

Special Symposium Issue

Issue 3, 2009

Welcome



By Marguerite Jackson, Chief Executive Officer

This issue provides you with an overview and highlights of EQAO's Learning Symposium "School Teams Making a Difference Through Knowledge, Support and Action," which took place on November 3–4 in Toronto. In her message, Marguerite Jackson speaks about the release of the Auditor General's report on EQAO, which is yet another strong, independent endorsement of Ontario's provincial testing program.

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Keynote Presentation



Harbours of Hope—Schools Where Learning by All Is a Reality

Wayne Hulley, President of Canadian effective Schools Inc.

School improvement is a complex issue fraught with ambiguity and challenge. To create "harbours of hope," where learning by all is a reality, a school must create a climate that supports collaboration, good planning, the frequent monitoring of progress and the celebration of successes.

 Contains Video

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Coffee Break



Interview with Sylvie Fréchette, former Olympic swimmer and accomplished businesswoman

Thanks to extraordinary tenacity, Olympic gold medallist Sylvie Fréchette reached the top of the podium despite significant obstacles. Today, strengthened by her own experiences, she motivates others to overcome the challenges of daily life and persevere in attaining their goals.

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View from the Front of the Class



Co-teaching Strategies to Help Your Class Succeed

Opeongo High School's Grade 9 math teachers Mike Neill and Ted Wren share their classroom strategies to improve student learning. After examining their EQAO assessment results, they worked together to implement strategies that engaged students and helped them to be better learners.

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Spotlight



Celebrating the Success of an Ontario School

St. John Catholic Elementary School has implemented various student programs in order to help their students succeed. Using data has helped them monitor students' progress, flag problem areas and guide programs such as a homework club and "Chill Zone."

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Data in Action



Using Data to Improve Student Learning

Victoria L. Bernhardt, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Education for the Future Initiative

Using *data*, not hunches, to identify problem areas and plan for improved student learning is the key to school improvement, says Dr. Bernhardt. In this presentation, she explains her model for collecting various types of data, including demographic, perception, student learning and school processes to get a clearer picture of a school's current situation—a prerequisite for successful improvement planning.

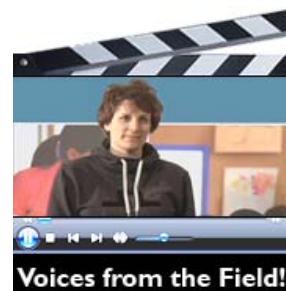
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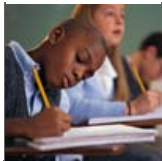
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How Would You Score This?

Try Your Hand at Scoring a Student Response!

Take a look at the following student response to a reading question from the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. How would you score it? The item, scoring rubric, annotations and correct score are





provided, as are sample student responses at other score codes.

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Special Symposium Issue

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Welcome

**Marguerite Jackson**

Chief Executive Officer

On November 3 and 4, 2009, EQAO hosted its fourth major educational event, the *Learning Symposium: School Teams Making a Difference Through Knowledge, Support and Action*.

With this year's symposium, EQAO built on its commitment to school boards and school communities to enhance our collective understanding of, and appreciation for, how a balanced assessment program contributes to improved student learning for the benefit of all students. More than 700 participants—principals, vice-principals, teachers and parents—from schools across the province attended the event. We were pleased to welcome the perspectives of parent representatives, who attended as part of school teams this year for the first time. More than 450 education partners, including educators from other Canadian provinces and territories, the United States, India, Ireland and Egypt, viewed the event via live webcast.

This year's theme was addressed by leaders in education at both the national and international levels. This issue of *EQAO Connects* provides you with articles about some of the symposium's main sessions as well as access to their videos. We hope you will seize this opportunity to use these as resources for your own school teams.

Also in this issue, you will find our regular features, "View from the Front of the Class" and "Spotlight," which both highlight the successful school-level strategies of exceptional educators. We'd like to thank Mike Neill and Ted Wren, Grade 9 math teachers at Opeongo High School in Douglas, and Pam Garbutt, the principal of St. John Catholic Elementary School in Kitchener, and her team for sharing their inspiring stories.

December also marks the release of the report on EQAO by Ontario's Auditor General, part of the latest instalment of a review of government programs. After an intensive, months-long audit, the Auditor General found that EQAO's tests reflect the provincial curriculum expectations fairly and accurately, are consistent in difficulty from one year to the next and are administered and marked so as to ensure that their results are valid, consistent and reliable indicators of student achievement. This report is a strong validation of EQAO's provincial assessment program and business practices. The report motivates us, as an organization, to work even harder to enhance our contribution toward student learning. The Auditor General has made a number of recommendations, and we will closely consider each one as we work to strengthen Ontario's assessment program even further. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the thousands of Ontario educators who have worked with us over the years to help establish a provincial assessment program of which we can all be proud. ■

Marguerite Jackson

CEO, EQAO

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Keynote Presentation

**Harbours of Hope—Schools Where Learning by All Is a Reality**

Wayne Hulley, President of Canadian Effective Schools Inc.

[View video session](#)

Wayne Hulley, president of Canadian Effective Schools Inc., celebrated author, presenter and educational consultant, has been sharing his expertise with educators throughout North America for almost 40 years. An insightful and charismatic motivational speaker, Hulley employs humour to address the serious business of aligning the energies of schools to create “harbours of hope” for students who attend them.

