Graduating

Ben Levin

Ontario high schools improved their high school graduation rate from 68% to 81% in five years.

A comprehensive strategy for improvement focused on enabling students' success and acting proactively when they had problems.

Schools built in opportunities for teachers to collaborate with one another and for students to connect with their communities.

Discussion guide available at www.nassp.org/pldiscuss0112

Not long ago, Ontario's 900 high schools and their 600,000 students were in a rut. The province had experienced 101 years of tumult in education, including an entirely new program for high schools, rapid implementation of new curricula, a zero-tolerance approach to discipline, budget reductions, and much labor unrest. Teachers and parents were unhappy. More importantly, the graduation rate was declining. In 2003, only 60% of the cohort graduated in the normal four years, and only 68% graduated after five years.

By 2010, the situation had completely turned around. The five-year graduation rate rose to 81%, meaning that nearly 20,000 more students were graduating each year than in 2003. Labor disruptions had ceased, few young teachers were leaving the profession, and many teachers were staying on even after they reached

retirement eligibility. Meanwhile the performance of Ontario students in the international PISA tests improved relative to the rest of Canada—which is among the highest-performing countries in the world.

But an 81% graduation rate is not high enough. The province's current goal is 85%, and even that is lower than the public expectation for its high schools. Nonetheless, the change in the last few years is striking, especially given the challenge in most systems of improving high school outcomes. The results from Ontario's high schools shows what can be done if the right strategies are implemented in the right ways.

A Comprehensive Strategy

The thoughtful and sustained effort to improve Ontario high schools was led by the provincial government and embodied several key ideas. First, *all* high schools need to improve.
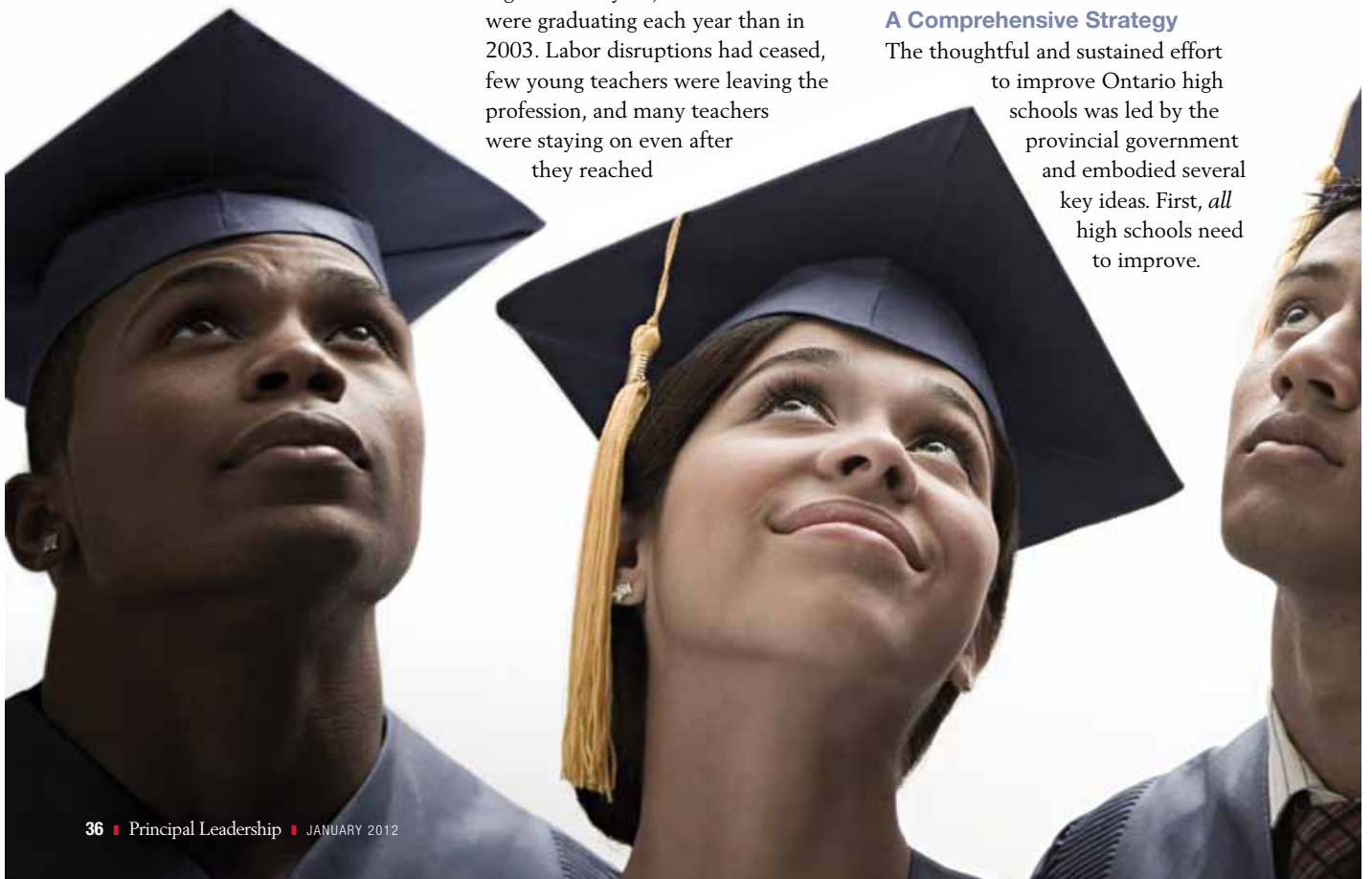
More Students

