter 4

Ministry of Education

Section 4.04

Education Quality and Accountability Office

Follow-up on VFM Section 3.04, *2009 Annual Report*

Background

The Ontario government established the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) as a Crown agency in 1996, with a mandate to develop and report on province-wide tests of student achievement. Such assessment results are intended to provide reliable and objective data that the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and the province's 72 school boards can use to plan ways of improving student learning.

Each year, the EQAO tests 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. Grade 9 students are tested only in mathematics. To graduate from high school, all students, including those in private schools, must pass the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), which is usually written in Grade 10. The EQAO spent \$33 million in the 2010/11 fiscal year (\$31.7 million in 2008/09), all of it funded by the Ministry.

In our *2009 Annual Report*, we found that the EQAO had adequate procedures and controls for ensuring that its tests accurately reflected the Ministry's curriculum expectations. We also noted that the EQAO, to ensure that the tests' level of difficulty was comparable between years, imposed

strict criteria for the development and field-testing of questions, and thoroughly reviewed test content. The general consensus among stakeholders, including principals and teachers, was that the tests were generally an accurate reflection of students' achievement in meeting the curriculum expectations. However, we identified areas where improvements could be made:

- The EQAO hired an external contractor to visit selected schools to review pre-test preparation, ensure test booklet security, observe the administration of the tests, and undertake other quality-assurance procedures. Overall, the external contractor had reported a high degree of compliance with EQAO administrative procedures, but an improved school selection process was required to reduce the risk of student cheating and non-compliance with administrative procedures. For example, 10 of the province's 72 school boards had not received a visit from the external contractor over the previous five years with respect to the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, while a number of private schools with as few as five students taking this test were visited.
- The EQAO must ensure that the up to 1,700 markers it hires and trains are consistent when grading test papers. To do so, it seeds "validity papers" (test papers previously scored by an

expert panel) among the regular papers. The grades the markers give these validity papers are monitored to determine if retraining is required. The EQAO consistently met its target of having 95% of the validity papers graded within one scoring level of the expert panel's score. However, on a per-question basis, the EQAO often did not meet its target of having 70% of the questions having the same grade as that given by the expert panel.

- The EQAO informally reviews the results at the school and school board levels. However, formal analysis and follow-up may be required to ensure that the testing process can be used more effectively to evaluate the reliability of assessment results. For example, we noted that some schools' EQAO results fluctuated by as much as 50% from one year to the next, but these instances were not being systematically flagged for follow-up to determine what accounted for such a dramatic change.
- The EQAO annually reports student test results, as well as results from questionnaires given to students, teachers, and principals on its activities. The school staff we interviewed stated that the questionnaires did not sufficiently allow for feedback on ways to improve the testing process. They also felt that the EQAO should take a bigger role in explaining the assessment process to parents and other stakeholders.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts held a hearing on this audit in March 2010. In November 2010, the Committee tabled a report in the Legislature resulting from this hearing. The report contained nine recommendations and requested the Ministry of Education, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), and the Ontario College of Teachers to report back to the Committee with respect to:

- whether the Ministry and EQAO have considered other options concerning the matter where principals exempt students from EQAO assessments for acceptable reasons and then assess such students as if they had not achieved the provincial standard, particularly for those schools where a disproportionately large number of students have been exempted;
- the number of exempted students over the previous five years, along with an explanation for any trends occurring over that time frame (EQAO);
- a summary of the EQAO's key findings or conclusions from its investigation into the matter of irregularities and cheating involved in last year's EQAO assessments (which it confirmed in the press), including an outline of any resulting policy or procedural changes it plans to implement;
- what sanctions, if any, the Ontario College of Teachers would recommend be applied to teachers who have been found in violation of the EQAO testing rules;
- whether the EQAO has adopted a formal process to investigate unusual fluctuations in test results and document the steps that it takes in dealing with these, and whether it would consider adding a section explaining such fluctuations in the standard *School Reports* that it issues to every elementary and secondary school in the province;
- the conclusions that the Ministry and the EQAO have drawn from the published results of the EQAO survey of 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, and whether the Ministry has considered a prescribed minimum percentage (as well as the 30% maximum) of the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics that would count as part of the student's final term mark;

- the views of the Ministry and the EQAO on how to best make clear to the public the differences between the Ontario English-language and French-language curriculums and the differences in the related EQAO testing, and that the testing results are therefore not comparable; and
- a summary of results from the EQAO on the feedback it received on its pilot communications strategy.

