



**Closing the  
Achievement Gap**

ADVICE FROM EXPERT ONTARIO PRINCIPALS • 2012



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Une publication équivalente est disponible en français sous le titre suivant : *Réduire l'écart de rendement*.

This publication is available on the Ministry of Education's website, at [www.ontario.ca/education](http://www.ontario.ca/education).

## *A Note to Readers*

This resource guide includes some text features designed to direct readers to further resources.



The “Learn More” icon in the left-hand margin signals that the word or phrase that is **bolded** in the text has a corresponding entry in the Learn More appendix at the back of the book. (Just click on the boldfaced term to see the Learn More entry!) Learn More entries provide definitions, commentary, or information on resources related to the boldfaced terms.



Where the OLF icon appears in the margin, it indicates that a connection is being made in the text to the Ontario Leadership Framework.

All references to the Ontario Leadership Framework are drawn from the revised version of the framework, which is being used in draft form in many contexts in the field, and is scheduled to be posted on the Institute for Education Leadership website ([www.education-leadership-ontario.ca](http://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca)) in Fall 2012. Wordings in the posted version may change slightly, but the concepts cited in the present document will remain the same.

# Introduction



*Closing the Achievement Gap* is a resource guide that collects best practices in their own words by expert principals across Ontario working to “close the gap” in achievement among groups of students, a core priority for education in Ontario. It is designed to give principals and other educators across the province support and ideas to use as a basis for conversation on **closing the achievement gap** in their own schools.

Even though a great deal of good work is being done to improve student achievement, gaps persist among various groups of students – for example, boys, Aboriginal students, students for whom neither English nor French is their first language, and students with special needs. Significant progress is being made, but more remains to be done. Why is this so important? A solid foundation of learning gives students the widest range of choices in school and beyond.

Ontario’s schools serve a diverse student population representing a wide range of cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. There are seventy-two school boards and four school authorities made up of English public, French public, English Catholic, and French Catholic schools. The diverse needs of Ontario’s students and their families underscore the importance of strategic and skilled leadership to address the achievement gaps that arise.

## Background

To gather information about leadership practices that have been successful in closing the gap, we – the Ministry of Education – asked directors across the

province to identify principals in their school boards<sup>1</sup> who they felt were “highly effective”, according to a set of criteria that we set out. We hosted nearly two hundred of these principals each year at the Principal Congress, a knowledge-sharing initiative launched in February 2009 that became an annual event<sup>2</sup> (see the boxed insert on pages 5–8). This resource guide is a compilation of the knowledge they have shared.



We were inspired to create the Principal Congress by our Deputy Minister at the time, Steve Marshall, who described gap-closing as a “**wicked problem**”. He told us that the expertise to solve wicked problems lies with practitioners in the field and that it was our task to find and use this expertise. The Principal Congress was designed to do just that.



In designing the conference, we wanted to avoid the so-called “**drive-by professional development** syndrome” of bringing principals together for a one-day conference where participants enjoy themselves if the keynote speaker is engaging, but do not have the time or energy to put what they have learned into practice when they return to their schools. With this in mind, we designed the Principal Congress to be about learning from these expert principals, rather than presenting to them. We invited and facilitated **networked learning** – learning shared among the participants – before, during, and after the actual event. Most importantly, we decided to require participants to write about their leadership practice *before* they came to the congress event, using a method called Reflective Writing Responses (see the following section).

All the advice we were given about the idea of having participants write about their practice and submit their writing ahead of time, like homework, suggested that it wouldn’t work, for a variety of reasons: principals are busy and have other priorities; they will not want to come to the congress if prewriting is required; they are not used to writing about their work.

But we chose to take the risk, make the writing assignment a requirement, and hope that we would receive some helpful responses. It turned out that our trust in participants’ ability and willingness to do the task was well placed. In fact, they far exceeded our expectations. Over 85 per cent of participants did the “homework”; their responses were insightful, thoughtful, and honest; and on analysis, we found that their descriptions of their practice aligned well with the leading research on closing achievement gaps.

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1. In this document, the term *school boards* includes both district school boards and school authorities.  
2. In 2012, the Principal Congress was incorporated into the broader forum of the annual Ontario Leadership Congress.

# THE PRINCIPAL CONGRESS

The Principal Congress was an annual event that brought together two hundred highly regarded principals and a small number of district leaders for a facilitated one-day conference focused on closing achievement gaps. The event was held in 2009, 2010, and 2011. In 2012 it became the Ontario Leadership Congress, which is outside the scope of this document. Further information on the Principal Congress may be found on the Ministry of Education website at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/principalCongress.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/principalCongress.html) and [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/Principal\\_QuickFacts.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/Principal_QuickFacts.pdf).

## PARTICIPANTS

For participants in the Principal Congress, we looked for “system thinkers in action” – that is, school principals and others who were regarded as influential leaders by their peers. We asked directors to identify those who:

- had several years of experience as a principal;
- had a strong focus on improvement and results;
- demonstrated a strong commitment to enhancing their own learning and the learning of others;
- displayed a positive approach to school leadership and a belief in its potential to improve schools;
- were willing to “roll up their sleeves” and work hard to help contribute to success.

In addition to principals, we also looked for supervisory officers, directors of education, and leadership association representatives who shared the same characteristics – who were proactive, innovative system thinkers focused on developing and sharing solutions for the challenge of closing gaps in student achievement. Their responses were not analysed and are not included in this document.

Each year, participants were provided with a set of resource materials to consider and draw upon in their reflective writing responses before the congress. A keynote speaker was invited to speak on a topic related to the area of focus for that year’s congress.

## Principal Congress 2009



The keynote speaker was **Roger Martin**, presenting on “Integrative Thinking”. Leaders are often faced with two opposing alternatives that seem at odds with one another. The theory of integrative thinking involves looking at a matter under consideration in a more complex, nuanced way, keeping all factors in mind throughout the problem-solving process, and coming up with a new solution to the problem that achieves multiple objectives, not only objectives that serve one or the other of the initial models.

- *Video highlights of Martin’s keynote address are available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/martin.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/martin.html).*

### RESOURCE MATERIALS\*

- “Successful Leadership for Especially Challenging Schools” by Kenneth Leithwood and Rosanne Steinbach (in Brent Davies and John West-Burnham (Eds.), *Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management* (London, UK: Pearson, 2003))
- *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* (2008), available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/energize](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/energize)
- The Ontario Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals

\* All resources are from the Ministry of Education, unless otherwise specified.  
The final report for Principal Congress 2009 is available at  
<http://ontarioeducationleaders.ning.com/forum/topics/report-on-principal-congress>.



## Principal Congress 2010



The keynote speaker was **Richard Elmore**, presenting on “Instructional Rounds”. Inspired by the medical-rounds model used by physicians, the instructional rounds model developed by Elmore and his colleagues promotes shared practice. It encompasses a specific set of ideas about how educational practitioners work together to solve common problems and to improve their practice.

- *Video highlights of Elmore’s keynote address are available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/highlights.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/highlights.html).*

### RESOURCE MATERIALS

- The Ontario Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals
- *Ideas Into Action for School and System Leaders*, a series of papers available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoAction.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoAction.html)
- “Theories of Action: How They Can Help Us Close the Gap”, adapted from Chapter 2 (pp. 39–57) of *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Teaching and Learning* by Elizabeth City, Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009)



## Principal Congress 2011



The keynote speaker was **Douglas Willms**, presenting on “Student Engagement”. Student engagement is a necessary condition for learning and achievement. According to Willms, student engagement is also a critically important outcome in its own right and may be a more important predictor of success in the workplace than academic achievement is. There are three dimensions of student engagement: social, academic or institutional, and intellectual.

Willms says that learning is a product of:

- quality instruction
- an enabling context
- student engagement
- time invested

According to Willms, all four elements work together, and if one is absent, learning cannot occur.

- *Video highlights of Willms’s keynote address are available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/2011willms.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/2011willms.html).*

### RESOURCE MATERIALS

- *The School Effectiveness Framework* (2010), available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/framework.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/framework.html)
- The Ontario Leadership Framework for Principals and Vice-Principals
  - The Five **Core Leadership Capacities** (CLCs) as described in *Ideas Into Action: Five Core Capacities of Effective Leaders* (Fall 2009), available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoAction09.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoAction09.pdf)
- *What Did You Do in School Today?: Transforming Classrooms Through Social, Academic and Intellectual Engagement* (First National Report) (2009), a report by Douglas Willms, Sharon Friesen, and Penny Milton for the Canadian Education Association, available at [www.cea-ace.ca/publication/what-did-you-do-school-today-transforming-classrooms-through-social-academic-and-intelle](http://www.cea-ace.ca/publication/what-did-you-do-school-today-transforming-classrooms-through-social-academic-and-intelle)
- Leadership Development section of the Ministry of Education website, available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/index.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/index.html)





We are excited about having had the unique opportunity to tap into the **tacit knowledge** of these **expert problem solvers**. Experts like our selected principals are often able to respond without hesitation to the many challenges they face in ways that they have learned through experience over time and that are ingrained in their practice. Because this is how they work, they are often not able to say why or how they did what they did – or perhaps no one asks them. But we did ask, and they answered in depth.

We now have three years' worth of data to work with, enough to gather and share in this resource guide. A major goal for this project was not only to collect this expert knowledge but also to mobilize it. We hope that the descriptions of expert practice provided here will resonate with principals across Ontario and help to build their capacity in leading their schools to ensure that all students can succeed.

## Reflective Writing Responses

Since our experiment to have principals write about their practice has been so successful, we are sharing the methodology we used to design and implement the reflective writing response (RWR) protocol.

Some key features of the RWR protocol are the following:

- The questions posed must be carefully designed to focus on particular areas, with explanations and clarifications as necessary.
- Relevant resource material must be provided to assist participants with their responses (see pages 6–8 for examples).
- Confidentiality must be promised and maintained so that participants feel comfortable being honest.
- Sample responses from a variety of perspectives should be provided to assist participants in drafting their own responses.
- The amount of time provided for participants to respond must be generous enough to respect their busy schedules.
- Responses must be featured during the event itself, showing how the responses received have informed the planning for the event as well as the follow-up.

The questions we asked became more focused each year. In the first year we asked more generally about participants' leadership practice around closing achievement gaps; in the second year we asked participants to think and write



about causal analysis, also known as the **theory of action**; and in the third year we drilled down, asking principals to address one of the most important methods for closing achievement gaps, namely, increasing **student engagement** in learning.

## Findings and Organization

Our expert principals identified achievement gaps among a variety of groups, including boys, Aboriginal students, students with special needs, English language learners, and recent immigrants. They saw the key to success as differentiating instruction to meet student needs and providing targeted resources for these groups to better support their ability to benefit from instruction.



