Ⓥ Ontario

Unlocking Potential for Learning

in Literacy and Numeracy

Project Report

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

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Series Editors:
Carol Campbell
Michael Fullan
Avis Glaze

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PREFACE

Schools and school systems all across the world are seeking ways of improving student achievement to respond to the growing public recognition of the importance of education for individual and societal progress and success. Ontario has adopted an exciting approach to supporting school improvement that is research and evidence based. Unlike many jurisdictions around the world that have adopted simplistic practices, Ontario has recognized that sustained improvement depends on schools, districts, and provinces adopting an aligned approach that builds the capacity of teachers, school leaders, boards, district leaders, parents, and community allies. Ontario is putting that approach into practice in elementary schools through the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and Secretariat, and in secondary schools through the Student Success Strategy. In both strategies, the Ministry of Education is closely working with schools and school districts to develop common approaches to meaningful change focused on improved school and classroom practices. We recognize that within these broad parameters there can be many different ways to proceed, taking into account the diverse demographics and contexts of Ontario schools.

The initial evidence is that these strategies are working. All the indicators of student progress are improving, and there is a renewed sense of energy and optimism in schools about the future. At the same time, we recognize that we are only at the beginning of the road.

The case studies in this collection illustrate the terrific work being done in boards as well as the significant challenges that must be addressed. The researchers and authors describe in detail the strategies being used by boards to create enthusiasm, to build teacher skills, to develop strong leadership, to involve the community, and to use data to guide improvement. They show that improvement must always be a collective effort no matter how significant a role some individuals may play. They show that the school cannot do it alone although the school must also be committed to the possibility of improvement. They show the importance of tenacity and, as Robert Slavin put it, "the unrelenting pursuit of success for students."

The cases in the Unlocking Potential for Learning series also show that while this great work is going on boards and schools must also manage a diverse range of other tasks and pressures. The realities of day-to-day schooling and board management cannot be left unattended either. It is indeed a fine balancing act, but these very diverse cases show how it can be – is being – done. They provide inspiration, ideas, and a map of sorts for other school leaders while also making it clear that the route will look a little different in each situation.

I am honoured to write some words of introduction to this collection, but even more to work with Ontario educators and communities for the benefit of our children. No cause is more worthy of our effort.

Ben Levin
Deputy Minister of Education
September, 2006

INTRODUCTION

This publication contains the overall report from the Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy research project conducted by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. The purpose of this project was to identify school boards that are demonstrating improvements in literacy and numeracy and to evaluate the strategies, actions, and outcomes associated with such improvements.

Eight school boards participated in the project – all boards are demonstrating improved student achievement. The boards were also selected because they represent the diversity of contexts and experiences in Ontario – urban/suburban/rural locations, small/medium/large numbers of schools, public/Catholic systems, French/English language and with improvement starting from existing higher or lower achievement levels. A selection of case study reports with details of strategies, practices, and outcomes in individual districts will also be published as part of the Unlocking Potential for Learning series.

We want to express our thanks to the directors of education in each of the eight districts for agreeing to participate in this project. We want also to thank all the educators we met with in these districts and schools for their insights and willingness to discuss effective strategies and for their work every day to support student achievement. We want to acknowledge also our colleagues on the Effective District Strategies project team, Dr. Carmen Maggisano and Dr. Carolyn Rees-Potter, Student Achievement Officers with The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, and Professor Marie Josée Berger of the University of Ottawa, and to thank them for their contributions to the case studies and to the project overall.

In this introduction, we put the Effective District Strategies project into context by outlining the provincial commitment and strategy for raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy.

In 2003, as part of a new government initiative, Ontario launched a major province-wide strategy to achieve substantial improvements in student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The starting point for reform was a five-year period of limited

improvement in the percentage of 12-year-old students (Grade 6) achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy, based on provincial assessments as carried out by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), an independent agency.

A key element of the government's strategy included the establishment of The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to work in partnership with school districts and schools to support improvement in student achievement. Nine key strategies have underpinned The Secretariat's work:

1. Work with school boards to set achievement targets.

2. Assemble and support teams at all levels to drive continuous improvement in literacy and numeracy.

3. Reduce class sizes in the primary grades to a maximum of 20 students per class by 2007–2008.

4. Build capacity to support student learning and achievement.

5. Allocate resources to support target setting and improvement planning for literacy and numeracy.

6. Mobilize the system to provide equity in student outcome.

7. Embark on a process of community outreach and engagement to build support for the literacy and numeracy initiative.

8. Demonstrate a commitment to research and evidence-based inquiry and decision making.

9. Establish a growing presence on the national and international scene in learning from and contributing to the knowledge base about how to improve literacy and numeracy achievement.

The proposition was how to mobilize trilevel engagement in improvement involving the school and community, the district, and the government. We undertook to proactively use the change knowledge – what we call "capacity building with a focus on results" – to achieve major results within a short period of time. Some schools and districts were already moving in this direction – in this sense they were ahead of the government, but the new goal was to have system-wide change in all districts and school authorities.

