



Laurie French
PRESIDENT
*Ontario Public School
Boards' Association*



Gail Anderson
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
*Ontario Public School
Boards' Association*

Ontario Public School Boards' Association
439 University Avenue, 18th floor
Toronto, ON M5G 1Y8
Tel: (416) 340-2540
Fax: (416) 340-7571
E-mail: webmaster@opsba.org
Website: www.opsba.org
Twitter: @OPSBA



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

Discussion Paper: EQAO and Large Scale Testing In Ontario



Discussion Paper

EQAO and Large Scale Testing in Ontario

The 2013-2014 priorities of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association include action to promote 21st Century Education. One of the specific areas of emphasis within this priority stipulates:

OPSBA, through the Education Program Work Team, will develop a position on EQAO testing taking into account Provincial Policy Memorandum 155 and the recent position paper of the Ontario Teachers' Federation.

In November 2013, OPSBA's Education Program Work Team initiated a survey to solicit feedback from member boards including all trustees and school board senior staff on a series of questions related to Education Quality and Accountability Office and large scale testing. A specific question with regard to Diagnostic Testing was also included in the survey. The full set of questions is attached in *Appendix A*.

In addition to this final version of the OPSBA discussion paper summarizing the survey results from 2013-14, it incorporates the feedback and recommendations developed following a review of the working draft during 2014-15 and 2015-16 with member boards and the Education Program Work Team.

Survey Response

The survey was circulated to all member boards including all trustees and senior staff. Responses were received from 27 of 31 district school boards and represented a cross-section of trustees and school board staff. In all, 82 survey responses were received. While some respondents did not provide input on every question asked, overall the detail of comment received in answer to the survey questions was extensive.

The Education Program Work Team reviewed the survey responses identifying key themes and, for the purposes of this paper, subsequently extrapolated issues that need to be considered in examining the future of large-scale testing.

Section 1 represents a synthesis of the advice to be drawn from an analysis of the responses and is presented as a series of recommendations to be considered in a discussion of large-scale testing.

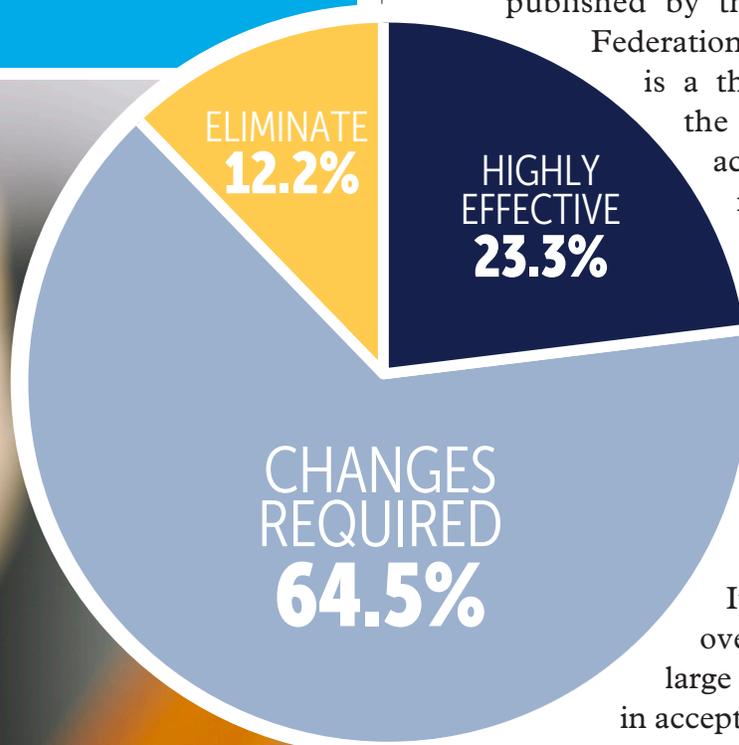
Section 2 provides greater detail, by key theme, on the input that informed the recommendations.

A high-level overview of responses indicates that approximately 23.3% of respondents considered EQAO testing to be highly effective while 12.2% of respondents favour elimination of EQAO testing. The highest percentage of responses (64.5%) either supported EQAO with some modifications or supported some form of large-scale testing. This is represented in the chart on page 2.

