

**Building Capacity with a Focus on Results:  
The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy**

**The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat**

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## **Building Capacity with a Focus on Results:**

### **The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy**

#### **The Education Mandate**

The Ontario government has made improvement in publicly-funded education the centrepiece of its mandate. Recently re-elected for a second term (2007-2011), the government has committed to continuing, sustaining and deepening the impact of a focus on educational improvement. The Premier of Ontario has outlined this as a moral, educational, economic and social imperative for Ontario's students and citizens:

“Making public education the best education is the single most important thing that we can do together to build a bright and promising future for all of us... When we get public education right, we get the best workers, and the best citizens... We can build a stronger economy, a stronger society, a stronger Ontario, by strengthening the skills of our people”.

The Honourable Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario

With a commitment to both ‘raising the bar’ to higher achievement levels and ‘closing the gap’ for lower-performing student groups and schools, an ambitious target was established shortly after the government’s first election to power. In 2002-03, an average of 54% of elementary school students were achieving the provincial standard in reading, writing and mathematics (as measured by provincial assessments in Grades 3 and 6). In 2004, the government set a target of 75% of students achieving provincial standard or above by age 12 (grade 6). During the government’s first mandate (2003-07), as will be discussed further below, an extensive range of initiatives and resources were put in place to support this goal. Now in its second mandate, the government has confirmed that, what has become known as, the “drive to 75%” (Ontario Liberal Party, 2007) remains a core priority as outlined in the recently published vision paper, *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008).

This paper examines the strategies being used and evidence relating to their outcomes and results to date to develop the professional capacity of educators to support student learning and achievement goals.

## **The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat**

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) was established within the Ontario Ministry of Education on November 1, 2004. LNS was made responsible for developing, co-ordinating and delivering the government's literacy and numeracy strategy and for ensuring that the initiatives resulted in greater instructional effectiveness at the classroom level with improvement in student achievement. LNS's focus is Kindergarten to Grade 6, involving over 4000 elementary schools located in 72 school districts and 24 smaller school authorities. Consistent with the Ontario governance system, this involves four publicly-funded education systems: English public, English Catholic, French public and French Catholic.

LNS is organized on the basis of seven regional teams that work across the province directly with school districts and schools. Student Achievement Officers (SAOs), the majority of LNS staff, are experienced instructional and curriculum leaders. SAO teams generally combine individuals with recent experience as teachers, principals, consultants/coaches/co-ordinators and/or senior district leaders. Each regional team works with districts and schools to analyze student achievement data, provide instructional and curriculum support, monitor school progress and support program implementation. The regional team support from LNS allows for greater responsiveness to local school districts and school contexts while further establishing collaborative partnerships focused on student achievement and learning. The work of the regional teams and the operational work of LNS are supported by the central organization including a Senior Executive Team and functional teams such as research, evaluation and data, capacity building, issues management, and policy and operational support.

Shortly after the initial establishment of LNS, nine key strategies were identified to underpin the work ahead. While the nine strategies interconnect (see appendix 1), this paper focuses on two of the key strategies:

- Build capacity to support student learning and achievement
- Demonstrate a commitment to research and evidence-based inquiry and decision making

Capacity building with a focus on results is central to the work of LNS in partnership with school districts, schools, partner organizations and stakeholders. Fullan *et al.* (2006: 88) commented:

Districts and states must integrate pressure and support so that everyone within the system seriously engages in capacity building with a focus on results. Capacity building is what most policy makers neglect. Capacity building involves the use of strategies that increase the collective effectiveness of all levels of the system in developing and mobilizing knowledge, resources, and motivation, all of which are needed to raise the bar and close the gap of student learning across the system.

The Ontario strategy has deliberately tried to learn from the successes and failures of other educational change initiatives to avoid Fullan et al.'s (2006) contention that the importance of capacity building is often neglected. Furthermore, while the focus is firmly on results with a clear target for improved student achievement, the Ontario approach has deliberately inverted "pressure and support" (Barber, 2001) to put a firm emphasis on support first, through capacity building for educators as the central strategy, with pressure through professional accountability, as well as external accountability, as a supporting strategy.