The Secretariat is committed to fostering inquiry and identification of effective practices. This is reflected in our mission to challenge ourselves, educators, and the community to seek out best thinking and build upon effective practices to maximize student achievement in literacy and numeracy. One initiative along these lines – the one we report here – was to identify what is known on the ground about district-wide reform. We set out to identify districts that a) had seemed to have sound strategies at work and b) were getting results as indicated by trends in EQAO assessments. What we wanted to know was what was going on under different conditions as districts went about this difficult and important work. The district case studies reported on in this series are part of our strategic approach to inquiry in which we derive lessons from Ontario's education system on an ongoing basis and report these findings and learning back to Ontario's educators to inform practice and contribute to improvement. We know that together we can make a significant difference for student achievement through unlocking potential for learning.

Project Report

This is a cross-case analysis of eight case studies of districts in Ontario, Canada, that are attempting to achieve district-wide improvement in literacy and numeracy at the elementary school level. We first put the study in context, then describe what we did and what we found, including lessons learned, and then take up next steps.

In 2003, as part of a new government initiative, Ontario launched a major, province wide-strategy to achieve substantial improvements in literacy and numeracy. The starting point for reform was a five-year period of limited improvement in performance where the overall percentage of 12-year-olds (Grade 6) achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy was about 54%, based on provincial assessments carried out by the independent Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO).

In the fall of 2003, the new government launched a strategy designed to achieve major improvements in all elementary schools in the 72 districts that make up the public education system (English, and French language, public and Catholic). The strategy includes:

- Setting a target of 75% of 12 year old students achieving at or above the provincial standard for 2008.

- Establishing The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to work in a two-way partnership with districts and schools.

- Adding considerable new resources for literacy and numeracy, including materials, professional development, staffing, and initiatives linked to local and provincial needs.

- Negotiating, through The Secretariat, yearly aspirational targets and board improvement plans with each district.

- Engaging in capacity building, which includes focusing on district and school strategies for achieving improvement, such as developing school improvement teams, strengthening the role of the principal, helping schools develop collaborative learning cultures, and increasing assessment for learning capabilities at the school, district, and provincial level.

- Fostering lateral capacity-building, where schools and districts learn from each other about effective instructional practices in literacy and numeracy, and learn about effective change strategies for school- and district-wide improvement.

- Fostering a commitment to both raising overall student achievement levels and pursuing equity of outcomes by raising the bar and closing the gap in educational performance.

- A commitment to drawing on the wider knowledge base to inform the strategies, as well as a commitment to use knowledge to inform decisions as the strategy unfolded and to contribute to the growing knowledge base about large-scale reform.

The proposition was how to mobilize trilevel engagement in improvement involving the school and community, the district, and the government. The government undertook to proactively use the change knowledge – what we call "capacity building with a focus on results" – to achieve major results within a short period of time. Some schools and districts were already moving in this direction. In this sense they were ahead of the government, but the new goal was to have system-wide change in all 72 districts.

In addition to The Secretariat's direct target-setting and capacity-building role, it was to foster inquiry and identification of effective practices. One initiative along these lines – the one we report here – was to identify what is known on the ground about district-wide reform. We set out to identify districts that a) had seemed to have sound strategies at work and b) were getting results as indicated by trends in EQAO assessments. What we wanted to know was what was going on under different conditions as districts went about this difficult and important work.

We ended up identifying eight districts of the 72 districts in Ontario that represent a wide range of circumstances. This cross-case analysis provides an overview of what we found. The eight districts themselves benefited by having us help them articulate and profile their stories; other districts are now benefiting as part of our effort to spread the word. The case study districts do not offer uniform blueprints for effective strategies, but rather provide concrete examples of what effective strategies look like in practice and in context. In another sense, the cases take all the excuses off the table because they represent the gamut of types of districts in the province,

from large multicultural districts in the south, to massive geographically spread regions in the north with large Aboriginal populations.

In the rest of this report we describe the nature of the districts, the methodology used, and the main findings. We then conclude with a brief discussion of next steps. The goal is not only to unlock the potential of district-wide reform, but also to determine how entire provinces might change by design. The larger proposition is how can political leaders, school districts, schools, union leaders, parents, and the public engage in reform that benefits all, as measured by transparent results.

The Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy Project

The Effective District Strategies project began in the summer of 2005. The purpose of the project was to identify districts in Ontario that are demonstrating improvements in literacy and numeracy and to evaluate the strategies, actions, and outcomes associated with such improvements.

The research questions focused around three key areas of enquiry:

1. District's Strategy and Actions

Questions included:

What is the district's approach to improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy?

What is the main purpose driving this approach and what are the goals to be achieved?

What strategies and actions are in place on a district-wide basis?

What is the structure and operation of the district to support a focus on student achievement?

What are the roles and responsibilities of key individual post-holders within the district?

2. Connections between District and Schools

Questions included:

Has a shared focus on literacy and/or numeracy been fostered across all schools?

At the school level, what initiatives and actions have taken place to improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy?

What is the relationship between the district and schools in supporting literacy/numeracy improvements?

How does the district challenge all schools to improve?

What types of support do schools receive from the district?

How is professional learning shared within and across schools?

3. Impact of District's Strategies and Actions and Future Developments

Questions included:

Overall, how effective is the district's approach to improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy?

What specific strategies and actions have been most effective?

What have been the main difficulties encountered and how have these been addressed?

How can improvements become sustainable?

What further developments are planned or required to improve student achievement district-wide?

