



# A discussion paper on assessment, evaluation and reporting for Ontario's Beginning Teachers

**A** few years ago, the term "culture of assessment" appeared in Ontario educational conversations for the first time. In its first annual provincial report in 1997, the Education Quality and Accountability Office, more familiarly known as EQAO, recommended establishing a culture of assessment in Ontario. It did not take very long for the recommendation to take hold. We are now totally immersed in an educational culture in Ontario that is increasingly preoccupied with results.

To be effective in this current assessment culture, teachers – both those new to the profession and those with years of experience – need to understand how assessment and evaluation have changed since they themselves were in school. They need to be comfortable with the current practices in assessment and evaluation. They need to have confidence in the assessments they conduct to collect evidence of their students' achievement. They also need to have confidence in the evaluations or judgments they make on the basis of that evidence in the grades they assign to their students.

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The assessment reform that is taking place in Ontario is taking place all over the world. Consequently, there is an overwhelming amount of professional literature on assessment and evaluation these days – program policy documents, resource documents, research reports, theoretical discussions, and reflections on practice.

We will try to give beginning teachers a bird's eye view of the Ontario assessment landscape and to begin a conversation that we can continue in the informal on-going discussions we all have with our colleagues in our own schools.

### **Large-scale Assessments**

Our overview focuses primarily on classroom assessment and evaluation. However, we cannot overlook the province-wide assessment program.

The provincial, national and international interest and financial investment in large-scale accountability testing have expanded greatly over the last decade and are still continuing to expand. Teachers, if they are going to be assessment literate, need to be familiar with the large-scale assessments, especially the provincial assessments, as all their students participate in them, and the results of these assessments are reported back to students individually, as well as in aggregations for schools, districts and the whole province.

In addition to designing and conducting their own classroom-level assessments, many teachers will also be involved in the province's annual large-scale assessments in Reading, Writing and Mathematics. This will be a new experience for many beginning teachers, since provincial, national and international tests were likely not around when they were students themselves.

Teachers may be involved in the provincial assessments in many ways. If they teach grades 3, 6, 9 or 10, teachers will be called upon to administer the assessments in their own classrooms. If they are working in the area of special education, teachers may be involved in helping parents, principals and teachers make decisions for the accommodations, exemptions and deferrals that are necessary for students with special needs or new to English or French, and they may also be involved in actually delivering the accommodations. If they teach grades 4, 7 or 11, they will be called upon to help students and parents analyze and interpret students' results from the previous year and draft individual student improvement plans. All teachers will also likely be involved in their school action plans for effecting improvement in school results as well.

Teachers may also become involved in the assessments on a provincial level by participating in the marking of the provincial tests. They may also participate in the development of the tests or participate in the piloting or the field

testing of the tests in their classrooms. Whatever their level of direct involvement with the provincial testing program, all beginning teachers need to become familiar with the tests and all the procedures surrounding their administration, marking, and the analysis and interpretation of their results. Becoming assessment literate in Ontario these days, necessarily requires an understanding of what the provincial assessments look like, how they are marked and how their results should be analyzed, interpreted and incorporated into improvement plans.

There is a wealth of information on the EQAO web site [www.eqao.com](http://www.eqao.com) about the provincial assessment program that all teachers should examine – the assessment schedule, sample tasks, scoring rubrics, anchor papers, resource documents, etc., as well as application forms for becoming involved in the marking, piloting and field testing.

The sample tasks are especially useful to beginning teachers. They provide teachers with models of paper and pencil performance tasks. The models can help teachers develop other performance tasks for their classes. Similarly, the EQAO rubrics provide models of scoring rubrics for holistic marking of a collection of tasks, and the anchor papers can help teachers explain to students and parents the features of high-level performances on the tasks.

### **Classroom Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting**

At the same time that there has been an increasing demand for accountability from the public sector in general and from schools in particular, a new understanding of the role assessment plays in improving learning has been emerging in the community of professional educators. The understanding of classroom assessment and evaluation has changed radically over the last decade.

