

Beyond Measurement: Accompanying Schools in Implementing Change

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Introduction

Implementing meaningful and sustainable change in any school setting is a challenge. However, implementing change in a high school environment is more demanding because of the autonomous functioning of administrative units and close knit structure of the various departments. Getting people to share a common vision and work on shared goals for school improvement is not an easy task in this environment. Recognizing this factor and acknowledging that ultimately, what all key players want in any school is success for all its students, it is possible then to step back and analyze the current school status and then step forward with goals and objectives that will define attainable success for all.

The success of secondary school students is influenced by a variety of factors and conditions, including student engagement, school climate, teaching strategies, programs that offer choices and respect learning styles, staff commitment and expertise, and school leaders who are able to negotiate all these elements, and more, into a well-structured and meaningful learning environment. Secondary schools are generally encouraged to offer all their students choices in programs, courses of study and pathways valued for their high quality and high expectations.

This paper presents a made to measure support program that helps secondary schools in implementing change, developing a culture of staff commitment and student success. The program, called *Destination Réussite (Destination Success)* was developed initially in publicly funded French-language schools across Ontario. Despite many government initiatives aimed at improving student success at the secondary level, one component was still missing: how to intervene **directly** at the school level to improve student success for all students in the school and in the classroom. Previous and current initiatives focused their efforts mostly at the board level, and involved Student Success Leaders who were either school board directors, superintendents, or designated project leaders. It is therefore important to signal that the approach described in *Destination Réussite* is an attempt to change the culture of learning and commitment within the school itself. In contrast to a more traditional view of education at the secondary school level where learning was viewed generally as the student's responsibility, this approach develops strategies to work directly with school personnel toward an understanding of the essential role of

school principals and teachers in stimulating student learning (Marzano, Waters and McNulty, 2005). The aims of *Destination Réussite* are two fold:

- a) reduce the gaps in student outcomes in the 20% of Ontario's French-language secondary schools that are systematically under-performing in province wide testing, credit accumulation, student retention, and graduation rates;
- b) maximize opportunities for Ontario's French-language secondary students to be engaged in experiential learning through dual credit courses with colleges, Specialist High Skills Majors, expanded co-op, more trade certification, and other forms of learning, allowing students a hands-on approach to their pathways of study.

Some of the positive results of the outcomes are:

- increased student engagement
- improved student achievement in province-wide testing, credit accumulation and overall learning
- equal learning opportunities for all students: reducing the gap.

Some of the means to achieve these aims are:

- increasing targeted professional development and building capacity in each school setting;
- using data to choose SMART objectives; and
- monitoring progress and raising the bar with high expectations.

Staff of the Ontario Ministry of Education work directly with selected schools and school boards to identify the needs and priorities for each school in the program, develop plans and strategies, make resources available, and help schools monitor their progress in order to set each student on a path to success. The program is spread over a three-year period.

Context

The Education System in Ontario

In Canada, elementary and secondary education falls under the jurisdiction of provincial governments. In Ontario, Canada's most populous province with over 12 million people, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the system of publicly funded elementary and secondary schools, in accordance with the priorities and goals set by the provincial government. The ministry is responsible for issuing curricula, for setting requirements for student diplomas and certificates, and for providing funding to school boards for instruction and operations. In 2007-08, the government's investment in elementary and secondary education (for students ranging from 4 to 18 years old) is equivalent to about US\$ 18 billion.

In 1998, following a series of important education reforms in Ontario, 72 publicly funded autonomous school boards were established across the province: 60 English-language and 12 French-language. This large education system counts almost 5000 schools (approx. 4000 elementary and 900 secondary) serving over two million students (1.4M elementary and 0.7M secondary). Collectively, the Ontario school boards employ almost 126,000 teachers. The 12 French-language boards serve about 90,000 students from Junior Kindergarten (age 4) to Grade 12 (age 17), and oversee immense territories, from 2,000 to 26,000 square miles. These boards serve 403 schools: 312 elementary and 91 secondary. The vast majority of these French-language schools are small: 67% of secondary schools have less than 300 students, as do 77% of elementary schools.

