

**Putting Literacy and Numeracy First:
Using Research and Evidence to Support Improved
Student Achievement**

***Dr. Avis Glaze, Chief Student Achievement Officer of Ontario and
CEO, The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat***

and

***Dr. Carol Campbell, Chief Research Officer for the Ontario
Ministry of Education***

Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association (AERA)
Annual Meeting, April 11 2007

Putting Literacy and Numeracy First: Using Research and Evidence to Support Improved Student Achievement

When the Government of Ontario made improvement in the publicly funded education system its top priority, it stated its intention boldly and unequivocally by setting a target for improved student achievement:

“Every student in Ontario will develop reading, writing, math and comprehension skills at a higher level by the age of 12. Progress will be measured by ensuring that by 2008, 75 percent of students reach the provincial standard.”

The current government has placed education at the centre of its mandate with a firm commitment to improvement:

“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 education and skills of our people.”

The Honourable Dalton McGuinty,
Premier of Ontario

The Ontario Ministry of Education is focusing on three key strategic goals:

- Increased student achievement;
- Reduced gaps in performance;
- Increased public confidence in public education.

These goals underpin a large-scale reform of K-12 education in Ontario, including a focus on literacy and numeracy, reduced class sizes in the primary division, student success in high schools, and improved graduation rates and future pathways.

The Ontario public education system encompasses four governance systems (all publicly funded): English public system, English Catholic system, French public system, and French Catholic system. The reforms outlined in this paper involve all of these systems.

The focus of this article is on one aspect of the Every Child Program – namely the work of The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. It is beyond the scope of this

paper to detail all the elements of the Ontario literacy and numeracy strategy. Rather the paper outlines the main phases of the strategy and provides information about key strategies and initiatives undertaken to date. In particular, the paper explores how research, evaluation, data, and other evidence have been used, applied, and developed to inform strategic decisions, evaluate and review actions, and support improved practice provincially and within districts and schools.

The Every Child Program

On June 24, 2004, the Ontario Ministry of Education put in place several actions to support greater achievement of literacy and numeracy for children in Kindergarten to Grade 6. New resources were allotted to provide intensive teacher development and ongoing support, smaller class sizes (Kindergarten to Grade 3), more focused curriculum with a daily emphasis on literacy and numeracy, targeted supports for low-achieving schools through turnaround teams, and innovation funds for local initiatives. The Every Child Program also included extensive training and capacity building for teachers and principals to raise performance in elementary schools. As well, there has been extensive support for provincially funded local innovations and the sharing of successful programs across the school system to improve students' reading, writing, and math skills. A new provincial Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was established to provide expert co-ordination of these initiatives and resources and to develop new working relationships between government, districts, and schools.

Establishment of a Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (The Secretariat) was established within the Ministry of Education on November 1, 2004. This new body was made responsible for developing and coordinating the government's literacy and numeracy strategy and for ensuring that the initiatives resulted in greater instructional effectiveness at the classroom level and improvement in student achievement. The Secretariat serves over 4,000 elementary schools across 72 school districts and 24 school authorities, including English and French, public and Catholic education systems.

At its inception, the primary purpose of The Secretariat was to establish a visible and transparent presence in the education system – one that conveyed a sense of urgency, optimism, and commitment to system improvement. We hired a very skilled and dedicated team of Student Achievement Officers (SAOs) who had a high degree of commitment to the government's goal and a proven record as curriculum and instructional leaders. The Secretariat includes regional field teams where the main role of SAOs is to work directly in partnership with districts and schools to support improvement – their daily work is “in the field” rather than in government offices. There are also central teams involving Secretariat staff

working in areas including a Research, Evaluation and Data Management Team, Capacity Building Team, Equity Team, Senior Executive Team, and Operations Team. We focused on creating a positive and demanding work culture that stressed high expectations within the context of a strong learning culture characterized by innovation, creativity, and a strong results orientation.

We developed a nine-point strategy to guide our actions into the future:

Strategy 1

Help school districts set ambitious achievement targets which reflect high expectations for student learning and assist in developing improvement plans to operationalize the targets.

Strategy 2

Establish and support teams of educators at the regional, board, and school level to drive continuous improvement in literacy and numeracy.

Strategy 3

Help classroom teachers focus on success for all students and take advantage of smaller class sizes in the primary grades by providing training on best teaching practices and the use of assessment data to guide instruction.

Strategy 4

Provide resources and professional learning to build the capacity of district and school leaders to implement best practices in literacy and numeracy instruction.

Strategy 5

Allocate resources to support target setting and school and district planning to support continuous improvement while taking into account local conditions and avoiding the “one size fits all” solution.

Strategy 6

Mobilize the system to provide equity in student outcome both by raising awareness and by providing professional development to target interventions for selected groups that continue to under perform, such as Aboriginal students, English language learners, students in special education programs, and boys.

Strategy 7

Embark on a process of community outreach and engagement, including student leaders, trustees, and parents, to build support for the literacy and numeracy initiative, K–6.

Strategy 8

Demonstrate a commitment to research and evidence-based inquiry and decision making and find effective ways to share this information with school districts and the public system at large.

Strategy 9

Establish Ontario's presence on the national and international scene as a jurisdiction that is both learning from and contributing to the knowledge base about how to improve literacy and numeracy achievement.

These strategies were identified as priorities through reviewing evidence of student achievement at that time in Ontario and through analysis of needs identified through experience of working directly in and with districts and schools.

Strategic Goals Informed by Evidence

The starting point for reform was a focus on the importance of education and a recognition that Ontario's educational performance could improve. Provincial assessments, through the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), began in 1997–98, and, while there had been some improvement over time, it was evident that the level of this improvement could be higher. In the period between 2000–01 and 2002–03, the overall provincial average result for Grades 3 and 6 combined had flat-lined at 54 percent of students achieving at or above provincial standard. The McGuinty government, elected in the fall of 2003, committed to “raising the bar” of educational achievement which underpins all of the strategic goals identified for The Secretariat. Strategies 1 and 5 specifically emphasize the use of data to inform targets, plans and resources for improvement.

As well as raising the bar overall, the government also committed to “closing the gap”, with targeted strategies to support equity of outcomes. Provincial data indicated that particular student groups continued to struggle to achieve at higher levels and gaps in performance continued to be large, for example, for English Language Learners, students with special educational needs, and boys' literacy acquisition. Alongside the provincial assessment data, local district and school data and other evidence indicated the need to continue to focus action to support Aboriginal students, students from other minority ethnic groups, and students living in poverty.

The nine strategies above were informed by data and other evidence about the current status of student achievement, as well as by a theory of action as to how best to support large-scale reform within Ontario's context. Lessons from international reform efforts were considered, including research on how to effectively build and sustain improvement. A key driving theme became the emphasis on capacity building at all levels of the system to develop teams of professionals working together for improvement and to foster partnerships and collaborative working within and across provincial, district and school levels. This is reflected in Strategies 2 and 4 above. The emphasis on partnerships and collaboration has been particularly important in a context where previous relations between government, districts, and schools in Ontario had become difficult during

the former government, due to a range of factors including prolonged union job action and a perceived lack of respect for the teaching profession. The new government began its mandate by fostering the conditions for positive change by improving collective bargaining to generate a climate of peace and stability in union relations, alongside significant investment in education and support for teachers' professional status and development.

The strategies were also informed by an understanding that partnerships with parents and community members are important in supporting both student achievement and wider confidence in public education. Strategy 7, in particular, was developed to respond to public concerns about education and parental opinions about the importance of supporting all students to learn. The commitment to reduce class sizes to maximize a conducive learning environment in the early years of school was made in response to parental concerns. The approach taken, however, has not simply focused on reduced class sizes as an end in itself, but rather draws on research evidence about the importance of differentiating instruction and supporting a range of skill and ability levels within class instruction groupings and strategies to support all learners, as reflected in Strategy 3.

Finally, and importantly, The Secretariat's approach has been informed from the outset, and continues to be, by a commitment to the importance of using, developing, and communicating evidence, including research and data, to inform decisions, strategies, and practices and to share evidence of success to support learning within and across the education system, as reflected in Strategies 8 and 9. We are committed to both learning with and from others and also to contributing to the knowledge about literacy and numeracy improvement.

