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## **PERSPECTIVES ON THE ONTARIO PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION STUDENT ASSESSMENT PROJECT**

**A PUBLICATION OF THE**

**ONTARIO PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION**

## Psychology Ontario

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## EDITORIAL

**Guest Editor: Dr. Maria Kokai**

**Chief Psychologist, Toronto Catholic District School Board  
OPA Board of Directors - Education Practice Area**

This issue of *Psychology Ontario (PO)* is devoted to the OPA Student Assessment Project. Since its inception in the Spring of 2006, this project has been progressing through various phases of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and will be coming to conclusion on August 31, 2008. As a member of the OPA Core Committee coordinating the project, and as the OPA Education Practice Area Director, I am honoured to provide the OPA membership with this stimulating set of perspectives from a variety of contributors.

The Student Assessment Project can be considered a milestone in OPA's 60 year history in several respects. It is the first time OPA took on responsibility for developing, managing, and delivering a project that has such a large scope (covering all 72 Ontario school boards and school authorities), that involves the management of such significant financial resources (20 million dollars), and that includes several other disciplines integral to the project (speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, special education). The project is also unique in that it has been developed and managed in very close collaboration with the Ministry of Education's Special Education Policy and Programs Branch.

When the request from the Ministry for the management of this project was presented to the OPA Board of Directors, it received unanimous support, as it is consistent with OPA's main strategic goals and priorities: recognition for the profession of psychology, and close collaboration and partnerships with other organizations and disciplines. The Board has been in receipt of regular updates from the Core Committee

about the progress of the project, and has been very supportive over the past 18 months.

Furthermore, the project has been received positively by psychologists practicing in school boards, who — directly or indirectly — are involved with it. This is not surprising, given the mandate of the project: to support all Ontario school boards in making professional assessments more accessible to children at a younger age, in order to provide early intervention and programming appropriate to their needs. This shift from a reactive to a proactive model in education has been greeted with great enthusiasm in the school psychology community, as it is consistent with our philosophy regarding the role and delivery of psychological services in schools. Consequently, there has been a shift in how psychological services and service providers are perceived by school boards as well: a shift from being seen as merely assessors, to being accepted as collaborative partners to educators in addressing the varied needs of their students.

This issue of the *PO* contains a collection of articles regarding the Student Assessment Project from the points of view of various participants, describing their unique roles, as well as their perspectives on the results and the challenges. Views from the Ministry, from the Project Manager, and from the Monitoring Lead are presented first, followed by the perspectives of a Chief Psychologist and a Chief Speech-Language Pathologist representing psychologists and speech-language pathologists "in the trenches". A French school board psychologist, a northern rural school authority administrator, and a school board superintendent of special education complete the picture. ■

## The Ministry Perspective



### The OPA Student Assessment Project: Kindergarten to Grade 4

**Robert Spall, Education Officer**  
**Bruce Drewett, Director**  
**Special Education Policy and Programs Branch**  
**Ministry of Education**

*“Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.”*

The above quote by Vesta Kelly aptly describes what we, at the ministry, have experienced while working with the Ontario Psychological Association (OPA) and its Student Assessment Project.

In the spring of 2006, the Ontario government announced funding to school boards to support assessments for students who require special education programs and/or services. This was a component of the early identification and intervention initiatives that support the Ministry of Education’s strategic direction.

A core committee of OPA members was created to manage the project and ensure that its objectives were attainable and on track. It was decided that there needed to be an ongoing relationship with staff from the Special Education Policy and Programs Branch of the Ministry of Education. Along with the executive director, president of the OPA and chief psychologists from a number of school boards, ministry staff were asked to be part of this committee. Later the committee expanded to include the newly hired project manager and a francophone psychologist from a school board.

This committee developed the four objectives for the project. There was ongoing discussion between the OPA and the ministry as these objectives evolved. Everyone at the table learned to understand and respect each other’s perspective and to find ways to make this collaborative process work.

It became clear to the OPA that a broader provincial perspective would be helpful to inform the committee’s

work. A second team was formed. A provincial advisory committee was established to represent psychology, occupational therapy and speech/language pathology, as well as the perspective of educators from school boards. The OPA chose to invite ministry staff to this committee table to provide English and French-language special education policy perspectives.

This committee proved to be incredibly helpful to the evolution of the project as it provided an informed sounding board for the project plans. As this work progressed, the objectives grew, changed and evolved. After a final version of the project plan was approved by the core committee, it was time to promote the project to the school boards.

Each school board was asked to name an OPA project team and the OPA assigned a monitor/coach to support this team. The ministry has been fully involved in this crucial, hands-on component, including supporting the development of school board project plans and monitoring their progress in achieving the four project objectives.

There was no obligation for the OPA to involve the ministry in all aspects of the project as it chose to do. The executive director, the president and the project manager view this project as a partnership between the ministry and the association. There is a deep sense of responsibility to provide the ministry with results that are accountable, support student achievement, and show improvement in assessment processes in school boards across the province that are sustainable.





The ministry has some specific outcomes that it wants to see as a result of this project. These outcomes centre on the classroom teacher providing effective instruction based on assessment information. This includes a better ability of the teacher to assess students in the classroom, as well as to better use, through program design and delivery, assessment information provided through professional assessments.

To achieve these goals the project needs to address the whole assessment process in school boards. This would include teacher educational assessments and the referral and follow-up processes for professional assessment reports. Finally, the project needs to support the development of the Individual Education Plan (IEP). These objectives were directly based on the recommendations regarding assessment in *Education For All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy for Students With Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6*. The OPA has built a project model that is in sync with these desired outcomes.

One indirect result is the project has brought the working relationship between curriculum and special education departments closer together in many school boards. This is a very desirable development to enhance learning for *all students*.