Harbours of Hope are created by staff that care more than others think is wise, risk more than others think is safe, dream more than others think is practical and expect more than others think is possible.

Wayne Hulley

From the outset, Hulley's message is one of positivity and clarity, focusing on the gifts and talents of his audience and leading them through the process of creating effective schools and examining the role that assessment plays in making these schools harbours of hope. He cautions against assuming that parts of schools can be pulled apart and made better without considering their holistic nature and warns that assessment in and of itself won't change a school. Should teachers alter their behaviour as a result of the information they receive, however, there is a chance to change schools.

Teachers Caring Passionately

The stories in Hulley's books *Harbours of Hope* and *Getting By: Getting Better* have a striking authenticity as they illustrate the mindset that permeates phenomenal schools where **teachers show up day after day with the intention of making a difference**. Take, for example, a small, inner-city school in Regina, Saskatchewan, where staff cared so passionately that every student learn to read that **they dared to drastically change the way they worked**. A complete restructuring of the school created triple-graded classes with five teachers for 100 students from Grades 1 to 3. With students remaining in the same classroom for three years, their teachers had time to teach everyone to read. The teachers have written 27 books together using words from a 90-word list that they compiled. Weekly assessments and celebrations of successes have produced such phenomenal results that, for 6 years now, all Grade 3 students, except for those with special needs, read at grade level when they enter Grade 4.

This incredible school and other such exceptional places for kids share one common attribute. The teachers as a team have decided that they want better. They know that children come to school prepared to learn. They also know that, for some, a gap exists even before they arrive at school and, without intervention, it will only increase over time as school work becomes more difficult. To these teachers, getting better involves assessment. They make assessments. They take action and the action changes results. Through their commitment to the success of all students, they manage to keep hope alive.

Schools: Places Where the Lives of Students Can Be Changed

In identifying these effective schools as harbours of hope, Hulley acknowledges a troubling reality in many other schools. Most students entering kindergarten, when asked if they're smart, will tell us “yes,” but three years later some of them no longer think they are. This profound loss in self-confidence indicates that the downward slide from hope to hopelessness begins in the early school years.

Metaphorically, Hulley explains, those who consistently experience failure have had mirrors held up to them, and the only image they've seen is failure. Eventually, if they see that image often enough, students come to believe that's who they are. He goes on to say that, while poverty and family break-up can contribute to feelings of hopelessness, schools can have a great impact on students' well-being. Indeed, **schools are places where we have the potential to change the lives of students**. As teachers and principals, we can alter the image they see in the mirror by eliminating failure from our schools. Reducing pass-failure rates is not good enough. We must ensure that every student passes. This, argues Hulley, is not only possible, it is our job.

Hulley credits a 1982 study, written by Ron Edwards, as a powerful philosophical influence. In essence it states that, **while families have an impact on students' academic future, a school that is focused can still make a difference**. Coming in the wake of Colman's claim that socio-economic status predetermines academic outcomes, this positive and hopeful message ultimately guides his life's work.

**Devising Ways To Eliminate Failure**

Devising ways to eliminate failure from schools requires considerable ingenuity and planning, and Hulley’s presentation is rich with examples of innovative teaching techniques. There was the middle-school math teacher, for instance, whose students raised their hands for every question – right hand if they knew the answer and left hand if they didn’t. In that way, if the teacher saw a lot of left hands raised, he knew his teaching was not working. He had to do better. Similarly, a few short questions, solved on file cards, determined who was prepared to pass the test at the end of a math unit. While the students who answered the questions correctly wrote the test, the teacher worked with the others, explaining that he had not done his job well but would work harder that day. Understanding that math skills build on one another, he did not allow his students to write the test until he knew they could pass it. This was a teacher teaching for success, assessing his own ability to meet outcomes while assessing his students’ readiness to be successful and carrying out modifications and differentiating instruction for those who were not ready. No students moved on until the data said they were ready.

Assessments: the Premise of Change

Assessment, according to Hulley, plays a prominent role in school improvement. And making assessments is a natural part of our attitudes as human beings. Aren’t we constantly making assessments and acting upon them to achieve better results in our day-to-day lives? But for assessments to yield the results we expect, we must be willing to change our behaviour.

At school, planning for improvement involves assessing and reflecting upon what it is that we value the most and turning that data over to Professional Learning Communities whose job it is to set goals and introduce high-yield strategies, which we implement, monitor and assess. Critical evidence allows us to see where we are and what we value and use that information to plan and monitor progress continuously, thereby answering the question Are we getting better?

While the four measures of school effectiveness, achievement, attitude, attendance and behaviour all correlate, achievement is the only one that offers concrete proof of school success. Although we can’t directly change anyone’s attitude, Hulley argues, we can have a huge impact on his or her achievement and, through achievement, influence attitude.

Vision and Values Should Drive Schools

If you have a vision of what makes an effective school, it helps if people align to get the results you want. Central to Hulley’s message is the idea of leadership. You need leaders who care enough and can express that caring to other people. You need people who are not satisfied with getting by but choose to get better, by taking action that will provide opportunities for positive change. Common characteristics and practices of effective schools include a safe and orderly environment, a clear and simply stated mission, active home-school relations, high expectations, frequent monitoring of student progress, opportunities to learn and instructional leadership.

