

System on the Move:

Story of the Ontario Education Strategy



reach every student





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SYSTEM ON THE MOVE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

Ontario is Canada's largest and most diverse province, serving just under two million students in 5000 schools within four different publicly-funded school systems (English public, English Catholic, French public and French Catholic). In 2003, the government introduced a large scale reform, the Ontario Education Strategy, in response to limited improvement in elementary and secondary schools.

Theory of action

Ontario has identified three system-wide goals for the education sector: 1) improved levels of student achievement, 2) reduced gaps in student achievement and 3) increased public confidence in publicly funded education. The Ontario Education Strategy follows a theory of action that is anchored in three interrelated key areas of organizational improvement. The strategy builds partnerships and collaborative relationships across the education sector. These partnerships support educators at all levels of the system in sharing successful practices, addressing persistent challenges and building the capacity of their school or district to improve student learning. The emphasis on data and transparency provides pressure for improvement without judging or evaluating performance through pejorative measures or practices.

Implementation and focus

Although the reform is comprehensive with many supporting initiatives, eight core areas of focus and implementation run across the entire strategy.

1. A small number of ambitious goals

The initial focus of the Ontario reform was to improve students' acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills (deeply defined to include higher-order thinking and comprehension) and increase the secondary school graduation rate (including innovations to make programs more relevant to the life interests of students). These priorities have remained intact since the outset.

2. A guiding coalition at the top

From the beginning, central leadership was seen as essential. An "Education Results Team," including the Premier, Chief Student Achievement Officer and other key stakeholders, monitors progress, brainstorms programs and helps the system stay the course.



3. High standards and expectations

High standards and expectations are implicit in the ambitious targets that were set for students, sometimes referred to as “stretch targets” for student achievement and graduation rates.

4. Investment in leadership and capacity building related to instruction

If there is one concept that captures the centerpiece of the Ontario strategy, it is capacity building supported by major investments in personnel, resources and finely tuned intervention strategies.

5. Mobilizing data and effective practices as a strategy for improvement

A number of new data management and assessment tools have been introduced to enable system-wide collection of student level data that can be integrated, tracked over time and used to inform policy and practice.

6. Intervention in a non-punitive manner

A key feature of the strategy is to encourage risk-taking, learning and sharing of successful practices, while intervening in a non-punitive manner.

7. Being vigilant about distracters

From the very beginning, leaders of the Ontario strategy committed to a proactive mindset that “distracters” would be inevitable but that they would work to minimize their interference with the main priorities. A distracter is anything that takes away energy and focus from the core agenda.

8. Being transparent, relentless and increasingly challenging

Although the strategy is light on judgment, there are a number of aspects that increase pressure for accountability, including transparency about results and practices, peer interaction and sharing across schools, and negotiation of targets and implementation plans.

Outcomes

The Ontario Education Strategy is making a difference, resulting in overall increases in numbers of students meeting the elementary school provincial standard for reading, writing and mathematics and graduating from secondary school. The strategy’s success as a dynamic partnership between the Ministry of Education, the district schools boards and the schools suggests that large diverse education systems can improve through collaboration and collective work that focuses on students and honours diversity of culture and community.



**SYSTEM ON
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STORY
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EDUCATION
STRATEGY**

Capacity building linked to results – “not a heavy handed demand for accountability” – is the main driver of the Ontario approach, report some of the key architects of the Ontario education reform in a recent issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*.¹ The authors emphasize that the Ontario changes were respectful of professional knowledge while key partners in government, district school boards and other organizations worked together to make the reforms effective. Improving results on provincial and international assessments,² dramatic improvement in secondary school graduation rates and renewed public confidence suggest that Ontario is headed in the right direction – that “results can be achieved without rancour.”

What follows is the story of the Ontario strategy, beginning with the context in which this whole-system, large-scale reform took place, proceeding to the theory which guided it and its multidimensional approach to implementation. Infrastructural changes are noted, as are key supporting strategies. The story ends with outcomes, ongoing challenges and a few examples of innovations.