What has been the key learning for the district in improving student achievement in literacy and/or numeracy?

What lessons have been learned of relevance to other districts and/or for province-wide reform?

The research method involved visits to each of the eight districts. Interviews were conducted with members of the senior administrative teams (directors of education and supervisory officers/superintendents) in all eight districts and other relevant central staff (curriculum co-ordinators, consultants, coaches). A sample of school principals were interviewed in each district. School visits involving further discussion with principals and with teachers and other staff, plus classroom observations, were also undertaken. Through this approach, the project attempted to gather views from the central office, and from the school and to compare and contrast these perspectives. We were interested in exploring the connections between districts and schools in system improvement and the ways in which effective districts foster collective commitment and responsibilities for student achievement.

The Eight Districts

The eight districts that participated in the effective district-wide strategies project were:

- Bluewater District School Board

- Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario

- Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est

- Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board

- Keewatin-Patricia District School Board

- Sudbury Catholic District School Board

- York Catholic District School Board

- York Region District School Board

The eight districts were deliberately selected to represent a wide range of sizes, locations, and contexts. In terms of student populations, three of the districts are small (fewer than 500 students in Grade 6 in 2004–05), three are medium-sized (1000–2000 Grade 6 students), and two are large (over 3000 students in Grade 6). However, the student numbers tell only part of the story. The districts with small student numbers cover large geographical areas, with the challenges of remoteness

and dispersed communities. The large districts contain concentrated urban and suburban communities, with diverse populations combining areas of affluence in close proximity to disadvantaged communities.

Ontario has French and English, public, and Catholic education systems. The eight districts were selected across each of these systems. One district is French-language and seven are English-language. Five districts are within the Catholic education system, whereas three are in the public system (all eight are publicly funded).

All eight districts are committed to raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy and have demonstrated improvement over time. However, their current achievement levels differ. Following the 2004–05 EQAO assessment results, four of the districts are above the provincial average results for reading, writing, and mathematics at both Grades 3 and 6. These districts are among the highest achieving in the province. At Grade 6, conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est has results of 75% for reading and 80% for both writing, and mathematics. This district is demonstrating that the provincial goal of 75% is achievable. Huron-Perth Catholic, York Catholic, and York Region are currently very close (2004–05) to the provincial target in Grade 6, with results ranging from 68%–74% across subjects. At Grade 3, Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board is above 75% in reading and writing. York Region and York Catholic both have two subject areas above 70% at Grade 3. As well as being high achieving, these boards are also demonstrating consistent year-on-year improvement across subjects and grades. Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board, for example, has demonstrated remarkable improvement, with double-figure increases in results for all subject areas within the past three years. Since 2002–03, Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board's reading scores have increased by 32 percentage points at Grade 3 and 16 percentage points at Grade 6. York Catholic and York Region have also both demonstrated year-on-year improvement in all subject areas at Grade 6.

Based on the 2004–05 EQAO results, one district – Bluewater District School Board – is above the provincial average at Grade 3, but below the provincial average at Grade 6. This district has demonstrated consistent year-on-year improvement over the past three or more years in all subjects. At Grade 3, all subjects have shown double-figure improvement in percentage points; for example, students achieving at or above the provincial standard in mathematics moved from 40% in 2001–02 to 70% in 2004–05.

Three districts were below the provincial average in most subjects in the 2004–05 EQAO results; however, these districts are also demonstrating improvement over time, that is, generally consistent year-on-year improvement across all subject areas. The districts provide evidence of effectiveness in moving from low achievement levels to higher achievement with focused efforts. Keewatin-Patricia District School Board, for example, has demonstrated remarkable improvement since 2002–03. At Grade 3, the district's EQAO results increased by 15 percentage points in writing (from 38% to 53%), by 24 percentage points in math (from 38% to 62%), and by 23 percentage points in reading (from 31% to 54%). At the same time in Keewatin-Patricia District School Board, there has also been growth at Grade 6 with increased results by 16 percentage points in reading, 10 percentage points in math and 5 percentage points in writing. The Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario has also shown consistent improvement in all subjects at Grade 3 and 6 during the past three years, with improvement around ten percentage points in each subject. Sudbury Catholic District School Board has also demonstrated overall improvement across subject areas over time, particularly in Grade 3 reading and Grade 6 math. They do not yet have consistent year-on-year improvement in all subject areas and provide an example of a district recognizing the need for further focused work around literacy and numeracy to extend and sustain improvement.

The provincial goal is for 75% of students to be at or above the provincial standard in EQAO Grade 6 assessments by 2008. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat is working in partnership with boards across Ontario to achieve this result. This project is part of The Secretariat's work to unlock potential for learning by sharing successful practices. The project has not just focused on high achieving boards but also on growth and improvement in both lower- and higher-performing boards to identify effective practices for districts at different stages of improvement and achievement levels and to learn lessons across the range of contexts and experiences in Ontario.

Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy: Key Components

Across the eight districts, we identified 12 key components of effective practices that link to four broad strategic areas (see Figure 1). Our focus in this project was on effective district-wide strategies for both system and school improvement. The 12 components are relevant at district, school, and classroom levels. Indeed, in effective districts these features form an interactive framework for action, both district-wide and within schools.