Capacity building with a focus on results forms a theory of action which includes an emphasis also on:

- Focus: Identifying key priorities for improvement which form the core for all supporting actions
- Tri-Level Reform: Developing system-wide coherence and alignment including collaboration and connections within and across schools, districts and the province/state
- Shared Leadership: Respecting professional knowledge and practice and actively seeking out, sharing and building on existing successful practices and strategies
- Professional Accountability: Holding ourselves and each other accountable for improvement through appropriate use of data, self-evaluation and evidence-based practices to drive improvement rather than ranking, shaming or blaming techniques

The nine key strategies and the theory of action outlined above have developed and evolved over four phases of the development and implementation of LNS. Phase 1 focused on 'Consensus Building' to foster support across the education system and collaborative working for the government's goal of improving student achievement. Phase 2 focused on the major importance of 'Capacity Building' (which continues throughout future phases) by providing leadership and

teacher development to increase instructional and organizational effectiveness. Phase 3's theme was 'Sharpening Our Focus' by increasing precision and intentionality in the strategies and with focused interventions for lower achieving students, schools and districts. Phase 4 is 'Intensifying Our Collective Efforts' by deepening the effectiveness and implementation of strategies, including through developing professional accountability for shared responsibility for improvement.

### **A Focus on Results**

As indicated above, a focus on results was an imperative for the development of LNS and related strategies. By international standards, the Ontario education system performs well with high results. In the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Ontario performed near the top of the international results and was noted also for having reduced gaps in performance associated with socio-economic status and immigration patterns. For example, in PIRLS, based on Grade 4 literacy, only Hong Kong and the Russian Federation performed significantly better than Ontario. In this same assessment, 37% of Ontario's students have parents who were not born in the country, compared to an international average of 10%. In PISA, the difference in achievement between Ontario's students in the top socio-economic quarter and the lowest quarter was half the OECD average.

Nevertheless, there is a firm commitment to continuous improvement and further supporting our students to develop higher-level skills for future success. When the current government first came into office in late 2003, the education results for elementary schools had remained relatively static with 52-54% of students achieving the provincial standard. From 2004 onwards, the majority of results for reading, writing and mathematics in elementary schools have improved overall by at least 10 percentage points. Table 1 summarizes key result indicators from 2003 (the year prior to the current government) and 2007 (the most recent provincial assessment data).

**Table 1: Provincial Results for Grades 3 and 6**

2003	2007
Just over half of elementary students achieved provincial standard.	Almost two-thirds of students achieved the provincial standard. The majority of assessments have improved by 10 percentage points or more.
No assessment areas provincially were above 75%	French-language students have surpassed the 75% goal in Grade 6 Mathematics and are close in Writing (73% in Grade 3, 74% in Grade 6)
No school boards were achieving over 70%	For Grade 6, 11 school boards achieved 70% or more students at the standard in Reading, 11 boards for Mathematics and 9 boards for Writing
There were <u>more low-achieving schools</u> than high-achieving schools: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 19% of schools had fewer than 34% of students achieving the provincial standard in Grade 3 Reading</li> <li>• 13% of schools had 75% or more students achieving the provincial standard in Grade 6 Reading</li> </ul>	There are <u>more high-achieving schools</u> than low-achieving schools: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5% of schools have fewer than 34% of students achieving the standard, a reduction of three-quarters compared to 2002-03</li> <li>• 25% of schools have 75% or more students achieving the standard, almost double the schools compared to 2002-03</li> </ul>

Within the overall pattern of results, there have been shifting patterns at school and district levels and for different student groups. For example, the nature of ‘low performance’ has evolved as initial concerns about the number of low performing schools has moved to also include concern about schools that are not improving at all achievement levels, so-called mid-performance ‘static’ schools. Furthermore, after three years of year-over-year improvements, in 2006-07 improvement in results slowed down and the overall result did not increase. The changing pattern, pace and impact of improvement has influenced the phases and foci of capacity-building strategies, as discussed below.

### **Building Capacity**

Systematic reviews of evidence indicate that attention to building professional capacity is important both for professional learning and student learning. For example, Timperley *et al.* 2007, p.vii) propose:

Many factors influence student learning, but it is increasingly clear that what teachers know and are able to do is one of the most important of all. Teachers are the ones who work directly with students, who translate and shape curricular goals and theoretical ideas into

classroom practice and who shape the environment for learning. Teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions have direct and serious implications for the success of the students they teach. From this standpoint, professional learning represents an enormous investment in the development of human capital, directed at ensuring that the teaching and learning in our schools is up to date and effective.