What they described as their leadership practice was holistic in nature; they worked to develop an approach to teaching and learning that would benefit all students and to implement an **instructional regime** that drove all of their work with teachers, again with the students' needs foremost. Their experience suggested that, in many schools, a chosen instructional regime must be understood, accepted, and practised before more targeted strategies can be implemented. The synergy of a collaborative teaching and learning environment provided the fertile ground for the best instructional practice to flourish.

In our study of more than five hundred responses from principals over three years, we have identified five themes for this resource guide to organize what we have learned. They are as follows:

- Building teacher capacity for positive change
- Using resources effectively
- Keeping the focus on student outcomes
- Building a culture of collaboration
- Harnessing parent and community support

We have worked to retain the authentic voices of our experts as much as possible. Naturally this means that not all of the data fits nicely into a single theme, and the chosen themes do not necessarily capture all of the expertise we collected. But we think there is much to be learned from the voices that we are sharing.

For each theme, we note the challenge(s) identified by principals in that area of practice and then give examples from their responses of how they approached the challenge. The quotations adapted from their RWRs give a glimpse into their thinking and why they did what they did. We found a strong link between

current research findings and the actual practice of principals. However, while their practice was often aligned with research, principals did not read the research first and then decide how to proceed. Their learning started with practice.

Their stories also provide illustrative examples of the Ontario Leadership Framework coming to life. We hope that these examples will become guideposts for those aspiring to engage in leadership practices that make a difference to student achievement and well-being.



In addition to the OLF practices highlighted throughout this resource guide, our expert principals demonstrate a skilful use of “Personal Leadership Resources” (cognitive, social, and psychological) from the OLF. Often their use of these personal resources leads to successful enactment of the leadership practices – problem solving, managing and exhibiting effective emotional responses, remaining optimistic and resilient in the face of daunting challenges, and so on. We hope their stories will be inspirational.

## THEME ONE:

# *Building Teacher Capacity for Positive Change*

Our expert principals knew that the progress they wanted to make on improving student achievement could only be done through teachers, which required getting them onside and engaged in the work. We were struck by the respect the principals showed for teachers in their writing – even when they met resistance to change or teachers who were simply unable to make the changes they envisioned, they never faulted teachers for these obstacles. Instead, they looked for reasons why teachers felt the way they did, what might be stopping them from moving forward, and most importantly, what they themselves could do to help. They provided instructional support, an OLF practice.



We found it was important to acknowledge the difficulties and obstacles to improvement and success. We had to reframe the obstacles into opportunities for growth and learning for staff and students. It was important to get teachers on board with a belief that we could achieve and that we would be successful. To ensure improved results, we performed a gap analysis, employed resources, and engaged our staff in professional development where necessary.

Principals acknowledged that their theory of action required teacher support to be successful. Like the principal in the following example, by listening to what teachers were saying, they were better able to understand how to move forward. Once they heard their teachers' concerns, they could adjust how they communicated their vision and goals for the school, an OLF practice.



I can envision the benefits that would be brought to students via a new school culture, but it is taking longer than I ever thought for staff to buy in. I need to spend more time talking with staff and supporting their baby steps. For my next steps, I will continue to work to empower staff and allow them to discuss issues and come



to collective decisions that align with board goals. This in turn will improve the quality of our instructional practices. I will observe how staff initiate new ideas from the points I raise, how readily staff buy into the theories of action we plan, and how staff begin to contribute independently to our collective plan. These observations will in turn give me evidence to feed into my own **double-loop learning**.

Principals realized that to support teachers, it was sometimes necessary to look beyond the walls of their own school to get ideas, and that networking with and learning from the work of another school could be very powerful.

I looked for ways to involve the staff in the recognition and planning stages. To start with, I proposed a visit to a demographically equivalent Lighthouse school so that we would not be able to say the gap between their school and ours was because of socio-economic and similar factors. Before our visit we prepared a significant number of questions that we emailed to the school. The dialogue during the trip was one of the best professional dialogues I have ever been a part of. We left the school with a clear direction and a focus that emerged from within rather than being dictated from above. The collaborative learning with the other school was amazing and prompted a different level of communication within our own team as well.

Many principals' initial strategy for their work with teachers was to plan ways to influence teachers' beliefs and attitudes about the changes they wanted to make in the school. Next, they planned and implemented strategies for developing and strengthening teacher practice. At the same time, they examined how they actually staffed the school, that is, who was assigned to which grades and subjects and whether they had achieved a good fit.

## Influencing Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes

The principals knew that the extent of their influence over teachers' beliefs and attitudes was dependent on the amount of trust between them and the teachers as well as among the teachers themselves. Many of them described starting with approaches and activities that would serve to build trust in their schools and then, from this base, moving forward to work on teachers' beliefs. Some principals started by engaging staff in specific and clear activities that they hoped would lead to success. With these early successes would come the confidence for teachers to change their instructional practice and to begin to believe in the changes the principals were asking for.

Principals wrote about facing a diverse set of circumstances when first entering their roles in a given school. In the following example, the principal was wise

to consider the context he was facing upon appointment to this school, and his ability to understand the emotions involved proved to be an important skill. Building trust was a key starting point.

The year has been a steep learning curve for me as we reshape the school's culture. The school suffered a blow when their principal was removed and I was unexpectedly placed there. There was a fear among teachers that I was there to judge, supervise, and report. As a result, I purposefully used the first two months to connect with them as individuals before I visited their classrooms on an official basis. My slow wade into the waters allowed staff to re-establish their confidence and also allowed families and students to get to know me and my commitment to supporting this very positive school environment. Once I felt they trusted me as a leader and saw me as a team player, I slowly began to introduce my goals for school improvement.

The challenges faced by another principal included turning around an environment of distrust.

The immediate challenge is to bring all staff on board, to collectively and consistently effect positive change. Part of this challenge is that the staff has a huge distrust for administration. The previous few years have been difficult for them, and they have felt unsupported. This has affected their level of passion and commitment to improving. The challenge for me is to lead and facilitate in a way that will bring staff back together to get working on the critical pieces that will affect student achievement.



The principal in the following example understood the importance of finding out what teachers needed in order to get on board with the vision. This example illustrates how the principal built a shared vision, an OLF practice.

As a principal you need to develop your personal vision of goals for staffing, the program, and the physical plant. At the same time you need to develop a system to gather information from staff about what their needs are in this same regard and then do your utmost to help them achieve their professional goals. This develops trust to the point that staff will follow you – even if they don't completely understand your personal vision (despite your frequent "selling" of it) or even if they disagree at the start but support the process out of respect for you.



Principals often mentioned that it was important to avoid blame and create a safe environment if they wanted to build trust with and among teachers, one aspect of the OLF leadership practice of building trusting relationships with and among staff, students, and parents.



Closing the achievement gap means examining each student, case by case, and putting strategies in place to address the problems that stand in the way of closing the gap. Engaging staff in this process can be challenging since it requires self-reflection about what is working and what is not working in their instructional practices. Moving all staff forward requires a safe collegial environment – a professional learning community that sets common goals and measures but also provides support and avoids laying blame.

Principals worked to build trust among teachers by making themselves visible and highlighting best practices within the school.

Good leaders are highly visible – they lead “from everywhere”. As I walk around in my daily classroom visits, I regularly photograph and post to our online school discussion site examples of best practice – room organization or layout, word walls, anchor charts, classroom expectations, curriculum expectations, students who are engaged, and samples of student work. I try to make eye contact with most students and, when possible, ask them what they are learning. I give positive feedback and encouragement to students and teachers.

They understood that trust could be built by showing their respect for teachers’ work through putting an emphasis on building capacity in a safe environment.

Without a high level of distributed leadership in the school, building the level of trust required for true collaboration would be difficult. Building capacity in the school honours the staff as equals and promotes honest and challenging dialogue that ultimately supports teacher engagement in the teaching and learning taking place, all focused on improving student achievement.

They also made a point of leading by example.

Above all, the principal has to model confidence, optimism, hope, and resilience for the school community. Sometimes we have to go forward when the path isn’t fully clear.

Principals understood that change was often messy, yet they remained optimistic about the possibility of success.

If everyone were to change at the same pace and catch the vital realizations at the same moments, then change would be simple. Thankfully, teachers are unique individuals, but with the individualization of how teachers accept and embrace change comes the reality that change is not a simple process. It can be messy, but the goal

is to see that the pathway we have chosen is one that is good for kids and brings us closer to our common goal. We are excited about where this will lead us.



Principals took advantage of a variety of vehicles for bringing about changes in teachers' beliefs and attitudes. In the following example, the Annual Learning Plan (ALP), which is part of the Teacher Performance Appraisal system, is seen as an opportunity to work with teachers to further the vision for the school, rather than an unrelated chore to be ticked off the "to do" list. This is one way for principals to identify specific, shared short-term goals, an OLF practice.

I schedule a thirty-minute meeting with each teacher to discuss their ALP. We discuss their annual goals, which could include trying out different approaches or strategies and identifying the ways they will contribute to school goals, such as differentiated instruction. I also ask them for indicators that will clearly demonstrate that they have achieved their goal. Included in their presentation is an explanation of how they used differentiated instruction. As well, I ask them how they plan their lessons to accommodate their students with IEPs (Individual Education Plans). It is also important that they demonstrate how they used higher-level thinking strategies, explain how they are able to tell if their students "get it", and identify what forms of assessments were implemented to see if all the objectives of a lesson were met.

Mathematics is a particular area of focus for many principals, and they believe that working with teachers as they become more comfortable and confident with new approaches in this subject area is important.

I believe that if staff start implementing this practice more and more into their teaching of math concepts, then they will become more comfortable with this practice and see more positive results in students' knowledge, understanding, and application of math concepts.

Teaching math through problem solving and making math more meaningful for our students is embedded in all of the above steps. The more exposure teachers have to this change in practice, the less resistant they seem to be. Having some staff members fully embrace this practice, then sharing their new learning and classroom experiences with others, also has a ripple effect on other staff members – again moving them closer to this practice.

Principals were reflective about the effectiveness of their trust-building approaches and shared moments of accomplishment in their responses.

A revealing moment during one of our TLCPs (Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways) this year led a primary teacher to state emphatically, after completing a battery

of primary literacy assessments on her class and reflecting on her journey as a teacher, “I now know I suck at teaching letter–sound recognition to my students and I need to do a better job.” Her remark, stated to other primary teachers and myself, indicated the level of trust and safety she must feel to be able to make such a revealing statement about her practice, which may lead others to be truthful in examining what they are doing to improve student learning and achievement, and how well they are doing it.

In thinking about what they might do differently to influence beliefs and attitudes if given the chance to start over, two principals shared the following.

If I were to tackle this challenge again at another school, I would immediately establish professional learning communities that would focus on the required change and monitor the best practices closely. I would also meet with teachers on an individual basis regularly to discuss their professional and personal needs, and would expect them to value instructional time. Since teaching has become a more challenging job, I would allocate school funds to support the goals and provide the professional development needed to meet the goals. I would also be more direct with dissenting staff members and be very upfront about our goals and the need for accountability.