Since the moment when the project was first announced, a sense of common purpose and commitment emerged. A working team that operates on mutual trust and respect is in place. This team has built and will sustain a positive relationship between the OPA and the ministry long after the end date of the project passes. ■

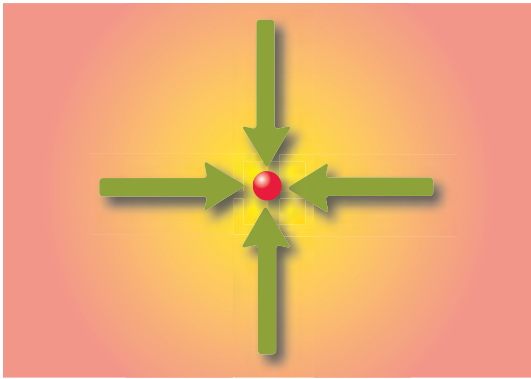


## Designing a Project for Success

### Marg Pepler, Project Manager OPA Student Assessment Project

I have spent most of my career working on project teams and managing projects in highly technical environments. I started out at Ontario Hydro in cost engineering and scheduling during the construction of the Bruce Nuclear Power Development. Over the years, my experience included projects in industrial marketing, business and strategic planning, process re-engineering and customer service. I became the Manager of Customer Policies and Programs for the transmission / distribution division, and eventually left the electricity business to pursue my consulting career. The next few years were spent working for the Ontario Government on information technology transition and other IT projects.

In September 2006, I received a call that was to open the door to a whole new area of project management. I was offered the position of working with the Ontario Psychological Association (OPA) and the Ontario school boards as leader of the OPA Student Assessment Project. The Ministry of Education had provided the OPA with \$20 million to support school boards to reduce the current waiting times for students requiring assessments and to enhance teacher capacity. I was both uneasy and delighted with this new opportunity and change in my career direction. But then, project management is always about change. With my recently acquired Project Management Professional credentials, and the excitement about helping young students to learn, I couldn't wait to get started.

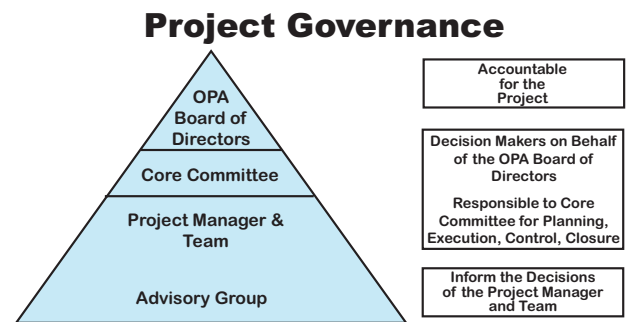


## Setting the Direction

According to the PMBOK Guide<sup>1</sup>, a project is “a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result.” By the time I was hired, the Ministry of Education and the OPA had already defined at a high level the unique results they wanted to accomplish. Key outcomes identified in early communications from the Ministry of Education and the OPA to school boards included: reduce wait times for professional assessments<sup>2</sup> for JK to grade 4 students; enhance teacher capacity; and help students to succeed. I knew from experience that clear direction would be crucial, and that the best way to develop that clarity would be to consult with the project stakeholders – those

who have a “stake” in the outcome of the project. The OPA had already set up a solid governance structure to make decisions, manage and advise the project. My first order of business was to facilitate a workshop with the project’s Advisory Group and listen carefully to what they had to say.

The Advisory Group included representatives from school board psychology, speech language pathology, occupational therapy, the Ministry of Education, and the OPA Board of Directors. I was impressed with the enthusiasm and insights of the group as the expectations, concerns and high hopes for the future were expressed at that first half-day meeting. When it was over, we all understood for the first time that the project was not just about doing professional assessments. It was about making changes to the assessment process, starting with the process of deciding which students would benefit from a professional assessment, then assessing the student, next supporting teachers in implementing assessment recommendations, then evaluating the impact of interventions on student success, and making assessment process changes based on lessons learned.



Working with OPA’s decision-making committee and the Ministry of Education, four project objectives were created:

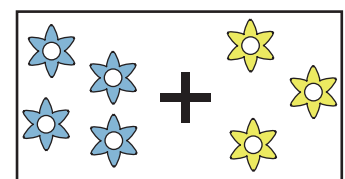
1. reduce wait times for students in junior kindergarten to grade IV requiring professional assessments
2. enhance teacher capacity to provide effective programming for students provided with professional assessments
3. improve literacy / numeracy for students provided with professional assessments
4. sustain assessment process improvements for the long term

To further elaborate on our direction, I worked with the stakeholders to expand and clarify our vision of the successful achievement of the four objectives, and to define how we would measure success.

## Planning Our Approach

Now that I knew where we were headed, my thoughts turned to implementation. How was I going to work with such a diverse group of school boards to achieve these objectives? I was fortunate in that the Council of Ontario Directors of Education<sup>3</sup> special education projects had been launched the previous year. With much appreciated advice and guidance from Frank Kelly, the Executive Director of CODE, and project lead, Michelle Forge, I was able to scope out a basic approach to working with school boards.

Another serious order of business was to determine a fair way to divide up the \$20 million grant among the 72 school boards and 3 school authority groups with their wide variation in enrollment, geographic location, and language. We ran many



scenarios of grant distribution, using a two-part formula based on enrollment. Then we tested the amount for the smallest school boards to make sure we had arrived at a reasonable minimum. We also decided to communicate openly about funding for each school board, eliminating any guesswork about which boards were getting how much and the basis for the decision. Funding would flow to the school boards based on completion and approval of project deliverables over time.

The OPA project at the provincial level needed to have a plan of action, and so did the school boards' teams at the local level. So the next order of business was to develop a template for each school board to develop a plan to make progress on each of the four project objectives. The Assessment Capacity Building Plan template was designed to lead the school board teams through a planning process that would turn strategies into action, and provide a framework for the ongoing management and control of the plan within their own school boards.

Besides the funding and the Assessment Capacity Building Plan template, other supports would be required to facilitate project success in the school boards. Our "100% success model" consisted of:

- Project Team Coaches: A project team of four additional personnel were hired to assist the school boards in accessing their funding and implementing their Assessment Capacity Building Plans.
- Access to Community Practitioners: Community practitioners were encouraged to apply to the OPA to provide services to school boards. Lists of practitioners highlighting their experience and service areas were posted on the OPA website where school boards could go to look for professionals to meet their assessment needs.
- Opportunities to Share Experience: We are always looking for opportunities for school boards to share their OPA project experience, and have facilitated discussions at meetings, conferences, and workshops. At the end of the project, school boards will be invited to share their successes, their challenges and lessons learned with each other at an all day workshop.

- Assessment Promising Practices Resource Guide: We are developing a resource guide that will contain some in-depth descriptions, as well as brief overviews of the promising practices in all school boards.

