

SUSTAINING EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN ONTARIO

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Schools in Ontario are exciting places these days as educators lead and manage change. After more than a decade of struggle and conflict there is a new optimism in the sector, illustrated by positive developments in teaching and learning in schools all across the Province. In this article we will outline some of the main elements of the Ontario government's approach to supporting educational change. Space does not permit a full description of all the elements of our plan, so this article gives a brief overview of main points.

Unlike many other jurisdictions, Ontario's strategy embodies vital principles, grounded in research, that we believe are key to meaningful and sustainable change.

- 1 - Changes are respectful of professional knowledge and practice;
- 2 - Main elements of change are coherent and aligned at the provincial, district and school level. Key partners – the Ministry, boards, schools, and provincial and local organizations of teachers, principals, and other partners work together;
- 3 - Change strategies are comprehensive and include professional development, strong leadership, relevant materials, necessary resources, and effective outreach to parents and the broader community.

The Ontario education strategy has two main components and a variety of ancillary elements. The two most important goals are the commitment to improve elementary school literacy and numeracy outcomes, and the commitment to increase high school graduation rates. Space does not permit a full description of all these elements nor of the reasons why these items were identified as priorities. Each of these goals is supported by a large-scale strategy that includes the elements just noted and will be described more fully a little later.

At the same time, these strategies are supported by a range of other initiatives. Some of these ancillary initiatives – for example the negotiation of four year collective agreements with teachers and the management of the issues arising from those agreements - are necessary to manage other pressures that might otherwise distract us from our focus on improving student outcomes. Others – such as attention to safe schools and healthy schools - are important to ensure that we maintain a balanced view of the educational enterprise and see our key goals as part of a larger enterprise. Still others – such as strengthening school leadership or changing curriculum – are necessary to the key goals. We will return at the end of this article to the challenge of managing all these initiatives. However it is important to note that even where there is a strong focus on a small number of key goals, the ancillary and potentially distracting issues still require some attention; the challenge is getting the balance right among all the concerns.

Main elements of the key changes

Literacy and numeracy

Ontario's Literacy and Numeracy strategy is aimed at improving literacy and numeracy skills for elementary school students, which were flatlined or stagnant in the five years prior to 2003. The goal is to have at least 75% of grade 6 students able to read, write, and do mathematics at the expected level by the spring of 2008. While 75% represents a substantial gain from the approximately 55% of students who met this standard in 2003, we also recognize that the public will not accept, and the education system cannot be satisfied with, a situation in which even one in four students fails to develop key skills that they will need to participate fully in our society.

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy aims to create meaningful and sustainable change in teaching and learning practices in Ontario's 4000 elementary schools. Main elements of the strategy include:

- adding thousands of new teaching positions to reduce class sizes in JK-3 to a maximum of 20 in at least 90% of classrooms by fall, 2007, and providing support to teachers to make most effective use of these smaller classes;

- adding about 2000 specialist teachers to enrich teaching in areas such as art, music and physical education while also providing more preparation and professional learning time for classroom teachers;

- creating a dedicated Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, headed by Avis Glaze and staffed by outstanding educators from around the province, to lead and guide the overall initiative;

- developing leadership teams for literacy and numeracy in every board and every elementary school;

- engaging school and board leaders to strengthen their focus on literacy and numeracy by setting ambitious but achievable targets and plans for gains in student achievement;

- providing extensive professional development for educators to improve literacy and numeracy instructional practices, including adding two more professional development days to the school calendar;

- providing relevant resource materials to teachers, such as curriculum exemplars and expert panel reports;

- targeting attention to some key underperforming groups, including some minority students, ESL students, students in special education, and boys;

- implementing a 'turnaround' program on a voluntary basis that provides additional support and expert advice for schools facing the most significant challenges in improving achievement;
- supporting research to find, understand and share effective practices;
- setting up a comprehensive, user friendly data- base on achievement results in literacy and numeracy at grades 3 and 6 which supports capacity building and internal and external accountability in which ' positive pressure ' prevails (see below).
- providing funding for books and materials;
- supporting important ancillary practices such as an expansion of tutoring and a fuller engagement of parents and communities.

