

# REPORT 1

## Implementation of the Leadership Self-Review Tool in Five School Boards

*A Report for the Ontario  
Ministry of Education*

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## INTRODUCTION

***“Leadership is to this decade what standards were to the nineties.”*** So said Michael Fullan, an international leader in education change and Special Advisor to the Premier of Ontario and the Ontario Minister of Education, to school board directors and superintendents at a meeting of the Learning Consortium held in January 2006. (The Learning Consortium is a Toronto-area school board-university partnership dedicated to improving teacher development and public education.)

The professional development of school leaders, or administrators, is one of the school system’s most important responsibilities. To meet the challenge of leadership

in this era of complex change, school administrators require the support of their boards in new and important ways. Research indicates that principals’ behaviour can contribute in many ways to improved student achievement (Marzano, 2005). More is being learned, through the longitudinal work of Leithwood et al. for the Wallace Foundation (September 2004), about the effects of district leadership practices and organizational conditions on school leaders’ ability to lead their schools in ways that make a difference for students and teachers.

## BACKGROUND

In December 2005, the Ministry of Education presented a mini discussion paper, entitled “Leading Education: New Supports for Principals and Vice-Principals in Ontario Publicly Funded Schools”, to the Education Partnership Table. (The Education Partnership Table, a forum made up primarily of representative groups in education, was established in 2004 by the Minister of Education to provide insight into, and contribute to the resolution of, substantive issues in Ontario public education.) The paper reviewed the changes of the past decade in public education in Ontario and outlined a new provincial strategy for reducing the administrative workload of school leaders and supporting them in their important work as instructional leaders.

As part of its strategy, the ministry brought together a think tank of leadership experts from schools, boards, and academia to provide input, based on published research and effective practice, into the development of a

Leadership Self-Review Tool. The tool – a survey to be self-administered by school and board leaders and aspiring leaders – was intended to help school boards examine how they support leadership practices in their schools. The LSRT was meant to be more than a celebration of successful practices already under way; it was intended to be part of a process, with analysis of district findings contributing to informed conversations and action that would lead to improved system, school, and, ultimately, student performance.

Ontario district school boards were invited to pilot the tool, and five chose to become involved: the Conseil des écoles publiques de l’Est de l’Ontario, the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, the Thames Valley District School Board, the Waterloo Catholic District School Board, and the York Region District School Board.

## ABOUT THE LEADERSHIP SELF-REVIEW TOOL (LSRT)

The piloted LSRT, provided to the boards as an electronic file, consisted of four sections in both English and French:

- suggestions for using the self-review tool
- a brief review of the literature on the importance of district support of school leaders
- the LSRT itself
- a gap-analysis scoring sheet

The piloted LSRT is meant to embrace current research and successful practice in district-level leadership development and in the design of organizational conditions to support school administrators. The six key domains in the LSRT are comprehensive, so as to encompass a wide range of policies, procedures, practices, and processes school boards use to support leadership development in their schools.

The LSRT consists of six domains:

- Domain 1: School and District Improvement
- Domain 2: Fostering a Culture of Professionalism
- Domain 3: Leadership Development
- Domain 4: Administrative Structures

- Domain 5: Parent and Community Supports
- Domain 6: Succession Planning, Including Recruitment, to Build Capacity and to Retain and Sustain Effective Leaders

Each domain contains a series of indicators of successful practice in that domain. Sample evidence demonstrates what each indicator might look like. The LSRT asks for two kinds of responses: the degree to which the practice, policy, procedure, or process is perceived by the respondent to be in place within the piloting board, and the degree to which the respondent believes it should be a board priority. In addition, there is a place for each user to provide comments on the tool.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report discusses two aspects of the piloted LSRT: first, responses to the design and elements of the LSRT; and second, the implementation strategies used by each piloting school board before, during, and after administration of the LSRT.

Information was collected through one-on-one interviews or focus groups with school and system administrators and others, such as research experts, who were part of each piloting board's LSRT implementation team. Some interviews were conducted specifically from the user perspective. Information was collected on each board's progress in analysing the data and on the process it intended to use for sharing its findings. In addition, information was gathered about the use of the tool itself.

In some instances, school boards are named. Where they are, the names are intended as a reference for other boards that may wish to approach the named boards for further information, particularly about strategies for introducing the tool and online applications of it.