The LNS is concerned with building capacity at all levels of the system – teachers, principals, district leaders – to support improved practices and outcomes. The nature of capacity building has evolved over time as the literacy and numeracy strategy itself has evolved. Consistent with research about effective professional learning, it is evident that a range and blend of approaches are needed, combining external expertise, job-embedded learning in schools and classrooms, individualized supports, and collaborative learning communities (e.g. Timperley et al., 2007).

In the sections that follow, six main capacity-building approaches are outlined:

- supporting local district initiatives
- implementing large-scale professional development
- changing classroom practice in lower performing schools: Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership
- spreading successful school and classroom practices: Schools on the Move
- building instructional leadership capacity to support school and classroom improvement
- reaching every classroom: consolidating resources, support and professional learning for systemic improvement

## **1. Supporting Local District Initiatives**

The first phase of LNS focused on ‘building consensus’ about the student achievement agenda by working together provincially and locally to support improvement. The Ontario strategy is firmly based on supporting tri-level reform (Fullan, 2007) with attention to the role of schools, districts and the province. While many jurisdictions internationally have implemented variations on the theme of centralization (to province/state/national levels) of education direction and accountability standards, alongside decentralization of day-to-day responsibilities for delivery to schools, there is evidence of the limitations of such approaches (Whitty et al., 1998). In particular, the middle tier district can play an important role in connecting central and local needs and supporting systemic improvement rather than the individualized successes or ‘failures’ of schools (Campbell, 2005; Togneri and Anderson, 2003).

To signal this commitment to working collaboratively with school districts to meet local needs and contexts, Local Board Initiatives (LIs) were implemented to provide resources and supports for locally-identified needs to improve literacy and/or numeracy. From January to June 2005, the LNS funded over 170 local projects. About 60% of these projects identified capacity building as a main feature – including initiatives for literacy and numeracy practices, assessment for learning techniques, professional learning communities, book clubs, staff conferences and institutes, action research, demonstration classrooms, teacher mentoring and coaching. In 2005-06, a second year of LIs was supported. Over \$18M (CDN) was distributed among 71 school districts for 85 projects and 23 school authorities for 5 projects. In total, there were 17 partnership projects and 73 single district/school authority projects. By 2005-06, around 80% of the LIs identified capacity-building as a central feature. More precise criteria were established with a focus on four key areas:

- utilizing smaller class sizes to increase instructional effectiveness;
- achieving equity of outcome and closing the achievement gap;
- improving junior students’ reading skills; and
- strengthening instructional leadership at the school and system level.

In addition to these areas of focus, districts were asked to meet the following criteria within their initiative:

- increase teachers' and/or principals' knowledge and skills;
- build capacity within and/or among schools and support communities of learners;
- use research informed strategies that support recommendations of Expert Panel reports (provincial documents to support literacy and numeracy); and
- contain measurable goals with indicators of success that allow for monitoring.

At the conclusion of the 2005-06 school year, the school districts provided final reports to the LNS. Through a descriptive analysis of the LI projects and a case study of 10 of the initiatives, the LNS learned some useful lessons to inform our future capacity building work. In particular, the evidence suggested that there is a relationship between the design of the LI projects and the degree to which the content of these projects became embedded into the daily professional activity of schools. Successful professional learning experiences occurred when:

- there was a collective or group, as well as individual, component within the projects - districts provided activities at the school and within district-based sessions;
- there was progression and cohesion across the projects - the classroom or school-based activity helped shape the next centrally-based workshop as well as leading to a deeper understanding of the previous session - maintaining alignment and growing in intensity;
- the project had a facilitator, consultant or lead that had the capacity and time to build relationships as well as maintain the project's momentum for the project participants.

These design characteristics occurred to very high degrees within the projects that had success in influencing professional learning of teachers. While individual projects had varying successes – with some being very effective – it was also clear that part of the trade-off for supporting local initiatives was that not all would impact on student learning and that there may remain areas that were under-developed provincially.