Values should drive schools. Goals are a statement of what we value. We must be willing to create structures and systems that allow us to meet our goals and, therefore, satisfy the value of learning for all students, whatever it takes. **If you want people to change their behaviour you have to change their minds.** Schools have to work from their head and their heart. Put the two together and change occurs. Spending money on education does not guarantee anything will happen. Hulley challenges his audience to ensure that this symposium be cost-effective by returning to their schools and making a difference.

In closing, with the dilemma of human mortality in mind, Wayne Hulley underlines the profound responsibilities that our profession entails. As educators, we truly do have the opportunity to change lives as a result of the choices we make. Without forgetting, of course, to use a great deal of wisdom and kindness. ■

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Coffee Break

**Interview with Sylvie Fréchette, former Olympic swimmer and accomplished businesswoman**

Sylvie Fréchette is an accomplished athlete and businesswoman who has scaled great personal and professional heights, in spite of significant obstacles, thanks to her clear objectives and extraordinary tenacity.

In 1986, she won the gold medal in solo synchronized swimming at the Commonwealth Games. In 1991, she earned seven perfect 10s at the World Aquatics Championships in Australia, which was a world record and also crowned her world champion. From 1988 to 1992, she ranked first in all but one of the international competitions in which she participated. Sylvie Fréchette has received numerous prizes and honours.

In 1993, she published her autobiography, *Sylvie Fréchette : sans fausse note* (published in English as *Gold at Last*). Sylvie has also worked in Las Vegas with the Cirque du Soleil, where she contributed to the show O as an artist, choreographer, trainer and assistant artistic coordinator.

Today, strengthened by her personal and professional experiences, she motivates people to face life's challenges directly and encourages them never to give up while reaching for their goals.

1. You began synchronized swimming at the age of seven. What have you learned from the world of sports and high-stakes competition that could be useful during school and studies?

One of the lessons I learned from my sports practice, and that my mother kept repeating over and over throughout my childhood, is that when you start something, you have to finish it. Because if you say, "Oh, I can't do that!" and give up without trying, you don't learn and you don't really become the best you can be. If you don't strive to be the best you can be, you'll never discover your full potential.

2. In your experience, what is the role of strong evaluations of progress and success, and how important are they?

Evaluation is a bit like a barometer, one that shows where you are. In the sports world, the competitions held during the year are "evaluations" for us athletes. They allow us to evaluate the stages that we've completed and that are bringing us closer to our end-of-year goal.

One thing I find noteworthy in sports is that the participants have precise objectives. In other words, when we start the year, we know what has to be achieved by the end of the year. It's all clear!

When I was eight and a half, my daughter's age, I knew what my objectives in synchronized swimming were: I had to be able to do a vertical, a fishtail and a one-and-a-half-minute solo.

I believe it's very important for children to know their objectives in school too. I think it's important for them to understand how concrete learning objectives are part of a process that leads to something much larger. For children to be motivated, they have to have a clear idea of how the things they learn in school will be useful in life.

Sylvie, what you're saying very much corresponds to what's going on in education at the moment: teachers are being encouraged to present their students with step-by-step learning targets, so that children feel involved in their learning.

Yes, that's right: one step at a time.

When my coach, Julie, had me do exercises, I knew that after accomplishing one thing, I would go on to the next, then the next, and that by the end of the year, I would be able to perform my entire routine.

3. Tangible proof may be indispensable for measuring the performance of students or high-level athletes, yet it is no substitute for the role of the teacher or coach the only one who can understand these results in the context of the school or sport. What role did your coach play in the analysis of your performances?

Like [my coach] Julie, a teacher is there to put the results in context. When I was little, I very often came in first during competitions. But the times when I came in 12th were a real drama: I cried and was totally discouraged. Then Julie would say to me, "Now stop; don't be discouraged; look at all you already know how to do. You just have to work on such and such, and we're going to find another way to get it right." For me, that's the role of the coach or teacher: to interpret results, identify what remains to be learned and come up with solutions. And this has also helped me as a parent. Today, when my daughter, who usually gets As and A-pluses in school, comes home all upset because of a lower grade, I say to her, "But look at it this way, thanks to your evaluation, you know what you didn't understand and it's easy to pinpoint the problem. Come on, we'll try it another way and things will work out; you'll see."



4. Coaches use strategies to help athletes adopt a positive attitude. Which of these strategies could be used by teachers in the classroom?

Coaches always review the skills mastered before looking to the unknown, to what remains to be learned. They first examine what the athlete has already learned, because this serves as a springboard to the next stage. Then, when they know what they can build on, they turn to the unknown, to what needs to be learned. Yet here again, when the coach helps the athlete look to the future, it isn't a misty haze: it's a staircase with clear, well-defined steps.

5. Most of us have had a special teacher who's had a positive impact on our life. Who was that person for you, and what made him or her so special?

It was Thérèse Pelletier in Grade 4B. She had a profound influence on me. This elderly lady was tall and held herself very straight. I was always the tallest one in the class, which I didn't like. With her, we all felt we were good at something. She was fair and organized. She made sure each student had a turn, following a logical order, and no one was judged. She delegated a lot of responsibilities to the students and used us as mini-teachers. More than anything, I felt she loved us. I felt important in her class. I'm convinced she still remembers me.

6. Given the important role that teachers play in the life of their students, what message would you like each teacher to give to their students?