### Monitor Progress – Theirs and Ours

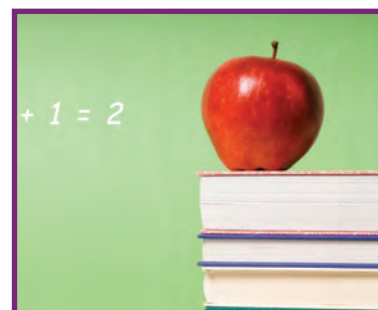
Once the school board plans were submitted and approved, it was time to meet with the school board OPA project teams face to face. A set of questions was sent to the school board teams in advance of the meetings so they would come prepared for a productive discussion. These monitoring meetings, which were held in April and May 2007, were both exhilarating and exhausting as OPA project team members traveled across the province to meet with the school board teams in the Ministry of Education Regional Offices. The school board OPA team members were bubbling over with enthusiasm and ideas, as they described their own visions of success, promising practices, challenges and action plans.

The purpose of the monitoring meetings was not only to monitor school board progress against their plans, but also to obtain their feedback on how we were doing in delivering the project to them. I anxiously waited until the day's meetings were finished to review the anonymous project evaluations. Would we / I receive a passing grade? In the end, the majority of school boards gave us positive feedback on the planning, coaching, monitoring and reporting processes, as well as on the project as a whole. We also received feedback from these key stakeholders that would help us to improve our delivery approach for the future.

### Evaluating Project Outcomes

Time has been flying by and it's already been more than a year since this adventure began. I feel like I've just barely started, and already it is time to think about the end of the project. All projects need to evaluate results or outcomes, so our main focus in the fall of 2007 has been the development of our Key Results Areas – school board reporting requirements for May 2008. With this information, we would know, both at the provincial and local level, the progress made in achieving the four objectives. We also asked the school boards for recommendations on how to mobilize learning across the school board and sustain the positive outcomes of the project.

To determine what we wanted to measure I didn't have to look any further than the planning we did at the beginning of the project when we visualized



success and determined how we would measure it. The plan was to send the Key Results Areas reporting requirements to all school boards late in 2007 so that they would have time to plan and acquire the information by May 2008.

To make sure we were measuring the right things, efficiently, with clear instructions, we went back to consult with key stakeholders for their advice and guidance before sending the final requirements to all school boards. In October and November 2007, we reviewed our reporting requirements proposal with the project Advisory Group, with groups of large and small school boards, and with our project decision making committee members. Based on stakeholder feedback, we refined, updated, simplified and polished the proposal until the final version was sent out in early December 2007.

There are many different ingredients that go into designing a project for success. Clear direction, a solid plan, monitoring progress against the plan, and evaluation of project outcomes are just a few of these. But these ingredients are only valuable to the extent to which they reflect the perspectives, insights, and experience of the project stakeholders. Understanding, responding to, and managing the expectations of project stakeholders is one of the most crucial ingredients in designing a project for success. In the final analysis, a project is only successful when the stakeholders declare it so. ■

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(Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide) Third Edition

<sup>2</sup> Psychological assessments, speech language pathology assessments, occupational therapy assessments

<sup>3</sup> Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) projects are described in more detail on their website at: [www.ontariodirectors.ca](http://www.ontariodirectors.ca)





## Getting to Know You: Working with School Boards for Student Success

**Beverley Terrell-Deutsch, Ph.D., C. Psych.,  
Monitoring Lead,  
OPA Student Assessment Project**

Almost exactly one year ago today I heard from Marg Pepler, the Project Manager, that I was being offered the position of Monitoring Lead for the OPA Student Assessment Project. I was excited and pleased, but truth be told, was also a little anxious about what I had gotten myself into. How exactly had all this happened? I wasn't even looking for a part-time job, and working on a school board project was not how I had envisioned spending my next two years. Why then had I agreed to attend the job interview in the first place? Good question. Simple answer ... when Marg had first called and described the project to me, it sounded intriguing. Imagine - having an opportunity to support school boards across Ontario in enhancing their educational and professional assessment processes for young students with learning needs!

“... and the over-arching objective of the project?” I had asked.

“Student success,” she answered.

Who could turn down such an amazing opportunity? With \$20 million in the bank waiting to be spent on assessment and capacity building services for Junior Kindergarten to Grade 4 students, I was hooked.

### Early Learning

I have learned so much in the past twelve months. Having grown up, lived and worked my whole life in the Barrie and Toronto areas (working for the Simcoe County Board of Education as an elementary teacher and then in the Peel District School Board, first as a Psychoeducational Consultant and later as the Chief Psychologist), I had little idea what was happening in school boards in other parts of Ontario. I didn't even know what a Ministry of Education Regional Office (aka RO) was ... there are six of them, you know ... London, Greater Toronto, Barrie, Ottawa, North Bay / Sudbury and Thunder Bay... the ROs are the administrative centres for all of the school boards within designated geographic areas. I also learned about EOs ... Education Officers ... many of these individuals work in the Regional Offices where they have supervisory and administrative responsibilities. EOs work in the ROs ... see, it's easy. I also did not know that there are 72 school boards in Ontario and many tiny School Authorities, which are often a “single school” school board located in remote regions of northern Ontario.

One of the first things I was to learn as a new member of the OPA project team was who else was on the team with me. Marg, our leader, (of course); then Ed Blackstock with whom I had worked for many years in Peel when he was Chief Psychologist and I was working in the field; Énide Émond, our French language member, a former School Board Superintendent and



Education Officer; and Bob Spall, also an Education Officer with the Ministry of Education who has many years of school board experience in the area of special education.

That's it - five of us, each, as part of our job, serving as "coach" for a dozen or more school boards. As coaches, we have been available to our school boards should they have questions or concerns about any of the project requirements or procedures. The OPA project has a "100% success policy." Part of the coach's job is to support, encourage and ensure the success of each of their school boards.

### Responsibilities of the Monitoring Lead

As might be expected early on with any project, there are many questions that can arise for stakeholders, (i.e., those who have a "stake," or vested interest, in the outcome of the project). One of the first major responsibilities I undertook as Monitoring Lead was to write the "OPA Student Assessment Project Questions and Answers" document. This was made available to school boards to assist with both general and also more detailed / specific types of questions having to do with any aspect of the project.