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If I were to start over again at this school, I would spend more time building relationships with the staff. I would look for more opportunities to empower them and let them lead the way rather than me leading. I would be more sensitive to the impact of change on them. I could have brought the staff along more effectively by going slower and taking smaller steps, praising, encouraging risk taking, and thus building empowerment. Most importantly, I needed to be in the passenger seat, guiding and facilitating.

## Developing and Strengthening Teacher Practice

Principals understood that teachers needed ongoing support to improve and deepen their practice. Although principals sometimes expressed frustration with the *rate* of change, they also demonstrated respect for the time needed for the *process* of change. They often encouraged teachers to experiment and explore during the process.

I believe that if the teachers adopt the belief that constant improvement of practice is the norm, then the shift in the culture will take place. The difficulty is having the teachers try new practices and see success. If the teachers meet with success, then they will adopt an open attitude towards change. This will require care,

scaffolding, and the giving of permission that if a new practice initially does not work, then that is fine.



They also buffered teachers against distractions from their work, an OLF practice, so that they would have space to try new things.

I will continue to be creative in scheduling and timetabling in order to meet the needs of teachers . . . finding the balance between classroom instruction and the need for in-service training, mentorship, and professional development. I want to become better able to filter information and to align new initiatives as much as possible in order to reduce the amount of paperwork needed for the many initiatives we have become involved in. These next steps fit/reflect my theory of action because I believe in the initiatives . . . we need to get better at how these initiatives are implemented, presented, delivered, and timed so that teachers are not left to feel as though they are never doing enough.

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As innumerable communications pass my desk, my first question is always, “How will this improve student achievement?” If the activity is labour-intensive for teachers but will result in positive outcomes, I will bring the opportunity to the teachers. If the activity looks very labour-intensive and appears to have little impact on student growth, I will try to find a way to minimize the burden on teachers.

They encouraged teachers to mentor and learn from each other, chose leaders to model behaviour and support change, and organized activities to support learning. The two principals below used these approaches to stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff, an OLF practice.



In order to continue to implement differentiated instruction, I think we need to work hard at allowing teachers opportunities to learn from each other. Those teachers who have made the shift are a wealth of knowledge for others – funds and resources need to be channelled to support knowledge sharing, and principals need to be creative in their efforts to provide these learning opportunities. Schools that have been more successful in changing should be paired with other schools. Teachers should be encouraged to team-teach and to job-shadow each other in order to learn and share best practices. Principals have to be willing to challenge those teachers who are unwilling to change their practice and to provide the necessary pressure and support to see these changes through.

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It is important to strategically place or use as mentors teachers who are committed to being leaders in their division and who see the value of changing instructional practices. These are the go-to teachers, the ones you know will embrace change or be motivated by change. Find your teacher-leaders and let them lead other

teachers. Initiatives and practices that are teacher-directed and -led are more sustainable and have greater impact, in my experience.



They analysed what the roadblocks were and determined what types of support they could provide to overcome them, thereby demonstrating the OLF practice of providing support and demonstrating consideration for individual staff members.

Sometimes teachers get “locked in” to seeing students by level (“She’s a level 2 student”) instead of believing the students have the potential to work at higher levels given explicit instruction, timely and specific feedback, and/or opportunities to upgrade their work. Or teachers may claim they don’t have the time to invest in individual student feedback. There is still a hesitancy to let go of strategies and practices that aren’t as effective.

I see that more professional learning is needed, whereby teachers can build on their understanding of feedback as a high-yield strategy to increase student achievement and work towards consistency of belief and practice.

They recognized that sometimes “good” is the enemy of “great”, and they challenged themselves to never be satisfied with “good”.

The introduction of the new assessment and evaluation (A&E) policy was a difficult challenge. The staff had a difficult time adopting the new model because they felt that we were tampering with an issue that did not need to be addressed. After all, our students were achieving at a high rate, and our credit accumulation and graduation rates were well above the average, so we were obviously doing things right. They were doing many things right, but the new A&E policy could help improve the already high results. Moreover, the demographics of the school were shifting. The school, due to its success, was attracting many families who had children who were experiencing difficulties that they felt could be “fixed” with the right teachers in the right school. The introduction of the new A&E policy was a year-and-a-half-long process. As an admin team, we did backwards mapping and planning. The key component for success was engaging the staff in a discussion around practices. We started the journey with our leadership team and gathered from them the main concerns expressed by their department members. We began the discussion with what they were already doing right and moved towards what could be done even better.

The next school year began with two PD days dedicated to A&E. These sessions were facilitated by teachers representing each department. Between the two sessions, the curriculum heads, lead subject teachers, and key teacher-mentors

were given the opportunity to attend a conference on A&E. This led to great discussions and provided an excellent opportunity to learn more about A&E. The group who had attended the conference then led some of the A&E sessions offered at the second PD day and spent time with their department, sharing their new knowledge with others.

## Staffing and Assignments



Michael Fullan talks about “**getting the right people on the bus**” as a strategy for school improvement. Principals do not have a lot of choice as to who is on their school staff. They may have opportunities to hire new staff as vacancies arise, but these can be few and far between. Usually they need to work with the staff complement they have, so strategic assignments are their best tool for enhancing the fit between teacher and assignment. Our expert principals thought about this issue in many ways. They put student needs first and looked for the right teacher for the collective needs of a student group, whether by grade or by subject.

Staffing allocations (teaching assignments) are extremely important. The choice of who teaches which classes will have a definite effect on not only student achievement but also student engagement, and this will also be reflected in student attendance. While department heads play a key role in the process of assigning classes to teachers, these decisions need to be reviewed by school administration in light of factors such as qualifications, interests, teaching skills, personality traits, past experience, motivation, and Annual Learning Plans, coupled with Teacher Performance Appraisal and instructional program needs, just to name a few.

When they could not solve the issue through staffing choices alone, they looked for other strategies.

I still have a couple of teachers who do not serve their weaker students as well as they should; however, I know who they are and I work around this. When I can, I strategically place students with teachers who will meet their needs. When I’m doing a walk-through, I often suggest to these few teachers some ideas for strategies or resources to try. I know that most of my teachers want these students to be successful, they just need to be given some ideas that will work.

Principals also provided opportunities for staff to try out new challenges and new assignments that might seem daunting at first, but could provide a strong sense of accomplishment and pride for those teachers who, with the right types



of support, were able to meet the new challenges. Principals were creative in their methods of staffing the instructional program, an OLF practice.

Two principals outlined how they assigned teachers and other staff to support their respective schools' gap-closing efforts.

We have placed two very experienced teachers in the primary grades. They are reading specialists, are very familiar with the curriculum, know how to differentiate instruction, and can effectively implement strategies and resources to benefit our students.

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Staff literacy coaches were assigned to the program to provide support for teachers and intensive remediation for students.

It was evident from our expert principals' writing that they worked persistently to get support for the mission, vision, and values of the school. Occasionally, when the attitude or practice of individual staff members continued to provide challenges to the work, our principals demonstrated the fortitude to have courageous conversations, mix up the teaching teams, and in some cases facilitate a more significant change.

It took significantly longer than I expected to change the thinking of my staff. After careful consideration, I made a decision in consultation with the superintendent to request an administrative transfer for one teacher. Over the next two years, changes in grade and division assignments of a group of teachers also took place. A couple of teachers who were not happy with a reassignment in turn applied for transfers to other schools or retired.

While this principal tried diligently to work with staff, he was determined to “do whatever it took” to get to improved student achievement. The board's process around facilitating teacher transfers retained respect for teachers and for the need to find a better fit for them in other environments.

Overall, expert principals' approach to working with teachers is best described as having high expectations and correspondingly high levels of support in order to ensure that every teacher experiences success (the **theory of reciprocity**, discussed by Richard Elmore). As one principal described it, expert principals strive to be both “demanding and caring”, never one without the other.



## THEME TWO:

# *Using Resources Effectively*

Principals are acutely aware that they are responsible for the effective use of the resources available to them. An important factor identified by the experts was how principals allocate their time, and how they facilitate the use of teachers' time, for best results. Similarly, decisions around the use of existing resources and the acquisition of new ones were identified as having major effects on the success of any improvement plan, depending on the skill of the principal and others that he or she recruited to help with these decisions. The third resource-related opportunity that principals used carefully was the choice of who they recruited or hired to join their staff on the few opportunities they had to do this. The principals' thoughtful responses around the allocation of resources point to an intentional and strategic approach to "aligning resources to priorities", one of five Core Leadership Capacities adopted and promoted by the ministry.



Notably, in their reflective writing responses, principals rarely complained about lack of resources. In fact, they rarely complained about anything. They just got on with the tasks with the resources they had and were clever about using them effectively to support the school's vision and goals, an OLF practice.

### Allocating Time

The expert principals repeatedly indicated their belief that time is a precious resource, and they found ways to use it wisely. At the same time, they also believed that a promising strategy for changing teacher practice was to create opportunities for teachers to learn together in communities of practice. They were undaunted by the administrative difficulties in creating this common



planning time and instead focused on the intended outcomes. They believed that if creating time for a strategy was instructionally beneficial then it was administratively possible, so they employed a creative array of strategies for making it happen.

As a principal and instructional leader, I focus on two major initiatives: 1) building capacity and 2) developing deeper knowledge and understanding of how to implement goals to improve literacy achievement. To support the development and implementation of these two initiatives, I use every opportunity possible to engage in professional learning and conversations with the staff – job-embedded release times, staff meetings, divisional meetings, lunch-and-learns with consultants.

We will be using our school-based release time to free teachers for a period of time to plan, assess, and monitor our TLCP work. This time will be embedded in the instructional day in order to allow us to monitor and support the teachers' use of this time. At least one administrator and one literacy teacher will be present to facilitate these sessions.

Each teacher has identified one "at-risk" student to follow as a case study. Time is devoted at monthly staff meetings and divisional meetings for teachers to share strategies, progress, setbacks, and successes and to gain support and suggestions from colleagues. The learning during these sharing times is supported through holding full-staff PD days planned by the School Leadership Team, sharing frameworks, inviting guest specialists on student engagement, and collecting specific school data (data from the School Focus Survey, data on at-risk students over time, and baseline data on students' writing by term).



Principals found creative ways to adjust teachers' schedules and generally structure the organization to facilitate collaboration, an OLF practice.

We have "blocked" our timetable, meaning all the Grade 9 English and math classes occur at the same time. As a result, all math teachers and all English teachers have the same prep times where professional dialogue can be facilitated.

Looking for ways to improve school achievement results, we've developed schedules that allow teachers to work together more frequently, thus creating a new collaborative framework and empowering the teachers with the tools necessary to synchronize their work and work plans.