Teachers are currently expected to deliver in their classrooms a model of assessment that is very different from the one they experienced as students in school themselves. They have clear models of effective instruction from their own experience as students – they all have had extraordinary teachers in their own lives. Very few have experienced the newer model of assessment as students themselves.

The new Ontario model of assessment is a standards-based model. What that means is that rather than judging students' achievement relative to that of other students, we are judging students' achievement relative to commonly held and clearly stated standards of achievement. In the past, teachers judged students' achievement relative to the standards they themselves had

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#### **Assessment to Standards**

- Not how students do in comparison to each other
  - How they do in comparison to the standards
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internalized from their own education or relative to the range of achievement they found their students exhibiting in their classes. Often the standards students were expected to exhibit were assumed rather than made explicit and varied from year to year and from teacher to teacher. The move toward explicit, commonly held and publicly available standards is at the heart of assessment reform.

The new model of assessment is also encouraging teachers to draw on a wider repertoire of assessment methods in their collection of evidence of student achievement and to go beyond gathering evidence of students' knowledge of the curriculum to collecting evidence of their skills and their abilities to communicate and apply both their knowledge and skills. The new model enables teachers to be more consistent in their judgments of student achievement and to provide students and parents with detailed information about students' achievement and clear directions for improvement.

### **Provincial Policy and Resource Documents**

The starting point for classroom instruction, assessment and evaluation practices for all Ontario teachers is necessarily the provincial policy and resource documents. The documents outline Ontario's version of the assessment reform that is taking place all over the world.

Beginning teachers will want to collect their own set of the provincial documents. Printed versions should be available in schools, but if they are not, all the documents teachers need to consult in planning their instruction, assessment and evaluation practices are available for downloading from the Ministry of Education web site [www.edu.gov.on.ca](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca).

The documents contain the key components of the Ontario model of assessment reform – Expectations, Achievement Charts, Exemplars, guidelines for completing the provincial report card – as well as the principles that should guide all assessment, evaluation and reporting practices in all Ontario classrooms. We'll take a quick look at each of these key components.

### **Expectations and Achievement Charts**

All of the curriculum policy documents contain two key components of the new model of assessment that necessarily shape teacher practice: the Expectations and the Achievement Charts.

The **Expectations** are the content standards. They state exactly what students are supposed to know and be able to do in each subject at the end of each grade in elementary school and each course in secondary school.

All the lessons that teachers prepare, all the learning activities that they orchestrate for their students need to be based on and clearly linked to the

Expectations. The Expectations are the targets for instruction. They are also the targets for all teachers' classroom assessments. Teachers should design their assessments so that they are clearly targeted at getting students to demonstrate how well they have attained the Expectations.

The **Achievement Charts** are the performance standards. Learning is not a binary – all or nothing – matter. There are degrees of learning. Similarly evaluating learning is not a pass-fail enterprise. There are degrees of achievement.

The Achievement Charts outline four levels or degrees of achievement. They provide the framework for assessing, evaluating and reporting on how well students achieve the Expectations. They specify the criteria for assessment and evaluation and also describe what student work looks like at each of four levels of achievement. All the assessments teachers conduct to collect evidence of students' current levels of achievement, all the evaluations or judgments teachers make in assigning a letter or percentage grade to students' current levels of achievement, all the reporting about student achievement that teachers do to both students and parents need to be based on and clearly linked to the Achievement Charts.

Another way of thinking about the Achievement Charts is as "generic" rubrics or templates for all the scoring, evaluating and reporting of student achievement. They are general scoring guides that apply to all the work that students produce in all grades. They are also the templates for designing more specific rubrics for scoring the specific products and performances that students produce.

Rubrics take the mystery out of assessment and evaluation. They make the **criteria** explicit so that all students and parents can understand the basis on which assessments and evaluations are conducted. The criteria tell teachers, parents and students what they should be **looking for** in student work. The characteristics or **descriptors** for each level of achievement tell everyone what student work at different levels **looks like**. The descriptors should be the basis for ascribing levels to all the work that students produce.