In November 2006, a template asking school boards to describe their "Assessment Capacity Building Plan" (ACBP) was sent out, to be completed and returned to the OPA in January 2007. Among other things, in this template school boards were asked to describe how they planned to: (a) identify students targeted for professional assessments, (b) enhance the educational assessment process (i.e., assessments to be completed by teachers prior to a referral being made for a professional assessment)<sup>1</sup>, (c) support teachers in implementing recommendations made in professional assessment reports, and (d) sustain process improvements for the long term.

For six weeks in April and May last spring, it was my job, as Monitoring Lead, to travel across Ontario and meet with members of each school board's OPA project team and the region's Education Officer<sup>2</sup> to discuss how school boards were progressing with their ACBPlans. The OPA project coach responsible for that region's school boards also traveled with me, so that there were two of us to engage in most of these meetings. We were there not only to discuss the school board's current successes and challenges, their visions of what future success would look like, their emerging promising practices, and to see how they were progressing against each of the four project objectives<sup>3</sup>, but also to answer questions or deal with any concerns that school boards might have. In addition, we took opportunities, as they became available, to share ideas that we had gleaned from one school board with another that was in a similar situation.

What a fulfilling, rewarding experience the monitoring was! Without exception, the process was profoundly positive. School boards came in to the meetings with enthusiasm and energy and such gratitude for this money that was reserved for special education purposes. Many times we heard that school boards had seen the need for changes in their assessment processes, but with the funding this project provided, they found they now had the additional resources to do something about it. We heard about many of the stressors facing school boards, from declining enrolment, to staffing shortages, to hiring difficulties, to economic and financial fears, to travel times taking longer than meeting times, to high needs students with few community supports available for families, to transient populations with staggering turnover figures ... the list goes on.

But despite the many challenges that were described for us, we were struck by the creativity and thoughtfulness of the plans that school boards brought forward to deal with the difficulties. We were amazed at the energy, dedication and hard work of these people, most of them putting in hours for this project on top of already overloaded full time jobs and many working concurrently on this project and several others.

Also gratifying was finally meeting the "person attached to the voice." We, as coaches, had been communicating with school board OPA team members for several months on the telephone and via email, and now we finally got to meet them in person. It was like seeing old friends. The monitoring meetings made us all realize just how personal the relationships with school board team members had become, and how important it is to build trust and real team relationships with our school board partners.

One of the responsibilities of the Monitoring Lead was to write a report that would summarize the data gathered in the monitoring meetings in a format that would be both accessible and meaningful to school boards, but not unwieldy in terms of length. A report entitled "Status of School Board Assessment Capacity Building: Summary of School Board Monitoring Responses: Provincial View April - May 2007," was produced and placed on the OPA website.<sup>4</sup> This report is an overall, provincial view of the results of the monitoring meetings and was intended to be helpful to school boards in moving forward with their Assessment Capacity Building Plans. Also produced and placed on the OPA website were "segment reports" (i.e., small, medium, large, very large, French language, or Northern school boards) where school boards could see what other similar school boards had described during the monitoring meetings.

## Moving Forward

Since the monitoring meetings last spring, each of us on the OPA project team in our coaching role has worked with our school boards as they prepared and submitted their June Reports, and as they more recently prepared and submitted their updated Assessment Capacity Building Plans.

The monitoring process this year will be different from that of last year. Rather than face-to-face monitoring meetings in the spring, school boards have just recently received a template from our team outlining the key results areas that they will be asked to report on and return to the OPA in May 2008. We coaches will be speaking with our school board colleagues around the reporting requirements to measure project success, offering suggestions, answering questions, continuing in our role as we help to ensure the success of every school board.



## Success

In this respect, my job as Monitoring Lead and as an OPA team coach, along with my four team member colleagues, isn't very different from that of all the teachers, administrators, special education resource staff, professional services staff, and all those other individuals who work so diligently in schools to promote student success. Success. It's what everyone wants. It's what everyone needs. Despite all of the challenges facing school boards today, this project has shown us that positive changes supporting student success are not only possible, but already happening. ■

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### (Footnotes)

- <sup>1</sup> Professional assessments include psychology, speech language pathology and occupational therapy assessments.
- <sup>2</sup> The Education Officers across Ontario had generously assisted us with the many complexities in arranging all these monitoring meetings and also attended the meetings with us. Our friend and colleague in Thunder Bay, Bob Greer, actually drove us from school board to school board, making sure we had good food and wonderful northern photo and shopping opportunities along the way.
- <sup>3</sup> The four project objectives are:
  - (1) reduce wait times for students in Junior Kindergarten to Grade 4 requiring professional assessments,
  - (2) enhance teacher capacity to provide effective programming for students provided with professional assessments,
  - (3) improve literacy / numeracy for students provided with professional assessments, and
  - (4) sustain assessment process improvements for the long term.
- <sup>4</sup> [www.psych.on.ca](http://www.psych.on.ca)

# What has the OPA Student Assessment Project Meant for School Psychology Practitioners in Ontario?

**Dr. Ian Brown**  
**Chief Psychologist, Durham Catholic**  
**District School Board**  
**President, Association of Chief**  
**Psychologists with Ontario School**



The following is a description of some of the ways in which the Student Assessment Project has been beneficial for school board psychology practitioners. I am grateful to my fellow Chiefs for their comments which constitute the bulk of this article.

## 1. Expanded role:

This Project has raised the profile of psychological services staff within school boards, (and in a more positive way than did the ISA process of previous years). That is, it has helped psychologists to be further recognized as collaborative and supportive of teachers' efforts in the classroom. We are seen as able to do much more than merely assessing students' spelling or reading skills; that is, the perception of the role has expanded from that of "assessment jockey" to collaborative partner and consultant in realms of, and beyond, psychometric assessment, including mental health, autism, developmental disabilities, and a host of other areas of student difficulty. In some boards, in fact, the number of referrals for psychological assessments has decreased, while there has been an increase in referrals for other services and supports. Psychological services staff are included on Board teams that address these issues.

## 2. Increased staffing:

The Project has in many cases provided for the hiring of additional staff (psychologists, psychological associates, and psychometrists), where it was possible to successfully recruit qualified individuals. Some boards have found it difficult to recruit staff, due to the significant shortage of qualified school psychology personnel in the province, a condition which will be exacerbated when a number of us retire in the next few years. This Project has provided opportunities for new graduates, those under supervised practice, and doctoral interns, as well as some veterans who came to the Nirvana of school boards from other areas of psychological practice. Some Boards are contracting out assessments to private practitioners so regular board staff can be more involved with follow up of recommendations in the classroom, while another is working with universities to recruit, train, and eventually hire additional staff.