We have purposefully created cohorts based on similar grades and/or objectives to allow teachers to mentor one another as they share their areas of expertise, while

engaging in inquiry that is rooted in our school goals and inspired by their own students' learning.

When necessary, they offered their own time to provide release time for their teachers.

While two or three teachers from a given grade are freed up for an hour, I take the classes to the auditorium for a special presentation. During this time teachers meet to discuss student engagement strategies and how to embed these in their classrooms.

## Aligning Resources with Needs

As they endeavoured to stretch their resources for maximum effect, principals looked for ways to repurpose resources in order to support changes and transfer learning from one project or area to another.

We have moved some school resources into the Grade 9 group to facilitate this change. It will require a positive and trusting relationship between the teachers and the administration. The support personnel will help with materials and suggestions for the teachers to lessen the workload in the beginning so as to help the change gain momentum.

Supporting Aboriginal students required targeting resources, as demonstrated in this principal's approach.

We are working hard to incorporate programming and supports for Aboriginal students, who are entering school at different grades and levels and from a wide range of family circumstances and challenges. We try to identify their needs prior to school entry so that we can be better prepared to assist them to be successful, and we have incorporated Native Languages courses taught by Aboriginal teachers.

## The Principal's Role as Resource

Principals saw their own time and energy as a resource that they could choose how to spend, and they made choices that supported their vision and goals for the school. They believed in their own efficacy, so there was no bemoaning their heavy workload or lack of time to pay attention to important things; instead, they found creative solutions to these problems. They seemed tireless in their efforts to get the best outcomes for students.

They worked with teachers to co-construct learning.

I have offered my services to any teacher who would like to plan and teach a lesson that involves the co-construction of success criteria with their class. It has been a wonderful opportunity to get back into the classroom and team-teach a lesson. Engaging with our students has been an energizing experience.

They recognized the importance of staying informed about the progress of the work being undertaken by teachers.

I devote time to classroom walk-throughs to stay informed about teaching and learning in my school. During these visits, gaps in resources become apparent. I get to observe students with learning difficulties, special needs, or behavioural or emotional problems. I become aware of classroom expectations, procedures, routines, and strategies being utilized. This enhanced contextual information assists me in decision making and aligning resources with priorities.

They saw themselves as learners and modelled behaviour for teachers, as described by these three principals. These are good illustrations of how the expert principals worked to demonstrate involvement and continuous learning and to model the school's values and practices, an OLF practice.



I am involved directly as a learner on the team. My goal as a team member is to model the need for continuous learning and to provide myself with the background to use in classroom visits and teacher evaluations. Through my visits, I now have a framework to use when observing and responding to interactions with students. I ask more specific questions about the learning expectations, and I ask for evidence of success with the strategies the teachers are using. My visits are not part of formal teacher evaluation, and since I've positioned my role as a learner in the group, the staff are more willing to acknowledge their own challenges when it comes to engaging students more effectively.

The ideal situation occurs when I can devote approximately thirty to sixty minutes per day with individual students. I feel this "rubber hits the road" action lends credibility to discussions with teachers about student learning and setting appropriate goals for their progress. It is extremely important that we use a common language, and these visits lend themselves perfectly to introducing new concepts or making suggestions about available resources. They are also an excellent way to establish a rapport with students who are struggling academically and need a boost in confidence. When a teacher is not participating in this process, I make it a point to work with students in their classroom in other ways. I have found teachers have

been more than happy with the extra support for their students and have adopted high-yield strategies more readily when they see them in action.

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I think the reason this process works for us is because we have seen its impact in the lives of our students. We are an inner-city school with many of the socio-economic issues that come with it. However, our student achievement over the last two years, as indicated in our Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) scores and our school-based data, has steadily improved, and I do believe we are levelling the playing field for many of our students. I feel my role as instructional leader is pivotal in this process, and I continually challenge myself to learn as much as I can on a daily basis and to find avenues for my own professional learning to support the process back at school.

This principal mentions taking advantage of a coaching opportunity to maximize his effectiveness.

I am continuing my personal development by reading about strategies to promote courageous discussions with my team. I take part in discussion groups, and I work closely with a coach who, for several years, has been demonstrating her considerable expertise in highly collaborative teamwork.

I think that it is important to demonstrate that it is through the concerted effort of every member on the team, including myself, that we will develop system-wide strategies that truly help every student. Finally, we will be more confident that teamwork is the foundation of a high level of achievement on the part of both students and teachers.

This principal reflected on how she might direct her efforts differently if she were to start over.

One of my roles is that of an instructional leader in the junior division, and I realize that I have not focused enough on the other divisions. Certainly work within the junior division has started, but the intermediate team has not consistently been provided with my time and energy. The creation of a primary book room is a good example of poor strategizing on my part. If I were to do it over, I would move right to creating a book room for the whole school. Although my focus was on primary, the other divisions should have been included more in a variety of areas.

## Outside Resources

Expert principals used outside resources to their best advantage, as indicated in these two responses.

Consultants from the office of student services came to coach our teachers and learning-resource teachers so that IEPs that meet the students' needs could be developed. The various expectations listed in the IEPs are now attainable and measurable. They are also realistic, and they motivate the students. We now offer a writer to the student who requires this service, and we are working a lot more with the learning-resource teacher to get the accommodations in place.

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The addition of a literacy/numeracy coach at our school is an asset. The numeracy learning centres have evolved, and they address the various learning styles of all of our students. Classroom instruction has become more explicit, and our discussions at PLC (Professional Learning Community) meetings concentrate more on data analysis. I can already see the changes being made in the classrooms.

While they did not hesitate to involve outside experts as needed, these principals never underestimated the impact of their own influence and involvement.

Listening to the needs of the staff and getting my own hands dirty in the process served as the key practice that effected change. Staff recognized that I did not have all the answers, was willing to say so, and knew where to go to find the assistance that we needed. Inviting others from beyond the school to share in the growth that our staff had made was key. Hearing words of encouragement and thanks for taking on the challenge was well received by all.

## Hiring and Selection

As mentioned earlier, principals seldom had an opportunity to hand-pick their staff, but when such opportunities arose, they were ready. They knew what they would look for in a potential hire, based on the vision and goals they had for their schools and the high expectations they had for how a new teacher would adapt and contribute to the emerging instructional practice in their school.

I looked for teachers who in their own lives were slightly off the beaten path. I routinely tried to scare off anybody who sent me a résumé. Some thanked me for my candid talk and politely declined to continue their application route. However, by getting high-energy, committed people in the Literacy and Special Ed positions,

even if they were only in their second year of teaching, we were able to start to turn things around.

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I lobbied for a vice-principal who I knew had exceptional technological skills and an intermediate background so that I could work with the junior division.

In summary, principals' approaches to resource alignment could be described as skilful, strategic actions to ensure that time, money, people, and other resources were in the right places and the right amounts to contribute to the overall vision of the school, and they subjected themselves to the same scrutiny that they applied to their staff.

## THEME THREE:

# *Keeping the Focus on Student Outcomes*

While the expert principals worked to support and encourage their teachers and make the best use of the resources they had, they never forgot that student achievement was the focus of their efforts. They made a point of using data to inform their efforts and, even after seeing initial results, they continued to push on for further improvements in student achievement.

### Collecting and Using Data

In Ontario, until EQAO scores began to be widely published, it was possible to lead a school without thinking much about measuring student achievement against any kind of external norm, if only because there was no access to information to do this. Once comparative data became widely available, teachers and principals together began to consider how their in-class assessments and final evaluations of students' work could contribute to a better understanding of student achievement along with the EQAO results. Our expert principals modelled behaviour in this regard. Even over the three-year course of the Principal Congress there was a noticeable increase in the breadth and depth of **assessment** data and other **data** that principals collected and relied upon.



Principals were quite creative in their choices about what data they accessed and how they used it to inform their work. They were hungry for data and undaunted by fears of any weaknesses they might have had in the field of statistics. They sought expertise from outside the school as needed, but they also made good use of internal expertise by tapping into the talents of teachers on staff who had a passion for data and interpretation. Still, some principals encountered challenges with getting teachers on board.

With support from the board and OFIP (the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership), we were able to, in our PLCs, narrow our focus and look carefully at our data, to dig deeper and work to understand what the data was telling us about student learning. The dialogue was rich, and learning for staff was evident. Intermediate staff seemed less able to obtain a deep understanding of what the information was telling them. Data for Grades 3 and 6 seemed irrelevant to them, and they felt the suggested high-yield strategies did not fit their settings. I thought that introducing the *Think Literacy* documents might provide an opportunity for learning. Personnel from the board provided some in-service training for the intermediate staff, and I further utilized board supports to review, discuss, and give practical examples. To stimulate further discussion, I introduced Grade 9 and 10 data and board benchmark data, such as those drawn from Computerized Access to Support and Information (CASI) and Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA) results. But I still feel that we are missing the deeper understanding and true implementation.

They expected their teachers to get comfortable with and use the data, and made data review part of the ongoing work of teachers. They countered teacher resistance to the use of EQAO data in ways that were carefully thought out. They demonstrated their understanding that sharing data is an excellent way of changing behaviour. They believed that their teachers wanted success for their students as much as they did, and that providing good data and the time to review it could help resistant staff to get on board. The following examples show how they monitored student learning and school improvement progress, an OLF practice.



Our results for our primary and junior divisions on the provincial measures of achievement, EQAO, are not as strong as they should be, given our community's high scores on the Early Development Instrument (EDI) and the fact that we are a community of high socio-economic status. The challenge was to assist teachers in finding the balance between focused use of classroom assessments (as, of, and for learning) to inform day-to-day student work and of data from standardized assessments such as CASI, DRA, and EQAO so that both kinds of information can be applied to improve our student achievement on external accountability measures.

We have begun to raise the profile of credit accumulation data, graduation rates, and rates of students who are achieving at levels 3 and 4 to complement our understanding of how effective our school is overall. This change in focus has shown us the value of targeting the needs of our current group of students. This year, our school's focus is on using achievement data from a variety of sources to guide our practice. Ideally, we would get to a point where teachers would have access to their current students' achievement data at the start of each term and would make



instructional decisions tailored to specific needs. For this focus to be successful, teachers would need to be well equipped with a variety of instructional strategies and tools to meet the differing needs they would face.

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The more successful forays have involved providing release time and strategically selecting leaders within the school who not only are able to make sense of the data and take ownership of it, but are also teachers who have the respect of their colleagues.

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We analysed the EQAO data and examined the report card marks, and our analysis shows that in general, students' difficulties are in the area of reading – more specifically, the ability to establish connections. Further, the results show that it would be beneficial to work on the students' vocabulary. The alignment of assessment practices is helping us to better target the strategies to use. The school improvement team is aware that student learning is ongoing, and that the success of our students is everybody's business.

Asked what she would do if given a chance to start over, one principal offered the following.

