

# Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

Follow-up on VFM Section 3.07, 2009 Annual Report

## Background

The Ministry of Education (Ministry) is responsible for the system of publicly funded elementary and secondary school education in Ontario. Its responsibilities include developing the primary and secondary school curricula, setting requirements for student diplomas, and providing funding to school boards. The Ministry also set up the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO)—a government agency—to provide independent assessments of student achievement by testing students in reading, writing, and mathematics. The Ministry's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (Secretariat), the subject of one of our 2009 audits and this follow-up, was established in November 2004 to help more than 4,000 elementary schools across 72 school boards to meet student-achievement targets. From the time it was established in 2004 to March 31, 2011, the Secretariat spent \$505 million (\$340 million by March 31, 2009), with almost \$423 million (\$288 million by March 31, 2009) transferred to school boards.

The Ontario government made a significant commitment to improving student achievement when, in 2004, it set a goal that 75% of all 12-year-olds (grade 6 students) would score a level-three

standard (approximately a B average) on province-wide testing for reading, writing, and mathematics by 2008. Although the Ministry had not achieved this goal by 2008, substantial progress had been made over the five years previous to our 2009 audit, and the percentage of 12-year-olds achieving the provincial standard increased from an average of 56% in 2003/04 to 65% in 2007/08. We stated at the time of our audit in 2009 that further increasing this percentage would be a challenging undertaking and noted a number of improvements that could be made to help achieve this goal. Some of our more significant observations at the time of the 2009 audit were:

- Although the Secretariat and the school boards we visited had done some limited assessment of the effectiveness of the secretariat programs, further analysis was required if the Secretariat was to ensure that its funding of almost \$288 million had been directed to the initiatives that provide the most benefit.
- School board improvement plans had been initiated to help teachers, principals, and school board staff plan and implement strategies to improve student achievement. The Ministry had developed a framework for an effective improvement-planning process. However, neither the Secretariat nor the boards we visited documented, monitored, or

reported on the plans to the extent necessary to assess whether the plans were contributing to improved student achievement. Also, because it exercised only limited oversight, the Secretariat did not have the information needed to identify patterns and trends among school boards, so it could not identify the most successful initiatives and share them with other boards.

- Secretariat program funding was not always allocated to school boards and schools with the greatest need. Rather, funding allocation was based on average daily enrolment or the reason a given amount of funding went to a school board could not be fully explained by the Secretariat. We found that, for one major program, the board with the greatest number of schools designated as low-performing received only \$17 per student, while several boards with no schools designated as low-performing received more than twice this amount per student.
- The Secretariat routinely uses certain boards as “bankers” to act as distributors of funds to third parties or other school boards. We questioned the need for such arrangements and noted that there is no memorandum of understanding or agreement between the Secretariat and the banker boards outlining respective roles and responsibilities, accountability relationships, reporting requirements, and service levels to be provided. Also, the Secretariat paid banker boards administrative fees that in some cases appeared excessive.

We made a number of recommendations for improvement and received commitments from the Ministry that it would take action to address our concerns.

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts held a hearing on this audit in May 2010. In Decem-

ber 2010 the Committee tabled a report in the Legislature resulting from this hearing. The report contained six recommendations and requested that the Ministry of Education report back to the Committee with respect to the following:

- what measures the Ministry is considering to make better use of cohort tracking to assess the progress of the same group of students over time;
- the criteria the Ministry uses to assess school board improvement plans, including an update on the template that the Ministry has developed for the boards to use and how it plans to communicate best practices to all school boards;
- the results of the Ministry’s review of the effectiveness of the Secretariat’s various programs, specifying the review criteria used, the results of previous reviews, and any program changes that have resulted from the reviews;
- the Ministry’s most recent data on the amount of funding allocated to secretariat programs on the basis of needs and the amount based on enrolment, its criteria for assessing whether program money has been spent effectively, whether it has identified any program funding that should be redirected, and the percentage of total funding that was actually spent on the intended services;
- an interim report from the Ministry on its review of lead or banker board use, specifying:
  - whether the Ministry is on track to complete its review by the end of the 2010/11 fiscal year;
  - what initiatives formerly administered by lead/banker boards have been returned to the Ministry;
  - whether the Ministry will continue to use lead/banker boards and, if so, what criteria it will use to select them and to monitor their expenditures; and
  - what criteria the Ministry will use to determine the appropriate levels of payment for