Context: Setting the Stage

Geographic location/school population/school system

Ontario is Canada’s largest and most diverse province, serving just under two million children in four different publicly funded school systems (English public, English Catholic, French public and French Catholic). Currently, 27 per cent of Ontario students were born outside Canada with 20 per cent self-identifying as members of a visible minority; 4.5 per cent of Ontario schoolchildren are French speaking.³ Across all Ontario systems, there are approximately 72,200 elementary school teachers and 42,000 secondary school teachers, represented by four different teacher federations. In total, there are about 4,000 elementary schools and 900 secondary schools, each under the jurisdiction of a district school board. There are 60 English-language and 12 French-language boards ranging widely in size from a few hundred students in rural areas of the province, to 250,000 students in Toronto District School Board, one of the largest urban district school boards in North America.⁴

The public education system in Ontario is a well-used resource with 95 per cent of all students attending publicly funded schools.⁵ The remaining students are either home schooled or attend private schools or federally funded First Nation schools.

Policy and governance of education

The *British North America Act* from 1867 gives the nation’s provinces exclusive jurisdiction in education. As a result of this act, the legislatures of the 13 provinces and territories have created 13 education systems. While the federal government maintains

obligations, as per the *Indian Act*, for the education of residents on reserves, minority rights are protected by the Constitution. Section 93 guarantees Catholics, as a minority, the constitutional right to have provincially funded schools. The *Constitution Act* from 1982 also gives legal protection for minorities of the two official languages (English and French), supporting the creation of French-language district school boards in Ontario. In addition, every English-language school across the country requires all students to study French as second language, and every French-language school requires the same of all students for English.

The basic structures of provincial and territorial education systems across Canada are similar, each with three tiers – elementary, secondary and postsecondary. In most jurisdictions in Canada, education is compulsory until students reach the age of 15 or 16; in Ontario, with new legislation, compulsory schooling continues to the age of 18.

Context and precipitating events

In 2010, Ontario has a growing presence on the international scene as a school system that has reshaped itself and pushed the boundaries of what one can expect from large-scale reform efforts. Seven years ago, some thought the Ontario system was in turmoil, despite implementation of some of the key constructive recommendations of the government's Royal Commission on Learning (among them province wide curriculum-based testing and the creation of the Educational Quality and Accountability Office).⁶ *The Schools We Need* policy audit, for example, described “a harsh environment” for less advantaged and diverse student populations.⁷ Even though Ontario was doing fairly well by international standards, the report identified gaps between high-and-low-achieving students and schools and called for a “new blueprint for Ontario education.”

In 2003, Ontario's then newly elected premier, Dalton McGuinty, inherited a trend of limited improvement in elementary and secondary schools. In elementary schools, an average of 54 per cent of Grade 6 (12-year-old) students was meeting the standard of Level 3 (equivalent to a B) on provincial assessments for reading, writing and mathematics. In secondary schools, the graduation rate was 68 per cent. The newly elected government committed to (a) improving elementary school literacy and numeracy outcomes, (b) increasing the high school graduation rate and (c) building public confidence, as core goals of the education agenda for the province.

Theory of Action

In creating and implementing a strategy that is targeted to support and improve schools, district school boards and communities, Ontario follows a theory of action which is clearly defined and articulated by an important architect of Ontario's strategy, Michael Fullan.⁸ Fullan separates successful change efforts into three important areas:

1. people and relationship building
2. knowledge building and innovation
3. transparency of accountability throughout the system.

These areas are interrelated and collectively play a critical role in the success of this reform and the ways that it continually adapts, improves and changes over time – an approach to the use of evidence in practice referred to as “learning as we go.” All initiatives and activities within the Ontario strategy are anchored within these three key areas.

Eight Components that have Guided Implementation

While the overall Ontario strategy is built upon the theory of action just described, there are eight interrelated components which form the building blocks for implementation.

1. A small number of ambitious goals

The initial focus of the Ontario reform was to improve students' acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills (deeply defined to include higher-order thinking and comprehension) and increase the secondary school graduation rate (including innovations to make programs more relevant to the life interests of students).

These priorities have remained intact since the outset of the reform in 2003.

In 2010, a new initiative was added – early learning – which includes the provision of full-day Kindergarten for all four-and-five-year-olds, beginning with phased implementation in 2010.

2. A guiding coalition at the top

From the beginning, central leadership, especially through the Premier's personal presence, was seen as essential. The Premier chairs a group of leaders that includes the minister, deputy minister, the chief student achievement officer, the Premier's special adviser and other key system leaders. This group, now called the “Education Results Team,” monitors progress, brainstorms programs and initiatives, and helps the system stay the course relative to the core priorities.