As a parent or educator, I think it's important to say to children, "You have the right to dream! And, what's more, you have the right to dream big! You're the business leaders of the future; you're the next Céline Dion, Bill Gates, Guy Laliberté, Julie Payette... There's somebody in the school who's going to become an astronaut or be part of a team that will cure cancer." You have to remind them of their potential, because for something to happen, you first have to be able to dream it! And I find that, too often, we have a tendency to clip our kids' wings by telling them, "Come on, get real," when what we should be doing is encouraging them. My mother never judged my dreams; she never said, "Better forget about it, you'll never be able to do that," even though she must have secretly thought "My daughter's absolutely nuts!" I think it's important not to judge. Because the important thing is that our children find their way. At a certain point, achieving the dream becomes secondary: it's the journey that's important. And if they change their mind along the way, what's important is that they continue to learn, because changing your mind isn't necessarily giving up: it's evolving.

7. How do you see the parent-teacher relationship?

I have the greatest respect for the role of teachers in the school. Educating our children is a huge task and responsibility. When you think about it, teachers are responsible for our children 50% of the time, while we, the parents, are responsible the other 50%, at home. And for that reason I really want to assist the teachers. I'm a mom who wants to participate in her children's success at school. When I sent my eldest child to kindergarten for the first time, I told the teacher, "I'm entrusting my daughter to you. Everything I've done for her up to the age of five, I entrust to you, and you're going to help me round out her personality and her education." In return, I would like to hear teachers say, "Hey you, the parent, I need you too, I need you to help me turn your little darling into a responsible adult." And when I send a note to my daughter's teacher, I certainly don't want it to be construed as a judgment. I only want to help. I truly see the parent-teacher relationship as a close collaboration.

8. Your road to success in sports has not been a smooth one. You encountered a number of setbacks along the way. Based on this experience, what advice would you give to people who are facing difficulties?

First of all, I would say they should give themselves the right to be disappointed, to be angry, to be sad. But they should also make sure this doesn't go on for too long. Because if you don't get over a setback, it takes hold of your life in an extraordinary way, and then your whole life becomes a disaster. Personally, I'd much rather "zoom out" at these times and tell myself, "Yes, I failed, but I'm healthy, I'm alive, I have a family, I have work." I find that very helpful. I also try to put my failure into perspective by asking myself, "Why did it happen? What can I learn from it? What are my strengths? What are my weaknesses? How can I overcome them? Have I neglected my strengths?" You have to nurture your strengths as well, because if you don't, they can also diminish.

9. In your opinion, what is the recipe for a fulfilling life and what are the ingredients of success?

For me, a fulfilling life is being able to re-evaluate yourself constantly, being honest with yourself and being able to admit, "Yes, I'd like something else." But it's hard, because all of us, young and old alike, have a tendency to stay in our own little comfort zone, to sink into a snug "La-Z-Boy and remote control" routine. Once we're comfortable, we become complacent and we forget to feel alive. Thus we have to muster the courage to get up from time to time, look around and ask ourselves, "Am I really comfortable here on my sofa or do I want to change? Is there something more I could be doing?" It takes enormous courage to answer these questions, because we're all afraid of change. Nobody likes change! For example, just look at the expression "growing pains"! But in fact, when you think about it, growing is extraordinary; what's painful is coming out of the armour we've built around ourselves! But when change makes us more fulfilled, stimulated and happier, this is so contagious for the people around us! And the fact that one of us has taken action and decided to change the status quo ends up having an impact on the world. Staying alive, staying open to possibilities, never ceasing to marvel at all that surrounds us this, for me, is the secret of a fulfilled life. ■

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Special Symposium Issue

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View from the Front of the Class



Co-teaching Strategies to Help Your Class Succeed

Located in a rural farming community of Douglas, Ontario, the school serves 500 students, all of whom are bused in. Parents in this district are busy working their farms and entrust the education of their children to the school.

Qualified, experienced and talented teachers who are able to inspire and motivate students through their teaching can make a real difference.

Opeongo High School's Mike Neill and Ted Wren are certainly such teachers.

Working together, they have increased their Grade 9 applied mathematics students' EQAO assessment results by about 30 percentage points in just one year.

What the Data Revealed

Their journey began last year. The EQAO assessment data were in, and the Grade 9 applied mathematics results were quite low: the 2007–2008 data showed that only 43% of students were performing at or above the provincial standard.

In examining EQAO assessment results from the past five years, educators at Opeongo identified a recurring problem: on average, only slightly more than one-third of students in Grade 9 applied mathematics were achieving at or above the provincial standard.

As the Grade 9 *academic* math results over the same period showed that more than 75% of students were achieving at or above the provincial standard, the data alerted the educators to the fact that their teaching strategies for the applied mathematics program were in need of improvement.

The Plan

Neill says that, after examining the data, the next step was to “have a good plan and know what you want.” The mathematics department was small, teachers were spreading themselves thin and it was difficult for the school to find qualified teachers. The plan at Opeongo High was to invest existing teachers' experience and specialty in the applied mathematics stream. Placing specialized math teachers ensured that the applied students would receive more attention and specialized instruction.

Neill and Wren were the most experienced teachers at Opeongo and took on the challenge of helping these students in their learning. Together, they devised the strategies described here.