At the time this report was written, all piloting boards indicated that they had introduced the LSRT in some fashion, had administered the tool, and had collected

results. In all cases, the boards' analysis of findings leading to action was under way, but not yet complete.

Each piloting board reported use of the LSRT as part of an overall strategy to revise board leadership development practices already in place. For some of the boards, LSRT analysis was part of the initial development stage of a leadership plan. Other piloting boards had new leadership development plans well under way, and they intend to use the LSRT results to adjust their new direction. One board will use the findings to prioritize its initiatives in leadership development.

In each district, board administrators acknowledged three things: that sustained learning is essential for leaders, that meaningful support for the increasingly demanding role of leaders is critical, and, finally, that there is a need to immerse leaders in important conversations about their work.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE DESIGN AND ELEMENTS OF THE LSRT

### **Finding 1: Comprehensiveness and clarity of the six domains and their indicators**

All piloting boards reported that the six domains chosen and the indicators within each domain were comprehensive and generally captured all aspects of possible support for school leaders. No one recommended a longer or more detailed survey instrument. System leaders felt that the indicators were wide-ranging enough to yield data that would help them modify their existing leadership development plans and adjust their system organization conditions. Piloting boards reported using the LSRT as a spur to further discussion about the role and functions of school leaders. Board personnel reported some confusion with the terms *current practice* and *priority*, expressing uncertainty as to whose sense of priority was being surveyed.

In summary, the terminology used in the tool was considered to be clear, and the initial use of the tool was reported to have promoted thinking and conversation. Some minor adjustments are thought to be required.

**Recommendation 1:** Although the six domains and their indicators are considered to be comprehensive in scope and sufficient for province-wide use of the tool, and the terminology used is considered to be clear, the terms *current practice* and *priority* should be revised to ensure that their meaning is clear.

### **Finding 2: Adequacy of language used for indicators and sample evidence**

No piloting board altered the language of the tool in any substantive way. School administrators indicated that they found the sample evidence extremely helpful in enhancing their understanding of the domain and indicators. Board personnel suggested some fairly minor changes to some indicators and sample evidence.

**Recommendation 2:** Although the language and sample evidence in the LSRT are considered to be clear, and the way the sample evidence elaborates on each indicator is considered helpful, the domains and indicators should be revised on a cyclical basis, as research yields new understandings of the complex links between the supports boards provide for school leaders and leadership practices in schools.

### **Finding 3: Catholic leadership practices**

Two Catholic boards were among the piloting boards. Both the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DSB) and the Waterloo Catholic DSB recommended that adjustments be made to infuse Catholic leadership practices into the six domains. Neither board altered the indicators or the sample evidence for the pilot project. Both felt that adding examples to the *existing* indicators and sample evidence was preferable to adding a seventh domain. They maintained that an additional domain would have the effect of isolating Catholic leadership practices, which are embedded in all aspects of board and school relationships.

**Recommendation 3:** For Catholic boards, Catholic leadership practices should be integrated into the six domains, embedded in the indicators and as examples within the sample evidence rather than being added as a seventh domain.

### **Finding 4: Language used in the French LSRT**

The language used in the French version of the LSRT required adjustments. It was initially seen by the Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario as a barrier to that board's full participation in the pilot project. However, after the conseil received clarification of the key terms and a better translation was provided, its staff were able to complete the survey.

**Recommendation 4:** Every effort should be made to ensure that the French translation of the LSRT is adequate, so that it is fully comprehended by francophone users.

#### **Finding 5: Online format of the LSRT**

Three of the piloting boards created their own distinct online versions of the tool: the Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB, the Waterloo Catholic DSB, and the Thames Valley DSB. The Dufferin-Peel Catholic and Waterloo Catholic DSBs used a software program called Survey Monkey. The Thames Valley DSB used a program called Ultimate Survey 7.1. Both the Waterloo Catholic and the Thames Valley DSBs used the entire tool in an online format. The Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB divided its district into six areas, and asked school and system administrators to respond to one domain only. Some aspects of these three boards' experiences are discussed below.

In some cases, users had technical problems completing the online versions of the LSRT. Where there was some experience with online surveys, such as in the Thames Valley DSB, and administrators were more familiar with the process, the launch of the online version went smoothly. Boards would be prudent to allow ample time for explaining how to use the online version of the LSRT, if it will be the first time most of their administrators are using such a tool.