3. High standards and expectations

High standards and expectations are implicit in the ambitious targets that were set for students – namely, that (a) by Grade 6, 75 per cent of students would achieve Level 3 or higher on provincial assessments in reading, writing and mathematics and (b) within five years of entering high school, 85 per cent of students would graduate. These goals are recognized as “stretch targets” – as aspirations for the system as well as expected outcomes, representing hefty increases from 54 per cent of students at Level 3 or above in 2003 and 68 per cent graduating from high school in that same year.

4. Investment in leadership and capacity building related to instruction

If there is one concept that captures the centrepiece of the Ontario strategy, it is capacity building. Capacity building was first launched by the Ministry of Education with the creation of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) and the Student Success/Learning to 18 Branch (SS/L18), now coordinated within a new Student Achievement Division. The province has made major investments in personnel (e.g., student achievement officers, student success leaders, school effectiveness leads, student success teachers, and additional primary and specialist teachers) and resources (e.g., professional learning institutes, webinars, instructional guides). It has also developed finely tuned strategies (e.g., Ontario Focused Intervention Partnerships (OFIP), Schools in the Middle, Differentiated Instruction Professional Learning Strategy, Credit Recovery, Student Voice-SpeakUp) to help improve teaching and learning in Ontario schools.

5. Mobilizing data and effective practices as a strategy for improvement

When the strategy began, the arms-length assessment agency, the Education and Accountability Office (EQAO), administered, collected and published annual data on student achievement from provincial assessments; however, few mechanisms existed at that time to integrate this information with other data sources to provide a more complete picture of student achievement. The Ontario Student Information System (OnSIS) was put in place in 2005 to collect and manage individual student records. At the same time, the ministry began to support the development of district school board capacity in data management, data analysis and evidence-informed decision-making, through its Managing Information for Student Achievement (MISA) initiative. The ministry also introduced a data query tool, Ontario Statistical Neighbours (OSN), to help both the ministry and district school boards stimulate improvement and oversee progress. These initiatives enabled system-wide collection of student level data that could be integrated, tracked over time and used to inform policy and practice.

6. Intervention in a non-punitive manner

A key feature of the strategy is to encourage risk-taking, learning and sharing of successful practices, while intervening in a non-punitive manner. In other words, the strategy is deliberately “light on judgment.” Even the turnaround program for elementary schools (called OFIP) and the School Support Initiative for secondary schools strike a positive tone as they identify schools and district school boards where the data show that a significant number of students are not performing to the provincial standard. Intense support for improvement is provided to these schools and boards in the way of human and financial resources and professional learning opportunities.

7. Being vigilant about distracters

From the very beginning, leaders of the Ontario strategy committed to a proactive mindset that “distracters” would be inevitable but that they would work to minimize their interference with the main priorities. A distracter is anything that takes away energy and focus from the core agenda. For example, ongoing teacher labour strife surrounding annual collective bargaining was a distracter in the period prior to 2003. The government made it a priority to establish four-year collective agreements with all federations and is now in the second cycle of four-year agreements. Other distracters would include ad hoc new priorities and excessive bureaucracy. It is recognized that distracters cannot always be eliminated but that protecting the focus on core priorities is crucial.

8. Being transparent, relentless and increasingly challenging

Although the strategy is light on judgment, there are a number of aspects that increase pressure for accountability, including transparency about results and practices, peer interaction and sharing across schools, and negotiation of targets and implementation plans between the ministry and schools/district school boards. More recently, new legislation strengthens the expectation that district school boards (including directors and trustees) have a responsibility to focus on student achievement. More generally, the constant emphasis from the Premier and the government on the core priorities keeps the Ontario strategy in the forefront at all times.

Major Changes in Infrastructure Support

Elementary reform

Early on in the reform, the government put in place, a new policy to ensure smaller, more teachable classes (the class-size reduction strategy) and a new secretariat (LNS) charged with reform delivery.



In the 2003–04 school year, only 31 per cent of primary classes in Ontario had 20 or fewer students and 25 per cent of primary classes had over 25 students. Ontario’s strategy set an ambitious goal of achieving a dramatically different situation over a four-year phased-in period: at least 90 per cent of primary classes within each district school board would have 20 or fewer students and no primary class would have more than 23 students. In 2008–09, this target was achieved on a provincewide basis. More than 540,000 primary students are now in class sizes with 20 or fewer students.