The Ontario Ministry of Education developed a Strategic Direction in 2005 which featured three key goals:

- Improving student achievement
 - By 2008, at least 75% of grade 6 students will perform at or above the standard on the provincial reading, writing, and mathematics tests (was 55% in 2002-03)
- Closing the gaps in student achievement
 - 85% of students will graduate from high school within one year of normal

graduation in 2010-11 (was 68% in 2003-04)

- Increasing confidence in publicly funded education

The elaboration of this provincial strategy was influenced by the work of Michael Fullan and his colleagues (Fullan, 2003; Barber and Fullan, 2005; Fullan, Hill and Crévola, 2006) on large-scale educational reform.

The Challenges for Secondary School Students

Challenges facing secondary school students in Ontario were identified through a province-wide study by Alan King (2005) commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Education. From his analysis of four high school student cohorts, King pointed to the early warning signs of high school failure. For example, King found that a single failure in any course dramatically reduces the likelihood of a student graduating in four years. Students failing to accumulate credits at a pace leading to the required 30 or more credits by Grade 12 are at risk of dropping out. King's study also pointed to a pattern of apparent inequities within the education system. Examining patterns of marks or grade distributions, he detected three signs that the system was not working in the best educational interests of some students. He found abnormally high failure rates, a large percentage of failing marks raised to 50%, and a skew overall in marks distribution toward low marks for students in applied and workplace English courses. By contrast, the marks of students in university-bound English courses were more evenly distributed, and skewed toward higher marks. In mathematics, marks were more similar in their distribution among the types of courses, but there was a very marked rate of failure and percentage of marks raised to 50% in the Grade 9 applied math course. While over the course of four cohorts of students from 2000-01 to 2003-04, mathematics failure rates declined and marks increased gradually, King reported that even for students of academic math in Grade 10, almost 40% received final marks of 60% or less in the last cohort he examined. King asked: "Is it educationally sound to make a "required" subject such a high-risk experience for students?" (King, 2005, p.40). One of his recommendations was to offer a program of credit recovery for students who had failed some courses along the way and a ministry policy was immediately put in place to allow this type of program in the province's schools.

Following on from the conclusions of King's study, the Ministry of Education commissioned researchers from the Hospital for Sick Children under the leadership of Dr. Bruce Ferguson to conduct a large-scale study of high school leavers, focusing particularly on the factors contributing to students leaving school early and those contributing to keeping them in school (Ferguson et al., 2005). The study's main finding was that young people struggling with a multitude of risk factors are at the same time determined to make better lives for themselves. The major contributors to students leaving school were disconnection and disengagement with the school culture and school community, rather than their personal and family circumstances, as one might have suspected. A key recommendation was that every student who is "at risk" of not succeeding in school needs to be paired with a caring adult—teacher, guidance counselor or administrator—who will personally work with, and provide advice to, the individual student. In the French-language school system, a similar study was done by Gratien Allaire (2005) which concurred with Ferguson's findings. It served to reiterate the importance of a shared responsibility for student success and the importance of having caring adults who intervene early with students at risk of failing and/or dropping out. Students voiced the concern that no one cared if they were at school and that, if someone had taken the time to develop a meaningful relationship with them, they might have reconsidered dropping out of school.

Intervention Strategies

When it comes to developing intervention strategies aimed at improving student achievement and student success, recent research suggests that external intervention teams are more effective than internal teams due to issues of power relationships (mentoring), credibility, and confidence. Considering the high stakes for students, Boyle (2006) makes a strong case for rapid intervention in failing schools. While he argues that there is a powerful moral imperative to improve failing schools, Boyle insists that these schools can only be fixed from within. One of the keys to successful interventions is to have external teams work with the internal teams of a school so that school leaders and staff can pool their strengths and efforts. Boyle also recognizes that compassionate intervention is efficient and repairs collateral damage, while creating better conditions for sustained improvement. Marzano, Walter and McNulty (2005) discuss the positive effect that school principals have on student outcomes, although the influence is indirect. This influence of principal leadership is mediated through teachers and other school members.

Combining principal leadership, school staff commitment and external team intervention has the most potential for successfully implementing improvement plans and strategies.

