



Can EQAO Results Determine School Success?

(Revised, May 2010)

According to the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), its provincial assessment results and reports are intended to “provide educators, parents and the public with a snapshot of how well Ontario students are fulfilling the curriculum expectations in reading, writing and math.”¹ The results can be an important indicator, and the data have been “used widely to focus support for student achievement in school communities across Ontario”. While this information has been broadly employed as part of the data for school planning and programming, there has also been growing misuse of these publicly available EQAO school-by-school results by different interest groups for judging school performance or for school ranking purposes. The intent of this fact sheet is to explain why EQAO data, especially the publicly available results, alone **cannot** indicate school success; nor can they be the sole evidence to determine whether or not certain school improvement projects are working. The reasons are highlighted as follows:

1. EQAO results do not reflect the performance of all grades or all students in a school. Each year the EQAO tests only Grade 3 and 6 students in an elementary school. Depending on the grade levels offered by a school, some schools (such as those which provide programs up to Grade 5) would have only one grade tested. It will be dangerous to judge the performance level of a school population by the results of a single or two grades of students.
2. Comparison of EQAO annual results cannot tell if a school has improved or not. Measuring growth entails comparing results over time. Comparing EQAO annual results is, however, not valid for this purpose. Although year-by-year comparison can inform the different achievement levels between two student populations (cohorts), it cannot suggest if performance change has been made by the same group of students over the year. To determine if a school effort has produced an impact on students, ongoing progress made by each cohort needs to be tracked regularly over time.
3. EQAO assessment is *not* intended to measure students’ ongoing progress. Individual students do not take EQAO tests annually. After the Grade 3 assessment, students will not take the provincial test again until three years later in Grade 6. Therefore, for individual students, EQAO is conducted too far apart to be able to show students’ change in performance on an ongoing basis.
4. EQAO publicly available results cannot fully capture improvements made by all students. The four major EQAO achievement levels used in public reporting are too broad to reflect the incremental change students may have made within these achievement levels. For these students, their progress is not accounted for in the EQAO publicly reported results. Furthermore, even if some students can move up from one level to another, the fact that most reporting collapses the results into a combined percentage achieving Levels 3 and 4 further masks the improvement made by those students from Level 1 to 2 or from Level 3 to 4. It thus *understates* the level of change that might have been made by “very low achievement” schools from Level 1 to 2, or the “very high achievement” schools from Level 3 to 4. Conversely, it *overstates* the performance of median schools with a relatively high transition from Level 2 to 3.
5. Comparing school-by-school EQAO results without context is misleading. As Marguerite Jackson (Chief Executive Officer of the EQAO) commented in a recent statement about the annual Fraser Institute Report (February 17, 2008), “Any judgment about a school’s results

¹Borst, J. (February 17, 2008). *EQAO, CEO speaks out on 2008 Fraser Institute Rankings*.
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- without due consideration for factors such as the number of participating students and the proportion of ESL, ELD and special needs students, as well as the number of recently arrived to the school or the country is inappropriate and misleading.” Aside from students’ demographics, other local school factors - such as school culture, leadership, staff efforts, school focus and plans – should also be considered when assessing the performance of a school. Hence, value-added assessment, which factors in local variables, should be employed as an additional method to measure students’ rate of learning in a school against its own baseline, and/or against schools in similar contexts.
6. Using any single measure to judge school success is over-simplistic and can be inaccurate. School improvement or school reform is not a program intervention with a narrowly defined focus. It is a whole school effort involving change at all levels and with multiple expected outcomes in order to meet the ultimate goal of improving students’ future success. While academic achievement is one of the key outcome indicators, it itself has many facets and cannot be fully captured by a single measure such as EQAO alone. After all, student success is not about academic achievement *only*. Students’ future success is related to multiple variables such as their physical and social well-being, their participation level, school climate, staff engagement, parent involvement, etc. Therefore, multiple tools, including qualitative information, need to be in place to monitor growth and change in the various areas. Again as Jackson points out, “... no single test can offer a complete picture of what a child has learned. That is why EQAO results simply can’t be used as a catch-all method for labelling a “good” or “bad” school.”
 7. School effects take time to show and measure. It is impossible to gauge the efficacy of a school improvement effort within a school year. According to Michael Fullan, school reform takes 5 years or more. “...all change involves anxiety and struggle and cannot be assimilated unless meaning is shared by all involved. At best this cultural change is a three to five year process.” (*Leading and Learning for the 21stC*, Vol. 1 No. 3 - January 2002).² Longitudinal tracking is thus necessary to monitor change over a number of years before school effects and success can be determined.

Hence, to determine school success or school impact by simply using a publicly available source of data, e.g., EQAO results, or any single measure is flawed and would not do any justice to the people involved in the change process. Instead, a thorough multi-year research and review plan needs to be in place, which entails the identification of school-wide outcome areas, use of multiple measures and research methodologies, as well as longitudinal tracking. Only through comprehensive and long-term monitoring can one properly assess the effectiveness and the types of impact produced by a school improvement or reform project.

Should you require additional information please contact us at 416-394-4929 (Organizational Development/Research and Information Services Department, 1 Civic Centre Court, Ground Floor, Etobicoke, ON M9C 2B)

² Fullan also reported the following observation: “In year one people experience the difficulties of getting started, and some misgivings about the top-down nature of the strategies (remember we are talking about large scale reform); in year two (if the strategy is sound) people talk about initial success; by year three people can see that their own skills, especially the collective skills of teachers and principals together, have developed. They see results of their efforts, can pinpoint problems in student learning, and have greater confidence about how to address the problems.” (*Accomplishing Large Scale Reform: A Tri-Level Proposition*, Michael Fullan - article prepared for the Journal of Educational Change, November 2001)