To take advantage of the reduction in class size, and to improve student achievement, LNS – as part of the Ministry of Education – was charged with developing, coordinating and delivering the government’s literacy and numeracy strategy in elementary schools. LNS was also made responsible for ensuring that programs and initiatives resulted in greater instructional effectiveness at the classroom level with improvement in student learning and achievement.

Organized on the basis of seven regional teams, LNS works across the province directly with district school boards and schools. Each regional team consists of educational leaders, called “student achievement officers” (SAOs), who have recent experience as teachers, principals, school consultants/coaches/coordinators and senior district school board leaders. The regional LNS teams allow the ministry to support school and district school board improvement efforts in a way that responds to diverse contexts and needs while further establishing collaborative partnerships focused on student learning and achievement.

While the early LNS teams focused on building partnerships with district school boards and fostering a climate of trust and collaboration, later stages have zeroed-in on more precise instructional and assessment practices at the school and classroom level. These practices are intended to improve learning and achievement for all elementary school students while emphasizing improvement of students with the greatest needs. While the ministry currently has a number of initiatives in place through LNS, they tend to fall into four general, interrelated areas:

1. The use of evidence

The use of evidence, drawn from current practice at all three levels of the system (classroom, school, district school board) to inform strategies and actions, is a critical part of the way LNS works with schools and districts. One example of the ministry’s “learning as we go” approach is the development of *The School Effectiveness Framework*. The framework, built in partnership with district school boards and schools, is a self-assessment tool which anchors school and district school board improvement planning in reflection on their own practices. It is designed to ensure

that improvement planning is a collaborative process that uses a wide range of sources of student data at the classroom, school and district school board level.

2. Teacher collaborative inquiry

LNS supports collaborative learning teams and school-to-school networks to foster deeper teacher engagement in teaching and learning and enriched student learning conditions, leading to improved student learning and achievement. Through such processes as the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway and the Collaborative Inquiry in Learning Mathematics, teacher dialogue is anchored in an examination of the student learning that has occurred as a result of collaboration and planning. This affords teachers the opportunity to examine the impact of their own assessment and instructional practices and to gain a deeper understanding of their pedagogical impact. These processes are designed for teachers, school principals and district school board leaders to use, share and leverage successful school-based practices in assessment, planning, and instruction in literacy and numeracy in continuous cycles of collaborative inquiry.

3. Direct support for targeted schools

The ministry partners with district school boards to help them support schools that have a large proportion of students who are performing below the provincial target in their provincial assessments. Strategies that are consistently used and have yielded very strong results are situated in the previous two approaches, outlined above. Evidence from Ontario over the past three years suggests that schools improve when they are supported in:

- establishing the use of evidence as a starting point for dialogue and action
- building collaborative organizational environments
- participating within a wider population of schools through networks
- building leadership capacity to maintain and sustain these processes.

4. Identification, adaptation and spread of effective practices

Closely integrated within the previous three areas described, the ministry continually works to identify, illuminate, further develop and spread effective instructional practices occurring across the province. Thus, the ministry supports capacity building, as outlined, while also learning, adapting and spreading the effective practices that are occurring across the province.

Secondary reform

In 2003, the ministry launched its secondary school reform, “Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy” (SS/L18).⁹ The goals – encompassing Grades 7 to 12 – are to:

- increase the five-year provincial graduation rate to 85 per cent (from 68 per cent in 2003)
- change pedagogy and culture through strong, focused leadership in schools and district school boards
- provide new and relevant learning opportunities for all students
- build on student interests and strengths
- support effective transitions: from elementary to secondary, and from secondary to postsecondary

The government recognized that it is often more difficult to create lasting change in secondary schools due to factors ranging from their larger size and subject specialization, to lower parent participation rates and different kinds of relationships between teachers and students.¹⁰ The government addressed these issues in a number of ways, starting with the creation of leadership roles at each district school board and school, and the provision of key indicators to keep track of students, especially those who were not earning all their credits in a timely manner and were at risk of not earning a diploma.