Blankstein (2004) points to the importance of having an overarching strategy for ensuring success for all students. Such a strategy includes having an improvement plan for all students, having systems in place to quickly identify those in need, providing a continuum of support and targeted strategies for low-achievers, and publishing results on closing the achievement gap. Similarly, Leithwood (2005) argues that to be successful, schools must develop a clear sense of purpose and foster teacher engagement and commitment to improvement. This requires effective leadership, which involves setting a clear sense of direction considered valuable by everyone, and also a positive influence, by encouraging school members to move towards the established goals for improvement.

Finally, Earl and Katz (2006) demonstrate the importance of data analysis in monitoring student achievement. By becoming good users of data to positively impact student achievement, school leaders can develop three crucial capacities: an inquiry habit of mind (creating or locating the knowledge that will be useful to them along the way), data literacy, and a culture of inquiry. These authors argue that to improve schools, data can and should be a vital force in the change process, thus providing some of the groundwork for defining improvement plans and implementing strategies. Monitoring progress through data analysis becomes essential throughout the whole process.

Approach

All school boards are expected to improve student achievement, with or without external assistance. Since *Destination Réussite* is an intervention program initially developed to help more than 20% of French-language secondary schools in the province to improve student success, certain criteria were used to identify schools most in need of help and support in implementing improvement plans.

The criteria used to determine eligibility for a French-language school's participation are:

- Less than 75% of students having passed the standardized Grade 10 literacy test
- Less than 20% of Grade 9 Applied Math students having met the provincial norm in their standardized test
- Less than 70% of Grade 9 Academic Math students having met the provincial norm in their standardized test
- Less than 72% of Grade 9, 10 and 11 students having accumulated the expected number of credits
- School suspension rate of 10% or more
- Annual school leaver rate of 5% or more
- Annual rate of transfer from French-language school to English-language schools of 5% or more

Schools meeting four or more criteria were deemed eligible for the intervention program. The decision to participate in the program is entirely voluntary and starts with the combined approval of school board, school principal and staff. This ensures buy-in at both the board and school levels, and prevents resistance often seen with top-down impositions. A pilot school board and a selected school volunteered to help validate the intervention program before it became a province-wide initiative. This step was crucial in defining implementation guidelines and ensuring that realistic goals were set from the start of the program.

Beginning in October 2006 of the first year of the program, a team of *Destination Réussite* project leaders was created with the following profile:

- Secondary school principals and vice-principals
- Experience in building capacity: various roles in schools or boards such as consultants, peer mentoring or other support roles
- Excellent communication skills with all partners
- Experience with implementing change in a secondary school environment
- Expertise in planning, coaching and assessing strategies and impact

Once recruited, the team acquired knowledge on:

- Ministry initiatives concerning student success strategies

- Other ministry initiatives that could support school improvement
- How to integrate ministry initiatives and school board visions into school improvement plans
- Various resource materials, strategies and training available to help schools
- Development of tools that enable schools to achieve goals throughout the program

The team's major role in the intervention program is to accompany school principals and staffs in defining their improvement plans and support them in achieving their improvement goals. Because the *Destination Réussite* team uses mentoring and coaching strategies, it is not in their mandate to supervise school teams and school leaders. The supervisory officer (superintendent) of the school board is responsible for this. In separating coaching from the official supervision of a school, principals indicate that the non-threatening and helpful environment that is created, helps to foster frank and open discussions and facilitates a positive attitude towards being included in an improvement model.

The *Destination Réussite* team then meets with a team from the school board consisting of the director of the board, the superintendent for the selected school, the board leader for Student Success, the board leader for the French-language planning policy, and a team from the selected school consisting of the school principal and designated staff. These three teams work together to ensure effective project management, to provide support in planning improvement, and to offer support, resources, advice, information, and feedback on the improvement plan and process. In order to ensure a collegial working environment and a non-judgmental climate, *Destination Réussite* team members have good listening skills and demonstrate high levels of empathy. It is also important at this meeting to verify the school team's willingness to participate in the program, as well as making sure that the school improvement plan and board vision are aligned from the very start. The school principal's leadership is highly valued and is essential to the implementation of the school improvement plan. If for some reason it is deemed that the principal and school staff do not want to participate in *Destination Réussite*, then the school is withdrawn from the program. A collaborative approach is needed at all times.