Figure 1

One strategic area is *Leading with Purpose and Focusing Direction*. This area encompasses three key components. The first component is *leadership for learning* which involves both individual and collective leadership to support improvement in professional learning and student learning. The second component is establishing *vision* and *shared focus* on student achievement as the priority. The third component is ensuring that a sense of *moral purpose* informs 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' character, emotional and social development.

Another strategic area is *Designing a Coherent Strategy, Co-ordinating Implementation, and Reviewing Outcome*. This includes four key components. The first component is the development of a *coherent overarching strategy* for student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The second component is the identification and allocation of *resources* prioritized to the system focus on improved student achievement. A third component is the effective *organization* at district, school, and classroom levels to support student achievement, including attention to the roles and responsibilities of staff. 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*. This involves three key components. 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. The third component is the regular use and understanding of *data* at the system and school level and the development of assessment literacy within schools to ensure instruction is informed by data about student learning and progress.

The final strategic area is *Sharing Responsibility through Building Partnerships*. This involves two key components. First is the fostering of *partnerships* within the system, for example, between central office and schools and across schools, and with parents, communities, and other organizations and agencies to build shared involvement in, and responsibilities for, supporting student learning. This requires the second component of clear *communication* where a consistent message about raising student achievement is communicated widely, frequently, and with a sense of urgency.

While each of the above four broad areas and the 12 components can be explored in isolation, for example, focusing on leadership or on instruction, it is their combined strength that is vital. A district that is strong on only one or two of these components will not achieve its full potential. It is important to note that the components are not mutually exclusive; rather, they interact and influence each other in practice.

A. Leading with Purpose and Focusing Direction

1. Leadership for learning

We refer here to *leadership for learning* to emphasize that the leadership was purposeful and focused on supporting learning. This focus on learning includes leadership both to support professional learning and to direct strategies and actions for improved student learning and achievement. The educators we met with – directors, supervisory officers, coaches, principals, teachers – were instructional leaders demonstrating deep knowledge of teaching and learning, which they discussed, modelled, and encouraged throughout the district. We use the broader term *leadership for learning*, however, to indicate that the district leaders we met who were not directly educators, for example supervisory officers with business qualifications, also shared a strong commitment to, and understanding of, the importance of their role in supporting student learning at the system level.

Across the districts, there was strong evidence of individual and collective leadership being exercised and fostered. This combination of both individual and collective leadership is important. Individuals demonstrated strong leadership skills both in the processes of supporting system change and in their individual educational expertise. By working collaboratively through teams, collective leadership was also developed and encouraged to ensure that shared leadership was drawing on the range of individual expertise to produce best thinking to inform strategies and actions. This is part of developing the two-way street between individual expertise and system transformation through shared leadership.

The districts demonstrated leadership for learning at all levels of the system. This leadership provided clear strategic direction, focusing on raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Trustees supported board and school leaders to focus on building the capacity of the system to raise student achievement. The director consistently provided leadership focused on raising student achievement at the system level. The senior administrative team and board staff demonstrated leadership in promoting and developing capacity for literacy and numeracy. Principals were trained as instructional leaders and this was reflected in their daily practices. At the school level, the principal's leadership was very important to supporting school improvement and successful practices to improve teaching and learning. Teacher leaders were developed, for example, lead literacy and numeracy teachers,

to support system, school, and classroom improvement in literacy and numeracy instruction and to build the professional capacity of colleagues.

2. Vision and shared focus on student achievement as the priority

The districts' vision, mission, and values focused on student achievement. Indeed, across the districts, the vision is for improving student achievement with literacy and numeracy as the priority focus for action. This priority includes attention to both raising overall achievement to higher levels and to equity of outcome for lower-achieving student groups, in other words, to both raising the bar and closing the gap, in educational performance. This vision was clearly articulated in the districts' focused strategic direction and actions for student achievement.

A lack of focus on student achievement was widely understood as being unacceptable, and there was low tolerance for excuses about poor performance. There was focused attention to identification of gaps in performance and attention to equity of outcome for all student groups. This included attention to low-performing schools within the district to ensure that all schools are improving.

The districts ensured that this vision for both raising the bar and closing the gap was widely understood and there was a shared focus on the priority for student achievement. The director and trustees promoted this vision consistently. Board staff contributed to the vision and ensured that this vision was realized through day-to-day implementation district-wide. Principals had responsibility for developing and realizing the vision for student achievement across their staff and within school practices. School staff shared a commitment to the vision for student achievement, and this was reflected in coherence between the district's vision, school plans, and classroom practices.

It is important to note that the districts did not develop a vision first in isolation and then implement it. They did have a strong sense of focused direction, but they also built the vision on the ground through joint action. Staff collaboration and teamwork were important for developing shared focus. The effective use of meetings both at a system level and within schools, for example, at whole school, division, and grade-level meetings, was important for building consensus and consistency in purpose and vision. This is consistent with our other work in which we find that *shared* vision is less a precondition of success and more an outcome of a quality process.

3. *Moral purpose informing practices to unlock potential for system, school, and student development*

The districts held an educational vision that extended beyond narrow attainment measures to a belief in the moral purpose of education, which included an expectation – and indeed assertion – that all students can learn and that all teachers can teach all students to learn given sufficient supports and time. The districts developed and promoted a culture of high expectations and positive attitudes for student learning and achievement.