The Ministry, EQAO, and the College formally responded to the Committee on March 30, 2011. A number of the issues raised by the Committee were similar to our observations. Where the Committee's recommendations are similar to ours, this follow-up includes the recent actions reported by the Ministry to address the concerns raised by both the Committee and our 2009 audit.

Status of Actions Taken on Recommendations

According to information received from the EQAO, substantial progress has been made on implementing almost all of the recommendations from our *2009 Annual Report*. Several recommendations—such as a more formal complaints process, an improved approach to selecting schools for quality assurance visits, and a new supervisory back-reading process to improve marker accuracy—were fully implemented. At the time of our follow-up, the EQAO was still assessing some initiatives, such as on-line marker training and more open-ended questions on its questionnaires to principals, teachers, and students. The status of the action taken on each of our recommendations is described in the following sections.

TEST DEVELOPMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

Recommendation 1

To improve the Education Quality and Accountability Office's (EQAO's) test development and administration process and to ensure that student assessments continue to be reliable and objective and that all students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their competence, the EQAO should:

- highlight to principals and teachers any significant changes in the compliance requirements outlined in the guides to administer EQAO testing;
- improve the process for selecting the schools visited by quality assurance monitors to ensure that all school boards and large private schools are periodically monitored;
- assess the equity of including exempt students in the overall assessment results as having not met the provincial standard; and
- identify schools and school boards where the number of exempt students appears to be relatively high and follow up to ensure that exemptions are justified.

Status

In its 2011 Administration Guides, the EQAO has added a "What's New" section that highlights the new procedures and information included for the first time this year. The EQAO has also created new Teacher Bulletins that summarize key administrative points relating to the process before, during, and after the examinations. These bulletins help to further emphasize key compliance requirements and, combined with the redesigned Administrative Guides, help to keep school staff informed of the current testing procedures.

Following our audit in 2009, the EQAO introduced tracking procedures to help ensure that all school boards are visited periodically by quality assurance monitors during testing. The five-year distribution of English and French school boards visited has been examined to identify boards that may be under- or over-represented. When selecting

schools to visit in the current year, the EQAO will replace over-represented school boards with those in the same region that have been visited less often. This will allow the frequency of visits to be more evenly distributed over each five-year period. Additionally, the quality assurance monitors will visit any schools where administrative irregularities or other concerns were noted in the previous year. At the time of our follow-up, these tracking procedures were not in place for private schools. The EQAO has indicated that it will review its process to select large private schools for visits in future years.

The EQAO's public website provides reports on each school that feature an overall assessment result for students who participated in EQAO assessments, as well as an overall result for all students, including those who were exempt from writing the tests. The EQAO is assessing options for reporting and displaying the results for all and participating students on the same page in public reports beginning in 2012.

The EQAO investigates school boards that exceed its threshold of 6% exempt in any one type of assessment (reading, writing, and mathematics). In 2010, four English boards and one French board in the primary and junior levels exceeded this threshold for at least one assessment and therefore were asked for justification or to produce a plan to reduce their exemption rates. In addition, the EQAO asks all school boards to review their individual schools and to discuss any unusually high exemption rates. The EQAO has informed us that exemptions are not permitted for students following the Ontario curriculum in Grade 9 mathematics and the OSSLT, so that it is students participating in locally developed courses who fall into the "exempt" category. When this classification anomaly is accounted for, true exemption rates fall below the level for concern.

ASSESSMENT MARKING AND ANALYSIS

Marking of EQAO Assessments

Recommendation 2

To improve the assessment marking process to ensure that results continue to be valid, consistent, and reliable, the Education Quality and Accountability Office should:

- *consider adopting on-line training for assessment markers;*
- *examine different methods to increase the number of validity reads for each marker, especially early in the marking process; and*
- *consider implementing supervisory backreading to help improve marker accuracy.*

Status

The EQAO has informed us that it worked with a consultant in early 2011 to develop specifications for an on-line training pilot study for markers of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) long writing question. The pilot study (conducted in the summer and fall of 2011) will investigate the feasibility of developing on-line training for markers and implementing it in 2012.