Strategy 1: Co-teaching

Neill and Wren co-taught the applied mathematics students. This meant taking turns teaching one Grade 9 applied math class for a week at a time. This strategy worked well for the educators and their students: according to Neill, co-teaching allows the teacher to return to the class with “a fresh set of eyes and ears” and be more receptive to students' needs. Furthermore, by working together, the co-teachers were able to share the challenges and triumphs of teaching the same class.

The students benefit from being exposed to two different teaching styles. Because each student learns in unique ways, differentiated teaching helps all students grasp new concepts and develop problem-solving skills.

Each of the educators creates a distinct classroom environment. Neill aims to create a community-oriented classroom environment, where students largely work in groups. He punctuates his lessons with anecdotes intended to create a collegial classroom where everyone knows each other and is comfortable. Wren's teaching style is aimed at motivating the students to ensure they succeed and produce their best work. He encourages his students to share their ideas, discuss mathematics and meet with him for extra help. His classes are well-organized and aim to engage students so that they enjoy learning.



Strategy 2: Consistent Methods

Despite the fact that Neill and Wren have different teaching styles, they maintain consistent methods and expectations.

Encouragement

It has been the educators' experience that students in the applied stream do not see themselves as successful in mathematics when they make the transition from elementary to secondary school. Therefore, they provide encouragement to ensure that students participate. Neill and Wren believe that a classroom should be an environment that is safe and comfortable, where students can speak fearlessly and listen to one another.

Lesson Plan

Both teachers start each lesson with a "minds-on" question that connects what students have already learned with the upcoming lesson. They stress that, at the end of the lesson, it is important to consolidate what has been taught and assess the students' learning.

Use of Manipulatives and Technology

The educators both stress the importance of using manipulatives in the classroom. They believe it is best to have students work hands-on, which is why all students in Neill's and Wren's class are required to have a graphing calculator. Also, since most of their students do not have personal computers at home, Neill and Wren use technology such as smart boards to engage them in the classroom.

Homework Policy

While they agree that homework solidifies a lesson, Neill and Wren believe that it is more important to produce quality work than a large quantity. If teachers assign regular homework, they contend, students are more likely to produce rushed work that is not up to par. For this reason, Neill and Wren place an emphasis on work done well in the classroom rather than on regular homework.

Strategy 3: Assess Level of Learning

Both educators believe that all data are important, and, for this reason, they rely on many methods of assessing student performance in addition to EQAO's tests. They encourage their students to demonstrate their learning in a "non-test-like fashion," which may involve oral communication, problem-solving and hands-on projects such as making posters—any activity that allows students to show what they have learned. Also, they ask "good questions" that require students to demonstrate their learning. This type of information complements data such as EQAO assessment results and helps provide a complete picture.

Neill and Wren review EQAO assessment data annually to determine where they stand. This helps them assess their own strengths and areas where they need to put more attention. The educators say that they sometimes expect the results they see, but that the results are eye-opening at other times. EQAO assessment data, in combination with communication from students, gives a clear picture of how well the students are learning. Thus Neill and Wren stress the importance of assessing learning in various ways to discover whether their teaching strategies are effective.



Using Data Effectively

These educators make other effective uses of data. For example, Grade 8 teachers from feeder schools place students in the Grade 9 applied and academic mathematics streams using data from their own assessments. Neill and Wren have decided to share the Grade 9 EQAO mathematics data with teachers at the feeder schools, so that they can determine how effective their placement is.

Coaching

The strategies described here have helped bring about a dramatic improvement in student learning, and this has been neglected in EQAO assessment results for Opeongo High School's Grade 9 applied math students. Their exceptional teachers also recommend a coaching program in order to accelerate gains. Government funds have provided the opportunity for Neill and Wren to become mathematics coaches for teachers in the intermediate level grades, which gives the teachers a clearer sense of secondary-level expectations. At the same time, this coaching program enables Neill and Wren to help new secondary mathematics teachers enhance their teaching strategies.

Neill and Wren say that, as the data prove, with this type of time and energy invested in a class, better results are sure to follow. It is vital to assess students continually and collect various types of data in order to evaluate the current learning processes and determine whether they are successful. According to data such as EQAO assessment results, Neill's and Wren's strategies have been successful: while, on average, only slightly more than one-third of students in Grade 9 applied mathematics at Opeongo High were performing at or above the provincial standard a few years ago, the past year has seen a dramatic increase in results, with 69% of such students performing at or above the provincial standard.

Now, Neill and Wren hope to use what they have learned with their Grade 9 applied math students to help those in the academic stream perform even better proving that for innovative teachers, the journey is never quite over. ■



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Spotlight



Pam Garbutt, principal

Celebrating the Success of an Ontario School

St. John Catholic Elementary School
Waterloo Catholic District School Board

School population: 189

Grades: Kindergarten to Grade 8

Principal: Pam Garbutt

I attribute the success of our school's plan to staying focused on a few goals, taking small steps and using the evidence gathered from classroom assessments and board and EQAO data to make collaborative decisions about student learning. Every decision comes down to what will improve student learning, and all staff members in the school take this approach seriously.

Principal Pam Garbutt

In the downtown core of Kitchener, St. John Catholic Elementary School serves 189 students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8, with all students walking to and from school. The school is celebrating its 80th anniversary this year and has a good reputation in the community thanks to the variety of programs it offers to its students both during the day and after school. The neighbourhood is at risk economically, as many residents work in the trades or retail, two sectors that have been affected by the economic downturn.