If I could go back in time, I would have assessed the situation differently by examining the data more closely. Staffing and budget decisions could have been different, although great strides were made in the primary division. A needs assessment of the junior division would have highlighted their needs sooner and would perhaps have influenced the direction of professional development.

## Sustaining Improvement

The expert principals were mindful of becoming complacent about results once early successes were achieved. They always had their eyes on the horizon and plans to take their teachers and students to even greater accomplishments in the future.

The focus of my professional dialogue with staff during meetings and individual conversations was about our commitment to raising standards for all students. I continuously challenged the thinking and learning of staff to further develop their professional practice. There was a constant need to refocus and reframe challenges into action statements that were within our circle of influence as educators. I openly challenged stereotypical thinking by examining data we had about our students, our community, and our school. We celebrated every success, no matter how small it seemed.

This principal detailed the strategies used to keep the focus on student outcomes and indicated readiness to lead any changes that the data indicate may be necessary.

Our monthly meetings are becoming forums for instructive discussions about learning and student achievement. At these meetings, I continue to teach the staff how to track and analyse data with our data-collection tool, Le Coffre. We discuss the School Improvement Plan and alter it when necessary. I continue to meet with staff members to make sure that they are confident about the PLC approach and to help them with their development. At our Macro-PLC meetings, we discuss challenges we face and strategies for overcoming them.



They were also mindful of the “**implementation dip**” phenomenon and were ready with motivational strategies for themselves and for their teachers to stimulate continued progress in the school. Their passion and **optimism** were contagious and inspired others to carry on despite early setbacks.

We suffered an implementation dip after the first year of our school improvement plan. It showed us that we had to refocus on instruction, with more staff dialogue and shared planning. We had to continue to build the relationship between assessment strategies and effective classroom practice and support. We needed to strive for “best practitioners”, rather than just focusing on best practices.

All staff must be responsible for this process of change. If we want change to occur everyone must have a role and an accountability loop and must feel supported along the way. I find asking teachers to work in teams with reporting loops assists me as the instructional leader in charge of the school. I also engage staff in courageous dialogue to enrich thinking, remove barriers, and keep focused. Too often school goals can be shifted due to anecdotal comments that are not founded in data. It is my job as the school leader to help process this type of thinking and manage all teams’ ongoing progress towards our goal.

Our expert principals understood the need for implementation that is both broad and deep. They knew that they must keep the focus on results and continue working towards deeper change, and that they must use the practice of teacher-leaders in the school to get others on board. They knew that a higher level of student success would only come with sustained effort that led to embedded practice or a feeling of “it is just the way we do it around here”.

As an intermediate division, we have been moderately successful but still need to go so much broader and deeper. We began with an expert talk and book study on the theory and then took elements of each high-yield strategy to try in our

classrooms and share the results. Experts on staff and those that “got it” then continued to push the implementation among their peers. This effort worked but did not become an embedded practice. The strategies did not become self-sustaining or a natural, ongoing part of the way we work. Those staff that were the experts and did the sharing and led the professional development went far and truly embraced the concepts of differentiated instruction and backwards design. Many of those who were not directly involved have embraced the philosophy and can articulate what it should look like but have not yet reached the point where the theory has become a part of common and sustained practice. The work must go on.

The principal must continually repeat, review, and focus on the “priorities” in order for teachers to keep them a priority within the classroom. I usually prepare a “top ten” priorities list that I give teachers once the School Improvement Plan is developed. It’s a quick reference sheet for teachers that they can easily carry around and refer back to when planning. We go back to this sheet regularly during staff meetings to ensure everyone remains focused. The light shines on the same things throughout the year until they are deeply implemented.

They realized the importance of thinking about succession planning and creating a strategy that would be sustainable even after they left the school.

In looking forward, the big challenge is to sustain our gains over the long run. It should not matter who takes over from me – the current climate that we have inculcated should be able to withstand future stresses and challenges.

One principal reflected on what he would change if given a second chance.

If I were doing this process again, I would have done a better job of logging events so that we could create a possible template for turning around schools. Each school is different, but I believe that practical, successful examples from practising principals would make the task of improving results less daunting. This would also assist with sustainability once administrators and staff leave. When staff changes, history and experience in that environment walk out the door, and everyone begins again. The new team often begins from nothing, and schools often decline. It is important to have contact lists and an outline of existing programs to ensure they outlast staff and that there is continuity and continued improvement.

Overall, the expert principals’ approaches to monitoring student achievement could be described as evidence-based, collaborative, and relentless.

## THEME FOUR:

# *Building a Culture of Collaboration*



**Building strong school cultures** is a topic that has attracted much attention in recent years. It would be easy to dismiss this topic as a fad that will eventually lose meaning and disappear. But the narratives of our expert principals made the idea of culture-building come to life – they were living it and breathing it every day.

In one sense, all schools have a culture just by virtue of their existence. However, in some schools, the culture is not productive for achieving gains in student outcomes and is so ingrained as to be resistant to change. “This is how we do things around here” is a refrain that often meets principals when they begin at a new school. According to our expert principals, building culture was really about changing the culture to be more accepting of the goals and vision they had for improving student achievement in their schools. They worked to build collaborative cultures and distribute leadership, an OLF practice.



The challenge was initiating change. I needed to begin by listening to the students, staff, parents, and community to find out everything about the existing culture, practices, beliefs, “old myths” attitudes, and, yes, the things that were commonly considered to be “untouchable”. Having a solid understanding of the existing culture is key in carving out the type of relationships that are so important in working effectively with others.



In an attempt to promote a collaborative learning culture in my school, one of the five Core Leadership Capacities as outlined in the Ontario Leadership Framework, I have encouraged teachers to make presentations at staff and departmental meetings promoting the benefits of incorporating more differentiated instruction

as a deliberate teaching strategy in their classrooms. As an example, the technique of using exit cards – cards that students complete at the end of a class to state what they have learned – as a strategy to check for learning was presented at a staff meeting last year. The idea was met with enthusiasm, and we have seen much evidence of its use among many staff members in the current year. Teachers share stories of how this technique has allowed more students to express themselves and ask questions.

We have had success when teachers work in cross-panel groups such as 7–12 to look at how they can develop a continuum for success. Support by subject specialists at the secondary level is beneficial to elementary teachers, who have expressed concerns about teaching some of the more difficult concepts in math, for example. Elementary teachers, conversely, have a lot of experience with differentiation that they can share with their secondary colleagues. Encouraging this type of collaboration allows for excellent and relevant professional development for teachers.



A key attribute of the kind of culture that our expert principals encouraged was collaboration; that is, they wanted the work of teachers in their schools to be consistently carried out in a **collaborative learning environment**. They laid out their expectations for collaboration, provided opportunities for it to occur, and modelled and fostered the trusting environments needed for collaboration to flourish. They didn't just have professional learning communities (PLCs), they had **effective PLCs**; they built teams in unique ways, and made teamwork a way of life. So “how we do things around here” became working collaboratively and openly with each other. In this way, principals created high performance expectations – an OLF practice – for both teachers and students.



They made a point of modelling collaboration.

Our theory of action is asking teachers to enter into a partnership with their students to improve both their own learning and that of their students. It is therefore necessary that the working environment reflect the same relationship. By modelling and entering into such a partnership with the teachers, the administration can improve teacher instruction. But this is not a one-way street – we also will be learning from them. If the culture of school practice becomes one of partnerships with a goal of improved learning for all participants, then the school will become a dynamic learning environment fuelled by synergy.

They understood the importance of working together to reflect on practice, develop a common language, and have conversations based on evolving research.

My early observations as principal were that it was not a priority for teachers to reflect on their own practice. If the concept of PLCs was to be successful in our school, I knew that I had to hook this very committed and wise group of teachers with an angle they could not resist. I chose to stress the element of research. I began slowly in the early years, providing them with articles about a variety of topics and pedagogy (e.g., homework, spelling strategies, conferencing with parents, assessment). I encouraged small-group discussions and responses to the articles, as well as discussion by division. I continually introduced professional language so that everyone could use the same points of reference when discussing student achievement.

They made sure their PLCs were informed by student work and other key data.

It is painfully obvious that simply bringing people together does not produce better outcomes. There is a need to go much deeper than just conversation. Accountable talk related to actual samples of student work, marking rubrics, and instructional approaches must become commonplace.

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As a school, we are approaching this inquiry as a collaborative professional learning venture led by our school improvement team (divisional representatives, special education resource teacher, principal). The teachers on the team are using a case-study approach to track student growth. Each teacher has chosen two students who consistently perform at level 2 in literacy and numeracy assessments. The teachers are starting by using academic data (report card marks, EQAO results, CASI/PM results, learning styles, etc.) and attitude/interest surveys to develop student profiles. They will then follow up with an analysis of the students' work to provide feedback that will help the students move forward, asking "What do teachers and students need to know to make this happen?" This is the focus of our learning – sharing with other staff members through PLCs.

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By starting with the goal of a common focus, our school has been able to move forward in other areas. The staff and students have seen the value of their work and are excited to move ahead. The Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) has provided the vehicle that our school needed to improve not only student learning but also teacher instruction. Teachers have begun to collaborate using PLCs and moderated marking. This shift has changed the environment of our school community. The staff has a vision for their students that is now visible. I believe that if the staff see the change in the students' work and the overall effect they are having on the school community, then they will make the TLCP common practice. It will be sustainable and take on a life of its own.

They fostered the belief that everyone was responsible for student learning.

The school's leadership team is cultivating a change in perception and culture, wherein literacy development is not seen as the responsibility of the English department, the school's literacy lead, or the literacy committee. Instead, literacy development is regarded as a school-wide, focal endeavour that is supported by all staff members in their daily practice.

When staff can see the difference collaborative teams can make, they become part of the vision, as exemplified in this teacher's remark to her principal.

We have come a long way for a group of individuals that sat in silence waiting for someone to tell us what to do. We have become a collaborative idea-sharing community with one common purpose – student achievement and school success.

Or this principal's observation.

Thinking as a collective unit is a new norm.

When asked what he would do differently, one principal said the following.

If I needed to implement effective PLCs in a different school, I would structure the process much differently. I would make sure that each session had a particular focus around student achievement. I would provide questions, articles, student work, data, etc., to focus the discussion. It would also be very important to be part of each session. The teams need to have the administrator as part of the PLC on a regular basis. I would have made sure that I had scheduled my attendance at these meetings as a priority.

Overall, the principals viewed building collaborative cultures as the foundation for all of their work as instructional leaders. They worked on it every day and modelled it in their own behaviour. For them, it was one of the keys to success.

## THEME FIVE:

# *Harnessing Parent and Community Support*



Principals made fewer references in their RWRs to this area of leadership than the others that have been covered in this document, yet research is pointing more and more to the importance of parents and the community in supporting student achievement and especially in closing achievement gaps. Even though this theme was not as prevalent as the others, there were some excellent examples where principals were taking strategic steps to leverage **relationships with parents** and with community members. These principals were working towards connecting the school to its wider environment, an OLF practice.