## **2. Implementing Large-Scale Province-wide Professional Development**

In order to support capacity building on a large-scale, alongside the locally developed initiatives outlined above, large provincial training programs were implemented. During the summer of 2006, for example, LNS sponsored summer programs for teachers in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, differentiated instruction, and primary assessment. Over 3,000 participants completed evaluation forms. Analysis of these forms indicated that summer programs were attended and considered useful by teachers of all experience levels and career stages; however, support appeared to be particularly important for teachers in the early stages of their careers (teaching for five years or less). The responses to the summer programs were very positive including opportunities for building knowledge, collaborating with other teachers, observing and modeling specific teaching practices, and providing professional reflection and improvement of teaching practices. In 2007, approximately 5,500 participants completed evaluation forms following summer institutes. Two important findings emerged from an analysis of these programs. Teachers indicated a desire to further their summer learning within the school year through job-embedded ongoing, collaborative work. Teachers also expressed a desire to share with other teachers outside of their own immediate school environment. A move to collaborative professional learning opportunities for school teams (involving the principal and teachers together) became important. For example, during 2005–06, more than 12,000 teachers and principals participated in shared reading training, and more than 16,000 teachers and principals participated in differentiated instruction training. Evaluation feedback for both of these training initiatives indicated that the majority of participants reported that their level of understanding and skill in relation to differentiated instruction or shared reading had increased. However, while such provincial training has been perceived as valuable, over time requests have increased for professional learning supports that are available directly for educators when they need them and for school-level learning and implementation, rather than educators having to take time out of school to attend provincial or regional training events.

An increasingly important area of capacity building has become the development of a range of provincial resources available on demand to be used individually or collectively by educators, including short resource documents, monographs with research and practical strategies, and webcasts available online, for download and on DVDs. One of the most popular capacity-

building resources is online video-text blended resources called webcasts. The webcasts have received approximately 300,000 hits over two years. This figure represents the number of unique IP addresses, but does not take into account the number of viewers at each computer (or terminal), nor does it include those school districts, such as the Toronto District School Board, Ontario's largest school board, that mount the video files on their own servers for their educators to access. In addition to online access, the webcasts have been made available on DVD – more than 7,000 have been distributed in this format. As well, school districts have been encouraged to make multiple copies for their unique learning needs. The webcasts reach out to all stakeholders regardless of geographic location or time constraints

Webcast users appreciate the convenience of being able to access professional learning on their own time, at home and at their individual learning pace. Specifically, teachers mentioned the benefits of the accompanying viewer's guides and how the webcasts are segmented for easy access. Webcasts also make it possible to relay the important information, using consistent vocabulary and in general help educators stay current about research-based, effective practices. Classroom teachers report appreciating seeing teachers and students in action demonstrating effective teaching practices. Teachers are positive about hearing the voices of other teachers and principals as they explain their thinking, actions, goals and challenges. Teachers report that being able to see examples showing practical strategies in a classroom setting is useful. by seeing how the learning environment is structured, as well as the specific teaching strategies. The video clips and the viewer's guide are tools to spark professional dialogue. Literacy coaches working with their school colleagues appreciated the opportunity to bring in a "knowledgeable other" via the webcasts to stretch their group's thinking, particularly in locations that may not otherwise have many opportunities to come together as a professional learning community or to hear an external expert speak. At the district level, webcasts can be used across school networks. Principals, superintendents and directors use the webcasts in a variety of ways and encourage their teams to use them with their professional learning communities. Webcasts are also proving to be a valuable professional learning tool as schools and districts begin to engage in self-assessment. Faculties of education have also placed several of the webcasts on their course outlines as part of the core instructional resources. The next stages of development include making webcasts available as podcasts and via RSS feeds so educators can access this information quickly and easily in a variety of formats.

### **3. Changing Classroom Practice: Focused Interventions for Lower Performing Schools**

Following from the initial Local Initiatives (outlined above), it was apparent that while many of the initiatives were supporting improvement, there was a need to further focus and target resources specifically to school- and classroom-level practices. This was particularly the case for lower-performing schools. The Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) was developed to assist and coach schools with low achievement and/or with static or declining results. Three categories of school are involved:

OFIP 1 Schools: have less than 34% of their students at or above standard in provincial reading assessments for at least two of the past three years.