services provided by lead/banker boards and for reviewing their expenses; and

- an update of the Ministry's assessment of data from the study it commissioned to compare the consistency of students' report card marks with their grade 3 and grade 6 EQAO achievement results and whether the Ministry will consider ongoing tracking of the correlation.

The Ministry responded to the Committee in March 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 Ministry, substantial progress has been made on implementing all of the recommendations in our *2009 Annual Report*. For example, the Ministry reported the completion of thorough reviews of the board improvement-planning process, of all the Secretariat's program initiatives, and of the correlation between report card marks and EQAO results. These reviews resulted in, for example, the development of new criteria for the board planning process and the elimination, revision, or expansion of several programs. The Ministry also completed the implementation of the Ontario Statistical Neighbours System, a system with demographic, school, and student performance information used for program planning, and the Ministry is training all boards in how to use it. The status of the action taken on each of our recommendations at the time of our follow-up was as follows.

## MEASURING AND REPORTING ON PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

### Recommendation 1

*The Ministry of Education should develop more comprehensive indicators for measuring and reporting on its effectiveness in improving student achievement. In addition to reporting the percentage of 12-year-olds who are at or above the provincial standard, it should also consider reporting changes in the gap between the top-performing and lower-performing student groups and schools, as well as how specific student cohorts perform over time while participating in the programs and initiatives intended to improve their performance.*

### Status

The Ministry informed us that it uses EQAO test results over time as one method for measuring improvements in student learning and achievement in grades 3 and 6. Cohort tracking now provides the Ministry with an additional way to assess student progress and gives some insight into the effectiveness of the Ministry's previous efforts to support students. Such tracking has also become one of the means to identify areas where performance could be improved, so that information can be developed about how to focus support on these identified areas of need.

Now that the EQAO has begun to regularly track cohorts of students, the Ministry has determined that most cohorts have been improving in reading, writing, and mathematics. For example, of the 120,000 students who attended school in English-language school boards and who wrote both the grade 3 assessment in 2006/07 and the grade 6 assessment in 2009/10, 10% more met the standard in reading in grade 6 than in grade 3, 6% more met the standard in writing, but 8% fewer met the standard in mathematics. For the 5,700 students who attended school in French-language school boards and who wrote both assessments, the results for reading, writing, and mathematics improved by 24%, 6%, and 20%, respectively.

The Ministry informed us that cohort-tracking data will continue to be used going forward from 2009/10 as a needs assessment and improvement tool for school boards. The Ministry noted that it uses EQAO test results over time for its planning purposes and for selecting priorities. The Ministry also tracks the proportion of students at each EQAO performance level, one through four (similar to letter grades). Level three, equivalent to a B grade, is an indication that the student has demonstrated most of the required skills and is currently at the provincial standard. Cohort tracking also includes analysis of specific groups of students, such as males and females, English- and French-language learners, and students with special needs. It compares the results for specific groups such as these to overall student results to help inform its plans to reduce the gaps in achievement.

The Ministry also indicated that it has introduced changes to the assessment, evaluation, and reporting of elementary student achievement by implementing a new fall progress report that allows teachers to give parents personalized feedback on each student's strengths and on steps required for improvement without grading students.