### **Involving the Family**

The expert principals understood that building public confidence started with engaging parents and allowing them to have input into the direction of the school.

Changing the school climate from a failing school to a success story was especially difficult for me, coming in as a new principal in September 2004. The school had been labelled a “target success” school, which really meant a failing school, and the community knew it. As a new principal, I realized that the problem needed a multi-faceted response, one that required all hands on deck. Most importantly, I knew I needed to engage the parents in a constructive dialogue about the direction they wanted to see the school move in. Once a dialogue was opened, the clear response from parents was that they wanted to see the school succeed, and that they would do whatever it took to change the atmosphere.



As principals began to involve parents in the decision-making process about how to support gap-closing strategies, they sometimes struggled to deal with different points of view.

My school hosted a guest speaker, a psychologist who spoke to staff and parents about the fact that a significant number of boys in our system today (and many school systems throughout North America) are unmotivated at school and in society in general. I felt that the points brought forth in the presentation were valid, informative, and cause for thought. Parents asked if we were thinking about classes separated by gender, as they had heard of such classes being offered in Toronto and were enthusiastic about the possibility. Consultants at board level were not as enthusiastic about the idea as others in the school community. They felt that focusing on differentiated instruction was the way to go. As well, we worried that advertising a focus on boys' literacy might lead to concerns from the parents who might feel female students would not be served as well in a setting focused on boys. We are still grappling with the issue.

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We invite participation on our school's leadership team. We seek to have diverse representation, including teachers from all grade levels, support staff, other employee groups within the school, parents, and community partners. This team works to develop a common mission, vision, values, and collective commitments that are brought forward to the larger school community. The group seeks feedback and works to ensure all voices are heard, valued, and represented. The level of engagement in this process is dependent on many variables and is cyclical in nature.

They focused on frequent and clear communications with parents to build trust.

My expectations for my staff exemplify my belief that we all must work together to create trusting relationships. All staff are expected to contact each parent/family a minimum of once per month and maintain a log of communications. These informal communications provide families with an opportunity to voice any concerns, share new information, or simply receive an update from their child's teacher. In addition, each staff member is given one postcard per pupil in their class. Throughout the school year, each child in the school will receive a handwritten note in the mail, sharing a good-news story about their school experience.

The expert principals told us about a variety of innovative strategies they used to reach out to parents and to engage them in ways that would better meet the diverse range of needs of both the students and the parents.

This year we have decided to use school council evenings to run events that encourage parents to come to the school. We capitalized on our past knowledge that parents don't tend to come for meetings, but they do come if there is a potluck dinner and if their children are an integral part of the event. One evening, we informed parents and their children about the demographics in our school and how strengthening literacy in their first language helps to strengthen literacy in English. We then watched a video entitled "The Peace Tree" and had families come together to make ornaments symbolizing peace across the cultures for a tree that we decorated subsequently in a neighbouring mall.

The next month, we hosted a potluck dinner in a common room where booths were set up around the perimeter, highlighting aspects of different cultures and what being respectful to each culture looked like. At each booth, guest readers used document cameras and LCD projectors to read dual-language books to families and model how these books can be used to share the love of literacy with children. Over the course of the evening, we enlisted some parents to come to the school at particular lunchtimes to read dual-language books to students as an extracurricular activity.

We then ran a third night where interpreters worked with staff to teach parents how to use effective questioning before, during, and after reading a book. These workshops ran in tandem in different rooms using different interpreters and a host teacher-presenter.

Principals engaged in evidence-based practices that helped parents support their children in doing well at school.

I engage parents in student learning by teaching them, at school council meetings, the strategies we are using to engage students. The school newsletter for parents includes suggestions on how to support their child.

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My primary hope, as the principal of two elementary schools, is to create opportunities for dialogue. I see providing opportunities for teachers, parents/guardians, and administrators to engage in dialogue as a key factor in ensuring success in our classrooms. Looking for a way to turn theory into action, I borrowed from the work of Dr. Vivian Vasquez, who, as a Kindergarten teacher, developed an "audit trail" in her classroom to make visible the curricular work her students were doing. With this in mind, our own audit trail has been developed in the form of a brochure for our community. It provides parents/guardians with an inside look at the work occurring in our classrooms in the name of our Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway. The success of this instrument is partially due to my diligence in ensuring that I

am in classrooms on a regular basis. Each visit provides me with insight into how teachers provide students with opportunities to develop socially, academically, and intellectually. These visits enable me to share with parents/guardians the ways in which our curricular engagements are authentic, varied, and rigorous.

Principals who experienced early success with getting parents on board knew that there was always more to do.

For us, staying the course will be imperative to success. We now have many parents on board who are seeing how education has changed since they were in elementary school. We are doing a lot of work to help them understand assessment. The parent council is starting to see they are not merely the social convenors of the school and that they play an important role in improving student achievement.

Efforts that principals made towards parent engagement were intentional and proactive.

We are promoting partnerships and working on engagement for students, staff, families, and the community. Rather than inviting parents for general communication, we know that we must be intentional in our focus: literacy learning, mathematics, and science are the key topics that draw in parents and families. We must have participation rather than just having them watch a presentation or a lecture. Learning needs to be experiential and respectful.

Even in difficult situations, the expert principals recognized the importance of working collaboratively with parents and others.

There was a time when we would just send students home, most often on a suspension, if they were too angry, upset, or aggressive to learn. But it didn't help the students to just send them home, as they learned nothing then. We now use a multi-faceted approach: work as a team in-school, involve agencies, set up safety plans, look at each case individually, and differentiate the response based on the student. We never give up, celebrate with parents even small successes, and aim high for all students. We help, support, and/or educate the family. Most importantly, we get the student back into class as quickly as is comfortable and possible.

These principals knew that sometimes the challenges were too big for school staff and parents to solve on their own. At these times, they used a coordinated team approach.

We work closely with the parish community, parents, the police, social services for families and children, and a variety of community agencies. Students' ability to focus on academic achievement is sometimes challenged by other issues going on in their lives. Sometimes we don't have the manpower or expertise to deal with the problems. It is important to know when the issue is bigger than the school level, and to ensure that positive partnerships are in place for these situations. Keen observation skills and a heightened sense of awareness are expected of all staff. This includes custodians, education assistants, teachers, vice-principals, and principals. Parents are notified at the outset of a potential problem and are given access to the appropriate support networks. Students simply cannot do well in school if they are sidetracked by other issues. We continue to work with the OPP and agencies available to help parents understand the issues at hand and all available choices.

## Involving the Community



The expert principals recognized the importance of building productive relationships with families and communities – an OLF practice – to better support students' growth and engagement.

Students are encouraged to move beyond their classroom setting. I often meet with teachers and parents to develop ideas for ways to provide students with opportunities in the community. Our community involvement may include visiting our local nursing home, shovelling driveways for snowed-in seniors in the neighbourhood, or creating positive partners for students who need companionship.

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We focus on sports programs that make sense for our school and lead to community involvement; for example, we have partnered with the town to introduce a school hockey team and a curling program. Teachers, parents, and volunteers from the community spend time with our students. We also have a community policing program in place, in which a police officer spends at least one lunch hour per week at the school, plus is involved in extracurricular activities (coaching, assisting with canoe practices and our drop-in music program and board games program).

Overall, principals' approaches to building relationships with the parents and the community recognize the importance of these relationships. As with everything else they do, they do not let barriers prevent them from reaching out – they find ways to engage the community, knowing it is a resource they cannot afford to ignore.

## *Five Big Ideas to Take Away*

Across Ontario, expert principals are leading the way to improved student outcomes, both in overall achievement and in closing achievement gaps. Five big ideas emerge from their stories:

1. **Build teachers' capacity for the change** needed to support improved student outcomes, especially for those students who are most at risk. Start with building trust and providing resources to support teacher learning and improve confidence before attempting to influence their beliefs and attitudes. Take advantage of a variety of vehicles for doing this, including having one-on-one conversations with teachers, providing opportunities for teachers to learn from peers, and assigning teacher-leaders, who can play a significant role in influencing their colleagues in positive ways.
2. **Acquire and deploy resources in creative and strategic ways** to ensure that people, time, and other types of support are in the right place at the right time to provide the most leverage for positive change. Understand that the principal's role is key in managing resources and buffering staff against distractions.
3. **Keep the focus on student outcomes** at all times, bringing a wide range of data to the discussion and ensuring that teachers become deeply involved with the collection and analysis of this data. Focus decision making on using this data wisely.
4. **Build a productive culture** with teacher collaboration at its core. Be clear about the vision and goals, and help staff to get on board so that they assume joint responsibility for student achievement and well-being.
5. **Look to parents and the community as resources** that can help students to succeed, knowing that tapping into these resources may be difficult work that requires flexibility and a spirit of willingness to adapt, but that it is always worth doing.

## APPENDIX

### *Learn More*

#### ● Assessment

Large-scale assessments, such as those conducted by EQAO, and classroom assessments and evaluations differ in their purposes and in the way they are designed, administered, and scored.

Large-scale assessments are one-time measures, developed by institutions or agencies at a provincial, national, or international level and designed primarily to provide snapshots of the strengths and weaknesses of education systems. They enable governments and school boards to compare results over time in a consistent and objective manner. However, it is important to remember that they are only one measure of students' overall achievement.

The EQAO assessments provide data to principals, teachers, parents, the public, school board staff, and the government and are used to help educators:

- identify strengths and areas for improvement in individual students' learning;
- identify strengths and areas for improvement in the education system;
- develop education policies, allocate resources, and determine the success of those policies and resource allocations.

By contrast, classroom assessment and evaluation strategies are developed by teachers to help individual students take the next steps in learning and to determine and inform students and parents of the student's achievement.

The primary purpose of classroom assessment and evaluation is to improve student learning, providing meaningful information that will inform instructional

decisions, and promote student engagement. Assessment to improve student learning is seen both as assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning. Assessment *of* learning is the assessment that becomes public and results in statements or symbols about how well students are learning.

Both classroom assessment and evaluation and large-scale assessments are important and useful and, when taken together, paint a comprehensive picture of the learning and achievement of students.

(Adapted from *Growing Success*, pp. 92–93; see below.)

### FURTHER RESOURCES

The 2010 ministry document *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* provides information on the assessment, evaluation, and reporting policy in the Ontario curriculum for Grades 1 to 12. The next edition will also include information on the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program.