The work of the teams after the initial meeting at the board level is then set in the school environment where the particular situation of the participating school is assessed. Again, the school principal will determine who will be working with him or her on the school team. Some schools have more than one team, depending on the size of the staff. Since the teachers will play very significant roles in determining needs and assessing areas of improvement in the school, it is recommended that classroom teachers, guidance staff, special education services and other support staff be included in the composition of the school teams. This gives more people a chance to look at the entire school environment. Some specific diagnostic tools were developed for this assessment. They include:

- A survey for students and for staff to assess school climate and student engagement;
- An assessment of school effectiveness including: teaching strategies, planning and implementation strategies, student success initiatives, use of data, school activities, transition, collaboration, partnerships;
- Self reflective questionnaire on teaching practices; and
- School profile.

The questionnaires help increase student and staff participation, but also help prioritize areas in need of improvement. A graphic scorecard was developed to provide a comprehensive snapshot of all indicators measured. The meetings and the tools allow the team members and the teaching staff to identify their needs and priorities for professional development. Table 1 shows the topics of discussion in the assessment of school effectiveness.

1. Teaching and learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational resources • Curriculum • Instructional and learning strategies 	4. Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Success plan • Training • Resources 	7. Climate for Integration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of belonging to the school community • Diversity of background
2. Evaluation and Data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation • Data 	5. Student Success <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation among stakeholders • Intervention with students • Identification and follow-up 	8. Collaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional learning community • Shared leadership
3. Climate for Interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Code of conduct 	6. School life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of belonging to the French-language culture • School activities • School facilities 	9. Partnerships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With parents • With the community

Table 1: Topics of discussion in the assessment of school effectiveness.

Following the assessment of the school and its environment, the school leaders and the teaching staff develop an improvement plan in collaboration with the *Destination Réussite* team. Budget, timelines, and measurable objectives (SMART) are elaborated. Over time, a community of learning develops from these teams, and tools such as websites and blogs foster greater communication and facilitate the expansion of professional networks. This is a welcome outcome for the staff at many of the small French-language schools who experience a feeling of isolation because these schools are geographically distant from one another.

Once priorities are chosen and goals are set, it is then possible to define common ground for professional development and training for all the schools involved in the intervention program. It is important that a made to measure approach for staff development be used for each school since no two schools have the same improvement plan. However, regional and provincial training sessions focused on common needs provide occasion for networking between schools and facilitate an exchange of ideas and winning practices. These training sessions also foster team building and eliminate the impression that the school is alone in its quest for improvement.

Some of the topics that are discussed at these sessions include: student engagement, evaluation standards and practices, differentiated instruction, classroom management, access to learning with electronic courses and resources, credit recovery, literacy and numeracy. Also, discussion groups are essential to all the training sessions as they are used to determine the next steps to each training session. As a result of some of these consultations, a more focused approach for training on data use and analysis was developed for school principals and their staffs. A province-wide session was then held for all secondary school principals and one member of each school board staff. Other training sessions were defined in a similar fashion, always trying to meet the needs identified by principals and their staffs as they move forward with their improvement strategies.

Following is what teachers said was gradually appearing in their schools since they began implementing improvement plans:

- Shared responsibility for student success;
- Teaching practices that foster student engagement such as differentiated instruction, cooperative learning and choices that respect learning styles;
- Evaluating for learning ;
- Positive classroom management;
- Reduction in referrals for outside classroom discipline and suspensions;
- Higher interest among students for handing in their assignments and homework;
- Sharing of practices and mentoring between staff members; and
- Enthusiasm for professional development and professional learning communities.

During the implementation of each school's improvement plan, the *Destination Réussite* team coaches the principal and staff team on how to choose effective strategies, programs and resources. The *Destination Réussite* team gives continuous feedback and encouragement to the school team throughout the whole process. A score card helps the school measure and monitor how each SMART goal is progressing, and what needs to be addressed for improvement to continue. Also, the school board team is encouraged to participate actively in the implementation process since it can help establish future steps to encourage other schools to define and implement improvement plans. A close collaboration among all teams ensures ownership and a

sense of common responsibility for achieving goals. It also prevents the school from having an improvement plan that does not reflect or include the school board's priorities. As well, it can minimize the number of plans a school is implementing at any given time, since the school board team is aware that a school involved in the *Destination Réussite* intervention program is already engaged in a continuous improvement process.