Section 1

Examining the Future of Large-scale Testing Synthesis and Recommendations

EQAO Survey Response



The survey of policy makers and administrators in Ontario public school boards revealed a range of views and insights which were considered by OPSBA's Education Program Work Team. The team discussed the broad range of advice generated by the survey and viewed it as valuable information for educators concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of our education system and building public confidence in public education.

The team also reviewed the paper **A New Vision for Large-Scale Testing in Ontario** published by the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) in 2011. This

is a thoughtful overview of the topic that takes into account a broad range of research on testing. It is noted that there is a considerable level of resonance between the issues identified in the OTF paper and those raised by respondents to the OPSBA survey.

It is acknowledged that, over the last ten years, large scale testing has grown in acceptance and value and the snapshot it presents is welcomed by a majority of parents and the public. In broad terms, as indicated by close to two-thirds of survey respondents, it is felt that there is scope for improvement and for reconsideration of the mandate and strategies employed by the Education Quality and Accountability Office. Drawing on the advice offered by the survey feedback, the team recommends the following issues for consideration by both the Education Quality and Accountability Office and the Ministry of Education in looking at changes or improvements to Ontario's approach to large-scale testing.

Recommendations

1

Equity and Accessibility

- a) It is recommended that the Education Quality and Accountability Office examine more deeply areas where students are having difficulty with the test process and introduce changes in content and references that eliminate cultural bias for students including references that present barriers for newcomer students, First Nation students, rural versus urban students, and students in low socio-economic circumstances.
- b) It is recommended that the Education Quality and Accountability Office examine how the EQAO assessments can be made more accessible for students who have Individual Education Plans in order to increase accommodations for inclusiveness and consistent participation in EQAO assessments.

2

Integration of Technology and Emphasis on Higher Order Skills

- a) It is recommended that the Education Quality and Accountability Office accelerate the work they have undertaken to implement options for using technology, rather than a paper and pencil modality, in doing the test to allow students to incorporate the tools and supports they use in their daily practice into the EQAO assessment process.

- b) It is recommended that the Education Quality and Accountability Office accelerate efforts to amend EQAO assessments so as to reduce multiple-choice question approaches in favour of approaches that promote critical thinking and creativity, and increase approaches that mirror regular classroom practice in terms of the varied ways that students demonstrate learning.

3

Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT)

- a) It is recommended that the Education Quality and Accountability Office work with schools to change the current practice of offering a remedial OSSLT course only after students have failed the OSSLT. Teachers and administrators should be supported in making a professional judgement about which students require a remedial course prior to taking the test. Offering remedial help first would create an environment that enhances motivation and self-esteem, and would serve to maximize student success.
- b) It is recommended that the Education Quality and Accountability Office review the OSSLT to ensure it is a more authentic process for the students, allowing them to use the tools they use in the classroom to improve their writing including editing, peer review and collaboration with the written products and also ensure the content's applicability to real world situations.

4

Diagnostic Assessment

Diagnostic assessment is a distinctly different approach and has a distinctly different purpose in identifying and supporting student learning needs.

- a) It is recommended that in reviewing the impact of recent changes to the diagnostic assessment processes traditionally used by school boards, the Ministry of Education take note of the feedback received through the OPSBA Survey. This indicates that the gaps created by those changes in terms of board accountability for consistent, timely and accurate identification of learning needs cannot be compensated for by EQAO testing.

5

Student Well-Being

a) It is recommended that the Ministry of Education develop a definition of student well-being in collaboration with its education partners including the expertise available through School Mental Health ASSIST and the Ontario Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health. Given the complexity of the factors and learning conditions that contribute to student well-being, OPSBA does not support EQAO leading in this area or embarking on developing well-being measures.

6

The Public Positioning of EQAO Results

a) It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and the Education Quality and Accountability Office overhaul how student achievement is communicated to parents/guardians and the public, and specifically:

- i Provide an overall context for assessment of student achievement that emphasizes that daily and ongoing assessment of students is guided by Board Evaluation and Assessment Policy and facilitated by teachers, culminating in individualized student report cards.
- ii Provide clarity about the role of EQAO and what purposes it can and cannot fulfil, including:
 - Clarify that EQAO is a process to provide provincial data on student achievement at a specific point in time, and to provide informative tracking of student cohorts over time
 - Clarify that a key purpose of EQAO is to determine effectiveness of implementation of the Ontario curriculum and any necessary adjustment of curriculum expectations
 - Clarify that EQAO assessments are designed to fit into the instructional routines of the classroom and should not be a source of anxiety or stress for students
 - Clarify that EQAO is not designed to offer in-year feedback that supports the specific student who has taken the test