In the Waterloo Catholic DSB, a cap was placed on the amount of space provided for participants' comments; the other two boards using online versions put no limit on that comment space. In the Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB, where administrators completed one domain only, users appear to have provided more elaborate comments than users in the other two boards.

The Thames Valley DSB converted all the sample evidence into additional indicators for the survey.

Interestingly, this change does not seem to have had an effect on the length of time users needed to complete the LSRT. The Thames Valley DSB also employed the "store" function, which allowed users to partially complete the survey and then retrieve it for full completion at a later date. This capability was viewed as really helpful, given the time pressures on the users.

Each piloting board asked users to provide a range of demographic information that would be useful in disaggregating the survey data. Some school leaders expressed concern about the confidentiality of their LSRT responses, given the specificity of the demographic data requested. The boards that produced an online version of the LSRT indicated that an advantage of collecting specific demographic data was that it allowed them to measure the impact of their support, or lack of it, on specific subgroups of administrators.

Most boards had thought through the kinds of data they would disaggregate for dissemination and discussion; other districts were not sure, at the time this report was written, which specific information they wanted to examine. Research experts were proving to be very useful in the process of determining the data sets to be analysed. Boards expressed the need to be cautious in determining the form and type of demographic data to be collected, in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed. A glossary of statistical terms could assist districts in making this determination.

**Recommendation 5:** Given the unique needs of each district school board, boards should determine for themselves how to design and implement an online version of the LSRT. However, a series of sample questions related to the collection of specific demographic information would be a useful part of the ministry's implementation guide, and a glossary of statistical terms would also be helpful.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LSRT

### **Finding 6: General findings about implementation**

As stated earlier, at the time of the pilot project, the piloting boards were at various stages of revising their leadership development practices and implementing support mechanisms for their school administrators. Each board operates within a unique context, but in circumstances that drew them all to this project. The LSRT framework provided guidance to board-level administrators in their revision processes.

Although the LSRT provided data to analyse the support provided by boards to their school leaders, implementation of the tool also served to open up a broader range of discussions related to leadership.

The Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB created a committee composed of aspiring principals to implement the LSRT, thereby making the launch and analysis of the LSRT a “living” practicum for managing system change.

The Conseil des écoles publiques de l’Est de l’Ontario chose to implement the tool after a series of monthly principals’ meetings, each of which featured a focused conversation, using a specific domain as a starting point. This strategy was reported as contributing to the development of a consistent district-wide language and shared common understandings about the role of the principal as both administrator and instructional leader. The conversations became a starting point for enhancing the board’s definitions of school and system leadership and their interrelationships.

In the Waterloo Catholic DSB, the LSRT was initially implemented by the board-level administrator with the leadership development portfolio. At the time of the interviews, the board was creating a committee to begin analysing the survey responses.

In the York Region DSB, a board planning team offered guiding questions for job-alike focus groups of apprentice,

practising, and aspiring school administrators. Implementation of the LSRT was designed to inform and enhance the system plan for a continuous improvement process and the board’s focus on its recently developed Leadership Competencies for School Leaders.

In the Thames Valley DSB, where the board had an established working relationship with the executive of the principals’ association, with communication and decision-making processes in place, this executive operated as the school-based administrator group on the LSRT implementation committee.

Largely because of the workload of superintendents, the piloting boards’ implementation committees generally had only one senior board administrator as a member.

In summary, boards adopted a wide range of implementation strategies, each designed to serve the boards’ own milieu and needs. Judging by the high rate of response to the piloted survey, which ranged from 74 per cent to 100 per cent of those asked to complete it, and by interviews with board personnel, there is a high level of interest in information about the piloting boards’ experiences in implementing the LSRT, as well as in the responses themselves.

**Recommendation 6:** Instructions for using the LSRT should remain broadly stated, to give each board the flexibility to use strategies for implementing the LSRT that match its own local circumstances.