Results

In the first year of the project in 2006-07, 10 schools were selected from among the 12 French-language school boards across Ontario according to the criteria outlined previously. A budget of \$80,000, spread over a three-year period, was given to each school in the project so that an improvement plan could be implemented over that same period of time. The money is used mostly to allow for release time for professional development and professional learning communities in each school. In the second year of the project, in 2007-08, nine more schools were added to the ministry-funded project, along with an additional 15 schools that were funded directly by school boards (budgets varied by board for these 15 schools). School boards wanted to have more schools involved in the program and were ready to help fund the initiatives of schools that wished to participate in the program but did not necessarily meet the criteria to be eligible. These schools wanted to improve other aspects of their school life as well, such as diminishing student absenteeism. There are 34 schools presently involved in *Destination Réussite*. Other schools have asked for occasional assistance from the *Destination Réussite* team to help solve particular problems or to help implement new initiatives. This help was, however, limited to two or three meetings with a school team. The interest in the project is also expanding to English-language schools, which represent the vast majority of the schools across the province. Some other provinces in Canada have also indicated interest in knowing more about the program because of its unique approach to bringing an outside team of peers to help principals and their staffs to develop strategies and plans made-to-measure for each school's needs and priorities.

In this section, we will present some of the improvements measured for the first 10 schools since they began participating in this project in 2006-07. While not all schools improved on all

indicators measured, Figure 1 shows that, for five of the key success indicators tracked across the system -- namely results on Grade 9 math and Grade 10 literacy standardized tests and expected accumulation of credits in Grades 9 and 10 -- most schools show marked improvement from 2005-06 to 2006-07.