The Achievement Charts help teachers make more reliable judgments about students' current levels of achievement and report on those levels in more consistent ways. They let parents and students know the characteristics that student work needs to exhibit at each level. They provide students with targets for improvement. Students should be able to judge for themselves the level of

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**Key components of Ontario's model of Assessment Reform:**

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- Expectations
  - Achievement Charts
  - Exemplars
  - Provincial Report Card
  - Principles of Quality Assessment and Evaluation
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achievement their current work represents and the characteristics they need their work to exhibit to make it better. For the Achievement Charts to really make a difference, all the partners – students, parents and teachers need to understand them and to be comfortable using them.

### The Provincial Report Card

Another key component driving assessment reform in Ontario is the provincial report card. There are two versions of the *Guide to the Provincial Report Card*, one for Grades 1-8 and one for Grades 9-12. These guides are essential reading for all beginning teachers. They contain the current provincial requirements around reporting to parents. Teachers should also check at their schools to see whether there are further board or school level policies and procedures they will be expected to follow.

Here are a few of the salient features of the provincial report card that impinge on all teachers' assessment, evaluation and reporting practices:

- The report card is used to report to parents formally three times a year. Beginning teachers should be very attentive to the fact that they will have to

#### Rubrics

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- Take the mystery out of marking
  - Make criteria explicit
  - Describe characteristics of student work at each level
  - Provide direction for students and parents
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collect enough evidence through assessment to make a judgment on the level at which students are currently performing three times a year. They really do not want to find themselves scrambling to complete the report cards at the last minute. They should find out from their principals the exact dates when

the report cards will be distributed in their school. They need to ensure that they collect enough evidence to base their judgments on and that they leave themselves enough time to make a considered and deliberate judgment on their students' current overall level of performance and to complete the report cards.

- The report card separates out study skills and attendance from achievement. This is a key difference from the report cards beginning teachers will remember from their own days in school when all the factors affecting achievement like effort and punctuality were collapsed in a single mark or letter grade for a subject. Teachers will need to track students' demonstration of study skills and their attendance record separately from their attainment of the Expectations.

- The report card requires that teacher comments for each subject focus on students' "strengths, weaknesses and next steps." The comments need to focus on the degree to which students are achieving the grade level Expectations. The grades teachers assign and the language that teachers use to describe stu-

dents' strengths and weaknesses should match. For example, if teachers judge students to be performing at level 4, students' grades should be in the level 4 range and teachers' comments should be expressed in language that is consistent with the language of the level 4 descriptors in the Achievement Charts.

The requirements of the report card necessarily shape our assessment and evaluation practices. One key message that comes out of the reporting requirements is the need for an assessment plan. Teachers should design an assessment plan for the reporting term before they begin to plan any individual lessons or learning activities.

They should plan ahead the key assessments in each subject area that they will use as a basis for their determination of students' grades and their reporting to parents – the tests, tasks, projects and performances that students will complete and the observations they will conduct as teachers. Similarly, they need to plan ahead the opportunities students will have to demonstrate their attainment of the study skills. They need to share these plans with students and parents, so that everyone will know in advance exactly how students' progress will be judged.

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**One key message that comes out of the reporting requirements is the need for an assessment plan.**

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For beginning teachers, a good rule of thumb is that you will need at least three strong indications of what students can do in each strand and each category of each subject. In other words, you will need at least three rich assessments of what students have learned in each reporting term – assessments that tap into a wide range of Expectations and that range over all the categories of the Achievement Charts, assessments which show what students know, what they can do, how they can communicate and apply their learning at all levels of performance. You would not want to judge students' achievement based on only one piece of evidence or evidence that was limited to knowledge and never got to skills or the communication and application of both the knowledge and the skills. Similarly, you would not want to rely on evidence from assessments that did not even allow for all levels of performance. The three assessments are a minimum. You need to determine students' highest and most consistent level of performance. You cannot begin to discern trends or patterns in students' strengths and weaknesses on less evidence.