All of the above has been backed by very significant new resources to schools. For example, in 2006-07 the government will be providing about \$300 million annually in additional funding just for the reduction of class sizes. The total annual value of the Strategy is at least \$450 million annually.

Increasing high school graduation rates

A number of sources of data (King, ***; Ministry, ***) showed that graduation rates in Ontario high schools dropped significantly after the introduction of the new high school program in the late 1990s. By 2003-04 only about 60% of students were graduating in the normal four years, and only about 70% were graduating even after taking an extra year. Yet high school completion is now a minimum qualification for effective inclusion in society and for participation in the labour market and economy.

Our Student Success Strategy to improve high school graduation rates and to ensure a good outcome for every secondary student has much in common with the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy as well as some elements that take account of the different nature of high school education. Here, also, the province has set a target of having at least 85% of entering grade 9 students graduate from high school in a timely way by 2010 – these are the students who will be entering grade 9 in September of 2006!

Key components of the Student Success Strategy include:

- adding two thousand new teaching positions to allow a 'student success teacher' in every high school as a champion for success for all students while also reducing class sizes in areas of greatest need, such as applied courses. One of the most important elements of the strategy is to ensure that that every student in our high schools is well known to and supported by at least one adult on staff;

- developing leadership teams for literacy and numeracy in every board and every high school, including a dedicated Student Success Leader in every board;

- engaging school and board leaders to strengthen their focus on student success by setting ambitious but achievable targets and plans for increases in credit attainment and graduation rates;

- developing a focus on and resources for literacy and numeracy in all areas of the high school curriculum;

- supporting effective use of data to track students success in all secondary grades;

- building stronger transition models between elementary and secondary schools;

- providing extensive professional development for educators to improve student success, including adding two more professional development days to the school calendar;

- providing new opportunities in the high school program through expanding the role of co-operative education and adding options for credit for genuine external learning and dual credit programs with colleges and universities;

- creating the 'high skills major' that will allow schools and boards to work with employers and community groups to create packages of courses leading to real employment and further learning;

- introducing legislation to embody the changes in the overall strategy and also requiring students to be in a learning situation (school, college, apprenticeship, work with training, etc.) until high school graduation or age 18;

- revising curricula in some key areas such as mathematics and career education;

- supporting research to find, understand and share effective practices;

supporting important ancillary practices such as an expansion of tutoring and a fuller engagement of parents and communities.

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Here, too, boards and schools have received extensive new funding to support the changes, amounting to some \$300 million per year.

Another noteworthy feature of the Student Success strategy is the creation of a Student Success Commission. The Commission includes representatives of the four teacher federations as well as principals and supervisory officers. The Commission is reviewing main elements of the Student Success strategy and

providing its endorsement of approaches to implementing these elements effectively in schools. This collaborative effort of boards, federations and the Ministry represents an important new approach to dealing cooperatively and in advance with issues so as to prevent disputes at the local level.

A particular challenge in Ontario is the lack of data on high school graduation rates; many schools and boards do not know what portion of their entering students graduate in 4 or 5 years. Working with boards, the Ministry has begun to publish data on a number of student success indicators, including not only graduation rates but also the proportion of students who are 'on track' to graduate at the end of grade 9 and grade 10.

Sustaining elements

Both of these important strategies share the key principles mentioned at the start of this paper – respectful, coherent, aligned and comprehensive. These are the elements that are intended to make the changes significant and sustainable.