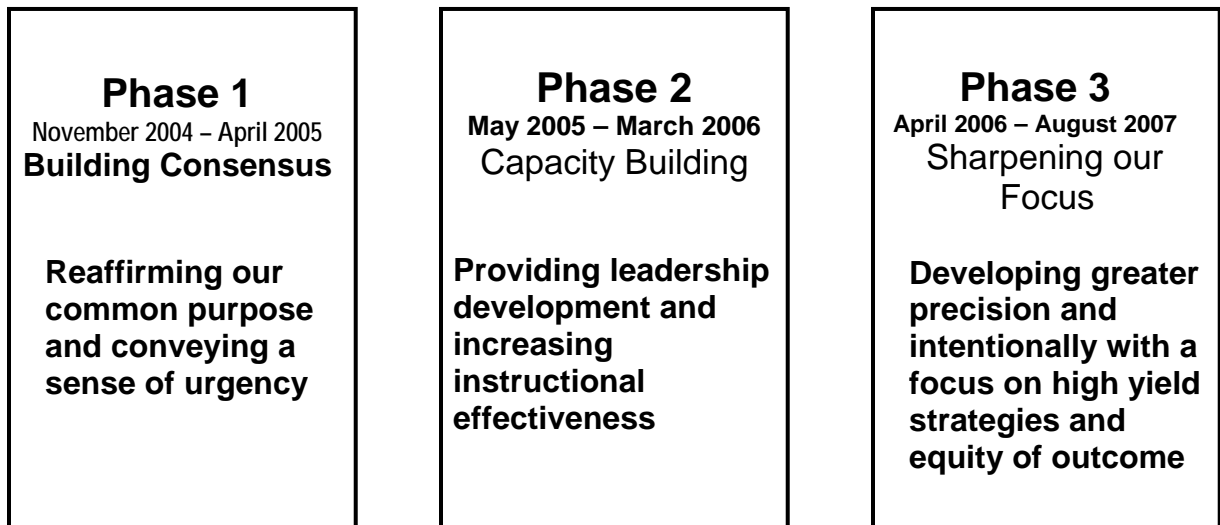
Overall, the main task of The Secretariat has been to work collaboratively with school districts to set ambitious targets, support board identified projects, build capacity, and engender a sense of goodwill and enthusiasm within the field. We have engaged teachers, principals, supervisory officers, trustees, and all those who work in schools in sharing ownership for the achievement of our goal. We have recognized their successes, built goodwill, and eschewed a "one-size-fits-all" philosophy in our efforts to validate and affirm local needs and conditions. We have acknowledged strengths while identifying areas for growth and professional development. We have promulgated the notion that "business as usual" would not bring about the results we wanted to achieve collaboratively.

Three Phases of Our Journey

The nine goals underpin The Secretariat's work; however, the focus of this work has progressed through three phases of development and implementation since the inception of The Secretariat. In brief, these phases have been (1) establishing trust with educators in the field who had been through previous years of disenchantment and upheaval; (2) building the capacity of the system for

improvement through fostering motivation, supporting teachers' and principals' professional learning, and providing new resources for schools and classrooms; and (3) the current phase, sharpening the focus on the challenges that lie ahead, especially for children in challenged circumstances.

Our Journey to Date: Key Achievements



Phase 1: Building Consensus (November 2004 – April 2005)

During this phase, the focus was on establishing The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and building mutual commitment, collegiality, and solid working relationships with districts. Generating a shared common purpose and a sense of urgency for improvement were key features of this phase.

The Secretariat's mission was developed in this phase: "We challenge ourselves, educators, and the community to seek out best thinking and build upon effective practices to maximize student achievement in literacy and numeracy." The focus was on finding ways to harness and build on identified successful practices, while also recognizing and respecting local needs and contexts.

Three main areas of research and evidence came to the fore during this phase of The Secretariat's work: (1) providing support for local initiatives; (2) identifying and sharing successful practices; and (3) target setting and improvement planning.

1. Providing support for local initiatives

The first major area of activity for The Secretariat (beginning in January 2005) was to provide resources and support for local board initiatives, based on needs identified locally by school districts as priorities to support student achievement in literacy and numeracy within their district. This strategy sought to harness both bottom-up needs, priorities and contexts with the top-down support and focus on student achievement.

Within the provincial strategy for improvement, funding was provided for over 170 local district initiatives. Some of these initiatives were very comprehensive, impacting many thousands of children, whereas others were quite small, impacting a hundred or so children in pilot projects. The initiatives represented a tremendous infusion of support – nearly \$18 million dollars (CDN) – into putting literacy and numeracy at the top of the agenda.

Districts were asked to monitor and evaluate locally the implementation and impact of these local initiatives while reporting also to The Secretariat about outcomes achieved by August 2005. Almost three-quarters of local initiative funding was used to support new initiatives that districts' identified as priorities, while the remaining funding supported extending or sustaining existing initiatives. Given the scale of new initiatives, one important indicator was the number of individuals directly involved with these initiatives. Districts reported that over 327,000 individuals (students, teachers, principals, parents, supervisory officers) had been directly impacted by these initiatives through direct involvement. It can be expected that wider effects were also experienced as individuals worked with others and in teams to spread improvement.

Another key area of inquiry was which specific student groups were being most targeted and supported by the local initiatives. Final reports included details of projects focusing on specific student populations, particularly students in special education, boys, ESL/ALF or ELD/PDF programs, Aboriginal and/or immigrant students. Of note was the large number of projects that reported a focus on "other groups" which usually referred to lower achieving students in general. The importance of recognizing the multiple and overlapping nature of targeted student populations, especially those experiencing lower achievement levels, has been important in taking our work forward to focus on all forms of educational and social disadvantage.

Overall, the majority of the first round of local initiatives involved building capacity (about 60 percent of projects) and providing resources to support teaching and learning. The most frequently used strategies were as follows (in order of frequency):

- Specific literacy strategies in-service for teachers, focusing on shared reading, reading comprehension, and oral language skills for students

- Professional learning community model for in-school literacy and/or numeracy learning teams
- Specific numeracy strategies training for teachers in the classroom including the use of math manipulatives
- Book clubs to study literacy and numeracy topics
- Methods for assessment of student achievement
- Student or staff conferences and summer institutes used to showcase or share strategies and key learnings
- Use of technology to support literacy in the classroom
- Early student identification and readiness strategies
- Family literacy and/or numeracy home school connections, development of strategies such as newsletters, materials/kits, parent information evenings and workshops
- School success planning using ideas and strategies for literacy and numeracy
- Teacher action research framework used to study specific literacy topics
- Development of demonstration classrooms for literacy and/or numeracy best practices
- Mathematics lesson programs
- Teacher mentoring and teacher modeling/coaching used in schools to support teachers for learning new literacy strategies
- Development of bookrooms in schools for reading resources for teachers

These local initiatives were specifically designed to respond to district identified needs and priorities. They provided resources and supports to foster a shared priority focus on literacy and numeracy within and across districts. Of note is that many of the local initiatives at that time were developed to meet district-wide needs, including the purchase of resources and training to support overall literacy and numeracy developments. Some districts combined this overall focus with targeting of specific student populations and/or support for schools not achieving maximally (over two-thirds of projects). However, there was a sense of the need also for system-wide initiatives to engage all teachers, principals, and superintendents in a

collective commitment and shared understanding of the literacy and numeracy priorities.

Another lesson from the first local initiatives was how to best foster local evaluation and monitoring of the outcomes achieved. The districts used a range of ways to report findings, including student achievement data, teacher/principal feedback, surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, action research, parent and student comments, and case studies. However, for districts, especially those with limited internal research capacity, assessing the impact of initiatives for student achievement proved challenging, particularly when the majority of initiatives focused on professional capacity building and reporting timelines were short. Often outcomes were broadly stated posing challenges for local monitoring and evaluation of actual outcomes achieved. This learning has helped to inform subsequent work to focus initiatives and develop more specific actions and indicators of success.

2. Identifying and sharing successful practices

As part of the first phase of building consensus, The Secretariat also initiated research projects with a focus on identifying, sharing, and celebrating effective practices for raising student achievement within districts and schools. This connects with our commitment to drawing on successful practices and fostering them more widely across Ontario. The challenge during Phase 1 of The Secretariat's work was that there was no existing mechanism for identifying and sharing such successful practices on a provincial-wide basis. As the Minister of Education commented in an interview in 2005: "Somewhere in the province it [successful practice for student achievement] has already been done. We need to find a way to share."

Two distinct, but complementary, research projects were initiated during this phase: first, the Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy project which focused on system-wide improvement at the district level and working in partnership with schools, and second, the Sites of Excellence/Successful Practices project which focused on school and classroom level practices.

2a. Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy

The purpose of this research project was to identify school boards that were demonstrating improvements in literacy and numeracy and to evaluate the strategies, actions, and outcomes associated with such improvements. Eight districts were identified that had demonstrated both substantial improvement in provincial assessment results and also had clear evidence of district strategies to

support literacy and numeracy. Case studies were conducted that involved interviews and focus groups with senior district officials, other relevant district staff, school principals, and teachers. School visits and observations were also included, as was analysis of documentary evidence and achievement data.

Across the eight districts, four overarching themes were identified which encompassed 12 key components for supporting successful district-wide practices. The overarching themes are outlined in Figure 1.

The first strategic area is ***Leading with Purpose and Focusing Direction***. The first component in this area is **leadership for learning**. This leadership involved not only individual expertise, but also, importantly, collective leadership through shared responsibilities and teamwork at district and school levels. The focus on leadership for learning involved supporting both professional learning and student learning. The second component is establishing a **vision** and shared focus on student achievement as the priority. The third component is **moral purpose** informing strategies and practices to unlock potential for improvement. This moral purpose includes the overall importance of education for economic and social development plus daily practices to support students' emotional, social, and character development. The districts had a dual commitment to students' academic achievement and their broader learning and development.