## 3. Wait lists and wait times:

For the school boards where students were waiting a long time for psychological assessments, the waiting time has been reduced. Similarly, the list of students waiting for a psychological assessment has decreased. A significant number (in the thousands) of additional professional assessments of students in JK to Grade Four, which would otherwise not have been completed, will be, as a result of this Project, to the benefit of those students, their teachers, and their parents.

## 4. Pre-referral process:

Many Boards have improved their pre-referral procedures, including the adoption of pre-assessment screening practices, and engaging classroom teachers in all steps of the process. A tiered approach that emphasizes consultation with teaching staff before making referrals for professional assessments is in place in some Boards. Others have made improvements in their referral forms and school support team processes, and increased face-to-face conversation with classroom teachers during the course of the assessment process about needs for programming purposes. Psychology staff have assisted school-based teams in problem-solving for students who are encountering significant difficulties; the discussions are focused and productive.

## 5. Assessment practices:

Some Boards have adopted a universal screening process to identify SK and Grade One students at risk for reading problems. These children receive a battery of reading related processing tests (phonemic awareness, memory, etc.). Results are shared with the classroom teacher and a reading team at the schools; advice is provided on differentiated

instruction, and reading progress is evaluated at the end of the school year; later, grade 3 EQAO results will be examined. A three-tier approach (screening of all students, targeted interventions for at-risk students, and intensive interventions for those students needing individual assessment) has been adopted in some Boards. Others have developed computerized reporting templates to increase efficiencies in assessment and feedback practices. Testing materials and resources have been upgraded to be appropriate for younger children, and inventories of assessment tools have been developed.

### **6. Psychological Reports:**

This Project has resulted in an improvement in the way in which psychological reports are written, to make them much more user-friendly and easily interpreted by classroom teachers, thereby increasing the likelihood that the recommendations which our staff make so carefully will be implemented in the classroom for the benefit of struggling students.

### **7. Feedback and Recommendations:**

Classroom teachers are being included more often in the feedback sessions to the parents and other school staff (e.g., principals and special education teachers). Professional practice has been enhanced by making more effective recommendations regarding instructional strategies to improve students' reading (for example), and has increased teachers' capacity to use the assessment information effectively. The recommendations provided in reports are more IEP-friendly and translate into effective classroom learning strategies. Some Boards have developed a bank of effective recommendations to help streamline report writing; the majority of these recommendations provide direct links to the *Guides for Effective Instruction*, *Differentiated Instruction*, *Early Intervention*, and *Education for All* initiatives of the Ministry of Education. There is an emphasis on the provision of evidence-based strategies and interventions (e.g., for oral language, reading, and other psychological processes), and an attempt to better integrate assessment results from psychology and speech-language pathology assessment when students are assessed by both disciplines.

### **8. Follow-up and Monitoring:**

Some Boards are reporting that they are now able to follow through more thoroughly with teachers and administrators regarding the recommendations

provided, to better ensure that the carefully and thoughtfully developed strategies and interventions are indeed being implemented in classrooms. Post-feedback sessions with teachers are being conducted to further monitor the effectiveness of our recommendations. Indeed, psychological services staff are becoming experts at monitoring student progress within schools. Some have adopted a Response to Intervention model to evaluate the effectiveness of the recommendations. In some Boards, classroom teachers are being trained on the use of progress monitoring tools and the importance of on-going tracking. There are some pilot projects aimed at following up and evaluating specific interventions, with a view to broader program evaluation.

The Project has also resulted in more involvement with students' families, and, in general, more activity in follow-up, consultation, and training.

### **9. Collaboration and Training:**

The Project has also been a benefit to school psychology staff in that psychological services providers are seen in a less reactive, and more proactive and consultative role. There is increased collaboration with special education and regular classroom teachers in schools, as well as collaboration among professional disciplines (Speech-Language Pathology, most notably). Sharing and learning between curriculum (program) staff and psychological services staff is occurring more frequently. Psychology staff in some boards have provided inservices for teachers from JK to Grade 4 to learn more about the use of professional assessment results; in other Boards, there has been training for special education teachers, principals, and vice-principals about psychological assessments and the implementation of recommendations from psychological reports. ■



# OPA – The Speech-Language Pathology Experience: " New Opportunities for Collaboration"



**Susan Menary, M.Sc, Reg. CASLPO**  
**Chief Speech-Language Pathologist**  
**Autism Lead**  
**Toronto Catholic District School Board**

The OPA project underway in school boards across Ontario has provided new opportunities for collaboration and innovation among Psychology staff, Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) and school based staff. This collaboration has common themes of using a proactive, rather than a reactive approach, a team approach to assessment, and evidence based interventions, but has taken many forms, and includes the following examples:

## **Greater Essex District School Board:**

The SLP has developed strong partnerships in the Board's initiative. This has included training for the SLP and Psychologist by the creators of the Dynamic Indicators of Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). They have since trained all Learning Support, Literacy and Numeracy Support, senior kindergarten and grade one teachers. This assessment tool has been administered by both school teams to all senior kindergarten and grade one students in two pilot schools. Using a Response To Intervention model (RTI), both school teams are using evidence-based interventions, including resources and manipulatives targeting oral vocabulary and language, phonemic awareness, and alphabetic principle, with the SLP overseeing the implementation and capacity building. School teams have received inservicing regarding RTI, including assessments, interventions, tiers of support, progress monitoring, and utilizing outcome driven data.

## **Waterloo Catholic District School Board**

The SLP and Psychologist co-lead the project. The board has targeted enhancement of team assessment of complex cases JK to grade 2, with a consideration of extension to Grade 4 for the last part of the process. The board has also developed a pilot process for joint team observation. To free SLPs to participate more fully in these endeavors, backfill assessments have been provided.