In collaboration with the school council, St. John Catholic operates "Mother Hubbard's Cupboard," through which basic school supplies and clothing are available to those in need. A Nutrition for Learning grant ensures that each child has access to healthy snacks in the classroom throughout the school day. The school values the commitment of parents and works hard to ensure its environment is welcoming and safe for students. Family events bring parents into the school, which increases their involvement in the education of their children. The school council raises funds for field trips so the school can allocate more money to learning resources. The trips themselves are linked back to the curriculum expectations and provide both cultural and learning experiences.

Over the past five years, the school has experienced declining enrollment, and most classes now have combined grades. Thirty percent of the student population are students new to Canada. With a large number of students whose first language is not English and with eight languages other than English spoken in the community, the school has a full-time ESL teacher to assist students. A YMCA settlement worker helps newly arrived students and their families become accustomed to their new school and community. There are two half-time special-education teachers and six full-time educational assistants assigned to the school.

When the EQAO results are released, the St. John School staff begins by examining the EQAO results over time in the context of the school's own achievement data. Staff members closely examine the Item Information Reports and classroom data to determine areas for improvement. Recently, they determined that reading for comprehension and meaning and making connections needed to be improved. Realizing that students did not fully understand open-response questions, they sought the assistance of an itinerant literacy teacher to support them in developing strategies that could be used across the grades. The strategies that resulted included anchor, "Go" and "Answer Sandwich" charts and the 3 Rs (Retell, Relate, Reflect). They also developed sample questions and responses that model the EQAO open-response format, so students would be better able to respond to such questions on the assessments.

With the focus on reading for meaning and making connections, the staff concentrated on guided and shared reading to help the students make connections and self-monitor. The school purchased resources such as *Moving Up with Literacy Place* to assist teachers as they focused on improving the reading skills of their students. A special-education teacher runs a daily hour-long Empowerment Program for Grade 3 students who are not yet reading, which supplements the regular language program.

Tawnya Dosman-DeBrouwer, the Grade 3 teacher, states: "It is very important to start making connections at the beginning of the year and focus on connections daily as you integrate your curriculum. Every student can be successful if you differentiate for their individual needs. You just have to find out how students can be successful. Sharing resources and working together as a team is the key to our ongoing success. We talk about kids a lot."

The staff uses classroom assessments, such as the balanced literacy assessment measures and CASI, to monitor students' progress and to flag problem areas such as the use of conventions and context clues. Staff members monitor learning daily, using common assessment tools and rubrics created collaboratively during Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway sessions, and change strategies as needed. Dialogue and sharing of resources and strategies continue throughout planning time and during frequent informal exchanges. Further, the school has taken advantage of funds from the board office for teachers to collaborate with colleagues in other schools. These professional



Serge Vlemmix, Pam Garbutt, Carlos Roque and Tawnya Dosman-DeBrouwer

which supplements the regular language program.

learning communities have been an excellent opportunity for teachers to share their resources and expertise and build consistency of practice.

At St. John, improvement planning is a collaborative, continuous and fluid process. The school's plan is updated regularly with successful strategies and the evidence that shows these strategies are working. Principal Pam Garbutt attributes the success of the plan to staying focused on a few goals, taking small steps and using the evidence gathered from classroom assessments and board and EQAO data to make collaborative decisions about student learning. She maintains that every decision comes down to what will improve student learning, and all staff members in the school take this approach seriously.

Principal Garbutt depends on her staff's excellent teaching and willingness to discuss issues and provide input to the school improvement plan. She states: "Teachers are committed to collaboration to create and implement strategies that enhance the learning opportunities for all students. St. John CES is a small, caring community. The teachers know the students well. I trust their ability as a team to assist in creating our school improvement plan and to celebrate our successes as we see the improvement of our students. Although we begin by examining our EQAO data, it is our ongoing conversations and school-based evidence that influence our decisions as we move forward."



St. John School attributes much of its success to its excellent community outreach programs. The school applied for a "Virtual YMCA" program, which now runs daily after school. This program has been a huge asset to the community, with many different programs offered to students and parents. Anything the YMCA offers, such as clubs, theme days and sports, can be made available at the school. In collaboration with the St. John staff, the Y instructors work with the students to improve their literacy and learning skills. Other programs for parents provide strategies to assist them with nutrition, wellness and supporting their child's education and homework completion. Also, through the Virtual YMCA, St. John School is pilot testing a "Learning Is Child's Play" program for children three to five years old, run one morning a week on a day when students do not attend kindergarten. Participants learn social skills, letter recognition and routines.

As another support for students and families, St. John offers an after-school homework club for Grades 4 to 8 students in which they can receive assistance from a teacher. The school has also applied for and received a grant to establish a drop-in centre for their intermediate students. Located in one of the school's empty classrooms, this "Chill Zone" is funded through the Canadian Mental Health Association and can be signed out by teachers for classroom meetings or for use as a time-out area. The school's itinerant child and youth worker also works out of this room.