The districts demonstrated a dual commitment and attention to academic achievement and to broader social, emotional, character, and personal development for students. System leaders articulated, promoted, and demonstrated moral purpose, connecting the importance of educational improvement for individual, societal, and economic development and equity of outcomes. A values-based culture was fostered at board and school levels, promoting collective moral purpose for improved student achievement and a shared commitment to all students' development and achievement. This purpose informed policies and practices for students' development and well-being, for example, through early identification and intervention for students facing difficulties, early childhood programs, interagency working with health and social services. At a system and school level, anti-bullying and anti-discriminatory policies and practices were developed and implemented.

Within schools, this commitment to the moral purpose of schooling included fostering a supportive school culture and developing classroom practices to support children's holistic learning. Curriculum and instruction to support character and citizenship development of students, including fostering empathy for others and emotional intelligence, were implemented. Attention was paid to ensuring that culturally relevant resources and materials were included within teaching and learning practices. A conducive learning climate that included respectful behaviour was cultivated. Principals and teachers sought to foster relevant and meaningful connections between students' school lives, home, and communities, to motivate and engage students and build partnerships with their homes.

B. Designing a Coherent Strategy, Co-ordinating Implementation, and Reviewing Outcomes

4. Overarching strategy

The districts had a planned, coherent, and co-ordinated strategy that combined a commitment to both short-term needs and long-term sustainability. This involved a multiyear strategy with district targets for student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Districts developed system literacy and/or numeracy frameworks that brought together all elements of intended strategies and actions to achieve student achievement goals. System plans, frameworks, and guides were often developed collaboratively through a system committee involving central staff and school representatives for specific key areas of practice, such as board assessment and evaluation guides.

Complementing the multiyear strategy, the districts developed clear and concise annual board improvement plans and target-setting practices. Board improvement plans included priorities, targets, actions, resources, and identified staff responsible for implementing priority goals. Strategies in the board improvement plan included a commitment to both raising achievement overall and ensuring equity of outcome by identifying and targeting schools and student groups that were underperforming. Plans included use of research-based strategies and interventions to focus action on school and student improvement. The districts ensured that their board improvement plans were widely understood and informing actions at system and school levels.

In trilevel change initiatives, the development and implementation of a strategy for student achievement in literacy and numeracy also requires attention to the connections between provincial, board, and school level developments. The districts sought to ensure that their local strategies connected with provincial strategies and took maximum advantage of provincial resources and opportunities to benefit their schools and students. Within the district, ensuring school improvement plans were connected to the board improvement plan and priorities was also important. School improvement plans included strategies and interventions for implementation at school and classroom levels to meet targets for overall school achievement, and, at the classroom level, for individual student progress. Within schools, attention to connections between the overall school improvement plan and teachers' individual plans was also important.

As they developed their coherent strategy, districts paid close attention to co-ordinating stages of implementation. This involved an understanding of managing a change process to support system reform and improvement. Multiyear strategies were carefully managed, with phased implementation linked to the needs and stages of development within the district. As one director commented, "there is a need to 'think big, start small' in order to bring people with you in the change process." One approach to managing implementation over time was to sequence initiatives related to priority areas of focus, for example, one district began with a focus on "early literacy" (primary division), then included a focus on "later literacy" (junior division), and then a focus on "numeracy." This is not to suggest that each stage was exclusive and replaced the others, but rather the priority for implementation was sequenced over time. In another district, the change strategy began with targeted action with a small number of schools and then, with growing success, extending the strategy to involve all schools in the district.

There is also a need to identify the key issues that have to be attended to early in the improvement process, particularly removing distractors that could prevent successful implementation of planned strategies. For example, in one district, the early stages of their focus on literacy and numeracy involved substantial work to build good working relationships with the teachers' federations to address staffing matters. Without addressing these issues upfront, the levels of improvement now achieved would have been difficult to secure. Across the districts, attention to resourcing and staffing was vital to remove potential distractors related to lack of support. The overarching strategy should also include attention to building sustainability of improvement over time. For example, districts developed strategies for building professional capacity and developing leaders over time to sustain the focus on literacy and numeracy.

5. Resources prioritized to focus on improved student achievement

Alongside a district strategy and plan for raising student achievement, the districts ensured resources were identified, allocated, and prioritized to the focus on improved student achievement. Trustees and directors were prepared to make tough decisions around resource allocation to ensure monies were directed to the student achievement priority. In the districts, an important factor was that the super- visory officer with responsibility for budget understood and supported

the commitment to student achievement as the priority for program-based funding. Academic and business supervisory officers worked together to allocate budget for student achievement. Resource allocation – staffing, funding, and materials – was identified and provided for key activities within board and school improvement plans. It was not the case that these districts had more funding than others, but rather there was a clear commitment to maximize the funding and resources available and to direct these to the priority focus on literacy and numeracy. Monies were drawn from a range of budget lines and funding sources to ensure substantial resourcing for literary and numeracy initiatives.