## SCHOOL BOARD IMPROVEMENT PLANS

### Recommendation 2

*To ensure that the improvement-planning process is sufficient to support boards, administrators, principals, and teachers in helping students to improve results and progress toward the provincial standard in achievement testing, the Ministry of Education should:*

- *implement a formal improvement-plan review process to help ensure that all of the necessary components of an effective plan are included;*
- *require that school boards post improvement plans online to enhance accountability and transparency;*
- *consider adopting the practice followed in some other provinces of using a formal contract with school boards that would require school boards*

*to periodically report their results in achieving the goals in their improvement plans; and*

- *properly document the result of its monitoring efforts along with any required corrective action to be taken and any subsequent follow-up where plans are not complete.*

### Status

We were informed that a ministry working group put in place a formal improvement-plan review process that articulates the criteria for good board improvement plans and provides an assessment template for improvement planning. These criteria include:

- assessment of student needs and achievements;
- identification of SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, time-bound) goals;
- development of indicators to measure student achievement;
- identification of required human and financial resources;
- identification of professional learning needs for educators;
- a process for data collection and analysis;
- clearly defined responsibilities for plan implementation and monitoring; and
- comparison of planned results with actual outcomes.

The Ministry's student achievement officers will use these criteria to assess whether board goals are appropriate and are currently being met, and will document their review of the school board plans and provide feedback to boards that includes information on best practices.

The Ministry has also developed a refined version of its School Effectiveness Framework to be used in the board improvement planning process to provide guidance for assessing student and professional learning needs. In addition, the Ministry has developed and provided boards with other resources, such as examples of SMART goals to help set targets and develop indicators for monitoring student achievement.

Although the Ministry advised us that it has not formally required boards to post improvement plans online, we were informed that all boards have done so. The Ministry also noted that it has not entered into any formal contracts with school boards to periodically report their results in achieving the goals in their improvement plans. However, revisions to the *Education Act* pursuant to Bill 177, the *Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act, 2009*, increased the responsibility of boards to report publicly regarding their plans to promote student achievement and well-being.

The Ministry informed us that it has put additional monitoring processes in place, with staff making three annual visits to school boards regarding their improvement plans. The first visit in the fall helps develop the board improvement plan and ensure that the Ministry's criteria are included before the final plan is submitted to the Ministry. The second visit, in the middle of the school year, is used to monitor the plan against the SMART goals, indicators, and targets to identify areas that require corrective action. The final visit, at the end of the school year, is to document, review, and evaluate the impact on student achievement.

## MONITORING AND FUNDING OF PROGRAM INITIATIVES

### Recommendation 3

*To ensure that student achievement initiatives are effective and that limited resources are used appropriately, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat should:*

- *formally evaluate how well all its program initiatives contribute to improving student achievement, and modify or eliminate the less effective initiatives;*
- *ensure that its program funds are allocated to the areas of greatest need;*
- *ensure that program funds are being spent for the intended purpose;*
- *ensure that expenditures made by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education are appropriately approved and supported; and*

- *reconsider pre-flowing funds to “banker” school boards.*

### Status

The Ministry noted that, in 2010, it formalized a three-year plan to assess the Secretariat programs and initiatives. This review was guided by a logic model designed to systematically assess whether a program contributed to student learning and achievement, by aligning program goals, inputs, outputs, activities, and performance measures. Overall, the Ministry indicated that it had performed an initial assessment of all its programs. As a result of this initial review, one initiative, Leader-to-Leader, has been eliminated. Several other initiatives have been revised or expanded since we completed our *2009 Annual Report*. Both external and internal research has been used as input for the assessment of student achievement initiatives, including the following reviews:

- In December 2010, an internal review was completed on the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) program, which focuses on schools where fewer than 50% of the students met the provincial requirement of level three on EQAO testing. The 2009/10 results for the 137 OFIP schools showed an overall average improvement of five percentage points, and in 62 of these schools more than 50% of the students met the provincial standard. The study noted that the strongest indicator of success reported by the 62 successful schools was their self-assessment using the School Effectiveness Framework. The results of this study were shared with school boards.
- An external study contracted by the Ministry and completed in November 2010, *Collaborative Inquiry and Learning in Mathematics (CILM)*, identified that CILM is an appropriate approach for teaching and learning math. Based on these findings, the Ministry expanded CILM to all boards. In addition, internal research done by the Ministry on the

Student Work Study Teacher Initiative found a number of factors contributing to the success of students' work moving from level two to level three (the provincial standard). The Ministry has shared these success factors with school boards.