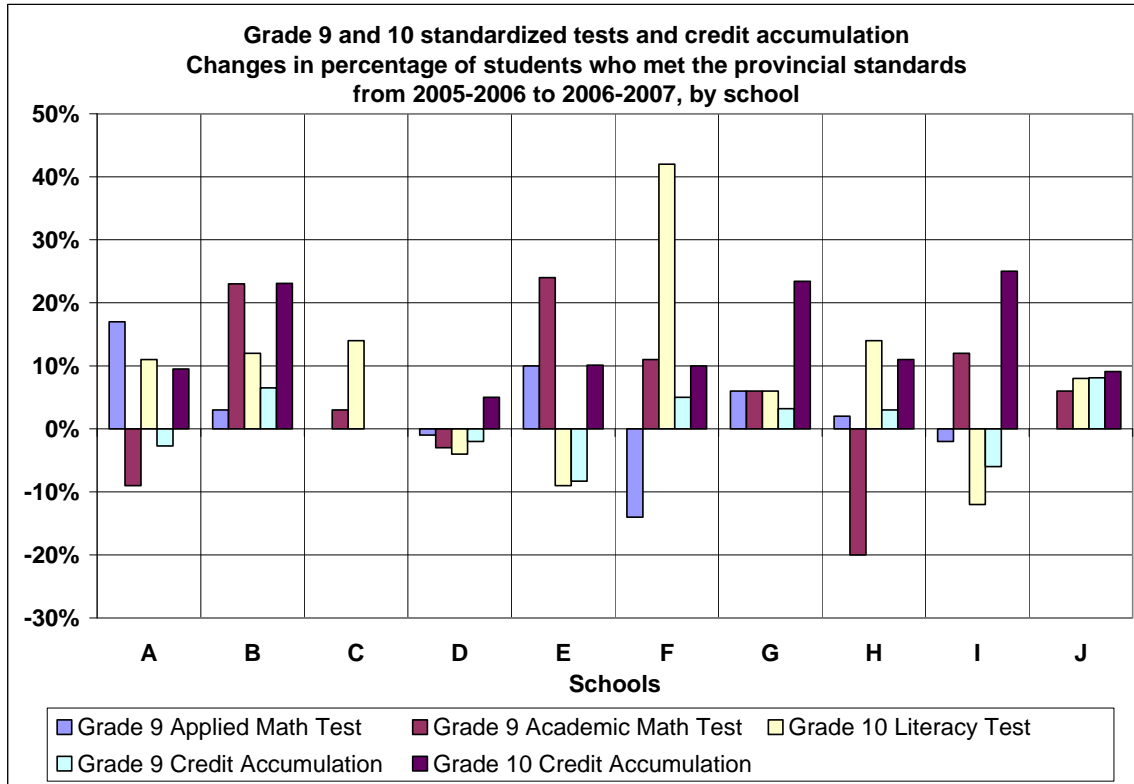


Figure 1: Results for Grade 9 and 10 indicators for 10 schools in the program.

Improvement along these five key indicators is considered a good sign of success, as these indicators are closely linked to the completion of the requirements for a high school diploma. Among the indicators, success on the Grade 10 literacy standardized test is particularly important as the test is both a measure of essential literacy skills and a requirement for high school graduation. It is interesting to note that anecdotal evidence indicates that schools showing little or no improvement appear to be the ones offering the strongest resistance to change, and displaying the lowest levels of engagement in the intervention process.

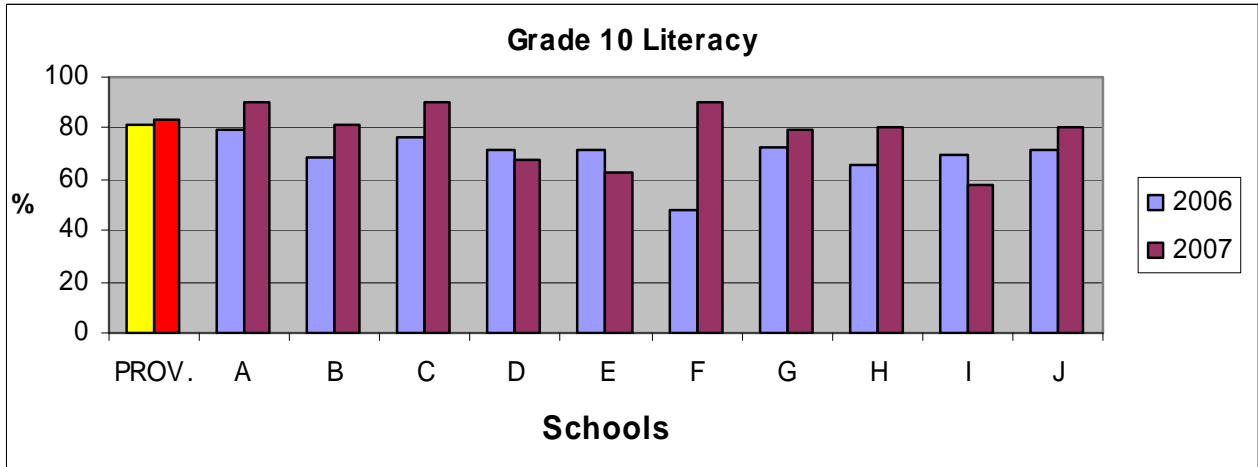


Figure 2: Shows the progress of the 10 schools in comparison with the province's results in the provincial literacy test.