The SS/L18 strategy has unfolded in phases. In the first couple of years, there was an investment in leadership capacity for secondary school reform at the district school board level, by creating the new senior leadership role of student success leader in all 72 district school boards in Ontario. In the spring of 2005, an external study which involved 193 youth who had left school found that a major contributor to their decision to leave was a feeling of disengagement or disconnect with the school community and its culture.¹¹ This finding led to a recommendation that students at risk of leaving secondary school needed to be connected to a teacher, guidance counsellor or administrator.¹²

In 2004, 800 new student success teachers were added to secondary schools’ staff with the critical role “to worry about students who need attention and are not getting it.”¹³ This role was accompanied by ministry-supported professional learning and capacity building. In 2005, the government set a target graduation rate of 85 per cent and introduced legislation, *Learning to Age 18 Act*, which required students up to the age of 18 or graduation to participate in a learning program, whether that was in the classroom or as an apprentice in a workplace setting. The act also recognized the need to adapt secondary school programs to more flexible models that could meet the needs of a diverse range of students.

From 2006 to present, the Ministry of Education – through the SS/L18 strategy – has invested in providing all students with more choice of innovative, engaging and quality learning opportunities that match their strengths and aspirations and prepare them for the destination of their choice. These opportunities include expanded co-operative education, Specialist High Skills Majors and Dual Credits, and credits for external credentials. This phase also includes a focus on successful transitions of all students from elementary to secondary school and from secondary school to postsecondary destinations. Secondary schools have established student success teams through which school leaders, student success teachers and staff address the needs of all students with particular attention being given to students who may be at risk. Investments have also been made to ensure effective transitions and stronger links and pathways between secondary schools and postsecondary education, training and employment opportunities.

Key Supporting Programs and Initiatives

The comprehensive nature of the Ontario strategy is considered key to its success.¹⁴ To support schools and district school boards in their work, the government introduced a number of programs and initiatives such as parent and community engagement, equity and inclusive schooling, safe schools and enrichment through the arts, music and physical education. Programs which target specific groups are also an interconnected part of the larger reform effort. For example, while *Education for All*, K – 6 supports literacy and numeracy achievement for students with special education needs, *Learning for All*, K – 12 provides an integrated process of assessment and instruction for all students aligned with the Kindergarten to Grade 12 curriculum. The Aboriginal Education Strategy is another example of a targeted program within the larger reform. The strategy was launched in January 2007 with the release of the First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework which supports the Ministry of Education, district school boards and schools working together to improve the academic achievement of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students in provincially funded schools. The strategy also dovetails with the SS/L18 strategy which strives to create personalized secondary school programs and close achievement gaps by meeting the needs of diverse student populations.

Similarly, in the French-language system, a series of tools was developed to provide direction and monitor progress of the implementation of the new French-language policy, *La Politique d'aménagement linguistique*. This policy supports French-language schools in Ontario in the implementation of their constitutional mandate to recruit and retain children of rights holders, transmit French language and culture, contribute to



the vitality of the French-language community and improve student achievement in alignment with provincial efforts.

Two key supporting strategies, summarized below, are integrated within all programs and initiatives in the reform effort:

1. Building leadership capacity across the system

It is widely recognized within the educational research community that school leadership, after direct teaching, is the second most important *in-school factor* in improving student learning.¹⁵ In the fall of 2008, the government launched the Ontario Leadership Strategy with the goal of ensuring that schools and district school boards are led by passionate, skilled educators who have the capacity to effectively support the overall education strategy. The leadership strategy includes a number of supports for principals and vice-principals such as mentoring, a provincewide principal/vice-principal appraisal system and mechanisms for them to have a stronger voice in the work of the ministry. It also includes supports for supervisory officers, such as mentoring and executive training in change management.

All of the elements of the leadership strategy are founded on the Ontario Leadership Framework which describes specific practices, attributes and skills of leaders, making explicit connections between the actions of good leaders and their influences on classrooms and teacher professional practice. To support the use and understanding of the framework, and of good leadership generally, the Ontario Institute for Education Leadership was established — a partnership between principals, supervisory officers and director (head superintendent of district school boards) associations and the ministry.

2. Building research capacity across the system

The government developed the Ontario Education Research Strategy in 2005 to develop and implement policies and programs that are evidence-based, research-informed and connected to the priority educational goals.

The strategy is built on collaboration and partnership across the ministry and throughout the sector. For example, the Ontario Education Research Panel brings together recognized leaders to facilitate research collaboration among Ontario's district school boards, universities, professional organizations, community agencies and ministries. The annual Ontario Education Research Symposium brings together education stakeholders to explore ways to improve connections among research, policy and practice.