- Clarify that ongoing in-school assessment of students leads to timely feedback to benefit the student and provide relevant supports
- Clarify that a key purpose of EQAO and the board by board data generated by EQAO assessments is to provide boards and schools with information that helps them identify strengths and gaps in curriculum implementation, and allows the school board to incorporate strategies for improvement and allocate relevant resources to execute the strategies

- iii Emphasize the value of the progress made by all students who participate in EQAO tests, whether it is progression from Level 1 to 2, Level 2 to 3 or Level 3 to 4
- iv Develop a method of publishing student achievement data that precludes the ability to rank schools.
- v Provide information, through the Ministry's Leadership and Learning Environment Division, that clarifies the range of factors that contribute to an effective school and the value that every school has to the community in which it is situated.

7

Use of Randomized Testing

While there is support for the current system of EQAO testing there is also a significant body of opinion calling for the examination of other effective methods of large scale assessment of student achievement. OPSBA member boards want to ensure that quality data and cohort sets are available to inform decision making and strategic planning efforts to maximize student outcomes.

- a) It is recommended, given the reliable, objective reporting on student achievement in reading, writing and mathematics that is currently successfully measured internationally and in other Canadian jurisdictions using randomized testing, that the Ministry of Education consider a process, in collaboration with all education partners, to examine the feasibility of randomized testing that would satisfy the requirement for accountability in Ontario's education system.

Section 2

Key Themes from Survey Responses

Survey responses reflected a high degree of interest on the topic of EQAO tests and large-scale testing. The survey elicited a wealth of insightful comments which not only served in the development of this paper's recommendations but provide a useful picture of the range of thinking across the public school board system. The following summary of feedback has been organized by key themes.

Improving Student Achievement

A majority of respondents were united in seeing a key purpose of EQAO testing as a tool to measure improvements in student achievement. It is viewed as offering an objective measure of the level of literacy and numeracy in Ontario's public schools. The data provides ways to identify strengths, gaps and gains in student achievement at the board and school level. The data informs the focus for instruction, leading to school or board improvement plans that can incorporate the supports that need to be in place for both teachers and students. The value of tracking results over time for cohorts of students was noted. It was emphasized that it is effective programs, sound pedagogy, the student-teacher relationship, and parental involvement and support, that improve individual student achievement.

Accountability

A number of respondents acknowledged the role EQAO information plays in building public confidence by demonstrating that schools hold themselves accountable for student achievement.

It was noted that EQAO provides reliable data that supports quality assurance in the education system. However, there was a strong emphasis by respondents on the responsibility and role of school boards in being accountable to the public for student achievement and well-being and there was no indication that the mandate of EQAO should be expanded.

Curriculum Implementation

Comments confirmed a broadly held view that EQAO testing is the way to measure that there is a stable and equitable implementation of the Ontario curriculum in schools and to determine that students are meeting the learning expectations within a consistently taught curriculum. It was noted as well that testing allows for evaluation of the success of literacy and numeracy strategies and provides evidence to support further enhancement of the curriculum. Comments also included some concern about what has been called "the crowded curriculum" and the challenges of covering the current range of curriculum expectations.

Effective Practice

Respondents indicated that the unbiased assessment of student achievement at a consistent point across the province provides an opportunity to make comparisons among boards and schools that have a comparable profile as well as comparisons between "statistical neighbour" schools within boards and identify successful practices and strategies to support student success. This leads to evidence-based system planning to determine resource allocation and implementation of supports, serving as a catalyst for improvement in classrooms, schools and districts.

Public Reporting of EQAO Data

This section of the survey generated a great deal of comment reflecting a range of perspectives. There was support for the present level of information disclosure, including contextualization, as a reasonable balance between accountability and privacy.

