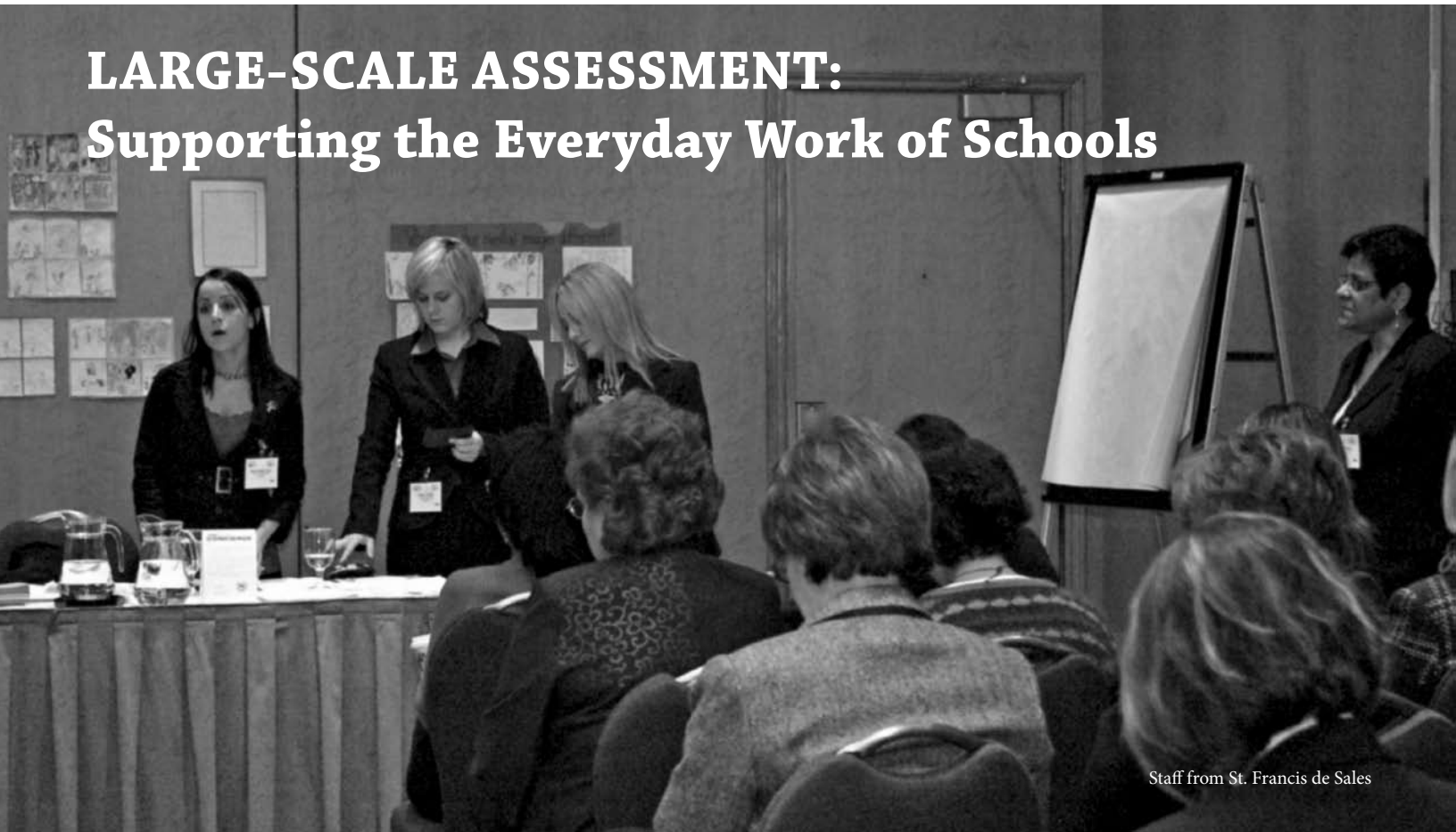


EQAO Conference

LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT: Supporting the Everyday Work of Schools



Staff from St. Francis de Sales

By Sierra Bacquie, EQAO

“Linking classroom instruction to tangible evidence leads to purposeful improvement,” said Marguerite Jackson, CEO of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), in her opening remarks at the agency’s first-ever conference held on December 4 and 5, 2006, in Toronto.

