

SUPPORTING THE ONTARIO LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

Principal Congress

What Is the Principal Congress?

The Principal Congress is an annual event that brings together 200 highly regarded principals and a small number of district leaders for a facilitated one-day conference focused on closing achievement gaps. Participants are required to complete an advance assignment that asks them to reflect on and write about their leadership practice, and serves as a platform for discussion. Congress is a knowledge mobilization strategy – it is intended to make expert leaders' knowledge explicit and capture the collective insights embedded in that expert knowledge.

Overarching Focus: Closing Achievement Gaps

In a truly equitable system, factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status do not prevent students from achieving ambitious outcomes. The Principal Congress draws on our collective knowledge and experience to:

- identify leadership challenges in raising the bar and closing the achievement gaps;
- gain insight about existing leadership practices to overcome these challenges;
- provide concrete advice about how to spread these successful practices and how to improve and build on them as we move forward.

To date, the congress has focused on practices and challenges (February 2009), theories of action (February 2010), and student engagement (February 2011).

Why the Principal Congress?

The Principal Congress provides an opportunity to bring expert leaders together to share knowledge about an important problem – closing achievement gaps – and to gather and mobilize this knowledge so that many others can benefit. A unique combination of pre-work, face-to-face discussions, inspirational and informative leading-edge keynote speakers, and facilitated discussions has helped to accomplish congress goals.

Key Elements of the Principal Congress

- participant selection by districts and associations based on criteria intended to solicit **high-performing and passionate leaders**
- a **collaborative approach to program development and delivery** led by a planning team whose members include ministry staff and representatives of principal associations and the Institute for Education Leadership
- **advance participant preparation**, including submission of individual written responses to a question relevant to the congress theme, which is then used to inform the design of session content and ensure that participant expertise is documented
- an **accomplished keynote speaker** whose presentation connects with the theme
- **facilitation of small-group discussions** structured to maximize participant dialogue and exchange of successful leadership practices (facilitators are trained and provided with resources and detailed instructions)
- opportunities and resources (such as video clips, a networking site, and artefacts) that participants can use to **follow up in their districts** after the congress

Goals

The congress is intended to:

- help school leaders identify the leadership capacities needed to support the ministry's core priorities;
- improve utilization of the system's collective leadership knowledge to better accomplish the ministry's core priorities;
- increase the sensitivity of policy makers to the challenges encountered by school leaders.

What Has Been Accomplished?

- Data from the first congress, including responses to advance questions regarding leadership practices that contribute to closing the achievement gap, have been thoroughly analysed and summarized. The responses are aligned with leading-edge research on gap closing.

These responses, along with similarly positive results from data gathered at the second and third congresses, will be incorporated into a handbook.

- Findings from the Principal Congress, particularly the challenges facing principals in tackling gap closing, have been shared with policy makers across the ministry. This has contributed to a better understanding of principals' needs.
- A new resource for principals was created in response to the discovery that they find it difficult to keep track of, and make sense of, the vast array of helpful resources the ministry provides. This resource, *Principals Want to Know* (PW2K), is a series of tip sheets that provide user-friendly, easily accessible advice on how to approach key instructional leadership issues.
- In response to a request from congress participants, a professional network was set up for participants from all three years so that the rich dialogue that they enjoyed with each other at the congress could be continued.

“The design and conduct of, as well as the follow-up to, the Principal Congress reflect evidence about what is needed to help individuals and groups make explicit the substantial tacit knowledge they typically acquire in the course of the normal practice.”

Kenneth Leithwood

What's Next?

- A **gap-closing handbook** will be made available for leaders across Ontario in winter 2011–12.
- **Ontario Education Leaders**, a professional network for leaders, will be promoted and used to share resources of use to principals and other leaders.

Participants have said...

“I came expecting death by PowerPoint – instead I received wonderful PD from presenters and from my small group. I was so glad to have a supervisory officer in the group to provide supervisory officer wisdom.”

“One thing I valued was the tremendous sharing that occurred in my group regarding data and how to use it to improve student achievement.”

“In my small group, I learned that we need more opportunities to share the wealth of knowledge that administrators across the province possess. Amazing conversations throughout the day – great networking opportunities.”

“I felt affirmed and challenged and that good research was made accessible to me.”

LEARN MORE

Principal Congress
www.ontario.ca/eduleadership