

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case presents lessons learned from the experiences of one Ontario district school board in its efforts to build school and district capacity and coherence while implementing early literacy strategies.

Board Profile

The York Region District School Board (YRDSB) is a growing school board, opening, on average, five elementary schools a year for the last five years, and one secondary school every other year. There are currently 140 elementary schools and 28 secondary schools in the board, with over 108,000 students and 8,000 teachers (Sharratt & Fullan, 2005).

Data Collection

Data collection included: interviews with the senior leadership team and 12 school principals, a review of school board documents and EQAO data, and observations of the Literacy Collaborative (LC), a district-wide initiative focused on enhancing literacy for all students through the support of all schools and teachers.

Literacy Collaborative

1) Shared Beliefs and Understandings

Leaders in LC schools must not only share certain beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning, but they must also “walk the talk” by taking action to demonstrate that they believe:

- a) *All* students can meet high standards given the right time and support.
- b) *All* teachers can teach to high standards given the right assistance.
- c) High expectations and early intervention are essential.
- d) Teachers need to be able to articulate what they do and why they teach the way they do (Hill & Grevola, 1999).

2) **Embedded Literacy Teachers**

This role was initially shared by a half-time Reading Recovery™ teacher and a half-time literacy teacher – allocated from within school staffing; now all elementary and secondary schools are provided with a literacy teacher so that all schools can be part of the LC. No one can say, “It’s impossible to find the staffing.” The literacy teacher works alongside classroom teachers modelling/demonstrating successful literacy practice – it is not a matter of withdrawing students who need help from the classroom learning environment.

In the selection of literacy teachers, the following characteristics are key:

- a) strong interpersonal/facilitation skills (required for classroom coaching)
- b) strong assessment and instructional knowledge in balanced literacy
- c) ongoing commitment to being a lead literacy learner

3) **Timetabled Literacy Block**

The literacy block, at least 100 uninterrupted minutes per day, should be scheduled in the morning to emphasize:

- a) focused time on task on balanced literacy assessment and instruction;
- b) no distractions or interruptions such as announcements, field trips, or assemblies during this dedicated literacy time; and
- c) alignment of the literacy teacher’s daily timetable with the literacy block.

4) **Full Implementation of Reading Recovery™**

This program supports literacy by identifying the lowest-achieving children in every Grade 1 class and moving these children to read and write at the average level so that they are able to benefit from good classroom instruction.

Principals must:

- a) select competent and experienced primary teachers to be trained in Reading Recovery™;
- b) ensure that *daily* lessons support the lowest-achieving individual students; and
- c) commit to providing access to daily Reading Recovery™ instruction for all children who need it.

5) **Principal Leadership**

The principal's deep structural understanding of successful literacy practices in classrooms is key. Therefore, principals in the LC must be committed to:

- a) attending *all* regional literacy professional development sessions with their literacy leadership team;
- b) focusing on school data to improve student achievement; and
- c) staying the course/maintaining the literacy plan, outlined in the school plan, until improvement is achieved.

6) **Case Management Approach**

In order to use data to drive instruction and select resources, the LC model recommends the use of a case management approach to:

- a) put an individual face on the data so that teachers know which students need more support (e.g., daily guided reading in the classroom, booster group support, reading buddies);
- b) ensure that *all* teachers in the school have collective responsibility for *all* students;
- c) develop tracking boards to monitor student progress throughout the year (keep in a prominent location so that staff is constantly reminded of it); and
- d) use diagnostic and assessment tools such as PM Benchmark and DRA assessments effectively for in-school and district determination of next steps to identify not only the needs of each student but also system-wide professional development needs.

7) **Literacy Professional Development at School Staff Meetings**

Principals made a commitment to focus on PD at staff meetings rather than on operational items (reduced to memo format). They focus on weaving together assessment literacy and instructional intelligence as experienced in classrooms through the literacy lens. This in-school PD is based on the school's own data, brought to meetings by the teachers who work on the data together.

8) In-School Grade Meetings

At weekly meetings staff focus on the literacy achievement of individual students by using common assessment tools or exemplars so that same-grade teachers can come to a common understanding of the expected standards across a grade level.

9) Book Rooms of Levelled Books

Principals and their literacy teams have created book rooms for the primary and junior levels. Literacy teachers have levelled books for classroom teachers' use in order to bring all students – from those in Kindergarten to those in Grade 6 – to the next reading level,.

10) Allocation of School Budget for Literacy Resources

Administrators and their literacy leadership teams have agreed to budget for book study resources recommended by curriculum consultants for use by both students and teachers.

11) Action Research Focused on Literacy

School literacy teams posed questions concerning literacy and increased student achievement that related to their school data. They explored answers together throughout the year. District staff provided four PD sessions during the year for action research teams and a \$1000 per-school grant for on-site work. As school teams had to write a report at year-end that documented their journey, they were highly accountable. These reports were compiled into a board report for use by other schools.

12) Parental Involvement

School literacy teams worked towards establishing community-home-school relationships. Many teams reached out to establish pre-school literacy programs in the community, with teachers going out to community centres as part of school readiness programs.

13) Cross-Curricular Literacy Connections

Although the Literacy Collaborative began with a focus on the primary years, *all* teachers, JK–8, began to discuss and then implement teaching literacy in the content areas across the grades.

14) Preparation of an Annual School Report

All schools in the LC prepare an annual report that summarizes the evidence of improved literacy achievement by:

- a) using data to drive instruction;
- b) building administrator and teacher capacity to teach balanced literacy to all students; and
- c) establishing a professional learning community.

Lessons for District-Wide Strategies – Key Learnings

The following key lessons include suggestions for learning at all three levels of implementation: school, board, and province.

- At the provincial level, there needs to be a team of people who understand education working in partnership with all directors. “We need to stop competing and we need to be willing to share with each other.”
- External partners are crucial – for example, “critical friends” who conduct assessments of where the school board is, identify key components that “make something work and make it successful”, and make recommendations to implement changes.
- The director needs to have a clear vision, focusing on one priority, such as literacy, which mobilizes the whole system to implement changes and to stay the course.
- Everyone in the organization needs to understand the focus and needs to be on board – no one should be left out.
- Everyone in the organization needs to understand the importance of data-driven decision making.

- Assessment-based instructional strategies and practices need to be the focus for improvement in student learning.
- Sustained professional development involving school teams is necessary in order to have distributed leadership; principals must be involved in the team.
- Funding needs to be in place to allow planning for more than six months to a year.
- Sustained support – financial, material, and human – is key.
- There needs to be compelling moral messaging about the initiative.
- A common language needs to be spoken by all.
- Building capacity has to take place at all levels.
- It is imperative to have curriculum coordinators develop the plan and implement the system vision, and embed a balanced literacy approach in every content session with school teams.
- Literacy is THE focus.