Respect for staff and for professional knowledge

The Ontario focus on student outcomes rests on the belief that staff in our schools are committed professionals who have enormous skill and knowledge to contribute to school improvement. The Ontario change strategy shows its respect for professionals in a variety of ways. Some of these have already been mentioned in the discussion above of the two main strategies. Other instances include:

- We have abolished of some policy elements (OTQT, compulsory professional development) perceived as punitive and replaced them with policies (such as induction for new teachers and changes to teacher performance appraisal) that are seen as supportive of professionalism. We have also increased staffing (despite declining enrolment), reduced teacher workload and increased preparation time.

- Our strategies build on successful practices in Ontario schools and involve extensive sharing of good practice. Almost everything that is happening at the provincial level draws on good practices that were already underway in schools somewhere in the province.

- The strategies involve substantial professional development led by respected Ontario educators. We have provided many opportunities for teacher learning at all levels, from schools to families of schools to boards to provincial activities. Indeed, as noted later, the multiplicity of professional learning opportunities is now somewhat of a problem.

- We are supporting the development of learning communities in schools and boards through the creation of leadership teams in schools and boards, and the emphasis on sharing good practice.

Coherence and alignment through partnership

We know that government directions can change quickly. Sustainable improvement in schools therefore requires real commitment and participation by all the partners – teachers, administrators, boards, and the broader community. Fullan (2005,2006) talks about the 'trilevel solution', in which governments, school districts and schools work together on common approaches and strategies. That is what we are doing in Ontario. An explicit part of our strategy involves building strong relationships and close connections with boards, schools and other organizations.

For example, the student achievement officers who staff the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat work very closely with boards to ensure our strategies and theirs are fully aligned and complementary. At secondary level, board student success leaders play an important role in shaping the Ministry's approach, again with the goal of ensuring greater alignment.

We also have extensive mechanisms for consultation on virtually all of our programs and policies, from the Partnership Table and Working Tables that bring together all the main provincial organizations, to many, many other forums for dialogue. The deputy minister and other senior ministry staff meet regularly with the main provincial organizations, including teachers, principals, and supervisory officers. Both former minister Kennedy and Minister Papatello also meet and talk often with various stakeholder groups. The Ministry takes serious account of input from stakeholder groups because we recognize that we can only be successful working together and respecting each other's views.

Given the problems created in Ontario education over the last decade by conflict with teachers and support staff, we have taken particular steps to involve teachers and their organizations in our policies and programs. We are working closely with the teacher federations by involving them in policy development, by cooperating in such innovative approaches as the Student Success Commission, and by providing funds to the federations to recognize their important role in professional development. We are also taking steps to work more closely with support staff groups and to recognize their need for involvement and for professional development.

Principals also play a vital role in our approach to improvement. The Ministry issued in 2005 a paper on 'role of the principal' that proposes a number of steps that we are now taking to support principals in focusing on leading improvement in student outcomes.

We have also worked hard to build positive relationships with school boards. This is itself a subject for a longer article, but suffice it to say here that we see boards as our partners in education, and work hard to listen to their views on policy while also building on their many strengths and successes. When boards and the Ministry fight in public the whole public education system suffers because citizens, who after all pay the bill, get a negative message about our ability to provide quality education.

Comprehensiveness

Our approach to improvement is not based on just one or two elements. For example, although we are focusing on literacy and numeracy, we are also aware of the importance of other elements of curriculum, which is why we are also supporting physical activity and the arts. The brief outlines of the elements of our main strategies should show clearly how multi-faceted they are.

However beyond that, our theory of improvement recognizes schools as ecologies. Michael Fullan has played a key role in shaping the government's program, so we are very influenced by his ideas about needing to pay attention to all elements of schooling simultaneously (Fullan, 2006). Thus we give attention to building capacity in teachers, to improving leadership, to involving parents, to changing policies, to adding resources – all at the same time. It is also important to pay attention to the issues that could turn into huge distractions – such as having collective agreements in place, dealing with safety issues, or ensuring that school buildings are in good repair. The effort to be comprehensive, however, creates the challenge of overload, discussed a little later.