However, the question also prompted a range of suggestions and opinions which focussed largely on the issue of greater context as a necessary aspect of providing a holistic picture. This was

expressed in a number of ways and included:

- Additional information about starting points, demographics, context of each school/board, funding data, graduation rates, suspension/expulsion data, services for students with special needs, community consultation feedback and board strategic plans
- Economic indices for board/school, percentage of students tested who have been with the board since Kindergarten, percentage of students with the board for fewer than three years; number of students exempted from EQAO tests
- School/Board Improvement Plan information showing response to test results
- Information about the curriculum as a whole to show that EQAO is a limited part of the whole picture of student learning
- Information about investments in teacher-capacity building by the board
- Provincial comparisons with international, Canadian and U.S. achievement
- Information about competency in 21st century skills such as critical thinking and collaborative problem-solving

In terms of presentation of data to the public, other suggestions included:

- More improvement is needed in making test information user-friendly for parents/guardians and the public, including providing information in a range of languages that reflects Ontario's diversity
- School performance data should be shared with boards, and schools within boards; overall performance should be shared publicly so as to indicate board performance but restrict the tendency to rank individual schools

- Efforts are needed to increase understanding that EQAO results are only a snapshot
- Include information that shows five-year trends

Future focus for EQAO

Respondents indicate the need for a continued focus on fundamental skills – reading, writing and mathematics. The recent reports about falling EQAO scores in mathematics is cited as an indicator for changes in the teaching of mathematics, the training/capacity building of teachers and a review of the mathematics curriculum.

Those respondents who commented on the value of going beyond literacy and numeracy indicated

the need to focus on 21st century/higher order thinking skills such as creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving and empathy. Other areas raised were study skills and use of technology in the learning process. This aligns with changes outlined in the Ministry's *Growing Success* document and with general expectations of the anticipated next phase in Ontario's education strategy.

In terms of methodology, there were a number of suggestions for future directions:

- The increase in the use of technology in the teaching and learning process needs to inform how students are allowed to access EQAO tests so that they can incorporate the tools and supports they use in their daily practice into the EQAO assessments.
- The OSSLT should be more authentic and allow the tools that students use in the classroom to improve their writing including editing, peer review and collaboration with the written products authentic and applicable to real world situations.

Efforts are needed to increase understanding that EQAO results are only a snapshot.

- Efforts should be made to eliminate cultural bias from the tests so that no group of students is at a disadvantage due to the cultural references. Currently references can represent barriers for newcomer students, First Nation students or rural versus urban students and fail to allow for the varied realities of students in the system.
- Examine the accommodations available for students with special needs or modify the tests.
- Provide boards with more supports to identify the kinds of considerations that are relevant for exempting students.

Some respondents also called for more types of analysis from EQAO. This includes looking at:

- Student progress in the two grades that precede the grade being assessed
- Information to help statistically similar boards to improve strategies
- Gaps that point to the need for modifications in the curriculum
- Relating results to school board effectiveness measures
- Research on the benefits and types of parental involvement in EQAO tests.



Several respondents recommended a shift to random assessments.

Reviewing the Mandate of EQAO

This question on the survey elicited a response rate of 88.6% in favour of a review of the mandate of EQAO. The rationale is evident in content-laden responses to the other survey questions. It is clear as well that respondents are not in favour of expanding the mandate of EQAO.

Benefits of EQAO Testing to Board and School Improvement Planning

While some respondents rated EQAO as highly effective (19%) in this regard, 15% of respondents viewed the testing as not effective in terms of board and school improvement. A high

proportion (46%) of respondents viewed it as somewhat effective, particularly in terms of assessing effectiveness of Ontario curriculum implementation, and commented:

- The weight given to EQAO is too high but it does provide a starting point to develop planning
- It has demonstrated the need to improve on mathematics
- It has led to allocating greater assistance to schools achieving lower results

EQAO and the impact of changes to Diagnostic Testing approaches

A majority of respondents (63.9%) who addressed this question indicated that EQAO cannot provide the necessary systematic data the Board requires to make decisions about student needs. Comments included:

- EQAO trails data while diagnostic testing leads it
- EQAO is irrelevant to determining student needs
- EQAO serves a very different purpose compared to the purpose of diagnostic assessments
- Recent changes do not support the excellent

system of diagnostic tests boards had for providing timely information

Respondents who felt the changes in Diagnostic Testing approaches might be compensated for by EQAO indicated that this would be only to some degree since EQAO was only part of the picture and that conducting diagnostic assessments is now dependent on the level of teacher buy-in for board chosen assessments.

Randomized Testing

Many respondents indicated that if randomized testing were introduced it should apply to the same grades and skill sets as are measured under EQAO. However, it was also stated that randomized

testing would eliminate much helpful data that schools currently get from the all schools/ every year testing of EQAO and would not satisfy the purpose of Grade 10 literacy tests.