The second strategic area is ***Designing a Coherent Strategy, Co-coordinating Implementation and Reviewing Outcomes***. The first component in this area is the development of a coherent overarching **strategy** for student achievement in literacy and numeracy, for example, through system frameworks, board improvement plans, and school improvement plans. The second component is the identification and allocation of **resources** prioritized according to the system focus on improved student achievement, involving attention to staffing and also to the purchase and use of literacy and numeracy resources. A third component is effective **organization** at district, school, and classroom levels to support student achievement, including attention to the roles and responsibilities of staff at a system level and in supporting improved classroom practices. The fourth component is the routine use of system and school-level **monitoring and review** of targets and outcomes achieved, reviewing progress to inform future action, and holding to account schools and system leaders for improvement.

The next strategic area is ***Developing Precision in Knowledge, Skills and Daily Practices for Improving Learning***. One component is attention to **capacity building** to extend professional learning, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy instruction, assessment for learning, classroom management, and instructional leadership. A second component is careful attention to **curriculum development, instruction, and interventions** to improve teaching and learning for all students system-wide and within schools. The third component is the regular use and understanding of **data** at a system and school level to ensure instruction is informed by data about student learning and progress.

Figure 1: Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy (Source: Campbell, Fullan, & Glaze, 2006)



The final strategic area is ***Sharing Responsibility through Building Partnerships***. The first component in this area is fostering **partnerships**, for example, between central office and schools, among schools, and with parents, communities, and other organizations and agencies to build shared involvement in, and responsibilities, for supporting student learning. Building partnerships requires also a second component of clear **communication**, where a consistent message about raising student achievement is communicated widely, frequently, and with a sense of urgency.

The findings from this research have been communicated widely and used as the basis for professional dialogue about district improvement. The elements articulated have also informed the recent development of a district leadership strategy to bring together a group of lower performing districts with high performing districts to collectively develop solutions to support improvement – the Leadership Alliance Network for School Achievement (LANSA) during Phase 3 of The Secretariat’s development.

2b. Sites of Excellence/Successful Practices

The purposes of the Sites of Excellence Project were to:

- identify classrooms where practical and meaningful classroom strategies were contributing to student success and improved achievement in literacy and numeracy; and
- Identify schools where leadership and capacity-building activities were directly supporting improved student performance in literacy and numeracy.

School boards and authorities across the province were asked to identify one or more schools and/or one or more classrooms that they considered to exhibit successful practices. A total of 163 sites (school and classroom) provided information about their identified practices to The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (see also Campbell, Comper, & Winton, 2007).

Many of the successful practices identified are common across the 163 sites. These common practices include the following: the benefits of staff collaboration, professional learning communities and teams, professional development, use of data to inform instruction, utilizing a variety of flexible groupings of students within classrooms, making connections between priorities in school improvement plans and classroom practices, and supporting parental involvement. Other successful practices identified frequently in the teaching of *literacy* were literacy blocks and the full implementation of balanced literacy programs (including guided reading, shared reading, independent reading, and read alouds). Additional successful practices identified frequently in teaching *numeracy* include acquiring and effectively utilizing resources to support numeracy, particularly manipulatives; implementing mathematics programs; and integrating mathematics across the curriculum.

We found that there were considerable similarities in the ways that the sites across Ontario developed their successful practices. The most frequently reported factors were the importance of professional development, staff collaboration, professional learning communities and team work, focused staff meetings, staff commitment, use of data and assessment for learning, school improvement plans, acquiring and utilizing resources, parent involvement, connections to district initiatives, and supportive leadership at school and district levels. An interesting finding was that many of the same factors identified by teachers and administrators were important at all stages of developing, implementing, and sustaining successful practices.

One of the striking findings across both the Effective Districts' project and the Sites of Excellence project was that although these were conducted by two separate research teams using different approaches, there was considerable similarity in the types of "successful practices" that were identified at district, school, and

classroom levels. The findings from Ontario reflect previous research on features of district and school improvement; however, by being developed in partnership with Ontario's districts, schools, and classrooms this research also re-enforced that improvement was and could happen in the range of contexts across the province. This has helped to inform discussions about how to support tri-level improvement (province, district, and school) in key areas to support professional capacity and student achievement.

3. Target setting and improvement planning

A third strand of initial work was around the development of meaningful and appropriate targets connected to improvement plans and actions. The approach taken in Ontario is that districts identify their own targets for improvement towards the overall provincial goal for student achievement. The specific strategy for generating targets varies with local districts, some starting with school targets and then establishing the overall district strategy and others setting their overall target first and then working to identify individual school targets.

An early learning was that setting targets that were appropriate required professional dialogue and development to balance ambitious and realistic targets for improvement. In the first round of target-setting, some districts set very low or even negative targets. A process of discussion with The Secretariat's SAOs involved working towards realistic targets embedded in district and school improvement plans with actions linked to priorities. This process includes both developing the use of data to inform decisions at district and school levels, plus the provision of a resource document which provided research information about effective improvement planning processes (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). Subsequent developments in targets and improvement planning have supported these processes so that they are closely connected to literacy and numeracy priorities and focus on student achievement at district and school levels.

Phase 2: Capacity Building (May 2005 – March 2006)

In this phase, the strategy was further developed to provide an extensive focus on building capacity at district and school levels to support rapid and sustained improvement of both professional learning and student learning. A range of professional learning initiatives was implemented, including support for principals' leadership development and professional learning teams at district and school levels, use of webcasts to provide e-learning opportunities for teachers, and the further funding of local initiatives to meet district needs to support professional capacity and student achievement. Several very large professional learning development initiatives were launched in this period as well; specifically Differentiated Instruction and Shared Reading professional development were two

province-wide initiatives using a cascade model to reach into every school in the province.

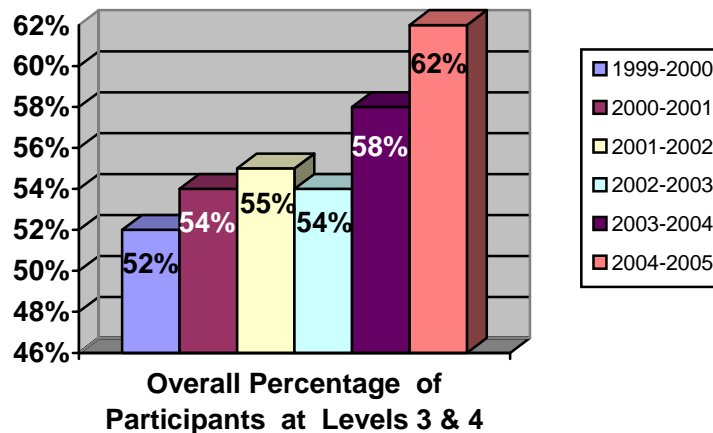
During this phase, The Secretariat further extended its research and evaluation work, with a particular emphasis on evaluating the implementation and outcome of the range of strategies being supported across Ontario. In this section, we outline three areas where the use of research, data and evidence has been important in informing decisions and actions: (1) understanding data for improvement; (2) building professional capacity provincially; and (3) supporting equity of outcomes.

1. Understanding data for improvement

Phase 2 encompassed the first start of a full school year within The Secretariat's existence (The Secretariat was established *within* a school year, with first initiatives beginning in January 2005). Phase 2 also involved the first reporting of provincial assessments. The development, administering, and reporting of provincial assessments are the responsibility of an independent agency, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). The Secretariat makes extensive use of EQAO data not only to inform strategic decisions and initiatives but also to support our SAOs' professional dialogue in the field to focus their work in partnership with districts and schools.

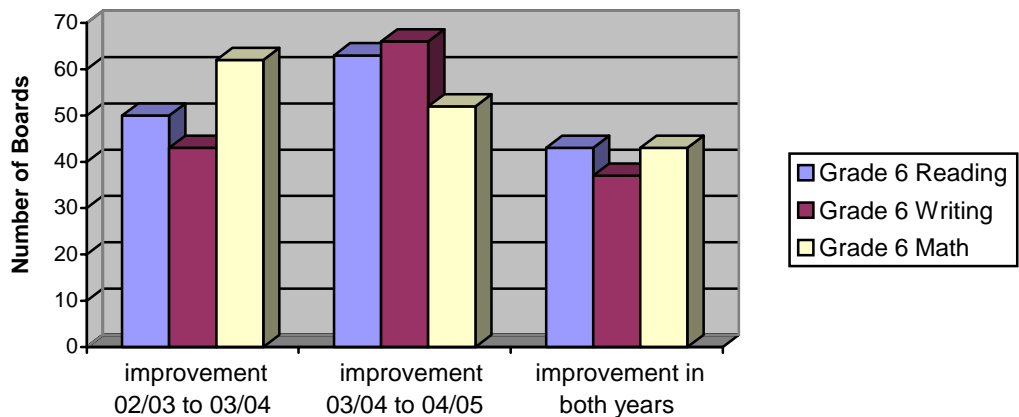
The 2004–05 provincial assessment results (reported in October 2005) were encouraging. The overall combined provincial average for Grades 3 and 6 Reading, Writing, and Mathematics indicated that since the Government had come to office (2003–04 school year) and the literacy and numeracy strategy had been developed, the province was demonstrating substantial overall improvement after a period of flat-lined performance (from 1999–2000 to 2002–03 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Overall Provincial Average Achievement Results (Grades 3 and 6 Combined) 1999–2000 to 2004–05



Importantly, there was evidence at the district-level to suggest the Ontario education system was on an upward trajectory with results up in the vast majority of districts (see Figure 3). In Grade 6, comparing the 2004–05 results with 2003–04, 92 percent of districts improved in writing, 87 percent improved in reading, and 72 percent improved in mathematics. As well as raising the bar with improved results, there was also evidence of a closing of the gap where lower performing boards were also improving their results (see Figure 4).