## **Exemplars**

The Exemplars documents are essential resources for informing classroom practices in assessment and evaluation. The Exemplars for Reading and Writing for Grades 1-8 have already been distributed to all schools and are

also available on the Ministry web site. Others are planned for elementary schools in the areas of Mathematics, Social Studies, Science and Technology, French and the Arts. Exemplars have been developed for all Grade 9 courses and are in the works for other courses in secondary schools as well.

While the Achievement Charts provide word descriptions of the levels of performance, the Exemplars provide pictures to go along with the word descriptions. The Exemplars present actual samples of student work at the four levels of achievement. The samples of student work are an essential resource for helping teachers to make their own assessment and evaluation practices consistent and dependable. The samples are also an essential resource for helping students and parents understand what quality work looks like.

In addition to the samples of student work, the Exemplar documents contain several other components that are very useful. The **Tasks** are examples of what rich performance tasks that require students to integrate and apply their learning look like. The Tasks could be models for others that teachers create on their own. The **Rubrics** that accompany the performance tasks give

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### Exemplars

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- Samples of student work
  - Illustrations of the levels of achievement
  - Show students and parents what quality work looks like
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teachers clear models of what specific rubrics look like when they are based on both specific tasks and the template of the generic subject Achievement Chart. Teachers can use these as models for creating specific rubrics for other tasks or types of tasks. The Teachers' Notes

provide rationales that explain exactly how and why particular samples of student work fit the general descriptors of performance levels. The rationales model the decision-making that is involved in ascribing particular examples of student work to the general descriptors of the Achievement Charts.

Teachers can use the Exemplars in their classes in a variety of ways. The most obvious way is to replicate the Tasks in their own classes and make use of the Rubrics and Exemplars for scoring the work their own students produce. Teachers can also engage their students in scoring the samples of work. The whole process of scoring samples of work helps students to internalize the features of high quality work and to understand exactly what they have to do to improve their own work.

### Principles of Assessment

The other key component of the current model of assessment and evaluation is the provincial principles of assessment and evaluation. The principles are guides to classroom practice. They are all geared toward ensuring that our assessments are valid, reliable and lead to improvement of student learning.



You could spend hours discussing each one of the principles and what each of them entails. All we have time for here is a quick run through that cannot possibly do them justice. Hopefully teachers can talk about them further in the moderated conversations that follow. Exactly what do the each of principles look like in practice? What do teachers need to do to make their assessment and evaluation practices reflect the principles?

The principles are found in the *Program Planning and Assessment* policy document and read as follows:

*In order to ensure that assessment and evaluation are valid and reliable, and that they lead to the improvement of student learning, teachers must use assessment and evaluation strategies that:*

- *address both what students learn and how well they learn;*
- *are based both on the categories of knowledge and skills and on the achievement level descriptions given in the achievement chart that appears in the curriculum policy document for each discipline;*
- *are varied in nature, administered over a period of time, and designed to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate the full range of their learning;*
- *are appropriate for the learning activities used, the purposes of instruction, and the needs and experiences of the students;*
- *are fair to all students;*
- *accommodate the needs of exceptional students, consistent with the strategies outlined in their Individual Education Plan;*
- *accommodate the needs of students who are learning the language of instruction;*
- *ensure that each student is given clear directions for improvement;*
- *promote students' ability to assess their own learning and to set specific goals;*
- *include the use of samples of students' work that provide evidence of their achievement;*
- *are communicated clearly to students and parents at the beginning of the course and at other appropriate points throughout the course.*

*(Program Planning and Assessment, page 13)*

## **Conclusion**

The changes in assessment and evaluation in Ontario are not peculiar to Ontario, and they are not driven solely by a political agenda. There is no question that greater public accountability is a goal. However, another key

goal driving assessment reform in Ontario and around the world is improvement in student achievement. The goal is to harness assessment and evaluation so that they lead to higher levels of achievement for higher proportions of our students.

The focus on classroom assessment is a key component of assessment reform. Assessment experts recognize that large-scale assessments provide useful information about the performance of schools, districts and the whole provincial system of schooling, but they also recognize that the information that has the best hope of effecting improvement in the achievement of individual students comes from classroom level assessments. It is the assessments that teachers conduct in their classrooms that have the best chance of helping individual students grow and improve.