Examples of resource allocation include the district-wide purchase and provision of key resources for staff development, including professional books and capacity-building activities. Districts purchased system-wide resources for all schools to support classroom practices, such as formative assessment tools and teaching resources. The districts also identified and funded staffing at system and school levels to support literacy and numeracy improvement, for example, literacy and numeracy coaches. There was also substantial investment in classroom and library resources to support literacy and numeracy, for example, refurbishment of libraries, district-wide provision of levelled books, and manipulatives for all schools. Within schools, resources were also prioritized to the needs of students requiring support to improve their achievement.

6. Effective district organization

The districts were very aware of making sure that you have the "right bus" and the "right people on the bus" – or as one director phrased it, "Making sure everyone is on the boat and rowing in the same direction." Establishing an effective district organization to support the system focus on student achievement was important. The majority of the districts had restructured the central office and role of district staff to ensure the structure, staffing, roles, and responsibilities aligned with the literacy and numeracy focus, including the roles of supervisory officers, consultants, curriculum co-ordinators, and coaches. The appointment of supervisory officers with strong literacy and numeracy expertise to oversee and drive the district-wide improvement strategy was very important. Developing a structure and process where supervisory officers and other key staff had a strong presence across the system and in working with schools was also significant. For example, one large district located

their supervisory officers with responsibilities for families of schools in community-based offices to ensure a closer connection with their local areas. The districts also created positions for system principals, consultants, and coaches with strong instructional expertise to work across schools. There was attention to recruiting staff at all levels with strong expertise in literacy and numeracy to enable focused conversations and consistent practices aligned to the student achievement priority district-wide. There was attention also to ensuring a structure that supported collaborative working between district and school staff, for example, the use of system committees to involve board and school staff in system planning and strategies. The effective organization and use of meetings at a central level and within schools was a key feature. The establishment of improvement teams at district and school levels was also important for ensuring a collective focus and effort on student achievement strategies.

To support directly working with schools, the districts provided an allocation of dedicated time for literacy/numeracy coaches or equivalent to work in schools. Within schools, effective organization included time allocations for literacy and numeracy instruction, for example, through a literacy block. At the classroom level, attention to seating arrangements and group working was also important, for example, teachers' use and understanding of when and why to use whole class, small group, or individual student instructional strategies.

7. *System and school-level monitoring, review, feedback, and accountability*

As well as putting in place a strategy and planning implementation, the districts paid close attention to monitoring implementation, reviewing progress and outcomes, and using this feedback both to generate accountability for improvement and to review the strategy and revise actions when needed. Board improvement plans included targets with monitoring of deliverables and results. For example, in one district there was thorough and consistent use of SMART goals at both district and school levels with training provided to support staff in using this process effectively. Districts also used annual system reviews to evaluate progress and outcomes in relation to system goals and priorities, for example, through evaluation of implementation and impact to date for priority actions within the board improvement plan. At district and school levels, there was use of student achievement data, both

EQAO assessments and formative assessment data, to evaluate improvement and to identify student groups or curriculum areas requiring particular attention. Working with schools, supervisory officers set clear expectations that principals would discuss with teachers the progress of students and review student data. Within schools, principals supported teachers in developing practices for classroom monitoring and review, including use of data to assess the effectiveness of their instructional and classroom practices and to modify practices when needed.

The development of accountability involved both the central office and schools. Senior administrative teams, including directors and supervisory officers, were accountable publicly and they held schools to account for performance and improvement. For example, directors would hold meetings with all principals to review student achievement and school performance results. System requirements were put in place for reporting from schools about achievement and progress. Reporting included gathering student formative assessment data at specific times of the year to support both school and district-wide assessment of student learning. Some of the districts had also established processes for district-wide teacher inquiry/action research linked to school professional learning teams, with the requirement that these projects would include use of data, focus on student achievement, and that results would be reported system-wide annually.

C. Developing Precision in Knowledge, Skills, and Daily Practices for Improving Learning

8. *Capacity building and professional learning for teachers and principals*

All of the districts placed a strong emphasis on the importance of developing professional capacity, particularly for literacy and numeracy instructional knowledge, assessment, classroom management, and leadership. Solid teacher capacity, expertise, and commitment are crucial factors for ensuring effective teaching practices to raise student achievement. Across the districts, a combination of types of professional learning was provided and resourced, including use of external expertise; provincial training; board in-service; in-school, job-embedded professional learning; and school and system professional learning teams. All the districts participated in

ministry training initiatives, such as those to support the Expert Panel reports, summer institutes, and literacy and numeracy training provided through The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. In addition, districts developed and provided a range of in-service options linked to priority areas identified in the district's improvement plan, for example, a district-wide commitment to a consistent approach to developing reading comprehension in all schools. The existence and use of release time to support professional development was important for ensuring that individuals had the opportunity to participate and consolidate their learning.

Alongside out-of-school training initiatives focused on specific areas of expertise, districts also had a range of professional learning opportunities to support job-embedded development. The districts recognized the importance of sustained professional learning with follow-up, and further development after external training was received. The use of mentoring and induction programs were very well received by teachers, with benefits being cited both for those receiving and providing support. The benefit of working with colleagues in school to learn together was considered important across the staff we met with. The development of professional learning communities to build teams for improvement at the school level was a common feature across the districts. In some districts, this approach was particularly well developed, with system support, guidance, and meetings bringing schools together to ensure professional learning teams were provided with both the process and content expertise to focus on improving literacy and numeracy achievement. Some of the districts also used demonstration classrooms for literacy and numeracy as a way to encourage shared professional learning and enable teachers to visit other classrooms and learn from their peers.