It is the strength of the school's community outreach and its welcoming atmosphere that have contributed to the success of its students. Principal Garbutt believes that the school is the hub of the community and that the students and their parents must feel safe and secure if student learning is to improve. "We have a hard-working and committed staff that believes every child can experience success, and they work hard to ensure the needs of every child are met. We also have a variety of in-school and after-school programs in place that serve our students from kindergarten to Grade 8. Our parents believe that St. John Catholic Elementary School is a calm, happy and safe environment, and they are prepared to work with us to provide learning opportunities to ensure the success of their children." ■



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Data in Action



Using Data to Improve Student Learning

Victoria L. Bernhardt, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Education for the Future Initiative

 [View video session](#)

Victoria L. Bernhardt is Executive Director of the Education for the Future Initiative, a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to build the capacity of learning organizations at all levels to gather, analyze and use data to continuously improve learning for all students. She is also a professor in the Department of Professional Studies in Education at California State University.

Her presentation at EQAO's November learning symposium entitled "Using Data to Improve Student Learning" provided insight into the importance of collecting data and using it effectively.

Dr. Bernhardt's presentation allowed for discussion and deliberation among school teams, and we invite you to review this article with your own school team to find out how you can use data to improve student learning at your school.

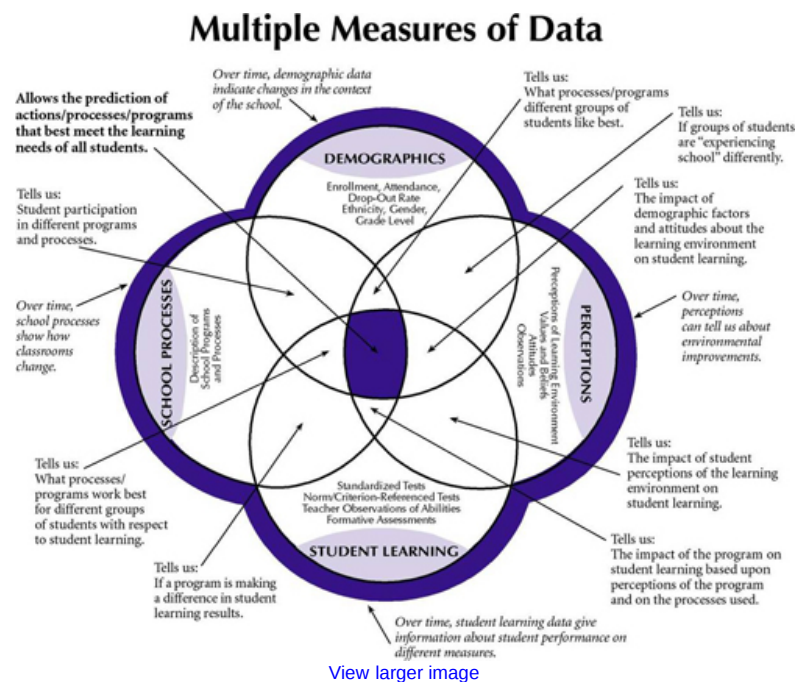
Before you examine your own school community's data, Dr. Bernhardt suggests that you consider a general question to begin the thinking process:

- ♦ *What would it take to achieve student-learning increases in every grade level, subject area and with every student group?*
 - What data do you need?
 - Why are these data important?
 - How are these data important?

The data show us where we are currently and how we got there. It is vital to know where we are, as opposed to where we think we are. A school requires data in order to evaluate what is currently working and what areas require improvement, and uses this information to plan for the future. In this way, data predict and prevent failure, ensuring success. This article will show you why having access to reliable sources of data is important and how a systematic approach to using this information is valuable.

Multiple Measures of Data

Dr. Bernhardt says that educators should use data, not hunches, to identify areas of challenge, improve instructional practices and improve student learning. She points to EQAO assessment results as one piece of the puzzle and stresses that schools need to collect additional demographic, perceptual, student-learning and school-process data, as outlined in the "Multiple Measures of Data" chart below. Examining each of these sources of information in isolation and then in combination allows for a rich understanding of your school community. This allows you to predict and plan the actions, processes, and programs that best meet the learning needs of all students.



According to Dr. Bernhardt, it has been proven that achieving student-learning increases in every grade level, subject area and student group in as little as one year is possible if we collect and use the information outlined above effectively. Throughout the process, it is critical to measure progress along the way, examine all of the various types of data and continuously monitor what your students need.

In order to use the Multiple Measures of Data, a school team can begin its data analysis with the top circle: examining demographics.

1st Category of Data: Demographics and Answering the Question “Who Are We?”

Demographic data are important because they allow you to define the context of your school and help in understanding other data such as achievement results.

Some examples of demographic data include

- Enrolment history
- Gender
- Date of birth
- Attendance (absences)
- Expulsions
- Suspensions
- Socio-economic status (through postal code or Stats Canada data)
- Entry to Canada
- First language
- Student mobility (tracked using Ontario Education Number)
- Special education needs/Exceptionality
- English language learners/Actualisation linguistique en français
- Student with an Individual Education Plan

When examining any demographic data, as Dr. Bernhardt reminds us, it is best to look longitudinally, over at least three to five years, in order to recognize trends. Now that you are familiar with what types of information is classified as demographic data, as a school team, consider the following:

♦ *What demographic data do you have available or need to collect?*

2nd Category of Data: Perceptions and Answering the Question “How Do We Do Business?”

