

A Province Called to Action ...



The Learning Journey

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Background

The current government of Ontario has made improvement in publicly funded education the centerpiece of its mandate. This commitment has focused on improving student achievement, reducing gaps in performance and increasing public confidence in publicly funded education. These goals underpin a large-scale reform of Kindergarten to Grade 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 for young people.

At the beginning of his term in the fall of 2003, Premier Dalton McGuinty made his commitment to improving Ontario's education system clear and unequivocal:

Making publicly funded education the best education is the single most important thing that we can do to build a bright and promising future for all of us. We know that in today's economy, the jurisdiction with the best-educated, most highly skilled workforce gets the best jobs and the most investments. But, it's even more than that, when we get education right, we also get the best people, the kind of men and women you want for friends and neighbours and co-workers. We get a stronger society.

The first step in realizing this goal requires that we find ways to help students develop solid reading, writing and mathematics skills, ideally by the age of 12, so that they have a strong foundation for future development. Ontario's target, set for 2008, is that 75 per cent of students will reach or exceed the provincial standard (Level 3) on EQAO Grade 6 tests. In the fall of 2004, to help support the province meet this goal, the Premier established the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat under the direction of Dr. Avis Glaze, the province's first Chief Student Achievement Officer. Dr. Glaze assembled a team of key educators from the field with expertise in both change management and literacy and numeracy strategies.

The Secretariat's team of Student Achievement Officers began the journey of improvement by building strong relationships with the educational community, working cooperatively with boards to build capacity to improve student learning and achievement. The Secretariat also launched an extensive professional learning program and developed implementation support for teachers and administrators.

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat is built on a foundation of moral purpose. Dr. Glaze states, "Educating all children to the highest level is a moral imperative." This challenge must be addressed with a sense of urgency. We need to work tirelessly to ensure that all our students meet with success in school to increase their life chances and choices.

A country's greatest asset is its citizens. We believe that the literacy and numeracy strategy, coupled with a strong moral imperative is the best guarantee for realizing the future envisioned for our children and for ourselves.

Goals of the Secretariat

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat works collaboratively with schools, boards and school authorities to build strong linkages and alliances to support learning. The Secretariat is forging a consensus around the resources, strategies and tools that are needed to ensure excellence in teaching and learning. We are building upon the spirit of innovation that already exists in the Ontario public school system.

Within this context, the key purposes of the Secretariat are to:

- strengthen the focus on literacy and numeracy;
- negotiate rigorous student achievement targets and work with boards and school authorities on their board improvement plans;
- share successful practices among schools and districts;

- extend the knowledge base of the teaching profession;
- increase capacity to support teaching and learning; and
- engage trustees, students, parents, members of school councils, Special Education Advisory Councils (SEACs), and business and community partners to further support student achievement goals.

The primary orientation of the Secretariat is to create a climate of high expectation, high challenge and high support directed at continuous student improvement. The following table represents the work of the Secretariat to date. The three phases of development and implementation represent key supportive actions carried out over a short timeline.

Our Journey to Date: Key Achievements		
<p>Phase 1 Nov. 04 – Apr. 05 Building Consensus</p> <p><i>Reaffirming our common purpose and conveying a sense of urgency</i></p>	<p>Phase 2 May 05 – Mar. 06 Capacity Building</p> <p><i>Providing leadership development and increasing instructional effectiveness</i></p>	<p>Phase 3 Apr. 06 – Aug. 07 Sharpening our Focus</p> <p><i>Developing greater precision and intentionality with a focus on high-yield strategies and equity of outcome</i></p>

In Phase 1 the Secretariat supported a range of locally managed literacy and numeracy initiatives, began to identify and publish reports on research-based successful practices, and assisted boards with target setting and improvement planning. In Phase 2 the Secretariat intensified its focus on professional learning to support improved leadership and instruction, offering several very large professional development initiatives and creating innovative e-learning opportunities for teachers via monthly webcasts. In Phase 3 the Secretariat sharpened its focus to zero-in on strategies to help children in challenging circumstances make the early achievement gains they need to make in order to experience academic success. Throughout these phases the Secretariat has continued to develop its research and evaluation work.

Lessons Learned from the Ontario Experience

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat assists schools and school boards in achieving continuous improvement in student achievement. Two school-based projects, which continue to build momentum and impact in the Ontario system, are *Schools on the Move: Lighthouse Program* and *The Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership*. These projects inspire change by presenting a picture of what schools might look like when whole-school effort is focused on student achievement.

Schools on the Move: Lighthouse Program highlights the work of schools that are making a steady and measurable progress in student achievement gains. These schools are examples to all that it is possible to overcome the odds that standing still is not acceptable and that great things will happen for student learning

when an entire school community pulls together. This project encourages networking and the sharing of effective practices that make a difference to student learning.

The Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) ensures equity of outcome for all students across the province by providing a range of supports for boards and schools in general and more intense support for specific schools that have experienced difficulty in achieving continuous improvement. The intent of this initiative is to strengthen and support instructional leadership and classroom practices for implementing precise and focused high-yield, research-based strategies for teaching and learning.