### **Finding 7: Who was asked to use the LSRT, and how much of the LSRT users were asked to complete**

Different piloting boards chose to have different groups of district and school leaders use the LSRT, depending in part on how the board defined *leader* within its district. Some involved aspiring leaders; others did not. Some boards that did not include aspiring leaders reported that

their aspiring leaders' knowledge of the leadership support provided by the board was limited. Some, but not all, boards involved centrally based program consultants, coordinators, and staff developers. One board invited the participation of trustees, although this practice was not common. One piloting board involved board-level managers, and others expressed their intention to do so in the future. As this tool is not designed for non-educator respondents, boards intending to include other personnel need to consider the changes needed in order to implement the tool in this way.

Most boards chose to have leaders complete the entire survey. In most cases, every school- and board-level administrator was asked to complete it.

The Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB, for workload reasons, had each group complete one domain only. This board developed a matrix of survey participants to ensure that the responses represented the boards' schools in terms of both geographic and demographic characteristics. This approach was reported to have been received very positively by school and board administrators.

In the York Region DSB, where a focus-group approach was used, it was deemed important that members of the board-level improvement planning committee complete the survey, so that the experience would enable them to embed support for administrators in the district improvement plan.

In summary, all boards had well-articulated rationales for determining who would use the LSRT. In most cases, every leader in the district was involved.

**Recommendation 7:** Decisions about the application of the LSRT should be left to the boards.

### **Finding 8: Introduction of the LSRT to board-level administrators**

Piloting boards used a variety of ways of introducing the LSRT to district-level administrators. In some cases, the director and the superintendent in charge of implementation brought the item forward as part of a regularly scheduled district administrators' meeting. In some cases, members of the implementation committee presented the rationale and implementation strategy to the district-level administrators. Boards generally reported that the press of time prevented them from providing district leaders with as thorough an introduction as was desired. In no case did district-level administrators work with the literature review provided by the ministry.

In summary, each piloting board had thought through a strategy for introducing the LSRT to its board-level administrators. In some cases, intervening developments prevented them from carrying through with their original plans. More often than not, time constraints prevented board-level leaders from discussing the LSRT extensively prior to its being introduced to the whole system.

**Recommendation 8:** Current research about and explicit strategies for board support of principals should be included in the "Getting Started" section of the LSRT package. In particular, specific support material, research, or explicit links to such material or research should be provided, so that board-level administrators see connections between use of the LSRT and their district improvement processes.

### **Finding 9: Introduction of the LSRT to school-level administrators**

The LSRT was introduced to school leaders in an assortment of ways. Most piloting boards used regularly scheduled meetings to explain the purposes of the tool, the reasons for using it, and the way they intended to administer it.

Boards reported challenges in finding ways to introduce the tool to school vice-principals who do not attend regular district meetings. Some used scheduled system-wide leadership development series or internship programs as communication channels for exchanging information about the LSRT. In some cases, there was no board-provided introduction for vice-principals. Both board and school administrators expressed concern that the lack of a board-provided introduction to the tool could cause misunderstandings about the intent of the tool and the strategies for its use.

**Recommendation 9:** Boards should ensure that everyone using the LSRT receives a proper introduction to the tool prior to using it. There should be specific strategies for introducing the tool to both principals and vice-principals.

**Finding 10: Use of the literature review provided as part of the LSRT package**

Piloting boards' use of the literature review as an introduction to the ideas related to board support for school leaders varied. Some did not have time to use the research paper at all, but others were able to use it.

The Thames Valley DSB implementation committee provided the document as background reading. Other boards formed a study group or used a jigsaw format at a board-level administrators' meeting. The York Region DSB used such a meeting to discuss aspects of the tool as well as the literature review. One board made a précis of the document for its administrators.

The Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario spent time discussing each domain separately, creating an opportunity for participants to develop and clarify language related to leadership development.

Several boards had aspirations to use the literature review, but developments such as pending labour action prevented them from doing so.

**Recommendation 10:** "Terms travel easily and concepts do not" – apt words from Michael Fullan (2004). Clarity of the language used and a shared understanding of the terms related to leadership development are critical to changing practice at both school and board levels. The suggestions for implementing the tool that are included in the LSRT package should include one recommending that the research paper be used in its entirety. The package should also include key questions, themes for discussion, study group ideas, and so on, *customized for both school and board-level administrators*, to help boards use the research document effectively.