The next type of data to consider involve perception. According to Dr. Bernhardt, perceptions need to be measured to understand how students, teachers and parents perceive their learning environment. For example, based on an extensive student-perception survey, administered to 10 000 students from kindergarten to Grade 12, the number one answer was a caring teacher. Then, “a teacher who helps me learn what I didn’t think I could learn” and “a teacher who likes to have fun in helping me learn.”

Dr. Bernhardt suggests that a school team consider

♦ *What perception data do you have available or need to collect?*

Sources of perception data include

- Student, staff and parent questionnaires
- Observations
- Focus groups
- EQAO questionnaire data

Examining a combination of demographics and perception data can show you how different groups of students experience school differently.

3rd Category of Data: Student Learning and Answering the Question “How Are Our Students Doing?”

Over time, student-learning data provide an understanding of student achievement through different measures. Some of these measures may include

- Classroom assessments
- Diagnostic assessments
- Formative assessments
- Provincial assessments such as EQAO data
- International assessments
- Current report card marks
- Prior report card marks
- Credit accumulation by subject
- Teacher observation of abilities



These data are important because they show us what students are learning and help us understand what is being taught. Also, this information helps educators determine which students may need extra help and attention.

By considering a combination of student-learning data and perception data, we can observe the impact of student perceptions of the learning environment on student learning. If we factor in demographic data, we will learn the impact of demographic factors and attitudes on learning.

4th Category of Data: School Processes and Answering the Question “How Effective Are Our Processes?”

The last measure is school-process data. School processes provide important data that tell us how a school community functions in terms of its programs and processes and, therefore, how it obtains its results.

Some examples of school processes include

- Curriculum alignment
- Assessment (diagnostic, formative, summative, EQAO)
- Instructional strategies
- School climate
- Leadership capacity
- Program implementation
- Special education
- Parental involvement
- Co-curricular activities
- Supervision schedules

♦ *As a school team, take a few minutes to consider what student learning and school-process data you have available or need to collect.*

Reviewing a combination of school-process and demographic data will inform you of student participation in different programs and processes. If you include perception data, it will show you the perceptions of various sub-groups of students regarding the processes and programs in your school community.

It is crucial to look at school-process data combined with student-learning data, as this will show you if school programs are making a difference in student-learning results. When it is combined with demographic data, you can determine which programs and processes work best for various groups of students. When it is combined with perception data, you will gain insight into the impact of programs on learning based on student perceptions of programs and processes.

The Results

A combination of the four categories of data above will allow you to predict and plan the actions, programs and processes that best meet the learning needs of various groups of students based on demographics and perceptions.

Looking at the results of the data described here empowers educators to adapt instructional methods in order to reach every student. The aim should be continuous improvement in any or all of the following categories:

- Information and analysis
- Student achievement
- Quality planning
- Leadership
- Professional learning
- Partnership development
- Continuous improvement and evaluation

As demonstrated in this article, a systematic approach to collecting and analyzing data is necessary in order to achieve school improvement. Dr. Bernhardt leaves no doubt in her belief that data-driven decision-making, instructional coherence and a shared vision for school improvement are preconditions for purposeful school improvement. ■

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Special Symposium Issue

Issue 3, 2009

How Would You Score This?



Try your hand at scoring a student response!

Take a look at the following student response to a reading question (or “item” in EQAO’s terminology) from the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. How would you score it?

The sample question (along with its reading passage), the scoring rubric, the correct score and an annotation are provided, as are sample student responses assigned other score codes.

Step 1: Look at the Reading Passage

First, take a look at the following reading passage, on which the sample reading question is based:

Who ate pasta first?

The October 2005 issue of Nature magazine reported that archaeologists found a 4000-year-old bowl of noodles at a site in western China. This discovery may be proof that China invented pasta.

“These are definitely the earliest noodles ever found,” said Houyuan Lu, a researcher in Beijing who studied the ingredients of the perfectly preserved pasta.

[View or print entire reading passage](#)

Step 2: Look at the Sample Question

Second, take look at the sample question:

Explain whether this archaeological find settles the historical question about who invented pasta. Use specific details from the selection and your own ideas to support your answer.

Step 3: Look at the Student Response

Next, take a look at the sample student response:

- 6 Explain whether this archaeological find settles the historical question about who invented pasta. Use specific details from the selection and your own ideas to support your answer.

The archaeological find settles the historical question about who invented noodles because it is the only real evidence that shows the Chinese did have noodles 4000 years ago. Other evidence is only information on written documents, personal accounts and menus, but there is no solid evidence like the 4000 year old discovery that is older then the other info.

Step 4: Score the Student Response

Use the scoring rubric below to determine how you would score this response. Click the button at the bottom to reveal the correct score. You can also use the links in the rubric to view responses that received the other score codes.

Code	Description

10	Response attempts to answer the question about whether or not this archaeological find settles the historical question about who invented pasta by providing • <u>no</u> opinion OR • <u>no support</u> for the opinion OR • <u>an opinion</u> supported by irrelevant reason/information from the selection and/or own ideas View sample student response
20	Response provides an opinion as to whether or not this archaeological find settles the historical question about who invented pasta that is consistent with the information in the reading selection but <u>provides vague support</u> for the opinion. The response usually requires the reader to make the connection between the support and what it is intended to prove. View sample student response
30	Response provides an opinion as to whether or not this archaeological find settles the historical question about who invented pasta and uses <u>specific and relevant support</u> from the selection to <u>justify the opinion clearly</u>. View sample student response

View Score

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