- In January 2011, another external study was completed on the Schools on the Move initiative to identify which factors contributed to student achievement in the 32 participating schools that faced challenging circumstances. In particular, it identified four factors contributing to student success that could be transferred to other schools: support for a common code of behaviour throughout the school; a feeling of responsibility among teachers for student learning; teachers' commitment to the notion that all students can learn successfully; and the explicit teaching of literacy skills to students. The Ministry has indicated that it shared these findings with schools in the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership program.

The Ministry advised us that it analyzes final report-backs from the school boards to assess whether board program funding has been allocated to the areas of greatest need. In our 2009 audit we noted that for almost 70% of the funding over the previous five years, either the funding had been based on student enrolment or the Ministry could not fully explain its allocation method. In the 2010/11 fiscal year, the Ministry indicated that the majority of its program funding was now allocated on the basis of need. In addition, the Ministry indicated that it had instituted further accountability measures for school boards by specifying the funding criteria, reporting requirements, payment schedules, and allowable expenditure categories in transfer payment contracts to help ensure that funds were spent for the purposes intended.

The Ministry advised that it recently approved and released *Administration Fee and Lead Board Guidelines* with criteria for transfer-payment expenditures to third-party organizations, such

as the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) and boards that act as lead boards.

In the guidelines, clarification is provided with respect to the overall rationale for the selection of lead boards, and the criteria that need to be considered and included in determining whether funding to a lead board is required. These include:

- whether it would be more efficient and effective in delivering the services;
- whether it would provide a more economical delivery to ensure value for money; and
- whether specific expertise resides with the lead board.

## CONSISTENCY OF STUDENT ASSESSMENTS

### Recommendation 4

*To help ensure that students are being assessed in a consistent way, the Ministry of Education should monitor the results from different types of assessment, especially those from report cards and Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests, to identify any major discrepancies for follow-up.*

### Status

In March 2010, the Ministry completed a study that examined the correlation between report card marks and EQAO results for grades 3 and 6. The study found that report card marks and EQAO results appear to be reasonably well aligned and that classroom-based assessments are relatively consistent over time. It also found that report card marks in the two years prior to the EQAO assessments are consistent predictors of EQAO results.

The study found that the relationship between report card marks and EQAO results was virtually the same for grades 3 and 6, and that assessment practices of EQAO and teaching to the curriculum were relatively well aligned. The study also found that report card marks were more closely aligned with EQAO results for female than for male students.

The study also looked into variations between report card marks and EQAO results based on grade level, curriculum, and student gender. The Ministry noted that there will be some variation in these assessments, because the nature and purpose of the large-scale EQAO assessment are very different from those of classroom assessment. The EQAO assessment reflects a point in time, whereas report cards summarize a longer period of time and include consideration of greater specific circumstances pertaining to the student.

The Ministry is reviewing these findings and further reviewing its capacity to perform similar statistical analysis in the future.

## ONTARIO STATISTICAL NEIGHBOURS INFORMATION SYSTEM

### Recommendation 5

*To ensure that all school boards and schools can obtain useful and relevant information to develop*

*strategies for improving student achievement, the Ministry of Education should consider granting them direct access to the Ontario Statistical Neighbours information system. This would be more cost-effective than school boards having to develop and maintain their own systems.*

### Status

The Ministry indicated that it has completed the development of the online Ontario Statistical Neighbours system, which gives school boards direct access to useful information necessary for improving student achievement. At the time of our follow-up, 50 of the 60 English district school boards and 11 of the 12 French district school boards had received training from the Ministry. The Ministry expected the training to be complete in fall 2011.