**Finding 11: Time needed to complete the LSRT**

Completion of the LSRT took anywhere from 10 to 15 minutes if one module was used, to 35 to 45 minutes if the entire instrument was used. These times seemed to be consistent whether an online or paper version was used. All piloting boards reported little consternation from time-pressed administrators about the length of the instrument, and the high response rates appear to corroborate this finding.

**Recommendation 11:** The maximum allowable time for completion of the entire LSRT should be about 35 to 45 minutes, a period of time that seems likely to ensure the best rate of participation by time-pressed administrators.

**Finding 12: Board plans for analysis of LSRT data**

As noted earlier, piloting boards were at the early stages of data analysis at the time this report was written. Each board expressed aspirations to review and analyse the data collected and to report it to all involved in a timely manner. Boards were discussing the data and the relative significance of differences in responses and of gaps. They were using research experts, working collaboratively, to determine the format and amount of data produced for analysis. More complex data would result if a board chose

to use the sample evidence as additional indicators or if it added substantively to the indicators.

**Recommendation 12:** Because most boards in the province do not have research departments, the Gap Analysis Scoring Sheet/Action – Next Steps part of the LSRT package should provide as much information and support as possible to boards. Ideas should include suggesting that smaller districts consider partnering with a larger district that has a research department, to support the smaller boards' ability to analyse the survey's results.

#### **Finding 13: Gap analysis and next steps**

When this report was written, the piloting boards were still in the early stages of crafting plans to disseminate results to their leaders, and several had not yet begun the task.

The Thames Valley DSB was considering using the results as a tool for discussion at its upcoming board-level leaders' summer retreat. Other boards indicated that the results could be shared and discussed at their August school administrators' meetings, so that all principals and vice-principals would have the opportunity to learn the results, to have a guided discussion on their meaning, and to formulate joint recommendations. In one board, the LSRT implementation committee intended to draft recommendations and bring them forward to the August meeting of board-level leaders.

In summary, all piloting boards recognized the importance of using the results as a springboard for action, such as celebrating successes, identifying training and resource needs, and improving board and school performance.

**Recommendation 13:** The Gap Analysis Scoring Sheet/Action – Next Steps part of the LSRT package should provide a few key recommended strategies for reviewing findings and developing action plans.

#### **Finding 14: Future use of the LSRT**

Several piloting boards discussed future use of the tool. Most agreed that the use of the entire tool could provide helpful benchmark data for their district. Many agreed that annual use of the LSRT would likely not be necessary. Some boards indicated that using the tool annually with specific or sample groups of leaders could be helpful, and others suggested that they might use the tool on a cyclical basis with their entire group.

All these comments were conjecture, as, at that juncture, no piloting board was at a stage to formulate concrete plans. All boards found information about other districts' implementation processes very useful.

**Recommendation 14:** The ministry should continue to collect data in future years about the processes used by boards to implement the LSRT.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations on the Design and Elements of the LSRT

**Recommendation 1:** Although the six domains and their indicators are considered to be comprehensive in scope and sufficient for province-wide use of the tool, and the terminology used is considered to be clear, the terms *current practice* and *priority* should be revised to ensure that their meaning is clear.

**Recommendation 2:** Although the language and sample evidence in the LSRT are considered to be clear, and the way the sample evidence elaborates on each indicator is considered helpful, the domains and indicators should be revised on a cyclical basis, as research yields new understandings of the complex links between the supports boards provide for school leaders and leadership practices in schools.

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### Recommendations on the Implementation of the LSRT

**Recommendation 6:** Instructions for using the LSRT should remain broadly stated, to give each board the

flexibility to use strategies for implementing the LSRT that match its own local circumstances.

**Recommendation 7:** Decisions about the application of the LSRT should be left to the boards.

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**Recommendation 9:** Boards should ensure that everyone using the LSRT receives a proper introduction to the tool prior to using it. There should be specific strategies for introducing the tool to both principals and vice-principals.

**Recommendation 10:** "Terms travel easily and concepts do not" – apt words from Michael Fullan (2004). Clarity of the language used and a shared understanding of the terms related to leadership development are critical to changing practice at both school and board levels. The suggestions for implementing the tool that are included in the LSRT package should include one recommending that the research paper be used in its entirety. The package should also include key questions, themes for discussion, study group ideas, and so on, *customized for both school and board-level administrators*, to help boards use the research document effectively.

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