Outcomes and Successes

The renewal of public education has been a major priority of the Ontario government since 2003. It has kept a relentless focus on three goals – raising the bar for all students, reducing achievement gaps and restoring public confidence in the publicly-funded school system. Through its detailed, comprehensive approach, the Ontario strategy has achieved steady improvements for all kinds of learners and all kinds of schools, thus earning its reputation for achieving both excellence and equity.¹⁶

Elementary Reform

From its inception, the Ontario strategy has emphasized building capacity through providing opportunities for professional learning, offering much-needed resources and putting in place innovative structures to facilitate improved staff and student learning. Overall, the number of students meeting or exceeding the provincial standard for reading, writing and mathematics has increased from 54 per cent in 2003 to 67 per cent in 2009. Some additional highlights in improved student achievement are noted below:

- Ontario has achieved significant success in international assessments – for example, Ontario performed equal to, or better than, 43 of the 45 jurisdictions that participated in an OECD international assessment in reading (PIRLS) for Grade 4 students.
- Students in Ontario's French-language schools have achieved the provincial target in all Grade 6 assessment areas (reading, writing and mathematics). Students in many of Ontario's Catholic district school boards are approaching, or are above, the provincial target in Grade 6 as well.
- The achievement gap has been greatly reduced for English language learners in all six provincial assessments for Grade 3 and 6 students. The smallest reduction of the gap is 38 percent in Grade 6 writing and the largest reduction of the gap is by 62 percent in Grade 3 writing.

But Ontario is not without challenges in the elementary panel. Since 2006, there has been no improvement in Grade 3 reading, a two per cent increase in Grade 3 mathematics and a four per cent increase in Grade 3 writing. This has led to an increased focus on the early elementary years as well as an increased focus on numeracy instruction as important areas for continued effort.

Secondary Reform

In 2005, the government set a target graduation rate of 85 per cent and, as detailed earlier, introduced legislation (*Learning to Age 18 Act*) which required students up to the age of 18 or graduation to participate in a learning program, whether in the classroom or as an apprentice in a workplace setting.

As a direct result of the supports, resources and programming of the SS/L18 strategy, there has been a gradual increase in the number of students graduating from secondary school. Essentially, the SS/L18 strategy operates as both an equity strategy and a strategy designed to raise student achievement for all secondary school students. Thus, the outcomes that follow reflect both equity and overall achievement within the secondary system:

- Ontario's graduation rate has increased from 68 per cent in 2003–04 to 79 per cent in 2008–09.
- More than 52,000 additional students have graduated than would have if the rates remained at the 2003–04 levels.
- Increases in credit accumulation in Grades 9, 10 and 11 indicate students' continuing progress toward graduation.
- 81 per cent of Grade 9 students in 2008–09 were on track to graduation with eight or more credits accumulated, which is a nine per cent increase from 2003–04.

Leadership Development

- Over 4,500 principals and vice-principals have benefited from the support of a mentor and over 3,700 have acted as mentors in the last three years.
- Succession planning and talent development have been targeted as key activities for district school boards. Funding and resources have been provided to support this work.

Challenges

Local success does not guarantee systemic success

The ability for *all* district school boards to use teacher-team and school-based successes and innovations for organizational learning, knowledge building and direction requires adaptive leadership, effective coordination and intensive support provided by all three levels of the system. The Ontario strategy starts with partnerships with communities, district school boards and schools with the intention to build from local success to system-wide success. Inevitably, the fidelity of implementation emerges as a challenge since the system is so large and diverse. The Ontario reform needs to be embedded in almost 5,000 schools and over 110,000 classrooms across a vast geographical region. What works in one context (e.g., an urban school with high diversity) may not be applicable in another (e.g., a rural school in the north with high rates of poverty). For example, the collaborative network model supported by LNS as a change lever for urban elementary schools may not be sustainable in a rural setting where schools are hundreds of miles apart. For secondary schools, Dual Credit opportunities may not be available in communities which do not have a community college.