The districts also supported a range of job-embedded support and follow-up through literacy/numeracy consultants, coaches, and lead teachers. School staff reported on the importance of having time and support in school to ensure that the learning gained through professional development was put into practice. They reported that the use of literacy/numeracy coaches or consultants was important in supporting their work at the classroom level. In one particularly remote district, the use of "at-the-elbow" professional learning, where two colleagues worked together to improve each other's practice, was a key part of the district strategy, both due to a belief that this type of learning was particularly beneficial and in recognition of the practical constraints on regularly bringing teachers together across a large

geographical area. The purchase and use of professional reading materials in some of the districts also enabled teachers to extend their learning without having to travel to training events.

Therefore, across the districts, there was a combination of external and internal supports for capacity building that were important for ensuring that training was translated into practice with follow-up and revision through experience in the classroom. Finally, the districts paid attention to developing widespread leadership; both for the present and to enhance sustainability of reform. They emphasized leaders developing other leaders as well as cultivating potential leaders for the future.

9. Curriculum development, instruction, and interventions to improve teaching and learning for all students

As indicated above, a key element of professional capacity-building work focused on enhancing principals' and teachers' curriculum knowledge in literacy and numeracy and developing a range of effective instructional practices. Curriculum development and instruction were also supported across the district through use of provincial and district reports, resources, and guides. Careful attention was paid to implementation of the Ontario curriculum and the Expert Panel reports to inform district-wide practice. Within the district, curriculum and instruction guides were also developed and distributed to all schools.

District policies and school practices included attention to instruction for specific student groups, for example, through the district-wide special education plan. Districts identified the specific student groups requiring additional support within their schools and appropriate research-based interventions for instruction and classroom practices. For example, in one district with a high Aboriginal student population a priority focus was given to the development and implementation of an oral literacy project to support Aboriginal students' learning. The use of early intervention strategies to support struggling learners, for example, as identified through reading diagnostic assessments, was used across the districts.

Within schools, principals with deep knowledge and understanding of successful literacy and numeracy practices were important for ensuring such approaches were applied in classrooms. The focus on literacy and numeracy began in Kindergarten

with attention to transitions and scaffolding of learning across grade levels. Aligned with the district-wide focus on literacy and numeracy, classroom practices involved the implementation of a comprehensive and balanced literacy program and of problem-solving approaches to mathematics. Attention to the interconnections of nume-racy and literacy, for example, by emphasizing the use of reading and comprehen- sion skills within mathematics teaching, was fostered, as was a cross-curricular emphasis on reading, writing, and mathematics.

Teachers' instructional foci and practices were informed by attention to student formative assessment data (assessment for learning) and to curriculum expecta-tions. Through the use of data and review of student learning progress, differenti-ated instruction strategies were developed and applied to meet the needs of students within classrooms. Teachers were using a range of evidence-based good practices for classroom practices, for example, as outlined in Expert Panel reports or developed through training. Teaching strategies include the use of a combination of teacher modelling and student learning through independent, small group, and whole class work. Attention to the classroom environment, display, and resources to support literacy and numeracy were also important.

Some of the districts had also implemented dedicated blocks of time for literacy instruction within schools. Through such approaches, the districts were ensuring sufficient classroom and learning time were being allocated to support the priority focus on student achievement in literacy. Teachers were also supported in their work by the existence of literacy and/or numeracy coaches with dedicated time to support developing strong instructional practices in reading, writing, and/or mathe-matics. Through collaborative working with colleagues, teachers also developed and extended their individual instructional expertise.

10. Use of data and development of assessment literacy

The districts were committed to the importance of using data for informing system-wide planning and for guiding school and classroom practices. To ensure a consistent approach to the use and understanding of data, district-wide assessment and evalua-tion guides were developed to inform practice in schools and classrooms across the district. There was also district-wide collection, storage, analysis, and reporting of student data to inform system planning and identification of schools and students

requiring additional attention. The districts paid attention to both summative assessment data (assessment of learning) such as the provincial EQAO assess- ments and formative assessment data (assessment for learning) through developmental and diagnostic assessments conducted within schools. At district and school levels, there was attention to disagreggation of data to focus on needs of subgroups of students and to focus interventions. For example, teachers worked collaboratively with EQAO item level analysis to examine performance within curriculum areas. There was attention also to the performance of different student groups, for example students designated as having special education needs or English language learners.

The district-wide purchase and provision of assessment and diagnostic tools for all schools enabled consistent system-wide use of the same assessment tools. In order to support schools in using and understanding data, professional development on data analysis and assessment literacy was provided for principals and teachers. At the school level, use of assessment for learning tools and data to inform classroom planning and instructional strategies was strongly supported. There was a clear expectation that teachers would regularly assess student progress and use this information to inform lesson planning and instructional practices. Assessment literacy is a high-yield strategy in which increments of capacity in schools and in the district produce significant improvements in student learning. This is because assessment literacy can be directly related to informing instructional strategies and classroom practices that specifically influence student learning. A range of approaches to data analysis were adopted, including software packages on desktops and the use of student tracking data walls for staff review. Teachers were encouraged to look at data both for their individual class and, in discussion with colleagues, to generate debate about assessment of and for learning and student progress.