Key elements of the OFIP strategy:

- disaggregating school level data to determine the students' greatest area of need;
- ensuring that strategies are in place to provide targeted interventions for specific groups of students who are not meeting their potential;
- developing a school focus and setting ambitious targets collaboratively with staff;
- implementing an effective mechanism to regularly monitor and assess the growth and progress of all students;
- overseeing the implementation of targeted interventions;
- scheduling and monitoring the implementation of effective use of blocks of uninterrupted time for literacy and numeracy;
- aligning budget and resources to the school improvement plan;
- embedding professional learning for all staff to strengthen instructional effectiveness; and
- engaging parents and community in school initiatives.

The lessons learned from *Schools on the Move* and *OFIP* can engage, motivate and inspire school leaders toward even higher student achievement and better school results. Leaders can imagine success.

Schools on the Move and *OFIP* schools tell powerful stories. These stories captivate, motivate, create enthusiasm and stimulate thinking. A caution though is that these stories of success are not easily replicated. What they do is help move thinking beyond the status quo, by showing that great things will happen for student learning when an entire school community pulls together.

Student Achievement Officers have observed some consistent factors that produce gains in student learning. These factors are also identified in the research literature:

1. Shared belief – all students can learn and all staff share responsibility for student learning.
2. Teamwork – willingness to learn together and take responsibility for achievement of all students.
3. Leadership – effective principal leadership and distributed leadership across the staff.
4. Data – used to monitor student progress and inform instruction and resource allocation.
5. Parents and community – involved in supporting learning in many ways.

6. Job-embedded professional learning – built into the school culture.
7. Instructional time – use of high-yield strategies in literacy and numeracy; time on task maximized; minimal interruptions.
8. Differentiated instruction – driven by assessment for learning to ensure all students achieve standards.

We have noticed that leaders in these schools facilitate and make engagement possible; they walk beside, guide, identify successful practice, encourage deep inquiry and share leadership. This energizing work creates the enthusiasm necessary to stay the course. Positive engagement becomes the intrinsic reward that makes it possible for schools to overcome the odds and do great things for learning.

What Is the Difference that Will Make the Difference?

Examples of Some Conditions in Some Low-Performing Schools	Examples of What We Are Now Seeing
Limited reliance on research and data ... compliance level of use	Use of provincial, district and school data to focus and become more precise in meeting student needs ... a greater intentionality re: teaching, assessing and learning
Teaching as an isolated event	Goal oriented and strategic with a focus on teaching and learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • precision and personalization • thinking about learning • research-based practices that connect high-yield strategies to student needs
A school context that was often characterized by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student behaviour is seen as a barrier to learning. • “We are doing all that we can do to teach our children.” 	Teaching is about learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning for all students • teachers teaching to high expectations • respect for all
Classrooms were isolated with little sharing of teaching practice and knowledge of students.	Staff demonstrating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responsibility for all students • high tolerance for truth • a sharing of practice • collaborative consultation
A focus on ad hoc professional development ... building teacher competency and expecting a transfer to classroom practice	Team-focused and job-embedded learning. It is about doing and sharing, using high-yield teaching and critical thinking strategies to support student learning ... strong feelings of teacher efficacy emerge.
A disconnect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • resources not meeting the learning needs of students • little time spent providing staff with the opportunity to be involved in professional learning/inquiry 	Schools are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • purchasing and using rich texts to meet the learning needs of students • creating a culture that respects the importance for staff to build and refine their knowledge and expertise together using time as a precious commodity to find solutions to improve achievement
Leaders maintaining the status quo with a focus on management tasks and very little inter-school collaboration	Leaders acting as “lead learners”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • distributing leadership to empower and engage staff • staying the course • facilitating and managing the change process • creating, supporting and advocating for the school to be a place of learning for all students • changing not just the school but partnering with other schools and influencing change at the district level
Leaders seeing professional development coming from outside the school	Leaders facilitating professional learning by assembling school teams. The work of the leader with the team is to reflect on and share evidence of teaching and learning in order to extend the knowledge and skill of all staff. Teaching/learning becomes transparent and is subject to reflection.
A focus on problems/issues with solutions being operational	The culture is characterized by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adaptive solutions • re-visioning • re-discovering purpose and passion • urgency • celebrating student achievement • re-committing to students who are not meeting standards
Parent and student engagement was limited and not always transparent.	Learning is a shared responsibility.

In Conclusion

The primary purpose of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat is to build capacity at all levels of the system to ensure continuous improvement and sustainability. Since its inception, the Secretariat has focused on building positive relationships in the system based on respect and collegiality. We have recognized successful practices and the many pockets of excellence that exist in the province. Improved student learning does not happen by accident; it happens because of intentional efforts and commitment to our moral imperative.

The overriding observation from *Schools on the Move and OFIP* schools is the tremendous commitment by school leaders to work tirelessly with staff to find ways to see their students succeed. This is especially true with respect to those students identified as needing additional support. We cannot look back!

For further information concerning the ongoing work of the Secretariat, please explore the following link: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy . Contact Elaine Hine at Elaine.Hine@ontario.ca or Denis Maika at Denis.Maika@ontario.ca for further information.