Second, improvement cannot come from any single strategy; it requires addressing many aspects of the school's work in an integrated way. Third, improvement requires sustained effort over time. All three ideas run against the grain of many current proposals that tend to focus on low-performing schools and on one or two change forces and that do not last very long. No wonder many educators are cynical.

The Ontario Student Success Strategy was introduced in 2005. The main elements of the strategy included:

- Dedicated infrastructures in the ministry and school boards, staffed by outstanding educators, that led the initiative
    - School leaders who set ambitious but achievable targets and plan for increased student success and graduation
- A "student success leadership team" in every school district and every school
- Effective practices that are grounded in research
- Extensive, carefully targeted professional development for educators
- Effective use of data to track students and intervene early when problems occur
- A "student success teacher" in every high school, who acts as a champion for success for all students
- Increased focus on literacy and numeracy in all areas of the high school curriculum
- Targeted attention to key underperforming groups, including minority students, ESL students, students receiving special education services, and aboriginal students
- Stronger transitions between elementary and secondary schools so that students get off to a good start in high school
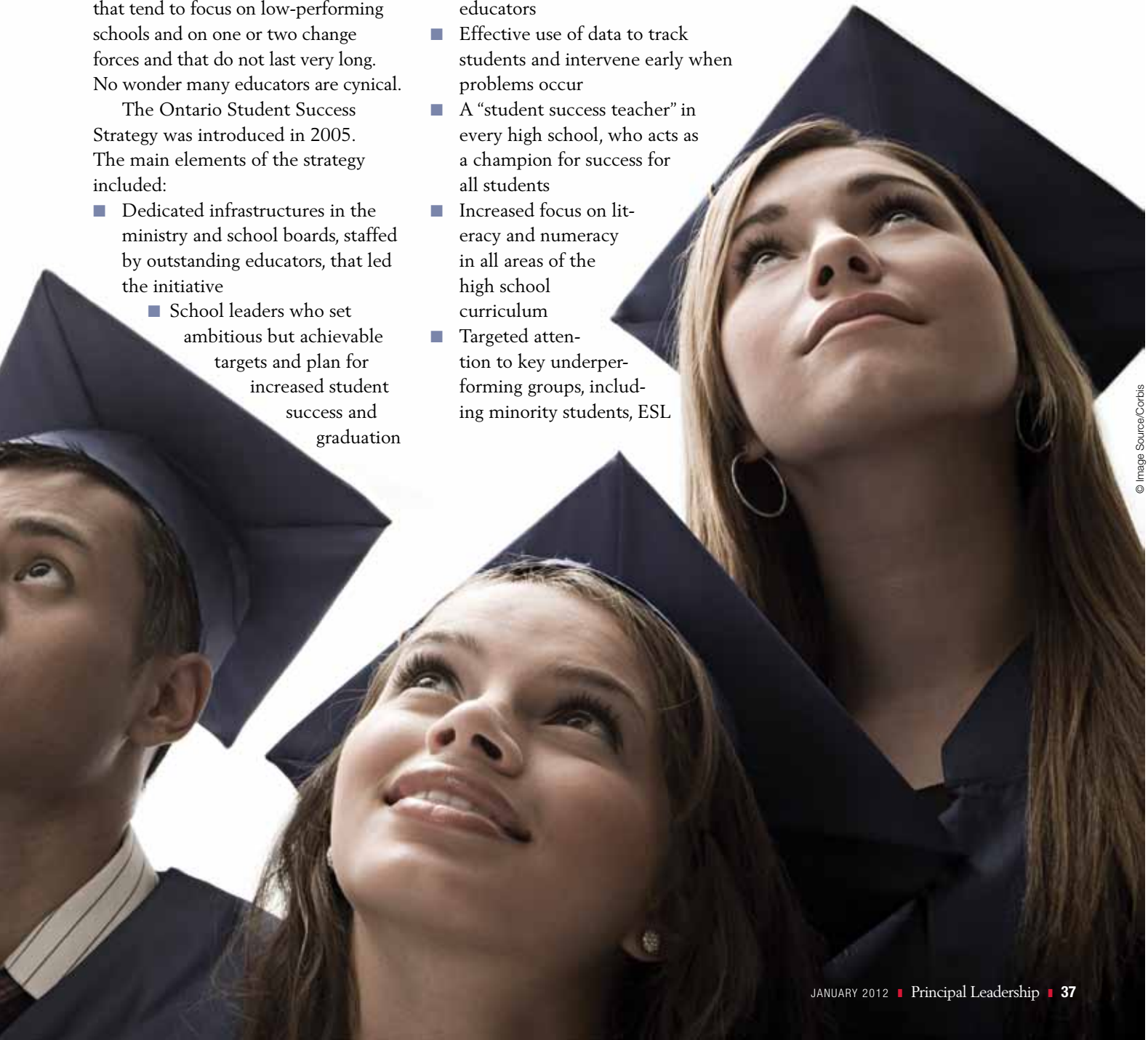
Ontario