### **What should assessment look like?**

What should assessment look like if its purpose is not only to measure student achievement but also to improve student achievement?

First, students need to be recognized as the central players in the assessment and evaluation process. Important as it may be, it is not enough for us as teachers to reliably assess, evaluate and report on their achievement. Students need to be helped to become their own best assessors. That means that they need to be able to assess their own individual pieces of work and also to monitor and take charge of their own continuing progress.

They need to know in advance what their targets for learning are – exactly what they are expected to know and be able to do. They need to understand, again in advance, exactly how their progress will be judged – exactly what products and performances they will have to produce to demonstrate their learning. They need to be brought into the assessment planning process – to decide the work they will produce to exhibit what they have learned and how well they have learned it. They need to understand in their own language the criteria on which their achievement will be judged. They need to understand, again in their own language, what quality work looks like – the key features they should ensure their products and performances exhibit. They need to be able to assess their own work and understand the specific steps they need to take toward improvement.

Teachers often engage students in assessing their own work and reflecting on their progress, and in setting specific goals for their improvement. Teachers often engage students in reporting on their progress to their parents. These are not just frills. They are the core business of classroom assessment. Teachers

need to understand and be able to use all the tools for assessment – the Expectations, the Achievement Charts, the Exemplars, and the principles. If they are to become their own best assessors, students do too.

Secondly, students need on-going, constructive and descriptive feedback that helps them improve their products, performances and processes while there is still time for them to do so. Summative assessment is at the heart of large-scale assessments. While summative assessment is also important in classrooms, it is formative assessment that is at the heart of effective classroom assessment. What does this mean for teachers? We need to build in time for helpful feedback that students can use to shape their products and performances.

As teachers, we are better at formative assessment in some areas of the curriculum than others. We are accustomed to rehearsals before recitals. We are accustomed to coaching teams and players over time before they ever get to competitions. We are accustomed to a process approach to writing instruction that allows for peer and teacher feedback and for revising and editing work to perfection. We are accustomed to giving students advice on their Science projects while those projects are in progress and long before they ever go on display. We are accustomed to giving our students constructive descriptive advice that shapes their final performances in these areas of the curriculum.

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**While summative assessment is also important in classrooms, it is formative assessment that is at the heart of effective classroom assessment.**

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We need to build in the cycle of trial, descriptive feedback, another trial or revision, more descriptive and constructive feedback into all their products and performances in all areas of the curriculum. We have to get away from using evaluative terms like "excellent" or "very good" and get down to giving specific usable advice in our feedback to students. Our goal should be, as it is in many classes already, to have all students produce a product or performance, or better yet, a whole collection of them, that they are proud of and have good reason to be proud of.

### Questions for Staff Room Discussions:

1. Not all Expectations are created equal. How do you decide which ones need to be addressed only once, and which ones need to be addressed again and again?
  2. How and when do you explain the Expectations to students?
  3. How do you use rubrics with students?
  4. How do you use rubrics with parents?
  5. How do you use the Exemplars with your students?
  6. How do you keep track of your students' current levels of performance?
  7. How do you decide the strength, weakness and next steps you are going to comment on?
  8. How do you decide the method of assessment you are going to use?
  9. How do you involve students in self-assessment and in monitoring their own learning?
  10. How do you build in "formative" feedback?
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### Need more help with classroom assessment, evaluation and reporting?

OECTA is offering a series of online courses:

#### **Course 1 – Principles of Quality Assessment and Evaluation:**

The guiding principles for assessment and evaluation in Catholic Schools.

#### **Course 2 – Methods of Assessment:**

The ways teachers can collect evidence of their students' achievement.

#### **Course 3 – Assessment and Evaluation Tools:**

The tools teachers can use for their assessment planning and for tracking, evaluating and reporting on student achievement.

Sign up for the courses at the OECTA web site [www.oecta.on.ca](http://www.oecta.on.ca)

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