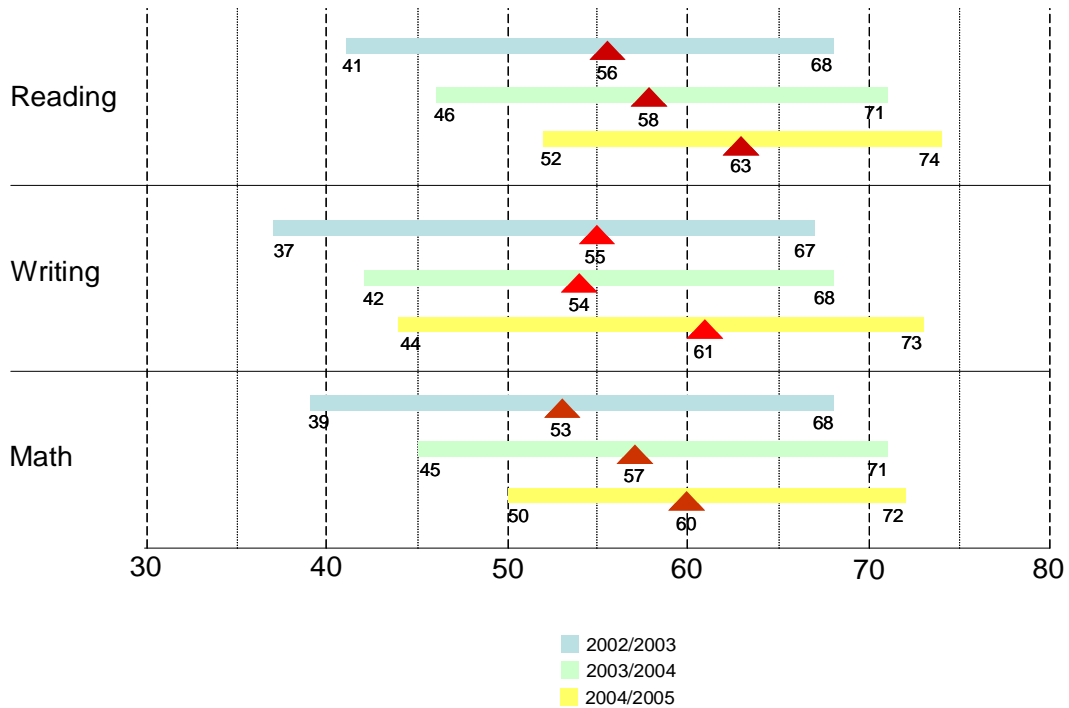
Figure 3: District Improvement 2002–03 to 2004–05



As well as acknowledging improvement, our data analysis is used to identify areas for improvement and to inform adjustments to the literacy and numeracy strategy. It was evident that while a majority of districts were demonstrating year-on-year improvement, many districts were also not yet able to sustain improvement over time. Similarly, while district results were improving, there remained low-performing districts. The provincial goal of 75 percent of students achieving provincial standard in reading, writing, and mathematics by 2008 required further improvement across the system to build capacity to both accelerate and sustain improvement and to support all students to achieve. The commitment to supporting all students and to equity of outcomes also required further attention, particularly in the areas of special education and English language learners where gaps between their achievements and other students remained large and were not yet closing at that time.

This data informed The Secretariat’s Phase Two strategies with a firm emphasis on building capacity provincially and locally to support literacy and numeracy. We sought also to further develop our capacity to analyze data in order to inform strategic directions and actions in Phase 3 (as discussed further below).

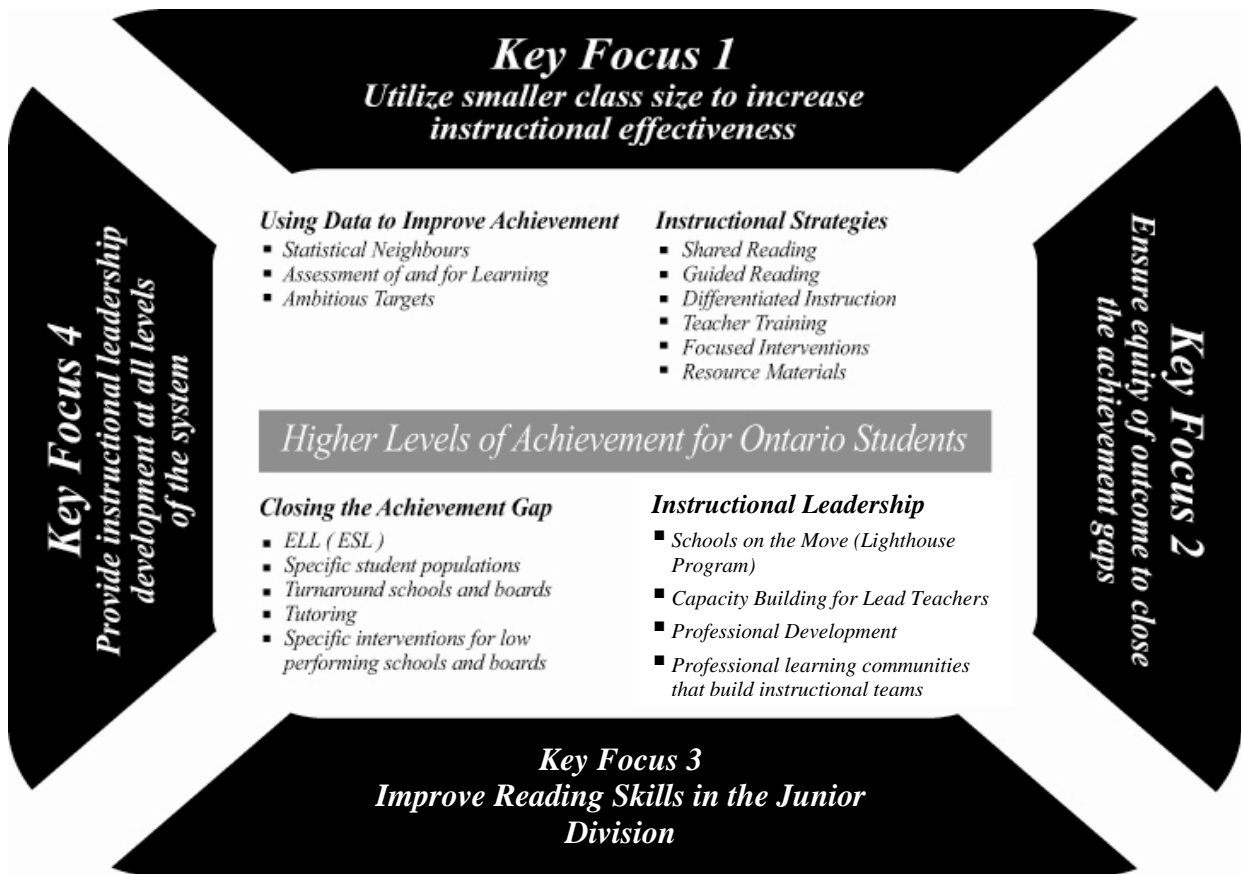
Figure 4: Range of District Grade 6 Results: 2002–03 to 2004–05



2. Building capacity provincially

During Phase 2, a second round of local board initiatives was undertaken. This round of initiatives retained the emphasis on fostering and supporting district priorities connected to local contexts and needs; however, the focus of activities was narrowed to ensure local initiatives were consistent with main areas for improvement during Phase 2. Four key areas of foci were identified to inform all strategies during Phase 2 (see Figure 5). These foci were developed through a process of strategic planning, including consideration of provincial data, experience from working directly with districts and schools, feedback from key stakeholder groups, and research and evaluation evidence gathered to inform improvement.

Figure 5: Key Focus of Phase 2: Building Capacity



As with the first round of local initiatives, districts were required to provide reports of implementation and outcomes to The Secretariat. Analysis of both the districts' initial proposals for local initiatives and their final reports indicates a shift between the first round of local initiatives (January – August, 2005) and the second round of local initiatives (2005–06 school year) (see Figure 6).

Although there were less projects in Phase 2, the same level of dollars were allocated overall (\$18 million CDN), so districts were able to use this funding to support more targeted actions with a stronger emphasis on capacity building, particularly at the school and classroom levels as well as through district-wide professional learning opportunities. About 350,000 individuals (students, parents, teachers, principals and supervisory officers) were directly involved with these local initiatives; however, as in Phase 1, the impact may be wider as these individuals connect with others and share practices.