Coherence and alignment are important

The Ontario strategy is constructed from many specific initiatives that target different parts of the school improvement challenge. Although drawing from the same theory of action and targeting the same goals, initiatives may focus on a different challenge and a different population of students and educators (e.g., special education, boys' literacy, First Nation, Métis and Inuit students, English language learners, children living in poverty). Keeping these initiatives coherent and aligned, while maintaining their relevance, requires partnership and collaboration from the entire sector. This is the core purpose and challenge for the Ontario Leadership Strategy – to build a coherent approach to leadership across the province. Leadership capacity building is often embedded in school improvement strategies, each of which has its own version of “good school and district school board leadership.” There is now one leadership strategy to anchor all leadership initiatives at the school, district school board and ministry levels.

Personalization is the key

Currently, there are also a number of challenges the SS/L18 strategy is facing with regard to continued personalization and engagement. Impressive gains, such as an increasing graduation rate, are being made; however, it may be that the many students who are not graduating or who are not engaged have more complex risk situations in their lives. Locating these students, giving them timely support and monitoring their progress before they lose their way to graduation is critical.

There has been an increase in creativity in both new programs and instructional approaches across secondary schools in Ontario, and while the shift to an explicit focus on the learner has been significant, more work needs to be done to ensure daily implementation of the strategy. This in turn will deepen the notions of personalized learning across the subject areas in secondary schools and could build a cross-departmental understanding of pedagogy and student learning needs. This would complement secondary school subject departmental professional learning in regards to effective or successful instructional practices that are newly developed or already exist. The student success teacher and the student success team in secondary schools are important structures and positions in moving the strategy further in this regard.

Overall, sustainability of focus is a constant challenge, while distracters are a constant worry.



For Discussion: Some Promising Innovations

The Ontario strategy's starting point, local examples of success and innovation, helped jumpstart the large-scale change process, enabling the elementary and secondary reform initiatives to quickly generate collaborative partnerships with schools and district school boards and secure improvements quite rapidly. Among a number of high-impact strategies, the following are especially promising both for embedding reforms in classroom practice and spreading success system-wide:

1. Using technology to support sharing and networking

A dynamic new online resource, e-Learning Ontario, was built by the ministry in partnership with district school boards allowing teachers to create, access and share instructional resources and innovative programs in a collaborative online environment. E-learning features a resource bank of individual units, activities and multimedia items as well as extensive professional development opportunities (ranging from face-to-face meetings to webinars) which ensure opportunities for teachers from different areas of the province to acquire new skills and learn from one another. Technology is also used to support a Homework Help project in which students can access assistance in mathematics while completing assignments outside class.

2. Drilling down to student learning

The Student Work Study Teacher Initiative, launched by the ministry in 2009, brought 50 experienced teachers into classrooms of 250 elementary schools across four regions to study student learning, both intensively and systematically. Teachers identified a small number of students in their classrooms who were struggling to achieve intended learning outcomes and these students consequently became the focus of the study. The initiative is based on a co-learning model and provides a unique opportunity for teachers to connect their instructional and assessment practices to student learning occurring within the classroom. The study will suggest ways to increase precision and personalization in instruction and assessment practices.

3. Sharing best practices across district school boards

Through innovations in school improvement planning, the ministry is monitoring, supporting and sharing the ways that district school board leaders in charge of school self-assessments are adapting their roles to engage more effectively in capacity building in schools. These roles at the district school board level are an important part of supporting and integrating effective implementation of improvement strategies.

Through its Schools on the Move program, the ministry identifies and celebrates schools (some in challenging circumstances) that have achieved significant improvements over a period of time. Additional resources are provided to facilitate their sharing of successful practices with other schools in the district school board.

Through its Specialist High Skills Major program, the ministry supports the development and sharing of innovative, experiential education programs in secondary schools.

4. Exploring effective district school board leadership practices

District school board directors are working in communities of practice to uncover key leadership practices that are used by effective district school boards. Working with Dr. Kenneth Leithwood, these communities are looking at leading-edge research, case studies and surveys of leaders across the province to develop a District Effectiveness Framework to guide the work of all Ontario directors.

5. Addressing needs of students

As detailed earlier, the SS/L18 strategy includes a number of strategies that work to meet the individual needs of students and help them succeed in all areas of learning. In all of these endeavours, the focus has been on improving instruction by helping secondary school teachers more fully address the needs of each student. Strategies such as SpeakUp and Differentiated Instruction aim not only to make students active collaborators in their learning, but also to emphasize the importance of knowing one's students, and responding to the diversity affecting teaching and learning on a daily basis.