In 2009, the EQAO implemented a formal process to confirm the consistency of its marking by asking markers to score a set number of validity papers per day. The EQAO tracks the average number of validity papers marked to determine if markers are meeting their daily targets. Markers of English-language tests are required to mark 10 validity papers daily; there are usually no validity reads on the first and last day of training, when other tasks need to be completed. For French-language tests, the amount of time to score papers and perform other tasks including training is shorter; therefore, these markers may average as few as five validity papers daily. If markers do not demonstrate sufficient scoring accuracy, the supervisory backreading process is implemented.

This process involves interventions by supervisors. When the scoring supervisor identifies a marker whose marking is not valid, as indicated

by the validity paper scoring reports, the marker receives retraining focusing on the identified problem areas. Once retraining has been completed, the marker independently marks six booklets, which the supervisor then backreads. If the supervisor and the marker score the booklets within the acceptable metrics, the marker is integrated back into full scoring. However, if the scores given by the marker fall outside the acceptable metrics, the supervisor gives the marker further retraining. In this process, the scoring supervisor also reviews the marker's validity reports for the following day.

Assessment Analysis and Follow-up

Recommendation 3

To ensure that assessment results continue to be reliable, consistent, and valid, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) should enhance its quality assurance procedures by:

- *implementing a formal complaints process to help determine if there are any trends and to identify potential actions that could prevent non-compliance with assessment guidelines or student cheating;*
- *considering more complete disclosure when test results at a particular school are withheld as a deterrent against non-compliance with assessment guidelines;*
- *outlining in its administration guides potential penalties for violating EQAO policy;*
- *tailoring its quality assurance processes to address unique risks associated with different assessments;*
- *reviewing Grade 9 applied mathematics results to assess where incorporating EQAO results into the student's final mark is effective in motivating students and, if so, suggest a more consistent approach; and*
- *investigating any abnormally large variations in school assessment results from year to year and ensuring that they are justified.*

Status

The EQAO continues to consult with its stakeholders to determine the process by which assessment irregularities can be brought to its attention by members of the education community and/or the public. Such input serves to inform the EQAO of ways in which it can enhance adherence to administration guidelines. The process being developed to ensure the integrity and validity of assessment results is expected to be posted on the EQAO website in the fall of 2011. While this process is intended to guide individuals in bringing issues related to assessment irregularities to the attention of the EQAO, the website will specify that irregularities involving students are to be brought to the attention of the school principal.

In 2010, the EQAO provided the media with a list of schools for which results had been withheld because of administrative irregularities. The EQAO has indicated that it will continue this practice and has compiled a similar list for 2011. In addition, when a school's results are withheld because of administrative irregularities, the public school report and individual student reports indicate this using the symbol "W" in the place of scores and in a separate letter to parents.

The EQAO's 2011 Administration Guides include a section describing various reporting outcomes that may follow if the staff identifies irregularities during testing. For example, no scores are assigned to students if they receive explanations of any concepts or if they are provided with instructional materials. The guide explains that this may have an impact on school and board results. The summary of professional responsibilities distributed to school staff also explains that administrators should not encourage students in any way to revise their responses. Regarding this, it states that "any circumstances that ... may have affected the validity of any student performance ... must be documented and reported to EQAO." In March 2011, the EQAO developed and posted to its website the *Video Guide to Key Administration Procedures*. This video explains that any action taken by educators or

school staff to deliberately contravene test administration procedures constitutes professional misconduct, and states that the EQAO will refer confirmed cases to the Ontario College of Teachers when this is determined to be necessary.

To address the increased risk of teacher or principal interventions in the lower grades, the EQAO has indicated to us that for the 2010/11 school year, it increased quality assurance visits to primary and junior assessments by 21%, while it decreased visits in secondary schools by 34%. EQAO monitors made unannounced return visits to a small number of schools where test administration irregularities were observed during their first visit. To address the higher risk of student collusion in high schools (Grade 9 and OSSLT), the EQAO selects for quality assurance visits all schools where an assessment of the pattern of responses to multiple choice questions yields at least one “high” rating for probable collusion between two students.