Figure 6: Summary of Differences between Local Initiatives Phases 1 and 2

Phase 1: 2004–05

- Over 170 projects
- 60 percent of projects identified capacity building as a focus
- Investment in infrastructure – human as well as resources
- Focus on many discrete areas
- Indicators of success often broadly framed

Phase 2: 2005–06

- Less projects – over 80 projects
- 80 percent of projects identified capacity building as a focus
- Evidence of building on 2004–05 infrastructure investments
- Focus on high-yield strategies
- Measurable indicators of success

Analysis of the local board initiatives reports indicates that the initiatives did focus on the four key areas identified by The Secretariat. In the area of utilizing smaller class sizes to increase instructional effectiveness, the focus was on maximizing learning and teaching strategies within primary classrooms rather than on reducing number of students within the class per se (as this is resourced and supported through a separate class size reduction strategy). Over three-quarters of the projects directed attention to key areas of instructional effectiveness e.g., differentiated instruction, specific strategies for shared and guided reading instruction, and assessment-driven decision making. Almost half of the projects indicated a primary focus on achieving equity of outcomes. The main focus was on targeting groups of students achieving at lower levels e.g., boys, students with special education needs, ESL/ALP and ELD/PDF students, or Aboriginal students and/or students with low prior attainment. Even for projects that did not identify equity of outcome as a primary goal, the majority of projects did include strategies to support struggling learners. The third area of focus was improving junior reading skills. As a province, the majority of school districts in Ontario have a stronger foundation in early literacy (primary division) so the local initiatives in this round were identified to support junior division literacy strategies. Around one-sixth of projects indicated a primary focus on junior reading skills. However when identifying the number of students impacted, over two-thirds of the districts indicated that students in junior classrooms (grades 4 to 6) were impacted in some way by the implementation of the project. Finally, the fourth key area was strengthening instructional leadership at the school and system level. Almost half of the projects indicated a focus on instructional leadership was a priority for their local initiative.

The Phase 2 local initiatives, therefore, did focus on key areas identified as priorities for development provincially; however, these were developed in a wide range of ways to meet local needs, priorities, and contexts. Across the local initiatives in Phase 2, the following were the main areas of activity (in order of most to least frequent):

- Literacy
- Leadership
- Assessment for learning
- General instructional strategies (including differentiated instruction)
- Resource acquisition
- Numeracy
- Community engagement
- Change in organization of school (e.g., literacy block or new position).

Evaluation of the local initiatives included analysis by The Secretariat of final reports from the districts, plus case studies of specific local initiatives identified as having particularly promising practices. From this review of the evidence, approaches to local initiatives that appeared to be more successful in supporting professional learning for principals and teachers included the following: a combination of expert-led training, professional learning communities, and coaching with activities connected to school and classroom practices. Linking professional learning activities to daily school practices was important as was developing professional learning sessions that sustained an in-depth focus on a topic (although this was not regularly achieved as many sessions were on single topics rather than progressive development of a topic over several sessions). The importance of a coherent and narrow focus was also identified. Districts that appeared to be more successful in connecting their local initiatives to student achievement maintained a coherent and tight focus over the project, especially for district literacy strategies.

Of interest in relation to a focus on the use of research, evaluation, and evidence is that, compared to the Phase 1 initiatives, there was improvement in the use of local evaluation, data, and research to inform and review district projects. The majority of districts were developing research-informed strategies and monitoring to measure impact for students and educators. However, mostly this was summative evaluation of data analyzed towards the end of the project. The use of more formative approaches to evaluation to enable ongoing feedback and local adaptation of initiatives requires further development.

Capacity building was the main overarching focus of Phase 2. This involved substantial resources and support for professional development opportunities across Ontario. Therefore, alongside the locally developed initiatives outlined above, large provincial training programs were implemented. During the summer of 2006, for example, The Secretariat sponsored summer programs for teachers in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, differentiated instruction, and primary

assessment. Over 3000 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, about half of those who attended had been 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 for teaching practices. These evaluation findings indicated the importance of providing support for teachers at all stages, but especially during their early career, in instructional strategies for literacy and numeracy.

In addition to the summer programs, however, a need was identified to provide provincial professional development opportunities on specific teaching strategies and needs identified through analysis of provincial assessment, curriculum, and instructional materials and through review of needs articulated by partners working with The Secretariat, specifically in the areas of differentiated instruction and shared reading. Furthermore, while the summer programs were extremely well received and perceived as beneficial, they involved individual teachers volunteering to participate – what was less clear was whether the teachers had supports and opportunities to implement this learning fully back in school. The approach taken to the provincial training, therefore, was for the first time to provide professional development for teams, including teachers and the principal from every elementary school in Ontario. 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 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.

Recognition of the importance of building professional teams, including principals and teachers, also informed the development of the Leading Student Achievement: Our Principal Purpose project with the three principals' councils in Ontario. This project has involved almost 1,300 principals (and their school teams) across 38 school districts to support building professional learning communities. An independent evaluation of this initiative has been informative throughout the development, in particular in pointing to the importance of focusing on instructional strategies, data, and leadership connected to literacy goals as the main purpose of professional learning community activities rather than more general team-building processes.

A further learning from the capacity building work during Phase 2 (and continuing in Phase 3) is the need for assiduous attention to the balance between taking teachers and principals out of school for professional learning and the need to foster and support job-embedded professional learning within schools. To support school-based learning, a Coaching Institute has been developed to provide training and materials to develop the use of literacy and numeracy coaching within school

teams. Evaluation feedback from the first Coaching Institute (summer 2006) indicates that participants found this useful and were looking forward to developing ways to further implement coaching process both for individuals and whole schools with a focus on supporting literacy and numeracy knowledge.

Ontario is geographically large and travel distances to provincial events are a consideration. The Secretariat decided therefore to also develop professional learning strategies that could be accessed directly by teachers in a time and location convenient for them. The Ministry provides a range of curriculum and instructional resources and The Secretariat has also developed guides and materials for distribution to teachers. Of particular interest, however, in putting research and other information directly into the hands of teachers in a useable and useful way has been the development of a webcast series (available at: www.curriculum.org). Monthly webcasts (which can be played on demand) are provided on a series of topics encompassing literacy, numeracy, equity of outcomes, and related strategies to support student achievement. All webcasts include research and evidence to inform practice. In 2005–06, for example, webcasts included presentations/input from Ben Levin, Michael Fullan, Michael Barber, Carmel Crévola, David Booth, Deborah Loewenberg Ball, Michelle Boucher, Jim Cummins, Asa Hilliard III, Jeffrey Wilhelm, Helen Raham, Lorna Earl, and Louise Stoll. These webcasts are watched by literally thousands of teachers; they are also being used in DVD format in district professional development programs and by faculties of education for teacher education sessions.

The Secretariat has, therefore, used research and evaluation, both to inform capacity-building practices and to evaluate the development and implementation of outcomes achieved from different approaches to capacity building.

3. Equity of outcomes

We are committed to closing the gap in performance outcomes. This is woven through all initiatives, including the capacity building and local initiatives outlined above. In addition, in recognition of the persisting gaps in performance for identified groups of students, The Secretariat has worked in partnership with districts and with other branches of the Ministry of Education to support specific initiatives targeted to equity needs. Again, these strategies have developed through a recognition of data about lower achievement levels and have both drawn on and developed research to inform practice. While we are working to address multiple forms of educational and social disadvantage, in this paper we will mention briefly four specific initiatives targeted for special education, boys' literacy, English Language Learners, and Aboriginal learners.

In the area of special education, The Secretariat has worked in partnership with Ministry colleagues in the Special Education Policy and Program's Branch and with the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) to support implementation of

recommendations from *Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6*. (2005a). In a similar manner to the local board initiatives described previously, funding was distributed to school districts to implement local proposals for supporting students with special education needs, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. An evaluation framework was developed which included districts providing local reports on implementation and outcomes (see CODE, 2006). Analysis of the implementation of district initiatives indicated the following changes in teaching practices (by frequency): differentiated instruction, literacy, assistive technology, professional learning communities, universal design, assessment for learning, and numeracy. The vast majority of reports also indicated positive benefits for students. A series of lessons learned at school, district, and provincial levels are outlined in the research report (CODE, 2006), many of which reinforce the findings from The Secretariat's local board initiatives analysis, for example: the nature of professional learning combining job-embedded approaches and professional learning communities; the importance of the effective use of data; and the development of the role of the principal as an instructional leader in the areas of literacy and numeracy.

In the area of boys' literacy, the Ministry established a Boys' Literacy Advisory Team in January 2005. A manual of research-based classroom strategies was produced and widely distributed – *Me Read? No Way* (2005b). To further support boys' literacy initiatives, the Ministry (led by the Curriculum, Assessment and Policy Branch in partnership with The Secretariat) invited schools to submit proposals to conduct classroom-based teacher inquiry projects to explore the effectiveness of interventions to improve boys' reading and writing skills. The response to this call for teacher inquiry research was phenomenal – over 1,000 proposals were received, of which a total of 143 were funded for a three-year period (to spring 2008). The Ministry has also contracted a university research team to support the project. The team responds to Teacher Team inquiries and has produced regular informational newsletters, instructional DVDs, and delivered a series of professional development workshops across the province. The teacher inquiry projects are currently at the mid-point of implementation. The interim findings are encouraging as they indicate increases in achievement as well as improvements in boys' interest and enthusiasm for reading. The final report on this project is scheduled for fall 2008. In addition, on the basis of EQAO data, 549 schools were identified with very large gaps between boys' and girls' literacy achievements. These schools received funding to purchase literacy resources of particular interest to boys, although teachers report that both boys and girls were accessing the new materials.