OFIP 2 Schools: have current reading results with between 34-50% of students achieving the provincial standard and their three-year performance trend is declining (year 3 results ten percentage points or more below year 1) or static (year 3 results less than ten percentage points different from year 1)

OFIP 3 Schools: have current reading achievement results between 50-74% of students achieving the provincial standard and their three-year performance trend is declining or static

Low performance has, therefore, been defined both in terms of current achievement results and (three-year) trends over time. Support is differentiated to these schools based on need. OFIP 1 schools receive the most direct support from the LNS, including five to eight visits per school year by an SAO to work with the school and district to implement capacity-building strategies for instructional effectiveness. OFIP 2 schools also receive direct support, but on a less intensive basis, for example three to five visits per year from an SAO, including support for developing an improvement plan. In the first year of the OFIP program (2006-07), OFIP 3 schools did not receive direct support from an SAO; rather districts were provided with resources and encouraged to develop improvement strategies for these schools. In 2006-07, there were almost 800 schools in the OFIP program. By 2007-08, the program was expanded to almost 1,100

schools with a particular emphasis on the OFIP 3 mid-performance schools with static or declining results, as they had become the largest group of OFIP schools.

Potential benefits for schools and districts participating in the OFIP program include:

- direct intervention for low performing schools and student groups;
- support from student achievement officers for improving planning;
- short-term resource support (human and financial);
- assistance in assessment, monitoring and evaluation of improvement strategies;
- capacity-building opportunities for staff;
- opportunities for networking and sharing within and across districts;
- school-based feedback and access to the most current research knowledge that informs the OFIP strategy; and
- opportunities to extend the knowledge base within Ontario about focused interventions that improve student achievement.

A variety of data sources about OFIP schools was collected during the 2006-07 year in order to gain a deeper understanding of the program's potential influences within schools and districts. The data includes: Teacher Feedback Forms (N=3599) and school reviews (N=97) conducted by external diagnosticians at the start of the OFIP program, OFIP School Principal End-of-Year Reflections (N=96), SAO field notes (N=103 schools) on OFIP 1 and 2 schools completed at the end of the school year, and the 2007 provincial assessment results. This data was examined in order to analyze what occurred within the program, and to attempt to tease out what influenced improved student achievement.

Data about schools was collected at the start of the program in order to gain an understanding of the existing conditions and practices within these schools before the program support began. This understanding helped in providing a baseline or context from which the effectiveness and specifics of the direct support occurring within OFIP can be understood. From these initial data

sources, three main aspects of developing capacity building to support improvement in lower performing schools, and by extension potentially all schools, can be identified.

First, the school staff involved were open to receiving positive support. This support, however, needed to recognize and build on existing strengths, be aware of challenges and address these, and demonstrate understanding of the school and staff needs. In particular, judgmental attitudes towards the school were rejected, for example:

“Support on teachers’ strengths. Allow time for teachers to work rather than piling on something new”

“ Please don’t let us feel as if we have done things wrong and belittle us. Help us plan more time to plan our lessons during the day”

Connected to the LNS overarching theory of action which places an emphasis on support and collaborative working, OFIP has developed as a partnership strategy which has moved teachers’ practice forward. In contrast to strategies which seek to address low performance through intervention to remove local powers (Doherty *et al.*, 1998), OFIP is an intervention based on partnership and capacity building to enhance and sustain the school’s capacity to improve through improved teaching, leadership, school and classroom practices. As Elmore (2004) and Hubbard *et al.* (2006) have also indicated, capacity building within lower-performing schools is vital for improvement.

Second, the initial data from the OFIP schools indicated that while internal capacity building needed to be a main strategy, school staff initially questioned their own capacity to improve. Some teachers expressed a low sense of efficacy, in which they questioned to what extent they could make a difference, particularly citing external challenges in the school community. Some teachers indicated that they very much wanted to improve, but felt they did not know which strategies to use and how to implement practices that would support improved student learning. The schools wanted to improve; however, they also felt that they needed external support to do so. So while job-embedded learning was central to capacity building, the role of an external ‘critical friend’ – the LNS SAO – was also important in providing expertise to kick-start both the content and process of change strategies. This balance between external support and internal

capacity building has been identified also in reviews of effective professional learning strategies, as Timperley *et al.* (2007, p.75) concluded:

Without the external expertise to challenge their beliefs and provide conceptual and practical tools, the teachers who received only collegial support were unable to implement the changes in ways that impacted positively on student learning.