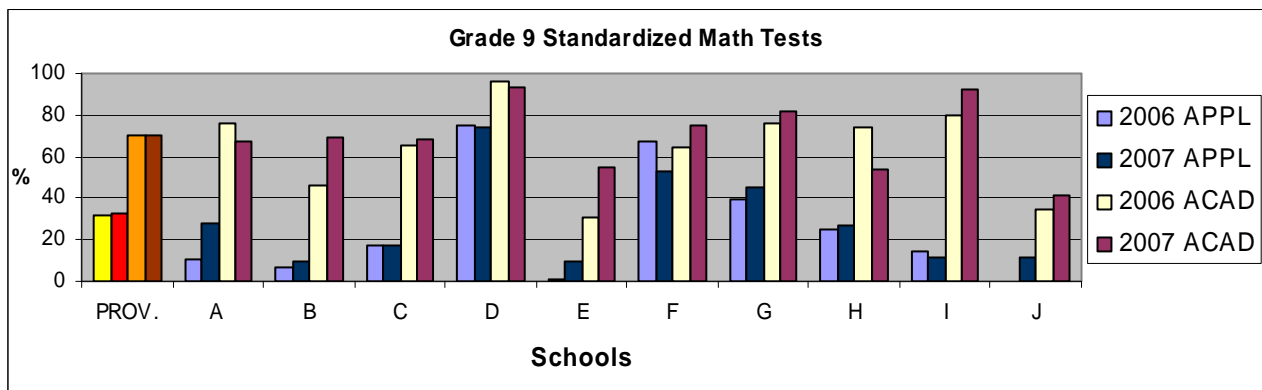


Figure 3: Shows the progress of the 10 schools in comparison with the province's results in the Grade 9 provincial Mathematics tests for both Applied (APPL) and Academic (ACAD) programs.

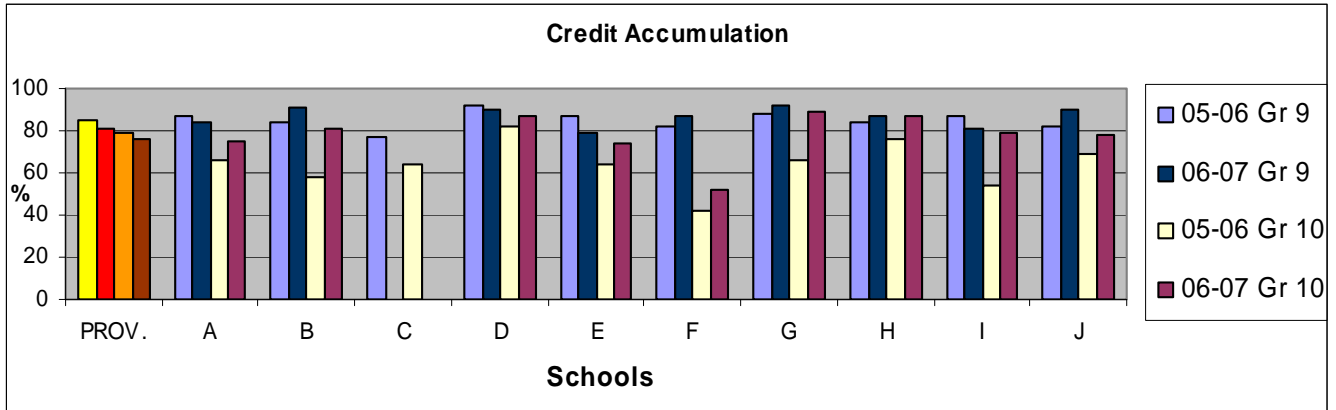


Figure 4: Shows the progress of the 10 schools in credit accumulation for Grades 9 and 10 compared to the rest of the province's results.