There has been considerable development also in the area of support for English Language Learners, in response to accelerating demographic change in Ontario. About 20 percent of elementary students in Ontario's English-language schools have a first language other than English and it is predicted that this percentage will increase. The professional resource, *Many Roots, Many Voices: Supporting*

English language learners in every classroom (2006), draws on research about second language acquisition and shares effective practice. Additional resources will be available in the fall of 2007, including developmental continua for assessing and tracking students' growing proficiency in English over a multi-year period, drawing on work done by the Council of Europe to validate descriptors of performance in second language acquisition. Implementation of a new K–12 policy for English Language Learners will begin in the fall of 2008, outlining Ministry expectations for initial assessment, the provision of English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development programs, and data collection, and identifying effective programs and approaches to support these learners.

There is also considerable work in process to generate data, research, and strategies to support Aboriginal students. Within The Secretariat, local initiative funding has been provided for northern boards working together to support Aboriginal students' achievements, particularly through oral language strategies. Case study materials profiling district approaches (Maggisano & Campbell, 2006) have been published and webcasts produced. Within the Ministry, an Aboriginal Education Office has been established and a First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework was launched in January 2007. The framework includes support for the development of policies for voluntary, confidential Aboriginal student self-identification for the purposes of data collection and analysis, and research-based instructional strategies.

The above outline of equity of outcomes initiatives is selective and illustrative only, as describing the full details of work in this area is beyond the scope of the current paper. Given our focus on how to use research, evaluation, and data to inform both policy and practice, however, the key point is that recognition of data about persisting inequalities for student groups has resulted in both strategic initiatives and supports for improved practice, including through inquiry processes and application of research-informed practices.

Phase 3: Sharpening Our Focus (April 2006 – August 2007)

In this current phase of our work, The Secretariat is developing greater precision with a focus on strategies for school improvement in all contexts, particularly for low-performing schools, and to focus on equity of outcome for groups identified as low performing and/or underachieving. We are now focusing on five key areas:

- Focused interventions for low-performing boards and schools
- Capacity building on high yield strategies for student improvement
- Equity of outcome for all students
- Community outreach and engagement to build support for our initiatives
- Communication of successes and outstanding challenges

During this phase, we are making extensive use of research, evaluation, and data to inform our strategies. In this section, we will focus on three specific areas: (1) the Statistical Neighbours project for data analysis; (2) profiling and sharing practices from improving schools; and (3) identifying and intervening in areas of low performance. During this phase, a focus on capacity building and equity of outcomes also continues to develop and to be woven through these strategies.

1. Statistical Neighbours Project

As a relatively new organization with a mandate to support improved student achievement across all of Ontario's 4,000 plus elementary schools, The Secretariat needed to develop the capacity to quickly and effectively analyze data for all elementary schools in Ontario in order to inform the literacy and numeracy strategy, to examine the nature of school performance in a range of contexts, and to evaluate achievement results. This work has progressed throughout The Secretariat's phases of work, but has come to the fore particularly in the current phase of development and implementation.

Through the Statistical Neighbours project, we have developed a dynamic tool for analysis of queries about elementary school performance, characteristics, and contexts. This is enabling identification of schools that are demonstrating substantial improvement in different contexts, particularly those "beating the odds", and schools that are showing limited or declining improvement, particularly in less disadvantaged contexts. This analysis both enables us to recognize and celebrate educational successes in challenging contexts and to remove excuses for under-performance in less challenging circumstances. Informed by this data analysis and associated qualitative research into the strategies and practices of schools in a range of contexts, this phase of the strategy is focusing on supporting lateral capacity building for professional learning across schools and focusing interventions for schools with consistently low achievement.

A driving purpose in the development of the Statistical Neighbours analysis has been to provide decision-support to The Secretariat based on developing a fuller understanding of student achievement as it pertains to all elementary schools in Ontario. A detailed analysis was carried out of a range of data sources, including Ministry-held data, data from the provincial assessment agency, and Statistics Canada demographic data, in order to determine which factors were most educationally meaningful. Data included in the Statistical Neighbours analytical tool includes:

- Typologies: EQAO performance, current results, and performance over past three years;
- Socio-economic/demographic indicators: low income, parent education, language spoken at home;

- School characteristics: size, location, language, special education, ESL, student mobility.
- Ministry program data: Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP), Turnaround Schools, Schools on the Move.

Only demographic and program data that related to school performance were selected for inclusion in the analytical tool. Once these data were identified, critical breaks (categories) were established within each factor based on analysis of school performance trends. Among the best predictors of school achievement results are socio-economic status indicators and student mobility (number of times students changed schools).

A next stage of development was to capitalize on this knowledge by developing a typology of school performance, in order to incorporate all performance trends of elementary schools into an easily understood and useful model. Three-year and one-year school performance typologies were developed in order to provide a meaningful way of understanding school performance both in the short term and over a three-year period of time. These are not scales, but rather a classification system for understanding the major types of school performers in Ontario. The one year typology includes categories based on current achievement results, i.e., with lowest achievement being 0–33 percent of students achieving at or above provincial standards, through to high achievement being schools where 75 percent or more students are achieving at or above the provincial standard. We are interested, however, not just in current achievement results but also in trends in performance over time. The three-year performance typology was developed to indicate the direction of improvement (or otherwise) of a school over the past three years, with categories including declining, static, and improving at either a higher (above 65 percent) or lower (below 65 percent) level of performance, plus categories for schools that are consistently very low achieving or high achieving. This is an innovative typology that has been very informative in identifying and profiling performance trends of schools. One major finding from this analysis is that the number of consistently low-achieving schools has become relatively small; however, the number of schools in the mid-range of performance who are essentially static – that is, showing little movement over time – is of concern; this has informed our strategic approach (as discussed below).

We then integrated this model of school performance with other contextual factors (demographics), as well as with key programs within the school (including programs for special educational needs and English Language Learners). The intention is to develop a fuller profile and understanding of school performance taking account of school characteristics, contexts, and student demographics, as well as achievement results. Using Statistics Canada Census data, a complex model was developed to ascribe socio-economic characteristics to a school based on the household characteristics in which students within the school resided. Data about children connected to their family and household and then connected to the school through enrolment post-code data has helped us develop an innovative

approach to connect data about children to schools, rather than more general data about communities or schools' overall location.

We developed a user-friendly information system, incorporating this data, to enable users to readily access this integrated model of school performance, context, and programs. In particular, although the project is statistically based, we wanted to develop a system that could be used by a non-technical user as our main focus was on educational improvement. The system was designed to be user friendly (including review and revisions based on feedback throughout the development process), in order to maximize its use among our SAOs whose time was very limited and who are mainly out in the field focusing on data for action. A major emphasis in the design of the system was placed on querying, as opposed to pre-defined report design, in order to accommodate The Secretariat's need to get quick answers to a wide variety of ad hoc questions. The system currently has the ability to respond to over 80 billion queries about schools in Ontario's education system. The emphasis on querying also provided The Secretariat with immediate answers to "what if" questions, which otherwise might have considerably slowed down the pace of program and strategic direction initiatives

The Statistical Neighbours system was also designed to reflect both extensiveness and intensiveness of school performance. The Secretariat was not only interested in the number of schools that were, for example, improving, but how widespread (across how many districts) did this trend travel. This functionality was added in Phase 3 of The Secretariat's development, to further sharpen its focus.

The Statistical Neighbours approach has also been developed to support our capacity-building goals by identifying and sharing practices across networks of schools. The system can enable the linkage of similar schools (in terms of program and demographics) in order to facilitate communication between schools that are similar, yet may differ significantly in performance status. A major module in the system enables users to match schools based on any combination of dissimilar/similar characteristics of a school and to specify the geographic parameters (for example, within the same district, co-terminous districts, regions, or the entire province) within which this matching will occur. Whereas many other statistical models of matching organizations are "pre-selected" (the user gets the same pre-selected matching organizations), The Secretariat's model has evolved into a totally dynamic one. Thus on any given day, a school could have different "neighbours", all dependent on the subjective criteria used by the user for the matching process, for example matching schools on low-income populations only or on English language learner populations only or both, etc. This innovative model recognizes the highly subjective component of establishing neighbours and the need for flexibility to reflect diverse needs and interests.

The development of the Statistical Neighbours analytical approach has been a major initiative for The Secretariat, working in partnership with the Ministry's Information Management Branch and with the provincial assessment body, EQAO.

Developing such a system has encountered some challenges along the way. In particular, as The Secretariat's remit is for all elementary schools, we had to use data that was available provincially for all schools and was appropriate to the demographic, geographical, and linguistic diversity of Ontario's schools. The purpose of the Statistical Neighbours analysis is both to provide evidence to inform strategic decisions and to support focused action within the field. We had to develop an approach that was both statistically robust and educationally meaningful. This includes paying attention to whether the "data school" realistically captures the current status of the "real school"; for example, we have developed an approach to view whole school performance across subject areas as well as for individual assessments. The data can, of course, only take you so far. What has become even more powerful is the use of this data by our SAOs in their work with districts and schools to target areas for improvement and to support networking and capacity building. The data is used also by the Research Team to support identification of schools for further research on the strategies and practices that have contributed to improvement or otherwise. Finally, as will be outlined further below, the analysis from Statistical Neighbours has played a vital role in providing timely information to support major strategic decisions, including the main current strategies for Schools on the Move and the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP). In turn, the performance of schools participating in these initiatives can be monitored through the Statistical Neighbours analytical tool to enable an evaluation of the impact of The Secretariat's strategies.