## ● Building Strong School Cultures

Research by S. D. Kruse and K. S. Louis (*Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press), 2009) shows that school cultures that create better opportunities for student learning are based on the following three features:

- Professional community. A climate of shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, public or “deprivatized” practice,<sup>3</sup> and collaboration in which all members of the school staff feel a sense of collective responsibility for students and outcomes.
- Organizational learning or collective engagement with new ideas. In the “learning school”, teachers work together to gather more information about their teaching and their content areas and then discuss, share, and critique the new ideas so that all members understand and can use the new information.
- Trust, or a sense that others will do their part. “Trust is the glue that holds social networks and relationships together” (Kruse and Louis, p. 9). It comprises integrity, honesty and openness, concern and personal regard for others, competence, reliability, and consistency.

3. “Deprivatized practice is when teaching practice goes public, teachers visit one another’s classrooms to observe lessons and materials and to mentor and to solve problems in the living laboratory of instructional space.” Louis, Marks, and Kruse, 1996, as quoted in *Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures* (see next page).

In a school culture that celebrates these values, the approach to leadership shifts away from the leader with all the answers and becomes one that increases the number of people engaged in leadership roles, with a particular focus on student outcomes.

(Adapted from the Spring 2010 edition of *Ideas Into Action*, entitled *Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures: Putting the Promise Into Practice*, available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionSpring.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionSpring.pdf).)

## ● Closing the Achievement Gap

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) now tracks the progress of individual students from one provincial assessment to the next. Key findings include the following:

- Students who meet the provincial standard early in their schooling are likely to maintain their high achievement in secondary school.
- Students who do not meet the provincial standard early in their schooling are likely to continue not meeting the standard in later grades.
- Pinpointing the needs of students early and providing support makes a difference.

For more on the latest available provincial results, see “Highlights of the Provincial Results: English-Language Students, 2010–2011”, available at [www.eqao.com/pdf\\_e/11/EQAO\\_PJ9Highlights\\_2011.pdf](http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/11/EQAO_PJ9Highlights_2011.pdf).

### FURTHER RESOURCES

For information on what the research says about the achievement gap and what educators can do to close it, see Joseph Murphy’s book *The Educator’s Handbook for Understanding and Closing Achievement Gaps* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2010).

## ● Collaborative Learning Environment

For suggestions on how to support the work of teachers in a collaborative learning environment, read the Spring 2010 edition of *Ideas Into Action*, entitled *Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures: Putting the Promise Into Practice*, available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionSpring.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionSpring.pdf).





## ● Core Leadership Capacities

While all of the leadership capacities identified in the Ontario Leadership Framework are important, and all of them contribute to student achievement and well-being, the ministry has identified five Core Leadership Capacities (CLCs), derived from the framework, as key to making progress on the province's current educational goals. These five CLCs are a focus for capacity building and are embedded in all ministry-sponsored professional learning and ministry resources for school and system leaders.

They are as follows:

1. Setting goals
2. Aligning resources with priorities
3. Promoting collaborative learning cultures
4. Using data
5. Engaging in courageous conversations

The ministry has developed a series of bulletins called *Ideas Into Action* to highlight each of the CLCs. These bulletins provide research insights and practical strategies that are aligned with both the Ontario Leadership Framework and the broader Ontario Leadership Strategy. They are available on the ministry website, at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoAction.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoAction.html) or on the Institute for Education Leadership's online Document Library, at <http://live.iel.immix.ca/content/library>.

## ● Data

In a survey of participants at Principal Congress 2011, principals reported using a wide range of data to determine action plans for school improvement. They often used the following types of information, listed in order of frequency of use:

- credit accumulation
- EQAO results
- report card data
- graduation rates
- classroom assessments
- school climate surveys
- student surveys
- parent surveys

In addition to the standard sources of data listed above, more than a third of the principals reported that they often used additional data. They obtained information from a variety of sources, some of them external, such as social workers, child and youth workers, and community agencies, as well as feeder schools. School-generated data included information from the following areas:

- safe schools, such as rates of student discipline, suspension, and expulsion
- attendance
- various student success indicators, such as mock Ontario Secondary School Literacy Tests (OSSLTs)
- special education
- Aboriginal enrolment

Principals also monitored a range of softer information, such as anecdotal data from teachers; informal conversations with staff, students, and community partners; and teacher satisfaction as measured by teacher participation in extracurricular and staff events.

#### **FURTHER RESOURCES**

The ministry has published a bulletin on using data as part of the *Ideas Into Action* series. *Using Data: Transforming Potential into Practice* (Fall 2011) is available on the ministry website, at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionFall11.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionFall11.pdf).

### ● **Double-Loop Learning**

The concept of approaching a problem by questioning existing assumptions. When the process of finding and fixing an error allows an organization to carry on with its present policies or objectives, then that error-and-correction process is called *single-loop learning*, a term coined by C. Argyris and D. A. Schon. *Double-loop learning* occurs when the finding and fixing of an error is done in a way that includes modifying an organization's underlying assumptions, policies, and objectives.

(Adapted from a 2001 article by Mark K. Smith, "Chris Argyris: Theories of Action, Double-Loop Learning and Organizational Learning", available at [www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm).)

### ● **Douglas Willms**

See **Willms, Douglas**.

## ● Drive-by Professional Development

Short-term workshops, also known as “sit and get”, where learning is done “to” participants, not for or with them. Research suggests that workshops presented in this format are unlikely to influence professional practice and are therefore also unlikely to improve student achievement. For changes in practice and student outcomes, sustained, collegial professional development is required, with time provided for reflection and coaching.

### FURTHER RESOURCES

For more about what research has to say on professional development that improves teacher practice and student learning, see Ruth Chung Wei, Linda Darling-Hammond, Alethea Andree, Nicole Richardson, and Stelios Orphanos, *Professional Learning in the Teaching Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the US and Abroad* (Stanford, CA: School Redesign Network and National Staff Development Council, 2009). Their report describes the availability of such opportunities in the United States and other high-achieving nations around the world that have been making substantial and sustained investments in professional learning for teachers over the last two decades.

## ● Effective PLCs

Effective PLCs transform the school culture and the culture of the larger system in a way that builds teaching capacity and improves student outcomes. The effective PLC’s collaborative learning culture is not simply a matter of process or practice but represents a profound shift away from isolation and autonomy and towards deprivatized practice,<sup>4</sup> away from the traditional silos of classroom, school, board, and province and towards a genuinely system-wide learning organization. Such a change is an adaptive challenge rather than a technical one and requires knowledge, skill, and persistence.

(Adapted from the Spring 2010 edition of *Ideas Into Action*, entitled *Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures: Putting the Promise Into Practice*, available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionSpring.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionSpring.pdf).)

## ● Elmore, Richard

Elmore’s book, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009), is

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4. See the footnote on p. 45 for a definition of deprivatized practice.

intended to help education leaders and practitioners develop a shared understanding of what high-quality instruction looks like and what schools and boards need to do to support it. Through the instructional rounds process, educators develop a shared practice of observing, discussing, and analysing effective learning and teaching.

An interview with Elmore appears in the ministry publication *In Conversation: Leading the Instructional Core* (Summer 2010), available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/Summer2010.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/Summer2010.pdf).

## ● Expert Problem Solvers

According to Leithwood and Steinbeck, in their study of problem solving by school and district leaders (1995, pp. 28–29; see below), expert problem solvers perceive a much higher proportion of the problems they solve to be non-routine and are quick to recognize in all problems the new features that require special attention. They adapt old solutions to new contexts and circumstances and bring fresh thinking to novel problems.

Problem solvers take the following into consideration as they confront new problems (p. 46):

- Interpretation – understanding of the specific nature of the problem
- Goals – the immediate and short-term purposes that solving the problem will achieve
- Principles – the longer-term purposes and the operating principles, fundamental laws, doctrines, and assumptions that guide the thinking that frames the problem
- Constraints – “immovable” barriers, obstacles, or other factors that severely narrow the range of possible solutions
- Solution processes – what was done to solve the problem, in light of all of the above

Leithwood and Steinbeck’s study showed that expert problem solvers deal with ill-defined, hard-to-solve problems in much the same way they deal with routine problems. Compared with non-experts, when dealing with ill-defined problems, they:

- focused less on interpretation – they appeared to more easily clarify the problem for themselves;
- expended more effort on determining goals;
- identified marginally more principles;

- did not identify any constraints to problem solving;
- provided more detail about actual solutions. (p. 48)

### FURTHER RESOURCES

For an analysis of the problem-solving approaches of school and district (i.e., school board) leaders and the connections between the involvement of expert problem solvers and the success of school improvement initiatives, see Kenneth Leithwood and Rosanne Steinbeck, *Expert Problem Solving: Evidence from School and District Leaders* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

## ● Getting the Right People on the Bus

The concept that the members of an organization are its most important asset. (The phrase “getting the right people on the bus” was coined by Jim Collins in 2001; see below.) In writing about organizations that go from “good to great”, Collins says that one of the first things such organizations do is to pay attention to *who* they have on board – considerations such as getting the right people, helping them to take action, and putting them in the right positions. The “who” is far more important than the “what”.

Why? Because the right team will respond better to changing conditions. The right people are self-motivated. Without the right people, an organization could be headed in the right direction, but will still never achieve greatness. (Adapted from Collins’s article “Good to Great”, October 2001; available at [www.jimcollins.com/article\\_topics/articles/good-to-great.html](http://www.jimcollins.com/article_topics/articles/good-to-great.html).)

### FURTHER RESOURCES

For more on “getting the right people on the bus”, see Michael Fullan’s book *Leadership and Sustainability: System Leaders in Action* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2005, pp. 68–69).

For more on going from “good to great”, see Jim Collins’s book, also entitled *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

For short video clips of Jim Collins talking about getting the right people and putting them in the right job, go to [www.jimcollins.com/media\\_topics/first-who.html](http://www.jimcollins.com/media_topics/first-who.html).

## ● Implementation Dip

A term for “a period in which enthusiasm wanes shortly after the launch of a delivery effort. The excitement of the launch is quickly replaced by frustration, as people face the day-to-day challenges of the task at hand and do not yet see any fruit from their efforts. This slump in enthusiasm has the potential to drag down the entire delivery effort. One way to minimize an implementation dip is to ensure that quick wins (early but demonstrable progress that people can see and feel) are sequenced into your strategy. Another way to prepare for this dip is to understand and communicate that substantial change must come before results will be visible.” (Barber, p. 130. See below.)

### FURTHER RESOURCES

For more on how to manage the implementation dip and set and achieve goals, see Michael Barber, *Deliverology 101: A Field Guide for Educational Leaders* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2001).

## ● Instructional Regime

The model or specific repertoire of instructional practices that a school determines will be most effective for its students, thereby constraining individual teachers’ decision making around instructional practice. The term was coined by S.W. Raudenbush in 2008 (see below).

Participants in Principal Congress 2009 identified developing a distinct instructional regime as one of the actions they took to improve instruction and better support struggling students. For example, one elementary principal implemented the following instructional regime.