The data generated through our assessments helps teachers identify the next steps in their students’ learning. Our province-wide assessments provide a consistent external benchmark - a common lens through which to view students’ progress.

The notion of large-scale assessment as a complement to classroom testing has been at the heart of EQAO’s work since the agency began measuring Ontario students’ achievement in reading, writing and mathematics ten years ago. It is a theme reinforced by speakers at this conference entitled, Large-Scale Assessment: Supporting the Everyday Work of Schools.

EQAO brought together more than 300 representatives of Ontario’s English and French language school boards for the two-day event. In the plenary sessions, renowned leaders in the field of large-scale assessment offered provocative views and

insights into the subject. In smaller breakout sessions, educators from across the province shared their strategies for success and experts offered primers in the science and methodology of large-scale assessment. Plenary sessions were available in both English and French and addressed issues specific to both language communities.

A choir of elementary students from Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School opened the event. This offered an opportunity to reflect on the fact that students are the essence of our work. Marguerite Jackson then welcomed the participants, highlighting for all in attendance that “data rests at the heart of good teaching.”

Keynote speaker John Wright, senior vice-president and managing director of Canadian public affairs, Ipsos Reid, spoke of the need always to consider the context in which results of large-scale assessments are produced. He urged the audience to look for the “why” of those results, and not just the “what.” Charles Pascal, chair of EQAO’s board of directors, echoed these sentiments when he spoke of feedback as the “breakfast of champions” and advocated its integral role in education and in life.

Dr. Mark Reckase, professor of measurement and quantitative methods at Michigan State University, suggested that viewing the results of classroom tests and large-scale assessments together is akin to using both eyes to see. Doing so allows for depth perception and a fuller understanding of the opportunities for improvement that each assessment provides.

Dr. Doug Willms, director of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy at the University of New Brunswick, stated that large-scale assessments help discern the extent of inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups. He described a continuous monitoring system used across the country to inform school policy and practice.

Dr. Lorna Earl, former head of the International Centre for Educational Change at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and a member of EQAO's board of directors, spoke directly to the value of EQAO's large-scale assessments. In keeping with EQAO's intention that its data be used as a springboard for improvement, Dr. Earl cautioned that,

Assessment is not diagnosis; it's making visible what's there. Data do not answer questions; they provide tools for thinking.

The conference's breakout sessions offered practical information about the use and interpretation of EQAO results and highlighted the strategies and successes of those on the front lines of education who have improved their students' literacy and numeracy skills. Fifteen English and French language school teams presented their stories. Two of these schools, St. Francis de Sales from the Toronto CDSB and Holy Family from the St. Clair CDSB are featured in this issue of Principal Connections.

In their plenary addresses, speakers referred to the sweeping demographic and socio-cultural changes taking place across Ontario. This increasingly prevalent reality was explored further in the breakout sessions. One session's presenter represented a school board whose website is translated into 25 languages because 50 per cent of its student population speaks English as a second language. One of the presenting school teams has achieved admirable success with an ethno-culturally diverse and transient student population.

Other breakout sessions addressed how to involve parents from all socio-economic communities in their children's academic success and how to spark the desire to learn in our Aboriginal students. Together, these sessions painted a fuller picture of the complexity and diversity of challenges facing an increasing number of teachers, schools and communities. Other aspects of diversity were addressed in sessions dealing with differentiated instruction and assistive technology, strategies for at-risk students and how to close the gender gap in literacy.

Communication was another important conference theme and was stressed in two sessions. One proposed ways that elementary and secondary schools can use EQAO data collaboratively to promote a better understanding of students' needs. Another



Marguerite Jackson, CEO

session offered a guide for schools and boards to communicate effectively with their communities.

After two days of thought-provoking presentations and lively discussion, the conference ended as it began, with a musical performance. A jazz combo from Le Collège français treated the conference participants to a contemporary French-Canadian pop song and a jazz instrumental. A solo pianist closed with a piece by Ravel.

As Marguerite Jackson stated in her closing remarks, the process by which these young musicians attained their high degree of proficiency - a cyclical process of practice, getting feedback, assessing results and working to improve performance - serves as a fitting metaphor for the work that schools do every day, using EQAO data as one of many important tools to achieve proficiency.

Notes from Marguerite Jackson's address are posted on the EQAO website. On-demand webcasts of the conference's plenary sessions will be available at: www.eqao.com.