The range of grades and skills suggested for testing by respondents who favour randomized testing covered a broad spectrum and there was no preponderance of opinion on this. Comments indicated that a shift to randomized testing might allow testing in grades not currently covered in EQAO and would facilitate flexibility in numbers of boards, schools, grades involved in testing in any given year.

In terms of administering randomized testing, it was also suggested that notice about the test be given to participating boards six weeks in advance; this comment relates to concerns expressed elsewhere in the survey that too much time is currently taken up in getting ready for EQAO tests. Most respondents who commented on randomized testing indicated that it should occur every year.

When asked about the body that should be responsible for a system of randomized testing, a majority (65.2%) suggested it be the Education Quality and Accountability Office or a similar independent body. 17.4% of respondents indicated that the Ministry of Education should be responsible and the balance (17.4%) indicated either that school boards should do the testing or that no testing at all should take place.

Other Data Measures

The survey also sought input on data measures (other than those in EQAO) that could be incorporated into an index that would provide a broader picture of the success of curriculum implementation and student achievement.

Respondents frequently commented on the value of teacher assessments including the assessment of learning skills on student report cards as a measure

of student success that rounded out the ‘snapshot in time’ aspect of EQAO. These were seen as including perceptual and qualitative data related to individual student improvement over time. Individual Education Plans, tracking improvement from grade to grade, credit accumulation and graduation rates were also cited, as was information on the post-secondary success of students.

With regard to “the whole child,” respondents expressed concern about equity across a range of demographics. They noted that, outside of the mandate of EQAO, there is Board responsibility to broaden the scope of input. They cited the need for the kind of expertise that exists through School Mental Health ASSIST to advise on tools

to support student well-being, satisfaction with learning and achievement of social milestones.

Other measures were suggested that relate to a full educational experience for students such as citizenship activities and participation in extra-curriculars as identified in the OPSBA document, *A Vision for Learning and Teaching in the Digital Age*. Several respondents cited the role of student surveys, staff surveys and parental feedback forms.

Respondents also highlighted the challenge of translating this range of measures into a model for provincial comparison given variances in practices, board context and tools from board to board. There was a concern that it would not be possible to develop the kind of provincial system analysis that provided reliable data across all schools, across boards, by demographic cohort or by other specific groupings. The approach would need to be board-specific and not for purposes of board-to-board comparison.

Respondents saw responsibility for generating a report based on such an expanded index of success measures as falling to school boards and supported by the Ministry of Education.

With regard to “the whole child,” respondents expressed concern about equity across a range of demographics.

Other Advice

Included in respondent advice is the statement: “individual assessments can lead to a lack of confidence in the data generated; EQAO provides reliable, objective and universal data and, despite bumps in this testing system, it has inspired a serious movement toward continuous improvement in every school.”

Comments also pointed out the limitations of EQAO assessments in terms of overall student achievement measures and the distortion created by how EQAO results are presented and used in the public domain. One such comment was: “Take away public reporting of results by school to stop “school shopping” but continue to have mass testing of sufficient density (random or not) to allow both the Ministry and the District School Board (with a smaller sample set to work with) to do drill-down analyses against census tract, program type, years of principal experience, etc., so that we can have meaningful analysis related to training needs, facility organization, resourcing and other supports. Another comment advocated: “Bring the testing practices into the world our kids are living in – more electronic accessibility, more flexibility in the exemption process, enhanced assessment in other areas and consideration of additional skills.”

Some Specific Criticisms

The following themes that are relevant to support, or lack of it, for current EQAO administration garnered a high level of commentary.

COST OF EQAO TESTING

A large number of respondents commented on the cost of conducting EQAO testing and suggested that work needs to be done on a system of testing that is more cost-effective. In this regard there were comments about the administrator and teacher time taken up with preparing for and administering tests that are over and above the expenditures incurred by the EQAO office in developing, overseeing and assessing the results of tests.

In discussing this aspect, the Education Program Work Team also reviewed the EQAO publication **The Power of Ontario’s Provincial Testing Program** which indicates that EQAO tests provide value for money. The document, using 2010-11 data, cites \$10,000 as representing average per pupil funding for Ontario’s close to 2 million students.

The total EQAO operating cost is cited as \$32 million based on an amount of \$17 as the per student cost of operating provincial testing.

If the amount of \$17 were applied to the total number of students to be tested in Grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 for the year in question, as opposed to the total elementary and secondary enrolment for the province, the total EQAO operating cost would be approximately \$10 million.