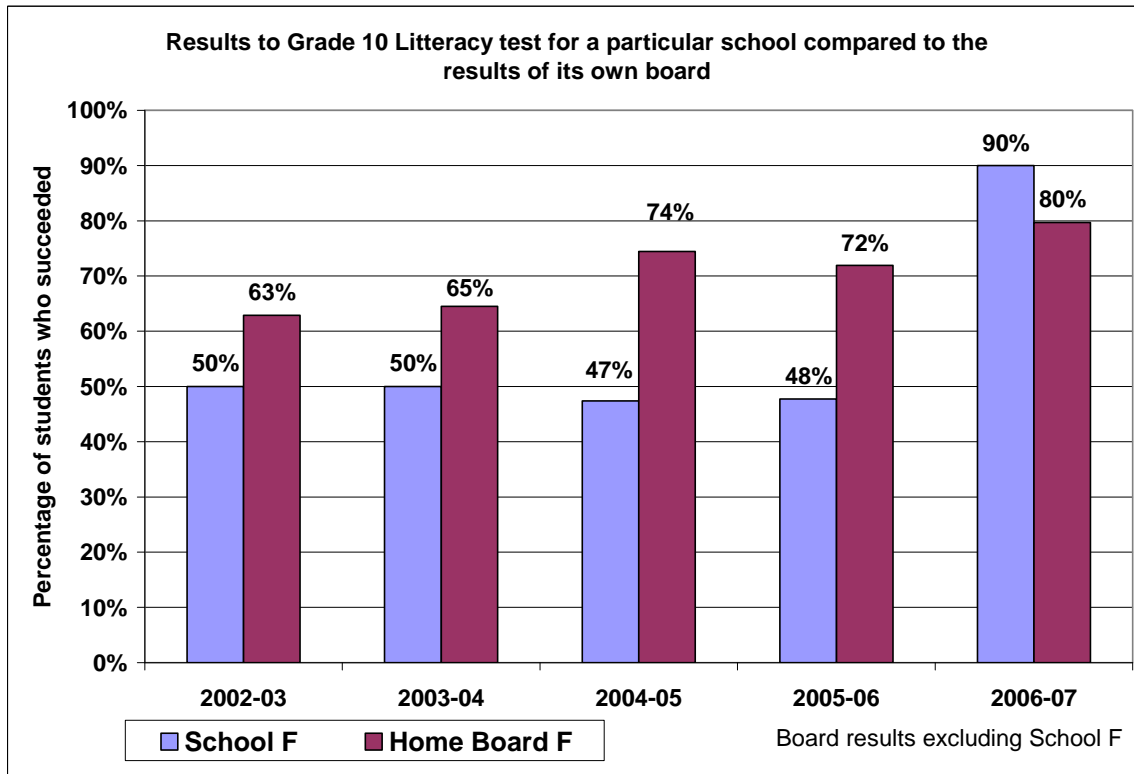


Figure 5: Shows how targeted efforts in a particular school, focused on improving literacy skills, have translated into a marked increase in the percentage of students who successfully passed the Grade 10 literacy test.

The collaborative efforts of the school team to implement specific literacy-enhancing strategies in all their programs, and focus on better reading practices, were outlined in the school's

improvement plan. Other indicators such as reduction of school suspensions, reduction of school leavers, and retention of students in French-language schools, are also measured.

Overall results show promising signs of continuous improvement in the schools participating in *Destination Réussite*. Some schools have set very high expectations in their improvement plans while others have set more modest goals. Judging from all the goals that were outlined in the schools' plans, all are raising the bar for their students and taking measures toward keeping it raised. The growing awareness for working responsibly together as a school team for ensuring success for all students, and involving students in this commitment, has had a positive impact on the schools participating in *Destination Réussite*. Even though this program is a relatively new initiative, the greatest impact that has been felt so far is not just one that can be quantified, but rather qualified. Leaders, staff and students are working together on problem-solving and defining expectations to achieve success. When regional and provincial training is offered, enthusiastic and dynamic participants are happy to discuss issues that launch them into questioning and finding answers. Feedback forms from these sessions all testify to this success.

Conclusion

The approach presented here is rooted in recent research advocating supportive and coaching interventions for schools in difficulty. School leaders and teaching staff must be engaged in the intervention strategy if it is to be effective, and data must be made available and must be used to inform the development of the intervention strategy. The added value of a project such as *Destination Réussite* lies in the establishment of:

- respectful coaching practices;
- made to measure planning, training and monitoring for each school;
- shared professional learning communities in schools;
- support and mentoring offered to novice school leaders;
- networking with other schools;
- exchange of successful practices among small schools that otherwise operate in relative isolation;

- support in developing different tools to facilitate improvement strategies (itineraries, pathways, communication plans, guides to data analysis, access to various websites); and
- effective budgeting and planning strategies.

The collaborative work of the *Destination Réussite* team, the board and school teams helps identify the strengths already present in each school. The intervention program builds faith in the potential for success for all students -- one student at a time, one teacher at a time, one school at a time. This stimulates a common understanding that improvement comes not only from the students, but, in large part, from the school staff. Based on clear values, capacity building, a strong accountability framework, and genuine commitment, tangible outcomes of the intervention program are: more applied and relevant teaching aimed at high expectations, constant evaluation of achievement and constructive feedback to reduce the gaps between learners, a school climate that fosters engagement and various programs acknowledging the different needs of students and teachers. All of the above are key factors in ensuring success.

“For every school to become a great school, requires not an individual school improvement effort, but a system-wide response.”

David Hopkins

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