Ontario schools enroll 2 million children in 5,000 schools in 72 school districts that range in size from a few hundred students to more than 100,000, in a total area the size of North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana combined. The population is 80% urban, but there are also many small schools. Enrollment is very diverse, with 27% of the population born outside of Canada and 20% visible minorities. The provincial government provides 100% of the funding to school boards, prescribes curricula, and controls many aspects of policy. The federal government plays no role. Teachers and support staff members are fully unionized.

■ Revised curricula in some key areas, such as mathematics and career education
■ Expanded program options, such as cooperative education, credits for external learning, and dual credit programs with colleges
■ A "high-skills major" that allows schools to work with employers groups to create packages of courses leading to real employment and further learning
■ Legislation to support those changes and also to require students to be in a learning situation (e.g., school, college, apprenticeship, work with training, and so forth) until high school graduation or age 18
■ Various mechanisms to bring stakeholders together to ensure that the program could be smoothly implemented and to prevent disputes at the local level.

This list feels like a lot of initiatives, but the entire approach can be distilled into four key strategies:

1. Know the status and progress of every student, know the reasons for any problems, and intervene as soon as there are signs of difficulties
2. Provide a program and approach that enable a good outcome for every student
3. Work on improving daily teaching and learning
4. Connect schools deeply to their local and broader community.

It is essential to address all four areas to achieve higher graduation rates. There is never enough time to do everything, however, so principals must focus on those elements that combine the greatest impact with the least effort. There is no point in tackling the "most important" strategy if it is too difficult to achieve. It is far better to adopt a strategy that may have less effect but has much more possibility of success.

Further, care must be taken in how the strategies are actually put into place. The best strategy in the world will fail if the implementation is ineffective.

Breaking It Down

Let's consider each of these elements a little more fully.

Know the Students

Students say repeatedly that the most important factor in deciding whether they stay in school is whether anyone there knows who they are and cares about what happens to them. (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). This is one of the clearest findings in all the research on secondary education. The key is to ensure that caring about students is built into the school's work through processes that ensure that each student's progress is tracked and that there is effective intervention as soon as a student encounters difficulties. "We care about you" only becomes real when it turns into action to help students achieve success and when that success is at the very core of how schools organize their work.

This strategy is the easiest of the four to implement and can pay large dividends very quickly. When they sense that the adults really do care, students will often meet the adults more than halfway by increasing effort. Moreover, this strategy is generally consistent with what teachers believe and does not ask for significant changes in daily teaching practice.