Suggestions for an effective yet more economical approach emerging from the OPSBA survey include consideration of randomized testing or changing the schedule of testing to every two years instead of every year. It was suggested as well that the money spent on EQAO testing might be better used in the classroom to improve resources for students.

INAPPROPRIATE USE OF EQAO DATA

Respondents were particularly concerned about how EQAO data is being used as a tool to rank schools, as has been done through reports from the Fraser Institute, dividing them in public perception into “good” and “bad” schools.

Comments focussed on the “snapshot in time” aspect of EQAO testing and the range of information that is relevant to the success and environment of a school that is not captured by the EQAO results. A narrow focus on a specific kind of academic testing, as exemplified in real estate advertising for example, does a disservice to schools and creates the risk of perpetuating negative stereotypes. It was noted that there has been a steadily increasing graduation rate from the province’s secondary schools and this is not given the prominence that EQAO test results have garnered over time.

A predominant response to the negativity of school ranking called for individual school performance data to be shared internally with the school board and individual student data to be shared with the student’s parents/guardians. Public information should be confined to the overall performance of the school board. Boards will use the data to guide decisions and allocation of resources to help student learning, e.g. decisions to invest in support for math teaching in the face of declining math scores. The importance of placing data in the context of multi-year trends was also indicated.



Conclusion

It is clear from the thoughtfulness in survey responses that our education community has a deep commitment to ensuring the conditions for student success and holding our schools and school boards accountable to parents/guardians, the community and the broader public.

In addition to a sustained focus on fundamental skills, there is strong support for the need to be responsive to the skill sets required for the rapidly changing world Ontario's students will live and work on. There is an expressed desire that large-scale testing incorporate ways of assessing creativity, critical thinking and problem solving skills. Aligned with this is the need to reflect technology as it is increasingly used for teaching and learning within the assessment process.

A high value is placed on equity and access for all students. This includes greater use of accommodations for students who require them so that they can participate fully with their classmates. For similar reasons, there is a call for more strenuous efforts to eliminate cultural bias in the content of tests to ensure that no group of students is at a disadvantage. The Grade 10 OSSLT was also highlighted as an area where students should be more proactively supported in advance of the test rather than receiving remedial support if they do not pass the test.



There is significant support for EQAO and its ability to provide a provincial snapshot on the effectiveness of curriculum implementation and improvement in student achievement as well as identifying where additional support is needed. However, there is also strong indication of the need to review EQAO administration and how information is presented to ensure that the full range of student assessments that take place in school boards and are directly impactful on individual student achievement are adequately represented.

EQAO has been in place for 20 years and a comprehensive review of its effectiveness should include an examination of alternative large scale testing approaches.

APPENDIX A

OPSBA Survey

Re: EQAO and Large Scale Testing

Section A – Questions composed by the EQAO Office

1. What do you believe EQAO's fundamental purpose ought to be?
2. What information, if made publicly available, would help keep schools, school boards and the government accountable for the quality and effectiveness of elementary and secondary school education and student achievement?
3. What specific areas should EQAO focus particular attention in the next 3-5 years?
4. In your view, what are the three greatest benefits of EQAO's province-wide testing?
5. What are the top three drawbacks of EQAO's province-wide testing?

Section B – Questions composed by OPSBA

1. Should there be a review of the mandate of EQAO to more accurately reflect the current education environment?
2. How would you rate the benefits to your board of EQAO-type testing in your board and school improvement planning? ___Highly effective___Somewhat effective ___ Not effective
3. Given the recent changes in approach to Diagnostic Assessments (PPM155), do you consider that EQAO test results will help fill a gap in providing the necessary systematic data the Board needs to make decisions about student needs?
4. If the province moved to a system of randomized testing, would you want to see it applied to the same grades and skills that EQAO tests in currently? If you answered no, please indicate the grades and skills a system of randomized testing should cover.
5. If a system of randomized testing were introduced, how frequently should such testing occur?
6. If the province moved to a system of randomized testing, what body should be responsible for administration and reporting? Education Quality and Accountability Office; Independent body similar to the EQAO; Ministry of Education; Other
7. Given that EQAO is only one type of assessment of a student's progress, what other types of data measures could be incorporated into an "index" that would provide a broader picture of the success of curriculum implementation and student achievement/success?
8. Who should have primary responsibility for generating this report? School Boards; Ministry of Education
9. Do you have any other advice to suggest?