Through the assistance and support of our literacy coach, board program coordinators, and our superintendents, we decided to focus on selected aspects of balanced literacy and the three-part math lesson.

### FURTHER RESOURCES

For more on instructional regimes, see Raudenbush’s article “Advancing Educational Policy by Advancing Research on Instruction” (*American Education Research Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 206–230).

See also Raudenbush’s article “The Brown Legacy and the O’Connor Challenge: Can School Improvement Reduce Racial Inequality?” (*Educational Researcher*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2009), pp. 169–180).

## ● Martin, Roger

In Martin’s book, *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), he draws on multiple success stories in the field of management to demonstrate how the “opposable mind” – his term for the human brain’s ability to “hold two conflicting ideas in constructive tension” (p. 7) – allows decision makers to synthesize new and superior ideas. He uses this concept to explore how leaders think, as opposed to what they do.

For more on the opposable mind, see Martin’s article “How Successful Leaders Think” (*Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 85, Issue 5 (June 2007), pp. 60–67).

An interview with Martin, “Leadership and Integrative Thinking”, appears in the Spring 2009 edition of the ministry publication *In Conversation*, available at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/spring2009.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/spring2009.pdf).

## ● Networked Learning

A method of pedagogy in which participants learn from each other rather than from an instructor. Michael Fullan (2005, p. 82; see below) defines it as “clusters of groups and individuals” – for example, principals from different schools – who exchange ideas and “work in interdependent and mutually supportive ways...using their diversity of experience as a positive force for knowledge sharing and innovation.”

Fullan provides a note of caution on networks, saying that they need to work hard at sorting out the valuable ideas from those that are less so. Worthwhile education ideas are complex, and quality knowledge is key. Fullan writes, “Sometimes existing beliefs, convictions, and groupthink subtly and not so subtly carry the day. At the very least, there is a large noise factor within any given network” (p. 84).

### FURTHER RESOURCES

Michael Fullan addresses leadership and networking at the school, board, and system levels in his book *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2005).

Two recent books discuss creating networked communities at the school level. Robin Thompson, Laurie Kitchie, and Robert Gagnon’s *Constructing a Professional*

*Learning Network for School Unity and Student Achievement* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2005), discusses how one school constructed an online learning network. Lois Brown Easton's *Professional Learning Communities by Design* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2011) provides a case study to explore how PLCs develop, mature, and sustain themselves.

Principals and system leaders interested in networked learning and information sharing may participate in the Ontario Education Leaders Network, an interactive community site (<http://ontarioeducationleaders.ning.com>) on the Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) website. The network site also includes the “Principals Want to Know” (PW2K) series, a set of one-page tip sheets to support principals’ instructional practice.

The Leading Student Achievement project – a joint venture of the Ministry of Education, the Ontario Principals’ Council, the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario, and the Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes – uses principal learning teams as a key element of its strategy. In the project, principals work in teams across their boards and participate in networked learning to increase their capacity as instructional leaders, work that has an impact on teacher practice and school conditions that lead to improved student learning. For an evaluation of the project’s most recent results, see Kenneth Leithwood’s report *How the Leading Student Achievement Project Improves Student Learning: An Evolving Theory of Action* (February 2010; available at <http://resources.curriculum.org/LSA/files/LSATheoryofAction.pdf>).

## ● Optimism

In this context, the belief that one can successfully adapt to change and meet challenges as they come. According to Kenneth Leithwood (see below), a sense of optimism allows leaders “to take the initiative and take responsible risks with positive expectations, regardless of past problems or setbacks.” If their expectations are not met, “they pursue alternative paths to accomplish their goals.”

### **FURTHER RESOURCES**

The Ontario Leadership Framework is evolving to reflect new research. A paper by Kenneth Leithwood on this research is soon to be released and the role of the importance of optimism for successful leaders will be reflected in it. It will be available later in 2012 on the Institute for Education Leadership website, at [www.education-leadership-ontario.ca](http://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca). (The text quoted above is taken from the draft version of this paper.)



## ● Relationships with Parents

As Leithwood et al. (p. 249; see “Further Resources”) point out, research shows that factors external to the school, such as family and the wider community, account for as much as 50 per cent of the variation in student achievement between schools. These factors are the most powerful lever leaders have to secure high performance.

Leithwood et al. write that “challenges arising from aspects of students’ family backgrounds and situations, especially poverty, are a key cause of poor student performance in many schools in need of being turned around. But through parental engagement and community involvement, schools can significantly reverse their performance and fortunes” (p. 250).

Parental engagement in learning at home is far more important than parental involvement in school. Leithwood et al. conclude that “when parents believe they have the skills and knowledge to make meaningful contributions to the school’s efforts and the learning of their children, improved learning is more likely to occur” (p. 251).

### FURTHER RESOURCES

For more on parental and community engagement, see Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris, and Tiiu Strauss, *Leading School Turnaround: How Successful Leaders Transform Low-Performing Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010). Leithwood et al. “propose a fourfold classification of school conditions that have important consequences for the learning of students. This fourfold classification encompasses rational, emotional, organizational, and family conditions. . . . each identified as having a direct impact, to a greater or lesser degree, on students’ experiences. These variables could include, for example, those relating to school culture, teachers’ practices, teachers’ emotional states, or parents’ attitudes. These variables can be influenced through the enactment of leadership practices and are the main route to improving student learning outcomes” (p. 237). Particularly relevant to the topic of parental and community engagement is the section entitled “Family and Community Conditions” (pp. 249–254).

## ● Richard Elmore

See **Elmore, Richard**.

## ● Roger Martin

See **Martin, Roger**.

## ● Student Engagement

Student engagement is a necessary condition for learning. Students who are engaged in the life of the school, engaged in their own learning, and engaged by what and how they are learning are far less likely to fall through the cracks.

Student engagement has three dimensions:

- social – a sense of belonging and participation in school life
- academic – participation in the formal requirements of schooling
- intellectual – “a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher order thinking skills...to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge” (Willms, Frieson, and Milton, p. 7. See **Willms, Douglas** for an annotated citation).

According to Willms, viewing learning as fun, seeing it as important, seeing the value of working with and functioning as part of a team, and being part of a social institution are critically important outcomes that form the basis for lifelong skills. This means that engagement is also a critically important outcome for students in its own right. The dimensions of engagement that students develop at home and at school may be a more important predictor of success in the workplace than even academic achievement.

### **FURTHER RESOURCES**

See **Willms, Douglas**.

## ● Tacit Knowledge

A term that describes a form of knowledge that cannot be easily explained. Another way to describe tacit knowledge is as “the invisible knowledge hidden behind intelligent action” (Bereiter and Scardamalia, as quoted in Nestor-Baker and Hoy, p. 90; see below).

### **FURTHER RESOURCES**

For an investigation of the ways in which tacit knowledge is used by both expert and novice principals during problem-solving situations, see Lorraine St. Germain

and David M. Quinn, “Investigation of Tacit Knowledge in Principal Leadership” (*The Educational Forum*, Vol. 70 (Fall 2005), pp. 75–90).

For more on tacit knowledge, see Nancy S. Nestor-Baker and Wayne K. Hoy, “Tacit Knowledge of School Superintendents: Its Nature, Meaning, and Content” (*Education Administration Quarterly* (Vol. 37, No. 1 (February 2001), pp. 86–129). Nestor-Baker and Hoy provide a brief introduction on what the literature says about tacit knowledge among education administrators and the differences in its use between typical superintendents and superintendents who have a reputation for being unusually successful.

## ● Theory of Action

An “if . . . then” statement that sets out what you are going to do to get the results that you want to achieve. It emphasizes the relationship between the action and the outcome and implies that the proposition is testable and subject to ongoing revision. The term was coined by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, as described by City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (see below).

The theory of action for the Principal Congress would be the following.

*If we provide a forum, along with the process and tools, for principals to articulate clearly the leadership strategies they have found to be successful in closing the achievement gap, then the use of these strategies will spread.*

### FURTHER RESOURCES

For a discussion of how to use a theory of action, see Chapter Two of Elizabeth City, Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Teaching and Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009). As an example, principals could develop a theory of action on how their work relates concretely to the work of teachers and students in classrooms.

For a discussion of theories of action that have staying power, see the introduction of Michael Fullan’s *Six Secrets of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

## ● Theory of Reciprocity

The theory that the effective exercise of authority is more than just holding someone accountable for something; it requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity. Richard Elmore describes the theory of reciprocity as follows: “If the formal authority of my role requires that I hold you accountable for some action or outcome, then I have an equal and complementary responsibility to assure that you have the capacity to do what I am asking you to do” (p. 21; see below).

### FURTHER RESOURCES

Richard Elmore discusses the five principles that lay the foundation for a model of distributed leadership, including the theory of reciprocity, in a report entitled *Building a New Structure for School Leadership* (Washington: The Albert Shanker Institute, Winter 2000).

## ● Wicked Problem

A problem that is especially difficult to solve or resolve. Wicked problems are those that are difficult to define, defy easy or routine solutions, mutate over time, and re-emerge after they have been put to rest. The term first appeared in print in a 1967 editorial by C. West Churchman.

### FURTHER RESOURCES

For more on wicked problems, see John C. Camillus, “Strategy as a Wicked Problem”, *Harvard Business Review*, May 2008, pp. 98–106 (available online at <http://hbr.org/2008/05/strategy-as-a-wicked-problem/ar/1>). This article notes that Horst Rittel and Melvin M. Webber described wicked problems in a 1973 article in *Policy Sciences* magazine. Camillus also identifies experts who have developed ways of spotting wicked problems and coping with them, in particular Jeff Conklin (*Dialogue Mapping: Building Shared Understanding of Wicked Problems*, New York: Wiley and Sons, 2006) and Peter DeGrace and Leslie Hulet Stahl (*Wicked Problems, Righteous Solutions: A Catalogue of Modern Software Engineering Paradigms*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990).

## ● Willms, Douglas

Douglas Willms presented a keynote address at Principal Congress 2011 on student engagement. Video highlights are available on the Ministry of Education website, at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/2011willms.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/2011willms.html).

The ministry website also has an interview with Willms, “Student Engagement: A Leadership Priority”, in its publication *In Conversation* (Summer 2011), at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/Summer2011.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/Summer2011.pdf).

The Canadian Education Association, together with the Canadian Council on Learning and school boards from across Canada, is researching student engagement and its relationship with student achievement, learning, and teaching. Its report on the topic, *What Did You Do in School Today?: Transforming Classrooms Through Social, Academic and Intellectual Engagement* by Douglas Willms, Sharon Friesen, and Penny Milton, is available on its website at [www.cea-ace.ca/publication/what-did-you-do-school-today-transforming-classrooms-through-social-academic-and-intelle](http://www.cea-ace.ca/publication/what-did-you-do-school-today-transforming-classrooms-through-social-academic-and-intelle).







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