

RESEARCH *in* BRIEF

EVALUATION OF THE ONTARIO MINISTRY OF EDUCATION'S STUDENT SUCCESS/LEARNING TO 18 STRATEGY

In 2003, the graduation rate in Ontario stood at 68 per cent. The stakes for leaving high school without a diploma are high. Thirty-four per cent of high school dropouts will require income assistance at some point in their lifetime, compared to seven per cent of those who graduate. And high school dropouts earn almost 40 per cent less than those with trades certificates or diplomas. For the good of individuals and society, it is critical to provide students with the supports they need to achieve their full potential.

“This [Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy] is the most promising initiative in system-wide change that I’ve seen in my professional career ...”

– Charles Ungerleider, Canadian Council on Learning

SNAPSHOT

In 2003, the Ontario Ministry of Education launched a comprehensive strategy to improve student achievement in secondary school. The goals of the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy are to:

- support a good outcome for all students;
- provide students with new and relevant learning opportunities;
- build on students’ strengths and interests;
- provide students with an effective elementary to secondary school transition; and ultimately;
- improve the graduation rate.

Phase 1 (2003) immediate and remedial assistance

- Revisions to Grade 9 and 10 applied math curriculum
- Introduction of a Student Success Leader (SSL) in every school to coordinate initiatives
- New locally-developed compulsory credit courses
- 105 Lighthouse Projects encouraging dropouts to return to school



Phase 2 (early 2005) resource and program development

- Expanded Lighthouse Projects
- Introduction of Student Success Teachers (SST) dedicated to help struggling students

Phase 3 (late 2005) coordination and legislation

- Specialist High Skills Majors – bundles of courses in specific high skills areas
- Expanded cooperative education
- Dual credit programs (earning secondary and college credits simultaneously)
- Legislated learning until age 18

In 2009 (6 years into implementation of the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy), 81% of students graduated from high school.

In 2007, the ministry contracted the Canadian Council on Learning to evaluate the strategy and make recommendations for managing ongoing change.

METHODOLOGY

- More than 300 in-depth, semi-structured field interviews and focus groups involving ministry staff as well as trustees, Student Success Leaders, teachers, administrators, students and their parents from more than 40 school boards, more than 50 schools, and 10 colleges across Ontario
- more than 14,000 responses from students and school staff to online surveys developed by the evaluation team
- analysis of depersonalized student biographic and achievement data for students in Grades 9 to 12 for the academic years 2000-01 through 2006-07

KEY FINDINGS

- There has been a shift from an implied focus to an explicit focus on the learner as the focal point in secondary schools.
- There has been an increased focus on fostering a caring school culture.
- There are expanded program choices and increased flexibility in meeting diploma requirements.
- Communications among some partners in the education system has improved.
- There is an increased focus on tracking and monitoring individual students, especially with respect to the transition between elementary and secondary schools.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Resource Efficiency, Funding and Support

- Increase collaboration among neighbouring schools and boards
- Maintain current expenditure levels even in the face of declining enrolment
- Provide guidance to boards on succession planning for SSTs and SSLs

Communications

- Communicate more effectively with those implementing the strategy on the ground every day
- Tailor messages to specific subgroups within secondary schools
- Ensure guiding principles for Credit Recovery are developed and maintained across the province

Data Use & Curriculum

- Augment capacity building for data use
- Encourage collaborative discussion among staff members on how data might affect practice
- Engage educators in identifying core objectives to be mastered in any course work

Managing Change

- Plan explicitly, at the school level, for the reintegration of disengaged students and those who have dropped out
- Conceptualize the progress of the implementation of the strategy among schools as stages in a change process
- Make “Success for all Students” the paramount goal of Ontario education

WHAT IS ONTARIO DOING NOW TO SUPPORT

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS?

The ministry is continuing the intentional, explicit focus on students and maintaining resources and supports. The ministry is augmenting efforts at capacity building around data use, specifically on how data might inform practice. It is also working on improving students’ awareness of the scope and variety of SS/L18 programs and supports. A new component of the strategy is the Student Success School Support Initiative, which taps expertise within and outside of a school board to support the work of the administration and school improvement teams to provide improved instruction and programming for every student.

ABOUT THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR



Dr. Charles Ungerleider is a professor of the Sociology of Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. At the time of this evaluation, he was on leave from UBC, serving as the Director of Research and Knowledge Mobilization for the Canadian Council on Learning, an independent, not-for-profit organization established to improve the quality and availability of information about learning for all Canadians. Ungerleider currently divides his time between UBC and Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, LLP, where he is Director of Research and Managing Partner.

LINKS

Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy: Final Report (Sept 2008) – Canadian Council on Learning
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/studentssuccess/CCL_SSE_Report.pdf

Cost Estimates of Dropping Out of High School (Feb 2009) – Canadian Council on Learning
www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/OtherReports/CostofdroppingoutHankivskyTechnicalReport.pdf

Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Disengagement from Secondary School: Final Report (May 2005) – Community Health Systems Resource Group, The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/schoolleavers.pdf

Transitions and Pathways from Elementary to Secondary School: A Review of Selected Literature (Feb 2007) – Community Health Systems Resource Group, The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/studentssuccess/TransitionLiterature.pdf

KEYWORDS

Student success;
secondary education;
dropouts;
graduation rate;
student engagement