2. Schools on the Move: Lighthouse Program

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat launched the Schools on the Move: Lighthouse Program in June 2006. The program provides an opportunity for schools and districts to learn from one another and to share strategies between and among schools and boards with similar challenges. The purpose of the initiative is to identify schools that have improved (from different starting points and in a range of contexts) and are able to clearly articulate and share the strategies that have supported their improvement, in order to support other schools to learn with and from the Schools on the Move. There has been a particular focus on schools that are using research-based strategies to support improvement, for example, connected to the Ontario Expert Panel reports for early reading, early math, junior reading, and junior math.

The initial 23 Schools on the Move were selected through a thorough process combining analysis of achievement data to identify schools demonstrating substantial improvement, discussions between SAOs, superintendents and principals, and school visits. Particular attention was paid to schools that have had success in improving student achievement with a strong equity focus.

The launch of the Schools on the Move involved a conference to bring the first 23 schools together to share their strategies, to learn from each other, and to plan for

how they could share their learning for improvement with other schools. The Secretariat produced a short written profile for each school, in discussion with school staff about the main strategies that they have identified as important for their school's improvement and for sharing with other schools. This booklet has formed both an important resource for practice and research on school improvement (LNS, 2006).

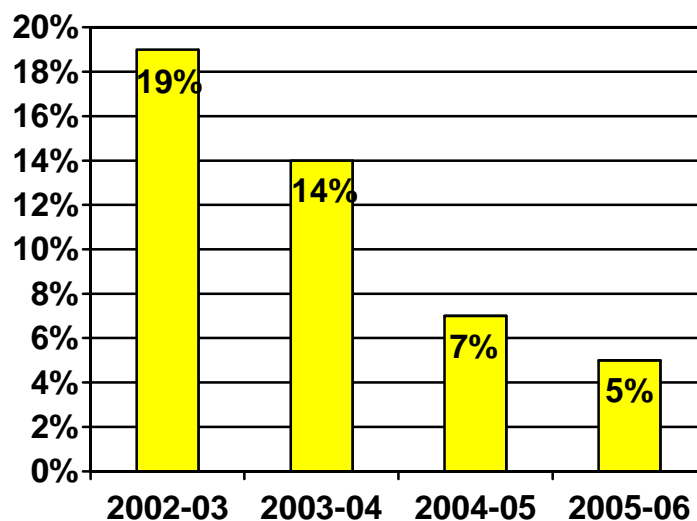
The Secretariat is currently in the process of further documenting and developing profiles of the strategies that are supporting improvement through professional networks and case studies to gather evidence and examples from the Schools on the Move. The next group of forty schools to be included in the Schools on the Move initiative is in the process of being identified.

3. The Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP)

While Schools on the Move: Lighthouse Program focuses on schools that have shown substantial improvement and provide support for sharing identified strategies, the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) focuses on and provide targeted support for schools and districts that are low achieving, declining and/or static in their performance.

Alongside the goal for 75 percent or more students to achieve the provincial standard or above by 2008, the government also intends to reduce low achievement and close performance gaps. This is reflected in our goal to improve the performance of those schools where two-thirds of students do not meet the provincial standard in Grade 3 reading tests. When the McGuinty government entered office, almost one out of five schools in the province had less than a third of students achieving the provincial standard in reading (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Percentage of schools with 34% or less students achieving provincial standard in Grade 3 Reading



An intensive Turnaround Schools program was implemented to provide targeted resources and support for some of the province's lowest achieving schools. Evaluation evidence indicates that the approach of targeted support was providing benefits to schools, both in supporting professional capacity and for student achievement. For example, all 14 schools that joined the Turnaround program in 2004–05 improved their Grade 3 Reading results, with an average 15 percentage point improvement in one year. As indicated in Figure 7, in the most recent assessment results, the number of schools provincially that are very low achieving had declined substantially.

During the summer of 2006, the Ministry decided to bring together the Turnaround program and The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to evolve a new program focused on low-improving schools and districts, the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP). Whereas the Turnaround program had focused on primary division reading, OFIP was to have a whole school focus connected to The Secretariat's K–6 mandate. By combining the two strategies, the number of schools that could receive direct support increased substantially also. In 2006–07, almost 800 schools are involved in the OFIP strategy.

The OFIP: Turnaround School strategy involves two groups of schools. First are schools that meet the previous "turnaround school" definition of having less than 34 percent of students achieving the provincial standard in reading for two out of the past three years (however, this now applies to Grade 3 and Grade 6, rather than previously to the primary division only). Schools in this group receive the most support, including five to eight visits per school year by a SAO to work with the school and district to implement capacity-building strategies for instructional effectiveness. These schools receive a diagnostic assessment of current status to inform improvement planning. In light of the fact that fewer schools in Ontario now have this level of low achievement, we added a second group of schools – those whose current achievement results were between 34 and 50 percent – that is, less than half of students were achieving the provincial standard in reading, and whose performance over the past three years was either declining or static. This group of schools receives direct support, but not at the same level as group one. The group two schools receive three to five visits per year from an SAO, including support for developing an improvement plan. The SAOs also work in partnership with district staff to support the district implement capacity-building strategies for the school.

A main finding from the Statistical Neighbours trend analysis was that in Ontario the profile of school performance has changed considerably in the last three years. One emerging concern was the issue of static schools in the mid-performance range. The OFIP: Board strategy includes a specific focus on schools whose current achievement results are in the 50 to 74 percent range, but whose performance over the past three years is either static or declining. This strategy involves working in partnership with the district to develop and implement a district-wide strategy and improvement plan to support these schools, including through capacity building and learning networks across schools.

All 72 districts across Ontario continue to receive resources and supports from the Secretariat, as our goal is to reach every student and support all schools to improve. However, through OFIP, those districts and schools that are most struggling to achieve at higher levels receive further direct assistance. As an extension of this more focused approach, we have recently launched the Leadership Alliance Network for Student Achievement (LANSA) to support district leaders in building their capacity to support system-wide improvement. LANSA brings together the 18 districts with the lowest performance in Ontario with the 5 districts with the highest performance to build a professional network. The low performing districts were identified through a combination of considering the number of assessment results that were below 60% of students achieving the provincial standard, trends in performance over time, and the proportion of schools involved in OFIP, particularly 'static' schools. Through LANSA, the Directors of Education (district superintendents) and senior executive of the Secretariat meet monthly to share best thinking and promising practices that exist within districts focused on student achievement and equity. The Secretariat is:

- Providing support to directors for self-identified professional development
- Supporting directors and superintendents to visit school districts in similar circumstances in order to share successful practices
- Providing support for targeted professional development for superintendents to drive the achievement agenda
- Facilitating the selected districts' ability to access a range of research and other resources
- Providing priority service from a proposed Statistical Neighbours information service desk
- Providing opportunities for dialogue with national and international experts in areas such as leadership, organizational development, facilitating system change and equity of outcomes
- Providing targeted interventions for struggling districts and supports to raise the bar further in districts that have already shown steady improvement

As indicated in this list, the use of research and data is central to LANSA. Indeed, following the first meeting of this group in March 2007, the Directors have requested research summaries about evidence relating to strategies to support student achievement at district, school and classroom levels. This will be part of the recently established, *What Works? Research into Practice*, series of research summaries in partnership between the Secretariat and Ontario Deans of Education (available at www.inspirelearning.ca).

Moving through the Phases of Action

The nine strategic goals outlined at the start of this paper remain constant; however their nature and application have varied over the three phases of development and implementation of the Secretariat: building consensus, capacity building, and sharpening our focus. In moving into our third (and current) phase, it is very clear that there is a need to bring about change in behaviour and expectations as follows:

Sharpening the Focus

Before	Now
Isolated events	Goal-oriented and strategic interventions
Disparate goals and priorities	Alignment of board and school targets with student achievement goal
Multiple Initiatives	Selected high-yield strategies for instruction
Isolated ad hoc professional development	Team focused and job embedded professional development
Limited reliance on research and data	Research-based and data driven initiatives
Getting people's attention	Focusing on results

From the outset, the Secretariat has been committed to the use and development of research, evaluation and data to provide evidence for informed decisions and improved practices. How to achieve this in practice has, however, required considerable thought and development. Our approach to research, evaluation and data has involved four main strands in practice:

1. Focusing on identifying and building on successful practices – using research to identify, distil, profile and share strategies for raising student achievement;
2. Building in evaluation throughout – using formative and summative evaluations at the local and provincial levels;

3. Analysing data and developing information management approaches to understand changing school performance and focusing strategies accordingly;
4. Fostering a 'culture of inquiry' and a commitment to evidence both among the Secretariat's staff and across the education system.

