

Foreword

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Ontario has one of the most explicit whole-system reform strategies in the world. Its focus is on a core set of goals that are relentlessly pursued: raising achievement in literacy and numeracy, increasing high school graduation rates, reducing the gap between high and low performers and increasing public confidence in the publicly funded education system. Ontario strategies include the following:

- a strong and continuing commitment to building capacity of individuals, schools and districts in terms of the knowledge, skills and competencies essential for success
- the use of increasingly targeted data on student learning
- a non-punitive intervention strategy
- the pursuit and spread of effective practices

The watchwords of this reform strategy are *measurable results, precision and specificity* when it comes to *effective practice, leadership at all levels and transparent accountability*.

One of the key strategies in the Ontario reform involves learning from implementation during implementation. The idea is that there always will be some schools and districts that make greater headway in overcoming difficult problems, and that one of the best ways to move forward is to learn from these examples. The notion is not “why can’t you be more like your brother?” but rather “this is very hard work. Some people are figuring it out. What can we learn from them?”

Schools on the Move is one such strategy. It consists of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat partnering with the field – in this case with Ontario’s 4,000 plus elementary schools and their 72 districts – to identify those schools that have improved in reading, writing and math over at least a three-year period. Schools are eligible only if they also have a describable strategy – that is, if they can articulate the strategies they used and how they implemented them. Now in its fourth year, Schools on the Move has 142 schools. These schools are provided resources to help other interested schools, and are given help from the Secretariat on how to disseminate what they have learned.

Each School on the Move is profiled in a two-page summary that highlights demographic characteristics, results and the essence of the strategy used.

The Schools on the Move report is publicly available to all schools and districts in the province at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/schoolMove.html>

Schools on the Move is a prime example of what I have called “lateral capacity building,” a professional learning strategy that has several positive features: (1) it recognizes that the best knowledge is already out there; (2) it celebrates success; (3) it enables the best knowledge to flow throughout the system; and (4) it increases the identity of all in the system as belonging to the system as a whole primarily by strengthening peer solidarity across regions and by connecting people to the bigger picture of improving Ontario’s publicly funded education system.

Schools on the Move is positioned as one of several synergistic strategies that create a cohesive, integrated approach to whole-system reform. It is part and parcel of identifying achievement targets, developing implementation strategies and conducting school effectiveness reviews. Ontario has not only put in place capacity-building interventions to support all Ontario schools but it has also given particular attention to lower-performing schools through a program called the Ontario Focused Intervention Program (OFIP) that works with some 1,000 schools.

Schools on the Move do not merely disseminate their knowledge; they also learn from other schools as they consider what these other schools are facing. The whole atmosphere is one of collaboration, learning, challenging each other, maintaining an open door policy with respect to parents and the community and focusing on reaching every child.

Schools on the Move can be found in every part of the province. Congratulations to these remarkable schools for their extraordinary accomplishments, and to the myriad other schools committed to learning from them as they develop their own schools to become recognized in the future. In a very real sense this effort represents a “system on the move.”

A Message from the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

Mary Jean Gallagher

Chief Student Achievement Officer of Ontario and
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Ontario launched Schools on the Move in the spring of 2006 both to celebrate schools that were making progress in improved student achievement and to share their stories with schools across the province. There are now 142 schools in the network, with 35 joining in the spring of 2009. The newest Schools on the Move are profiled in this book; all of them are listed – with ways to get in touch – in the green pages at the back.

Schools on the Move 2009 share what researchers and practitioners refer to as “challenging circumstances.” These circumstances are associated with:

- communities struggling with poverty
- high levels of student mobility and family turbulence
- high percentages of ELL students
- high percentages of parents without college/university education

Often schools in challenging circumstances report student achievement scores that are lower than provincial and/or national averages, but not always. Some enjoy great success with student learning and achievement. And, as a result, they receive attention from researchers interested in identifying precisely what the school, teachers and principals do to build effective environments for learning.

The international research literature on effective schools in challenging circumstances (e.g., Flintham, 2005; Macbeath et al., 2005; Reynolds et al., 2001) highlights some common themes:

- setting a culture of high expectations for all students
- embedding a sense of purpose and challenge within the ethos of the school
- using student data to inform classroom and school actions
- building school leadership that is both inclusive and distributive
- sustaining partnerships within the community that support parental involvement in school programs

Recent Ontario research also highlights the importance of focusing, at the school level, on how issues of poverty may be impacting on students and the school community (Flessa et al., 2009). This research stresses the importance of addressing individual context and needs rather than turning to “off-the-shelf,” generic strategies – an approach that requires patience, time and lots and lots of collaboration.

All of these research themes are evident in the profiles that follow. Schools on the Move 2009 certainly recognize there is no panacea for the complex and multi-faceted issues that they face. They place a high priority on working together to help children experience success. And all will welcome contact to problem-solve on behalf of children and to improve life chances for all.

References:

- Flessa, J., Parker, C. D., Gallagher-Mackay, K., & Becker, H. (2009, February). Learning from schools in challenging circumstances: Emerging findings from new research in Ontario. *Changing Perspectives*.
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- Macbeath, J., Gray, J., & Cullen, J. (2005). *Responding to challenging circumstances: Evaluation of the "Schools Facing Exceptionally Challenging Circumstances Project."* University of Cambridge, UK.
- Reynolds D., Hopkins D., Potter D., & Chapman C. (2001). *School improvement for schools facing challenging circumstances: A Review of research and practice*. London: HMSO for DfES – Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO and the Queen's Printer for Scotland.

Schools on the Move Criteria for Selection

- improvement in provincial assessment (EQAO) scores in reading, writing and mathematics in both Grades 3 and/or 6 over a three-year period
- use of evidence-informed strategies in classrooms across the school
- ability of staff to articulate the instructional strategies used and provide evidence of growth in student learning and achievement