At the same time, as soon as one starts delving into the reasons why students are not doing well, other issues arise, such as the timetable, school rules, teaching methods, and

assessment practices, as well as family and community connections. Often it is easier to get people engaged with those other requirements if the school starts by looking at the needs of specific students.

Provide the Right Mix

Secondary schools often take the position that greater student success is largely a matter of providing enough different courses, but this approach may segregate lower-achieving students and put them into courses that have low levels of intellectual demand and no connection either to postsecondary education or to meaningful employment. Students soon get the idea that they do not need to do any work because the school does not believe that they have much ability. Students who in many ways need the best teaching are often assigned the least-experienced teachers.

Better approaches than adding more courses include:

- High expectations for all students in all courses
- Programs that have flexibility to support students' inevitable changes of plans and goals
- Credentials with real value for further education, employment, or both
- Recovery options so that students' poor choices can be remedied and more-ambitious pathways pursued
- Recognizing the importance of the cocurriculum
- Scheduling in ways that support student success—for example, by not offering the most-difficult courses in the same semester
- Assigning teaching tasks so that the students who most need good teaching are most likely to receive it.

Those principles can be applied in many different ways but will vastly increase the chances of students being motivated and having good opportunities for success. They also reduce the chances that students will be assigned to courses that neither they nor their teachers believe have much value.

Improve Teaching and Learning

Addressing teaching and learning is difficult in secondary schools because they are divided into subjects and departments. Teachers in different areas see their work differently, and students often see little coherence across subjects in terms of activities, intellectual demands, and ways of working.

There are some promising ways to get even a large high school focused on common and improved teaching and learning practices. One powerful approach is to look at student assessment practices. This kind of collective work can be a powerful tool for better schooling by focusing staff members on the actual work that students are doing, the standards that are being used to assess that work, and the feedback that students are getting. The result can be better instruction and also more-consistent student experiences.

Another opportunity lies in engaging students in the daily practices in their classrooms by giving them more input in such areas as the organization of classes and the kinds of work they do. Student voice is an important correlate of student engagement, which is in turn an important correlate of better outcomes.

A third strategy involves increasing opportunities for independent work by students. There are many ways to encourage students to work more independently. Whether in everyday courses or through other venues, including online courses, independent learning can be highly motivating for students.

Connect Schools to Their Communities

Schools are necessarily influenced by their communities because students are highly influenced by their families, peers, and neighborhoods. Yet schools often see communities as sources of bad influences, rather than look to them for the resources and strengths that even the most-stressed communities have. With care, the natural tensions between schools and families can be managed.

Communities can also be sources of learning for students, if schools are willing to use them in that way. Employers and postsecondary institutions can increase the range of learning opportunities for students and can provide alternatives for students in difficult circumstances. The part-time work that many students do provides another opportunity for learning instead of being seen as a distraction from students' schoolwork.

As with any other area of work in a school, community connections do not come without effort. Someone must do the work of initiating, organizing, and maintaining the relationships between the school and the community. In many schools, this is the kind of task that is not assigned to anyone, so it tends not to get done. But the rewards in terms of increased trust, increased understanding, and new ways to connect with students are valuable and well worth the effort.

Implementation

Improvement does not happen by itself. It must be built and sustained carefully. Too often, education reforms are announced but never get the support and attention they need to succeed. Implementation is a subject in its own right, but a few key points can be made:

There is no such thing as too much communication about change.

- Effective change begins with careful attention to the evidence on current results and possible improvements.
- An organization can only focus on a small number of core goals at any one time; too many goals will lead to diffused effort and little change.
- Improvement requires dedicated resources, systems, and processes. This means designating people and teams to lead particular changes.
- There is no such thing as too much communication about change; communication should be as positive as possible to build commitment and morale. If people don't support a change, it won't yield the desired results.

Although all this may sound daunting, it is what effective organizations in any field do. There are no shortcuts to success, but there is a well-marked road. This is possible, and students need school leaders to make the effort! **P**L

REFERENCE

- Rumberger, R. W., & Lim, S. A. (2008). *Why students drop out of school: A review of 25 years of research*. Santa Barbara, CA: California Dropout Research Project.

Ben Levin *holds a Canada Research Chair at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He served for three years as Ontario's deputy minister (chief civil servant) for education while those reforms were developed and implemented. His new book about improving high schools,* More High School Graduates, *was just published by Corwin.*