It is important, however, over the period of the intervention to ensure that the locus for change becomes owned within the school and that local capacity for sustainability is established, rather than creating a dependency on external input.

A third component of the initial OFIP work was the importance of responding to the school's specific areas of current weakness, and developing practices to address these. For example, the diagnosticians' reports at the start of the first school year identified specific areas for development to be built into school improvement planning and priority actions. These areas included: cultural and attitudinal areas, e.g., 68% of schools worked on developing shared responsibility for student achievement; staff working relationships and processes to deliver improvement, e.g., 51% of schools worked on collaborative improvement planning; and/or literacy and numeracy practices, e.g., 51% of schools worked on developing blocks of time for literacy instruction within classrooms. These areas of foci are consistent with Corrallo and McDonald's (2001) findings about schools improving in challenging contexts requiring attention to improvement planning, collaborative practices and instructional programs.

Within the first year of the OFIP program, the schools directly involved – particularly OFIP 1 and 2 schools which received direct assistance – demonstrated considerable improvements, particularly against a context of three-year trends of low, declining and/or static results. Table 2 provides the results for reading in Grades 3 and 6. This meant that for the current year, the pattern of lower performance has changed. In 2006-07, 110 schools met the OFIP 1 criteria (lowest achieving), whereas by 2007-08, only 18 schools met the OFIP 1 criteria.

**Table 2: OFIP school results within first year of program**

***Grade 3 Reading***

	Improved	Same	Declined
OFIP 1	66%	2%	32%
OFIP 2	77%	1%	22%
OFIP 3	50%	4%	46%

***Grade 6 Reading***

	Improved	Same	Declined
OFIP 1	76%	0%	24%
OFIP 2	67%	5%	18%
OFIP 3	61%	3%	36%

The results are significant also as analysis of school demographic data, through the Ontario Statistical Neighbours Information System, indicated that OFIP 1 and 2 schools were facing educational challenges *and* socio-economic and contextual challenges. For example, in 2006-07:

- OFIP 1 schools had almost three times the proportion of students in ESL/ELD programs compared to the provincial average
- 65% of OFIP 1 schools have more than 16% of their students living in low-income households (compared to 27% of all elementary schools provincially)
- Over a fifth of OFIP 1 schools have more than 20% of their students in special education programs
- 1% of OFIP 1 schools have 46% or more students whose parents have some university education (compared to 23% of all elementary schools provincially)

Although each OFIP school's support program varied based on its specific needs, the combination of strategies that appear to have been important within the focused intervention include:

- effective instruction in comprehensive literacy and numeracy programs
- blocks of classroom time for literacy and numeracy teaching and learning
- use of student data and assessment for learning strategies to review student progress and inform classroom practices
- identification and supports for struggling learners, including tutoring within classrooms and through before and after school opportunities
- access to appropriate books and other learning resources
- effective professional learning teams, including use of teacher moderation activities and collaborative working to inform instructional strategies
- school improvement planning with specific goals, actions and monitoring
- raising higher expectations that all teachers can teach and all students can achieve (given sufficient time and supports)
- engaging school principals and developing instructional leadership throughout the school.

Of the 96 school reflections submitted to LNS at the end of the first year, all schools mentioned that the program had a positive impact on professional learning and student achievement. Only two principals mentioned that they experienced any resistance to the program from their staff. In terms of capacity building, 74% of the schools identified the implementation of professional learning communities as a key strategy in the success of the program. One of the striking initial findings from the teacher reports at the start of the OFIP program was the extremely low levels of staff collaboration; for example, only 12% of respondents indicated that collaboration within the school happened informally and only 3% indicated that collaboration occurred as a whole school. The image was of individualized practice and isolation of experience. By the end of the first year, the dominant feature was of professional learning communities having developed and being considered effective for supporting improvement. 94% of the schools discussed developing or continuing to develop collaborative inquiry for student improvement and learning through their professional learning communities.. These professional learning communities were

developing many of the features of effective practice identified by Kruse *et al.* (1994) involving reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration and shared norms and values. As Timperly *et al.* (2007, p.74) identified:

...teachers find participation in a group in which they can develop a shared sense of purpose and motivate and support one another highly conducive to professional learning when substantive change is required.