How Are We Doing?

Our two main strategies are relatively new. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat only began operation early in 2005, and the most important elements of the Student Success Strategy only came into place later in 2005. However in both cases we are not starting from zero but are very much building on work already underway in a number of boards. Because of this foundation, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat has been able in less than 2 school years to have a substantial impact on teaching practices and on students' results. Results on Ontario's provincial assessment have improved substantially and broadly in each of the last two years. The current trajectory of improvement puts us on target to achieve the goal of 75% by 2008. Nor are these results just a matter of test-taking. Gains on tests only matter if they represent real improvements in students' skills, and my conversations with teachers across the province confirm that we are seeing real skill improvements for students.

We are even earlier in the secondary Student Success strategy, but the indicators here, too, are positive. Results on the Secondary School Literacy test – itself not a main focus of the changes – rose substantially over the last two years. Credit accumulation in grades 9 and 10, which so strongly predict graduation, appear to be improving. We expect to see significant improvements in graduation rates beginning in 2007.

Just as importantly, there is a level of energy and enthusiasm in Ontario schools that has not been seen for quite some time. All of the authors are in schools across the province quite regularly, and everywhere there is a sense of optimism and positive attitude around our ability to work together to improve student outcomes. It is this positive energy, combined with high quality capacity-building for precision teaching and leadership, that will really make a difference for our students.

Challenges

No change of this magnitude occurs with challenges. Two are particularly important to note.

First, there is no question that schools are feeling that there are many, many initiatives all at the same time. Even though people are positive about the elements of change, putting them all together has put stress on educators, without doubt. One might describe the situation as being a bit like eating all the Halloween candies at once; each one tastes good but too many at one time does not produce a happy result!

We expect that this situation will improve in the next two years as there will be fewer new initiatives and more focus on deeper implementation of those already underway. Capacity building and support will provide more depth and experience will also reduce the stress of the new. Nonetheless, at all levels of the system we need to ensure that we provide more alignment and coherence, and fewer distractors, than we have had in the last two years.

The second challenge has to do with resources. The government has increased funding for public education by more than 20% since the fall of 2003. This is a very large increase by any standard. However schools and boards still face financial pressures in matching resources to demands. We will need to work hard in the next two years to ensure that we are using our resources as productively as possible. We will need to re-examine some of our current practices and allocations of staff and funds and ask ourselves whether these actually are the most effective ways to use resources in support of students. In many areas – from transportation to special education to professional development to use of substitute teachers – there may be opportunities to improve efficiency. Effective use of research evidence and data will be critical in

this effort as we learn more about practices that are more effective, and share that knowledge more widely.

Managing resources will never be easy. In a field like education there will always be more demands for additional services than can be supported. Priority choices can be hard, and intensely political, which makes it all the more important for all of us to make a concerted effort to share what is known about how our resource allocations support good outcomes for every students.

Conclusion

We see the press for reform in Ontario as creating an atmosphere of 'positive pressure' which creates the conditions for people at all levels to invest in the energy and commitment necessary to do the hard and rewarding work of continuous reform. Positive pressure is pressure that provides resources, that increases expectations, that furnishes data on a ongoing basis which is connected to strategies of further reform, that avoids unfair comparisons among schools in favour of comparing 'apples with apples', that does not interpret results on a simple one year basis but builds its work on trends in which success is celebrated, and lack of improvement is addressed in a transparent manner.

This is a tremendously exciting time for education in Ontario. We have had the good fortune of seeing public education in quite a few different parts of the world. We know of no other place that is making such a concerted effort to produce real, sustainable educational change in the interests of students and communities. It is possible to make change in education that is respectful of educators, fair to students and communities, and based on the best available knowledge. When that happens we can see the energy it generates and the positive results it produces. It is a great privilege to be associated with such a large scale attempt of improvement based on the best of what we know about mobilizing effective knowledge and moral commitments.

References

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