Moving Forward

This account of the Ontario strategy, from 2003 until present, has touched on core aspects, leaving out many initiatives currently in place to support Ontario's education system. While a steady trajectory of improvement has been established, the work continues.

Ontario's tremendous diversity requires new approaches to the curriculum, programs and culture of the school. For example, by 2017, about one-fifth of the population will be members of diverse faith communities including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism. Not only must schools provide students and staff with authentic and relevant opportunities to learn about diverse histories, cultures and perspectives, but also students should be able to see themselves represented in the curriculum,



programs and culture of the school. The ministry's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy promotes inclusive education and provides a framework to help the education community identify and remove discriminatory biases and systemic barriers to student achievement related to the prohibited grounds of discrimination set out in the Ontario Human Rights Code and other related factors (e.g., socio-economic status).

This year, the ministry will begin the implementation of full-day Kindergarten for four- and-five year-olds in an effort to bring increased success for children as they enter the educational system. The program will be phased in over five years with 600 schools starting full-day Kindergarten in 2010 and an additional 200 schools in 2011. This equates to 50,000 children participating in full-day learning by 2011.

At the same time, on the other end of the system, a number of measures are being introduced by the government to safeguard the investment in the postsecondary sector, among them, giving opportunities to highly qualified international students to stay in the province and contribute their newly acquired skills to growth, innovation and development.

Although Aboriginal peoples' participation in postsecondary education has improved, it is still significantly lagging behind that of the non-Aboriginal population in Ontario. This year, the government is also developing a *Postsecondary Education and Training Policy Framework for Aboriginal Learners* – the government's plan for delivering high-quality postsecondary education and training to First Nation, Métis and Inuit learners in Ontario.

Ontario now has widespread ownership and good capacity to go deeper. The next phase for Ontario combines continued quality implementation with innovative initiatives to push the boundaries of what we know. There is a rapidly growing interest across the world in whole system reform, that is, reform that improves the entire system.¹⁷ We are committed to participating internationally in learning from others and contributing to the knowledge base, policies and strategies that will further improve education across the world.

Thus, the Ontario strategy has both depth and breadth. It is a reform effort that builds on research and successful reform from across the world as well as on successful existing practice across the Ontario system. Locating and learning from existing successful practices in Ontario is also an instrumental part of building engagement within the sector. It provides opportunity for policy makers and practitioners to learn and adapt policy and programs that respond to the diverse contexts in which schools and district school boards exist.

- ¹ Levin, Glaze, & Fullan, 2008. With the Ontario Premier, Dalton McGuinty and then education minister Gerard Kennedy, the authors of this article are among the key architects of the Ontario strategy.
- ² In Ontario, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) provides annual assessments of Grades 3, 6 and 9 which provide a general measure of student achievement in the province. Internationally, the Organization for Economic and Community Development (OECD) Program for International Assessments (PISA) provides world-wide comparative measures for 15 year-old-students.
- ³ Pedwell et al., in press.
- ⁴ Pedwell et al., in press.
- ⁵ Pedwell et al., in press.
- ⁶ Report of the Royal Commission on Learning, 1994.
- ⁷ Leithwood, Fullan, Watson, 2003, p.10.
- ⁸ Fullan, 2008.
- ⁹ A provincewide study by Alan King (2005) commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Education on challenges facing secondary students provided the basis for the secondary strategy. King found that a single failure in any course dramatically reduces the likelihood of a student graduating in four years. Following from the conclusions of King's study, the Ministry of Education commissioned researchers from the Hospital for Sick Children, under the leadership of Dr. Bruce Ferguson, to conduct a large-scale study of high school 'leavers', focusing particularly on the factors contributing to students leaving school early and those contributing to keeping them in school (Ferguson et al., 2005).
- ¹⁰ Levin, 2008.
- ¹¹ Ferguson, 2005.
- ¹² Ferguson, 2005.
- ¹³ Levin, 2008, p. 36.
- ¹⁴ Levin, 2008, p. 31.
- ¹⁵ Leithwood et al., 2004.
- ¹⁶ OECD's Program for International Assessments (PISA) notes that Ontario is one of only a few jurisdictions that score above average in, among other assessments, science, while also having a below average difference between performance of students from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- ¹⁷ Fullan, 2010

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