\* Phonemic Awareness  
\* Phonics  
\* Fluency  
\* Vocabulary  
\* Text Comprehension

## **Peel District School Board:**

SLPs with Peel are involved in and support a variety of activities through the OPA pilot using a three tier approach based on the Education for All document. These include:

- Assessments of Individual students (2 SLPs)
- Sound Skills K and grade 1 binders for all schools, as well as a Board wide presentation
- *Schools Attuned*<sup>1</sup> training for all staff
- Language for the Early Years Program (this is similar to Hanen for school boards) for K and grade one teachers, and teachers of kindergarten language classes, as well as primary general learning disabilities classes. A half-time SLP is responsible for the training
- Literacy Booster: a joint program run in three schools with the SLP/grade 1 teachers and early literacy teachers, with a focus on students at risk
- *Empower*<sup>2</sup>: used in 3 schools with the Hospital for Sick Children
- Project with English Language Learner (ELL) students, and use of tools to help identify needs
- Review and writing teams to look at the criteria for contained communication classes (related to the special education handbook).

### Toronto Catholic District School Board:

The goals of the OPA project are being piloted in 4 demonstration sites. These schools have enhanced levels of Psychology, SLP and Special Education support, with a focus on: enhancements to the assessment process, evidence based interventions, and building capacity and sustainability. The project has undertaken the following initiatives:

- The development of a student profile when discussing students at team meetings
- Professional development on Education for All and differentiated instruction
- Coordination of team assessments and possible joint reporting
- Evidence based approaches to instruction and intervention, including *Empower*, *JUMP Math*, the *Web-Based Teaching Tool*, and early literacy and phonological awareness intervention programs.

In addition, there is a system focus on addressing the backlog of Psychology and SLP assessments.

### York Catholic District School Board:

A full time SLP has been devoted to the OPA project to work in collaboration with a psychologist, occupational therapist and teacher. The focus of activities includes:

- Addressing the assessment backlog
- Participation on the board's Capacity Building Team
- Attending related workshops
- Participation in development of an OPA Model Lesson to be piloted in 15 schools incorporating: Guided Reading, Phonological Awareness, Sight Words, Working with Words (phonics, vocabulary, comprehension)
- Promotion of Sound Skills (and other) PA programs
- Provision of in-service on OPA model to selected schools - development of literacy recommendations specific to speech and language.

**EVIDENCE  
BASED  
PRACTICE  
IN  
SPEECH  
PATHOLOGY**



### Upper Grand District School Board:

The Chief Psychologist and Coordinator of Speech-Language Pathology co-lead the project. A three pronged approach is being used to support differentiated instruction through assessment for programming rather than for diagnosis. The focus is on early identification (not IPRC) of students at risk for Learning Disabilities/Language Impairment. High needs students will continue to receive supports already in place. The following are the activities that are taking place:

- *JK- Grade 1 students:* receive a joint one day assessment by Psychologist and SLP. By end of the day, the report is completed, 2 - 3 goals set and written into Individual Education Plan, and feedback with school and parent is conducted.
- *Enhanced Consultant Support Team Meetings:* All Psychology, SLP and Special Education staff received training in *Schools Attuned*. This provides a common language for discussion, problem solving, and goal setting at teams. The aim is to reduce the need for formal assessment and focus on program rather than diagnosis.
- *Grades 2 – 4:* When formal assessment is required, joint SLP and Psychology assessments are considered. Follow-up meeting(s) with teachers are conducted to model how to support strategies in classroom, using videos developed by the OPA team from school board classrooms. In addition, resources are provided from a binder developed by the OPA team.



### Challenges within the OPA Project:

There are provincial shortages of SLPs and challenges have occurred when hiring staff members that are temporary or part-time. Some school boards have needed to re-adjust their current staffing complements to participate on the project. However, in spite of these shortages, the OPA project has provided opportunities for professionals to work together creatively and collaboratively across Ontario school boards. ■

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### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> A professional development and service delivery program (based on the principles of All Kinds of Minds), that assists K-12 educators in using neurodevelopmental content in their classrooms to create success in learning and provide hope and satisfaction for all students.

<sup>2</sup> A program for students with reading difficulties, developed by the Hospital for Sick Children Learning Disabilities Research Program

The 2005 report, Education For All, Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade Six, emphasized that knowledge about a student's strengths and learning needs helps teachers to provide effective programming. This should be the goal of every teacher. The following quote is taken from the document Education For All. "The assessment process is multidisciplinary, and occurs in a continuous cycle that is fully integrated into the learning-teaching process: at the outset of work; as work progresses; and at the conclusion to any work. It is also multi-tiered, beginning and ending with the classroom teacher and leading to an ongoing evolution of effective instruction, reassessment, and access to opportunities for achievement based on changing student needs." (Salvia, 1990) This continuous assessment cycle builds upon the process recommended in all Ministry of Education documents from expert panel reports to the Special Education Guide for Educators. This continuous assessment process is fundamental to the success and sustainability of the Ontario Psychological Association (OPA) Student Assessment Project.

The OPA project is based on the continuous assessment process model as described in Education For All. The objectives of this project are to: (i) reduce current wait times for students in junior kindergarten to grade 4 requiring professional assessments, (ii) enhance teacher capacity to provide effective programming for students provided with professional assessments, (iii) improve literacy and numeracy for students provided with professional assessments, and (iv) sustain these assessment process improvements for the long term.

Making  
the  
GRADE

Numeracy



## ...from the Perspective of a Superintendent

**Marie Parsons**  
**Superintendent of Education**  
**(Special Education)**  
**Avon Maitland District School Board**

As a Superintendent of Education with responsibility for special education programs and services, I strongly support the goals of this project. Wait times are taken into consideration as staffing levels are determined within the parameters of the funding available. The focus of the OPA project on junior kindergarten to grade four students has prompted school boards to examine their assessment practices and assessment tools. Psychology departments and Speech Language departments have undertaken gap analysis through inventory reviews to identify areas of need. This project has provided the means for boards to acquire the necessary resources. Our professional assessment staff now has an enhanced bank of resources to be utilized with students in the targeted grade range of this project. However, caution must be exercised when considering assessment for young children. The professional assessment is not a fix for the problem. Professional service assessments should not replace differentiated instruction and universal design. Strategies

and their effectiveness within the differentiated instruction model and the concepts of universal design allow for best practices in assessment of learning and assessment for learning as precursors. Professional assessments should be the final step after teacher diagnostic assessment and observation. Precise and creative examples of good teaching must precede formalized professional assessment. Assessments are the mechanism for teachers to complete the puzzle of a child's learning.