In 2011, the EQAO added questions to the teacher questionnaire that surveyed whether or not teachers counted the EQAO Grade 9 mathematics assessment as part of the students’ final course marks. According to Ministry of Education policy, a final course exam must not count for more than 30% of the course mark. Therefore, Grade 9 teachers are allowed to count the Grade 9 assessment of mathematics for up to a maximum of 30%. A vast majority of teachers indicated that they did count the EQAO assessment as part of the final course mark. Approximately 65% of students in the academic course and 40% in the applied course said that their teachers would count the EQAO assessment as part of their final course mark. The number of students achieving the provincial standard was consistently higher among those who said they knew that the EQAO assessment would count than among those who did not. However, according to the EQAO’s survey, there was no consistent pattern in the variation in student achievement according to the weight assigned to the EQAO assessment. The full details and results of this survey will be provided to teachers, principals, school board staff,

and the Ministry of Education for consideration. The EQAO will advise that this information should be included in the course outline and assessment plan provided to students at the beginning of the school year.

In August 2009, the EQAO began identifying schools with significant increases in the previous year in the percentage of students achieving level 3 or above on any one assessment. A significant increase is defined as between 20% and 30%, depending on the previous year’s results; a sliding scale is applied because it is expected that schools with a high percentage of students achieving the provincial standard are less likely to achieve a large gain in the following year. For the 2009/10 school year, 39 school boards were contacted regarding schools with increases that met the criteria for investigation. The responsibility for investigation lies with school superintendents, who involve school principals and central board staff in their information search. Most investigations concluded that improved student performance was due to education programs and other initiatives. The quality assurance report prepared by EQAO noted that, in all cases, the schools with significant increases were able to provide rationales that supported the increases, and there was no evidence of irregularities. For its 2011 reporting, the EQAO has started to include guidance to help principals interpret and explain their school results.

Recommendation 4

To further improve its policies and processes and the procedures designed to produce accurate and reliable reports that can be used to improve student performance, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) should:

- *consider formalizing its pilot initiative to provide more open-ended questions for principals, teachers, and students to obtain better feedback on any concerns with the assessment process and ways to improve it;*
- *develop a more formal outreach strategy to give all schools and school boards an opportunity to*

gain further insight into the value of EQAO data and how it can be used to improve student learning; and

- *increase the understanding of parents and the general public of how the assessment process enhances student learning.*

Status

The quality assurance monitors who visit a sample of schools during test administration are given questionnaires that contain open-ended questions to use in their interviews of teachers and principals. The EQAO has indicated that resource constraints keep it from administering open-ended questionnaires directly to all principals, teachers, and students, but that it will consider including new open-ended questions each year to continue obtaining more feedback on its assessment process.

The EQAO has a School Support and Outreach team that conducts regional workshops shortly after the schools receive their results. This team also conducts presentations on specific topics, profiles schools with success stories, organizes seminars, and responds to individual requests for support by boards or schools. According to the EQAO, it has conducted more than 250 of these workshops and presentations since 2009. The EQAO indicated that it would enhance its outreach strategy in 2011

by establishing a section dedicated to outreach on its website, giving presentations to graduating teacher candidates at Ontario faculties of education, providing opportunities for its board members to become involved in outreach, and using digital media to provide other outreach opportunities for educators and parents.

The EQAO has indicated that it has developed a five-year parent engagement strategy to enhance EQAO's parent resources, increase awareness of those resources, build capacity for the education community to engage with parents about EQAO, and continue successful engagement activities. In 2010, the first year of this strategy, EQAO provided principals with new resources and templates for discussing test results with parents. Opinion editorials and parent-focused communications were also included as part of the EQAO's media campaign. A new general information guide for parents was distributed in September 2010 for parents of elementary school students, and in spring 2011 for Grade 9 math and OSSLT students. The EQAO has informed us that its board has requested the development of an information campaign aimed at the general public to be implemented during the 2011/12 fiscal year.