These features of job-embedded collaborative capacity building, with external assistance as required, are key elements of the OFIP program.

#### 4. Spreading Successful School and Classroom Practices

The LNS is also supporting the development of successful school and classroom practices by identifying, sharing and supporting networking with schools that are demonstrating substantial improvement, particularly in challenging contexts. The Schools on the Move program is identifying up to 100 elementary schools that are showing relatively consistent year-over-year improvement in the provincial assessments, and where staff is able to articulate their specific practices that have contributed to improvement. While the specific practices vary across and within individual schools, analysis across Schools on the Move revealed the importance of the following overarching elements:

- Organizational culture: Schools on the Move have collaborative cultures, with teachers and administrators committed to learning together. Staff and partners, including parents, are encouraged to participate in the school's improvement.
- Focus: The schools have created an environment where learning is the top priority, and literacy and numeracy are crucial.
- Leadership: Leadership creates an environment in which teachers and administrators work and learn together. Leadership is distributed and shared.
- Assessment, accountability and use of data: Administrators and teachers feel a sense of responsibility for children's learning. A range of data is used to monitor student progress and assess achievements.
- Links beyond the school: The schools are closely connected within school networks, and with their district and local communities. (see The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007).

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In addition to profiling features of practices that have supported improvement in these schools, the Schools on the Move program is intended to develop capacity-building networks between schools. A research study investigating the attempts of eight schools to network with other schools found that outreach with other schools varied in structure (type of connection), frequency (number of connections) and degree (depth or criticality of the sharing which occurred). In general, the case studies revealed that there is potentially great benefit in having schools collaborate with one another. However, this collaboration was far more influential, and supported deeper improvement processes, when the district established a support structure around it that was embedded or aligned to the broader district improvement strategy to improve clusters or groups of schools. The findings also revealed that being a mentor and a colleague to other schools is complex work that takes openness, patience and willingness for collaboration in order to have longer-term success. All of these are important aspects of the LNS's focus on district and school leadership.

##### **5. Building Capacity to Support School and Classroom Improvement: Instructional Leaders**

Alongside supporting improvement within classroom practice, LNS is supporting capacity building to develop instructional leaders at all levels of the education system who can support classroom, school and district improvement. For example, at the district level, the Leadership Alliance Network for Student Achievement brings together the senior leaders from the highest- and lowest-performing school districts to create a network for improvement. LNS has also supported the development of literacy and numeracy coaches with district and/or school roles. Annual coaching institutes have been well-received. Analysis of feedback forms from participants (N=102) who attended the 2007 coaching institute indicated that this supported their professional learning in relation to four general areas: first, their increased knowledge and skills as a coach; second, their increased knowledge and skills in pedagogic and curricular areas of literacy and numeracy; third, their opportunities to interact with other participants; and fourth, the increased awareness and understanding of coaching interactions within the school. In particular, compared to the 2006 institute, the evidence from the 2007 institute suggests that coaches were developing increasingly sophisticated ways of working as a coach. Three main themes emerged about the nature of coaching and interactions in schools: the importance of

developing “questioning and listening” in dialogue with teachers; the complexity of being both colleague and facilitator of teachers’ professional learning; and developing the ways personal and group accountability operate within the classroom experiences or teacher actions. These findings suggest the importance of capacity building both in areas of content knowledge and also in strategies for supporting educational change through relationships, collaboration, networking and inter-personal dynamics.