In fulfilling these strands of activities, the Secretariat has supported research as:

- A *user* of research – for all initiatives, the Secretariat reviews and draws on research evidence to inform developments and practices;
- A *commissioner* of research – the Secretariat commissions external researchers to provide evaluation and comment on our strategies and actions;
- A *conductor* of research – we have our own research team that provides both quantitative and qualitative research expertise;
- A *communicator* of research – we support approaches to mobilize knowledge of research-based strategies including through webcasts, publications and electronic communications.

This paper has illustrated how these activities have evolved over time and been embedded in The Secretariat's work. This has been iterative process as research and data are used to inform strategic decisions, to monitor implementation, to evaluate impact and outcomes, and throughout to review and revise our strategy and practices. This work is multi-faceted and extensive, for example across the two years of local board initiatives and other partnership initiatives, over 250 projects have been supported. All involve local evaluation and most include research studies – this paper therefore has only provided an overview summary, rather than a detailed description of all work in process.

Combining Evidence of Success with a Sense of Urgency for Further Improvement

The evidence suggests that our strategy is demonstrating improvement in student achievement. The most recent achievement results (2005-06 school year) indicate that for the first time in Ontario every achievement result is up in a single year – that is, results are up for Grade 3 reading, writing and mathematics, for Grade 6 reading, writing and mathematics, and for both English language and French language systems. Since the McGuinty government came into office, we have had three years of continuous year-on-year improvement in achievement results. The annual provincial assessment results are detailed below:

Grade 3 English	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Reading	49%	49%	50%	50%	54%	59%	62%
Writing	52%	52%	55%	55%	58%	61%	64%
Mathematics	57%	61%	58%	57%	64%	66%	68%

Grade 6 English	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Reading	50%	55%	55%	56%	58%	63%	64%
Writing	48%	53%	53%	54%	54%	59%	61%
Mathematics	51%	54%	54%	53%	57%	60%	61%

Grade 3 French	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Reading	45%	41%	44%	47%	49%	49%	56%
Writing	50%	51%	55%	58%	63%	68%	72%
Mathematics	41%	40%	47%	47%	55%	57%	59%

Grade 6 French	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Reading	58%	54%	58%	58%	63%	67%	68%
Writing	58%	57%	61%	63%	68%	70%	73%
Mathematics	57%	60%	63%	66%	70%	74%	76%

Overall combined results for Grade 3 and 6 are now 64%, up ten percentage points from 54% since the McGuinty government came into office. The goal of 75% of students meeting the provincial standard by 2008 has already been exceeded by French-language students in Grade 6 mathematics. Over the period of the current government, the number of schools where 75% or more students are achieving at or above the provincial standard in Grade 6 reading has almost doubled. In 2002-03, around 450 schools or 13% of schools had 75% or more students achieving the provincial standard in reading, whereas in 2005-06 this has risen to nearly 900 schools or 25% of elementary schools in Ontario (see figure 8).

Analysis of the distribution of achievement results at district-level also indicates that Ontario is a system experiencing considerable improvement (see figure 9) in student achievement. In 2002-03, no district had 70% or more students achieving provincial standard. By 2005-06, districts were achieving at this level and, conversely, now there are no districts with very low achievement results.

Figure 8: Percentage of schools with 75% or more students achieving provincial standard or above for Grade 6 Reading

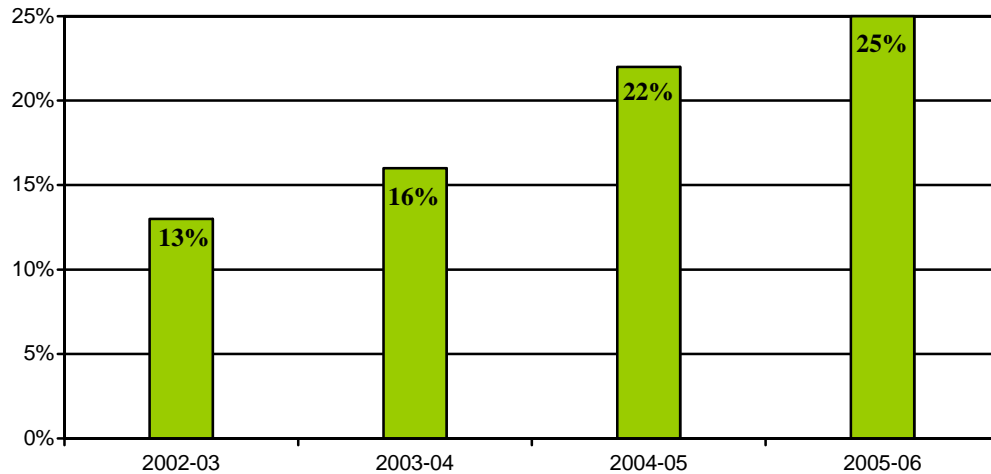
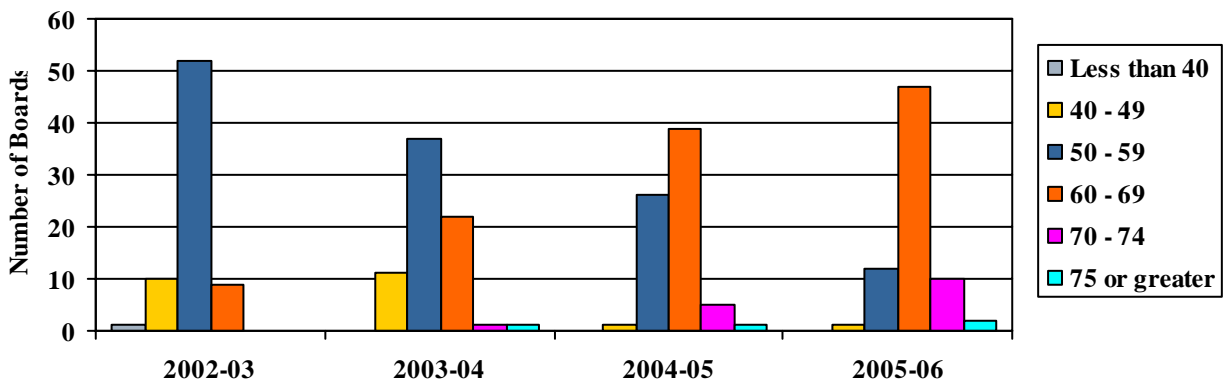


Figure 9: Year-by-year distribution of All Board Scores from 2002-2006: Grade 6 Reading



As well as “raising the bar”, there is also evidence of improvement in our commitment to “closing the gap” and supporting equity of outcomes. For English Language Learners, results improved in all assessment areas in 2005-06 and there has been a closing of the gap between their performance and other students overall. Similarly, for students with Special Educational Needs, their 2005-06 results improved in all assessment areas and there has been some closing of the gap, with the exception of Grade 6 Mathematics for English-language special

education students. Although these results are encouraging, we will continue our efforts to further reduce gaps in performance of student groups, including boys' literacy where gaps persist, and for lower performing schools and districts, while also "raising the bar" overall. As we continue in this work, we will stay the course, using evidence to make our strategies and actions more precise, in our commitment to working in partnership with districts and schools to support all students to achieve.

Helping to build a fully literate society is a challenge the members of The Secretariat have embraced. Focused action and intentionality of purpose are the best guarantee for realizing the future that Ontario students deserve. The quest to maximize student achievement must therefore continue to be pursued with a sense of urgency.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on the work of colleagues within The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, across the Ministry and our partners in Ontario's education system. In particular, thanks to the following colleagues for their contributions and comments for this paper: Heather Berkley, David Cameron, Joel Clodman, Elizabeth Coelho, John Comper, Linda Ebruk, Barnabas Emengonu, Judi Kokis, Yvette Leander, Carmen Maggisano, Issam Massouh, Ruth Mattingley, Lucie McCartney, Sandy Palinski, Judy Speirs and Judith Taylor.

References

Campbell, C., Comper, J., & Winton, S. (2007) Successful and Sustainable Practices for Raising Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy. *Changing Perspectives*. Ontario ASCD.

Campbell, C., Fullan, & Glaze, A. (2006). *Unlocking potential for learning: Effective district-wide strategies to raise student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Project report*. Toronto, On: Queen's Printer.
http://www.inspirelearning.ca/english/research/unlocking_Feb01.htm

Council of Ontario Directors of Education. (2006, Oct.). *The CODE Special Education Project, 2005–2006. Executive summary*. Oakville, ON: CODE.
<http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/pages/Projects/index.html>

Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. (2006). *Schools on the Move/Les écoles en action: Lighthouse program/Programme phare*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2006). *Target setting and improvement planning*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2005a). Education for all. *The report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer.
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2005b). Many Roots, many voices. Supporting English language learners in every classroom. A practical guide for Ontario educators. Ontario Ministry of Education. (2004). *Me read? No way!*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer.
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2004). *Me read? No way! A practical guide to improving boys' literacy skills*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer.
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>

Maggisano, C., & Campbell, C. (2006). *Unlocking potential for learning: Effective district-wide strategies to raise student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Case study report: Keewatin-Patricia District School Board*. Toronto, On: Queen's Printer.
http://www.inspirelearning.ca/english/research/unlocking_Feb01.htm