The power of assessment reports lies not in the actual assessment tools and the scores, but in how the classroom teacher understands and can implement the recommendations. Recommendations must be written in language that parents/guardians and teachers understand and can implement. Special education departments must consider the training needs of the members

of their psychology and speech language teams who will provide them with further information on writing reports with recommendations that can be interpreted and implemented by teachers. Not a lot of time has been spent on building capacity of classroom teachers to interpret and implement recommendations. Teachers must be able to communicate with parents/guardians so that there is a clear understanding of how the recommendations will impact the programming for the student in the classroom. This project has resulted in the expansion of our school-based consultation model. Special Education Consultants are more focused in their dialogue with school teams following assessment feedbacks. Discussions relate to the review of specific report recommendations and how to translate these recommendations into classroom programming and instructional strategies and practices.

We all share the goal of improved student achievement. Classroom teachers focus on improving literacy and numeracy for all students including students with special education needs. Teachers must use universal design for learning and differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students. Teachers have to consider the strategies, and the accommodations and/or modifications that may be necessary for specific students. In order to make these decisions, the school team needs data. The professional assessment is one piece of data that can assist in the proper programming for these students. However, once again, it must be stressed that other pieces of data are also equally as important. Special education departments should give thought to the training of professional assessment staff in high yield teaching strategies for literacy and numeracy. A deeper understanding of the high yield strategies will allow professional staff to embed the strategies in their conversations with and recommendations to classroom teachers and parents/guardians. It is critical that all professionals speak the same language when focusing on improved student achievement. This will also serve to ensure sustainability over the long term.

The OPA project has provided the opportunity for school boards to focus on building capacity of classroom teachers to use the recommendations from assessment reports to guide their practice in programming appropriately for students with special education needs. The challenge for school boards

will be the sustainability of these process improvements over the long term. As Superintendents work with special education departments to review their programs and services within the framework of the OPA project, thought must be given not only to how they will support current classroom teachers, but also how they will build the capacity of new teachers. Wait times have been reduced, but the challenge for school boards will be to maintain the reduced wait times within the special education budget parameters.

One of my favourite sayings (framed and hanging on my office wall) is that “all students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day in the same way” (William G. Spady). Parents/guardians place their trust in all educators to program for their children so that they achieve to the best of their ability. Classroom teachers need assistance with this important task. Belief #6 of Education For All states that “classroom teachers need the support of the larger community to create a learning environment that supports students with special education needs”. Teachers need the support of administration, school-based special education resource teachers, other classroom teachers, coordinators and consultants and other professional staff. The OPA project has provided school boards with the means and the framework to closely examine this network of support and as a result, to strengthen their existing supports for the benefit of all students. This will ensure that all students can learn and succeed. ■







## The OPA Student Assessment Project: A French School Board's Perspective

**Dr. Guy Gignac**  
**Psychologue superviseur**  
**Conseil scolaire de district des écoles catholique du Sud-Ouest**

As a psychologist for the Conseil scolaire de district des écoles catholiques du Sud-Ouest, I have been invited to share my experiences and perspectives regarding the Student Assessment Project overseen by the Ontario Psychological Association (OPA). I have gathered some feedback from other members of French school boards, as well as other people who are closely involved in this project. As a French school board, we experience different challenges in participating in the OPA project. One challenge is not as much related to the language, but to the small size of the board and the vast region it covers. There are many initiatives being launched by the Ministry, yet we remain limited in the human resources available to us. Therefore, the same people are involved in several projects at the same time. To meet these challenges, our board has created a new position and this person will be in charge of coordinating special projects. In our board, there is one certified psychologist with two psychometrists. As the OPA project was launched, one of our psychometrists went on a maternity leave. Our efforts trying to replace her have been unsuccessful so far. That leads to another particular challenge, which is the lack of qualified professionals who can perform psychological, as well as speech and language assessment, in French, not to mention a vast territory that each person must cover. We have been fortunate to find one psychological associate who was willing to perform psychological assessments on a contractual basis, but that person is also employed full time elsewhere, thus limiting the number of assessments that can be done. We have also reorganized the speech and language services department to optimize the available resources. We have developed more precise guidelines regarding the speech and language services and we are looking into a more integrated model of psychological, speech and language, and special education services.

Despite the lack of human resources, we have succeeded in lowering our wait time for a professional assessment in the first year of the project. We intend to maintain that trend by continuing contractual hiring and by using our own staff during the summer. In my opinion, the success of the projet is linked not only to the number of assessments done, but also to other important initiatives that the project has allowed our school board to undertake. One of those initiatives is the identification of difficulties at an early age, between junior kindergarten and grade four. Interventions can be implemented, therefore, preventing the occurrence of more serious academic problems at a later age. Early identification and intervention could prevent the need for further psychological, speech and language or occupational assessments and services. To achieve this, our psychological and speech and language staff are working more closely with teachers and special educational consultants. A concerted effort by all is also necessary to ensure that the language of professional reports is understood and that recommendations are translated into well designed interventions for the classroom. The efficiency of the interventions will be closely monitored by the team to better meet the needs of the assessed students. A good communication among all parties is, therefore, essential for the success of the initiatives put forth by our school board.

The early identification of difficulties in students is also affected by the availability of assessment instruments in French. Not so long ago, there were very few valuable standardized instruments in French in Ontario. It seems that this situation is evolving and more instruments are now available. The OPA funding allowed us to buy more psychometric instruments that can be used for early identification.

The sustainability and the success of this project also depends on the teachers' capacity to implement efficient strategies. In addition to the direct consultations with teachers and school staff, we are planning to offer workshops to better understand the needs of the students having received a professional assessment.

Finally, I would like to share my opinion that an extension of the project beyond the two year period and for another targeted group of students, such as the students in the transitional years between elementary and high school, would be beneficial. Also, an integrated approach on the part of the Ministry level would contribute to the boards' efficiency in dispensing quality initiatives for the success of all students. ■

*It's A Whole New World*



## Closing the Gap for Isolated School Authorities

Jim White

Supervisory Officer, Moosonee District School Board  
NEOSA OPA Project Lead

*Students in the North Eastern Ontario School Authorities (NEOSA) are making gains through the Ontario Psychological Association Student Assessment Capacity Building Project.* Twelve school authorities in the north eastern region of Ontario have joined forces to provide better opportunities for our students to be successful. The OPA Student Assessment Capacity Building Project is one of many initiatives the North Eastern Ontario School Authorities has undertaken to improve student achievement in the past few years. This project has enabled our schools to virtually eliminate a backlog of referrals for psychological assessment. It is providing our teachers with better assessment tools and improved assessment and instructional strategies, which will especially benefit our higher needs students.