This combination of a focus on literacy and numeracy aligned with improving collaborative working is central to Leading Student Achievement (LSA), an initiative guiding almost 1,800 principals to develop their instructional leadership and effective learning teams within and across schools. In this program, instructional leadership and collaborative working are developed on a tri-level basis: professional learning communities in schools; principal learning teams at the district level, who in turn support the school-level professional learning communities; and a provincial steering committee involving collaboration between the LNS and the Ontario principals’ associations. Evaluation has been used throughout the development and monitoring of LSA. After the first year of implementation, early evaluation evidence suggested that developing principal learning teams was showing promising signs of significant impact for leadership learning. Initially, however, impact on classroom teaching and student outcomes was less strong – reasons identified included both the early implementation stages of the initiative and also the evidence that leadership development alone may not have a direct or rapid impact on student outcomes. Following recommendations from the evaluators, the LSA project, now in its third year, has continued to support collaborative learning teams, while also increasing the focus on specific leadership and instructional practices that are evidence-based. These include: support for professional learning; school and classroom practices involving an emphasis on the importance of academic work; a positive behaviour climate; collective teacher efficacy; improved instructional practices; and enhancement of students’ learning time in class. Findings from the third year may provide further evidence about effective capacity-building strategies, including the balance among content focus, learning processes, and individual and collaborative professional development opportunities.

## **6. Reaching Every Classroom: Consolidating resources, supports and professional learning for systemic improvement**

As LNS continues to move forward with the literacy and numeracy strategy, the emphasis will be on ‘staying the course’ to continue the focus on student achievement by building on strengths across Ontario and consolidating effective practices, providing supporting resources and allowing time for deep embedded professional learning and practice. This emphasis on focus, consolidation and implementation is consistent with international evidence about effective capacity building to support successful educational change. As Timperley *et al.*, (2007, p. 225) concluded:

A key finding of this synthesis has been that teachers need to have time and opportunity to engage with key ideas and integrate those ideas into a coherent theory of practice. Changing teaching practice in ways that have a significant impact on student outcomes is not easy. Policy and organisational contexts that continually shift priorities to the ‘next big thing’, with little understanding/evaluation of how current practice is impacting on desired outcomes for students, undermine the sustainability of changes already under way. Innovation needs to be carefully balanced with consolidation if professional learning experiences are to impact positively on student outcomes.

For capacity-building, current actions include two main areas. First, improving the accessibility and usability of multi-media resources connected to strategies that evidence and experience from Ontario’s classrooms, schools and districts indicates can contribute to student learning. Second, leveraging change across multiple school sites to develop “systems of success” (Togneri and Anderson, 2003) through the development of teaching-learning networks involving schools identifying current priority areas in teaching and learning, applying instructional practices to address these areas, collaboratively reviewing progress and sharing successful strategies both within each school and across hubs and networks of schools.

### **Moving Forward**

Ontario is in the process of an ambitious strategy which combines an intensive focus on improving literacy and numeracy, reaching across more than 4,000 elementary schools. In short, the strategy embodies capacity building with a focus on results as a key driver for improvement.

A range of capacity-building strategies have been applied and these have evolved based on evidence from implementation and outcomes over time. The work has balanced a tri-level focus with strategies at the provincial, district and classroom levels. Capacity building has also combined external support and expertise, where needed, with an increasing emphasis on facilitating and fostering professional learning within schools. In order to meet the goal of 75% of students achieving the provincial standard in reading, writing and mathematics – which in turn supports these students to develop higher-level skills that are important for their future learning, development and life chances – supporting improvement across all of Ontario’s classrooms is important. LNS is supporting such improvement both directly – for example, the OFIP school strategy – and indirectly, through the provision of resources, materials and professional learning opportunities available to schools and districts. Through a range of focused capacity-building strategies, LNS is attempting to address some of the challenges in balancing large-scale change with the variety and complexity of individual classroom needs and practices.

## 9 KEY STRATEGIES

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|--|---|--|
| <p>1. Set targets with district school boards</p>  | <p>2. Identify teams at all levels to drive continuous improvement in literacy and numeracy</p> | <p>3. Reduce class sizes in the primary grades to a maximum of 20 students per class by 2006</p> |
| <p>4. Build capacity to support student learning and achievement</p>   | <p>5. Allocate resources to support target setting and improvement plans</p>                    | <p>6. Mobilize the system to provide equity in student outcome</p>                               |
| <p>7. Embark on a process of community outreach and engagement to build support for the literacy and numeracy initiative</p> | <p>8. Demonstrate a commitment to research and evidence-based inquiry and decision making</p>   | <p>9. Establish a growing presence on the national and international scene</p>                   |

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