D. Sharing Responsibility through Building Partnerships

11. Positive and purposeful partnerships

The districts fostered partnerships. The building of partnerships and sharing of responsibility were both encouraged and valued at all levels of the system. For example, the senior administrative team, including the director, was visible across the district and connected to schools through visits, meetings with principals, and attendance at professional development events. These connections helped to model

and foster a commitment to working together with a shared focus and responsibility for student achievement. Trustees and school councils also focused on a common commitment to student achievement for literacy and numeracy in discussions and decisions. At the school level, professional learning communities within schools and lateral capacity-building across schools were developed to support teachers and principals learning from each other. By developing positive connections at district and school levels, a sense of common purpose was fostered. A key element of building partnerships was to encourage positive and purposeful joint working with a shared responsibility for student achievement. This involves a shift in focus from "my classroom" to "our school," "my school" to "our board," and "my board" to "our province."

The districts and schools also sought to engage parents and communities in shared responsibility for student achievement, for example, through partnerships for volunteering, family literacy, and parents' meetings. Partnerships were also fostered with organizations and agencies for specific initiatives linked to student learning and development. This included partnerships with broader social and health services to support the commitment to students' emotional, physical, and personal development alongside their academic achievement.

12. Communication

To develop shared understanding of the district's vision and focus and to build shared responsibility for the student achievement priority, effective communication is vital. In the districts studied, principals reported that schools felt supported by the district through regular two-way communication and a sense of common direction. This involved a clear articulation and understanding of the vision and strategy among all involved. The districts emphasized a clear and consistent message about raising student achievement and ensured this message was repeated frequently and with a sense of urgency. While this message remained consistent, different communication strategies were used for educators, parents, and the public. Communication within the district and schools included face-to-face interaction through effective system and school meetings, plus use of print and electronic media. A range of communication approaches was used district-wide, such as directors' reports, curriculum newsletters, and e-mail announcements. While some of these communications were also available publicly, specific public announcements through

newsletters, websites, and press releases were vital to ensuring the district's message about student achievement was presented widely in a language and style appropriate for a general public audience.

Unlocking the Potential of District-Wide Reform

In summary, across the eight district case studies, we found evidence of successful practice relating to four broad strategic areas:

A. Leading with purpose and focusing direction;

B. Designing a coherent strategy, co-ordinating implementation, and reviewing outcomes;

C. Developing precision in knowledge, skills, and daily practices for improving learning; and

D. Sharing responsibility.

Within these strategic areas, there are 12 key components:

- Leadership for learning;
- Vision and shared focus on student achievement as the priority;
- Moral purpose informing strategies and practices;
- Overarching strategy;
- Resources allocation and prioritization;
- Effective organization;
- Monitoring, review, feedback, and accountability;
- Capacity building for professional learning;
- Curriculum development, instruction, and interventions;
- Use of data and assessment literacy;
- Positive and purposeful partnerships; and
- Communication.

The Effective District-Wide Strategies for Raising Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy Project is one initiative of The Secretariat's commitment to identifying, celebrating, and sharing effective practices. The findings in this report are part of our strategic approach to inquiry in which we derive lessons from Ontario's education system on an ongoing basis and feed this back to Ontario's educators to inform practice and contribute to improvement. Together we can make a significant difference in student achievement by unlocking the potential for learning across Ontario.

Unlocking the potential of district-wide reform involves several requirements. The first requirement is that the overall system – the province – must expect, foster, and support districts to take focused action. Second, it is necessary, as we have shown in this initiative, to identify cases in which specific strategies are in place so that we can examine what they look like in practice. Even with this increased precision, it is difficult to detail specifically how to make districts effective as there are no universal blueprints for success. The combination of strategies and the influence of local contexts, needs, and experiences will vary in the implementation and outcomes of similar practices. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. To a certain extent, districts must identify and review their own particular solutions, drawing on the best knowledge from evidence of successful practices locally and beyond. This could include comparing a district's existing strategies and actions against the 12 components identified in this report and reviewing what is currently working well, requiring improvement, or absent. While not offering precise blueprints, these cases can help other districts as they learn about what is happening and explore potential areas for development. This is enhanced also by our strategy of lateral capacity-building as we support districts to collaborate and learn from and with each other. By helping districts to articulate and tell their strategy stories, this initiative supported district and school leaders to reflect on and articulate what they are doing, why, and with what results. This reveals one's usually tacit theory of action and strengthens the capacity to reflect on, refine, and extend quality strategies. Finally, as part of what we call the evolution of positive pressure, successful district cases that represent a range of circumstances contribute to removing excuses for low performance. No district in the province can claim that success is not possible. Although the cases are not intended to be exemplars or beacon cases, they are very much variations on successful themes. All districts in the province will move forward relative to their own starting points and in comparison with districts with similar profiles to unlock potential for learning and to raise student achievement.

We know from past research that neither top-down, prescriptive strategies nor bottom-up, site-based strategies alone work. What is needed is a blend of the two. In trilevel reform, the district, as the mid part of the "tri," is in a vital position to reconcile and harness top-down and bottom-up forces needed for large-scale reform. In essence, this is what unlocking potential is all about.