NEOSA is comprised of twelve school authorities:

Airy & Sabine District School Area Board  
Asquith-Garvey District School Area Board  
Foleyet District School Area Board  
Gogama District School Area Board  
James Bay Lowlands Secondary School Board  
Missarenda District School Area Board  
Moose Factory Island District School Area Board  
Moosonee District School Area Board  
Moosonee Roman Catholic Separate School Board  
Murchison & Lyell District School Area Board  
Parry Sound Roman Catholic Separate School Board  
Penetanguishene Protestant Separate School Board

Whitney, Ontario  
Shining Tree, Ontario  
Foleyet, Ontario  
Gogama, Ontario  
Moosonee, Ontario  
Missanabie, Ontario  
Moose Factory, Ontario  
Moosonee, Ontario  
Moosonee, Ontario  
Moosonee, Ontario  
Madawaska, Ontario  
Parry Sound, Ontario  
Penetanguishene, Ontario

Our school authorities are spread over a wide geographical area. Those in the Moosonee/Moose Factory region near the James Bay coast are hundreds of kilometers from other school authorities, such as those in Parry Sound and Penetanguishene on Georgian Bay, Madawaska and Whitney, south of Algonquin Park, or the Foleyet, Gogama, Shining Tree, Missanabie schools spread throughout remote areas of northern Ontario. Some school authorities are located on major highways and close to larger towns, while others have no highway connection and may be accessible only by air or rail. Moose Factory, located on an island in the Moose River delta on the James Bay coast, is accessible by water taxi in the summer, ice road in the winter, and by helicopter only, during spring break up or fall freeze up.

School Authorities are typically “single school” school boards and mostly serve elementary students. James Bay Lowlands Secondary School Board serves only secondary students. Gogama District School Area Boards serves mostly elementary students, but provides opportunities for students to obtain online secondary school credits. Some of our school authorities are very small, having only one teacher and a handful of students. Other school authorities are quite large in comparison. Our largest school authority has approximately 350 students, and a proportional number of teachers and educational assistants to deliver the educational program. Some of our school authorities have an enrollment which is almost entirely aboriginal. In the Moosonee/Moose Factory region, many students study Cree as a second language, in addition to studying French as a second language.



Under the *Education Act*, school authorities are responsible for providing education for students, in the same way as district school boards. School authorities in Ontario are provincially funded. Each school authority is governed by its own elected board of trustees. Each develops its own set of policies to determine how business is done and how education will be provided to its students. Each school authority is accountable to the Ministry of Education, and to the community it serves.

Although school authorities operate in similar ways as district school boards, there are many huge differences. Support service infrastructure is minimal. We do not have program consultants or coordinators, psychologists or psychometrists, speech and language pathologists, behaviour therapists or any of the other usual support professionals that one may find in a district school board. School authorities usually are required to hire the services of private professionals or rely on professional services provided by provincially funded agencies. Such services are often difficult to acquire in a timely manner due to high demands for such service and the high cost of transportation to bring these services to some very remote areas of the province. For some of our school authorities, it requires three days for a professional service provider to provide one day of service, if one includes travel time.

The challenges for school authorities to provide specialized services to our higher needs students are many. Geography is huge, demographics are diverse, transportation costs are high, and infrastructure is minimal. We often have to think “outside the box” to discover our own solutions. We are often forgotten because of our smallness and remoteness and have to be proactive in order to get essential services for our students. We network with each other and provide support to each other through the NEOSA alliance. We advocate for the students in the school authorities to make sure they do not get left behind.

In January, 2007, the Moosonee District School Area Board submitted a project proposal to the Ontario Psychological Association on behalf of the other school authorities within NEOSA. Approval of our project meant we would have a budget to hire a coordinator to develop a needs assessment, develop an action plan and report progress. We needed answers to such questions as:

- ▶ How many students were on wait lists for professional assessments?
- ▶ What kind of assessment instruments currently existed in our schools?
- ▶ Which assessment instruments did we need to acquire for our schools?
- ▶ What training did teachers need in order to use these assessment tools?
- ▶ What training did teachers need to be able to link teaching strategies with assessment results?

The answers to these questions provided important information to guide the development of our action plan and how the project would move forward.

To date, the backlog of referrals for psychological assessments has been eliminated. We have had 43 psychological assessments completed to date through this project. We are very pleased with this accomplishment, but are concerned that if we don't do things differently in the future than we have in the past, we are only going to accumulate another backlog of referrals within a year or two. To prevent this from happening, our action plan contained three components to achieve an effective early identification and intervention program for our students:

- ▶ Acquisition of good assessment instruments that can be used with our JK-2 students to screen for students who may be at risk of failure, and identify areas of student need;

- ▶ In-service for JK-2 teachers to help them make effective use of these assessment instruments;
- ▶ Train teachers on how to provide effective instruction based on assessments.

We are currently working through our action plan. The OPA Student Assessment Capacity Building Project criteria stipulate that all activities in our plan must be completed by August 31, 2008. Our end goal is to develop our teachers so that they will be more self-reliant. We want them to be skilled in assessing the learning needs of high needs students and determining the kinds of instructional strategies that will benefit them. We want our teachers to be able to make better decisions about which students need to be referred to outside professionals for assessment and/or consultation. Finally, we want to build stronger bridges with our partner agencies and the professional community. Having done these things, we hope to have increased our capacity to provide only the best programs for the students in the North Eastern Ontario school authorities.

We have developed some valuable partnerships which have greatly contributed to the success of our student assessment capacity building project. NEOSA would like to acknowledge the support of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario in providing training to our staff on the Web Based Teaching Tool. We would like to acknowledge the support from Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board for providing support in development of speech and language screening tools and instructional strategies. We would like to thank the Robarts/Amethyst school in London, Ontario, and Trillium school in Milton, Ontario (both Provincial Demonstration Schools) for providing support with computer-based assistive technology. Finally, we would like to express our appreciation to the Ontario Psychological Association for its continued support throughout this project. ■

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