

Leading Student Achievement Project

By **Patty Orecchio**, Program Developer

Research shows that school leadership, especially by the principal, is the second most important factor (next to the teacher) when it comes to impact on student learning. School principals have a special responsibility to focus on what it takes to implement the core priorities.

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As a ministry supported project, *Leading Student Achievement* (LSA) is unique in its longevity. It has been in existence for three years and is expanding into a fourth year with emphasis on building teaching-learning networks in and amongst schools. From inception, the project has brought together representatives from the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, the three principals' associations (CPCO, ADFO, OPC) and Curriculum Services Canada to build leadership capacity with the purpose of impacting on teacher instructional practice and student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The purpose has not changed over the four years but the learning and the strategies have evolved, gaining in depth and complexity according to the time in the project and the commitment of the participants. This year 23 Catholic boards were involved in the project.

The *Leading Student Achievement* project is based on a tri-level collaborative leadership approach. Principals build professional learning communities in the schools while working collaboratively in principal learning teams and accessing support from their boards, principal associations and the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in order to improve their skills as instructional leaders. This approach is based on the research of Michael Fullan who talks about developing "strategies that integrate top-down and bottom-up forces in an ongoing, dynamic manner, achieving permeable connectivity." Permeable connectivity occurs when teachers and leaders at all three levels - school, board and province - interact professionally to build lateral capacity. An important goal for the *Leading Student Achievement* project is to work within the tri-level framework to produce effective leadership actions that positively impact principals, teachers and students.

The success of the project comes from the continued focus on precise goals and the ability of the steering team to continue to meet the evolving needs of the participating boards. Working in principal learning teams to improve instructional leadership, developing principal and teacher capacities for effective literacy and numeracy instruction, developing learning communities of principals at the board and provincial levels, and assisting principals to develop learning communities in their schools are the underlying goals of the project.



This year the focus shifted from the *how* and *why* of learning communities to the *what* of learning communities. Dr. Ken Leithwood, the research advisor to the *Leading Student Achievement* project began the year by introducing research on five key conditions, which evidence shows have the most powerful direct effects on student learning. One of the major aspects of the challenge faced by educators in Ontario who are striving to improve student achievement, is the fact that our students are on the whole, doing well. As Dr. Leithwood explains, the challenge lies in determining how to advance from *good* to *great*. The five conditions include academic press, school disciplinary climate, collective teacher efficacy, teacher trust in colleagues, parents and students, and time for learning. Principal learning teams around the province were asked to focus their conversations and learning on these five conditions and begin to see how the conditions fared within their school communities.

Dr. Leithwood and his team conducted principal and teacher surveys in the fall and then again in the spring to determine the extent to which the *Leading Student Achievement* project supported the development of these conditions in schools. Through their involvement in the project, schools are contributing to educational research rooted in an Ontario context.

The *Leading Student Achievement* project has supported principal learning teams by providing professional learning based on the "research-led practice and practice into research" model. This has included three annual symposia for principal team leaders and superintendents/district leaders. This year the symposia featured international speakers and researchers such as Gayle Gregory and Karen Seashore Louis. Principals and vice-principals also participated in face-to-face workshops in their boards. Over the



year, CPCO has provided workshops on differentiated instruction, principal faith retreats, mathematics, assessment, professional learning communities, mentoring and legal issues to boards through this project. These workshops have been presented by our own members and evaluations show that they have been very well received.

As the expertise of participating teams in the project has grown over the past four years, there has been a call for teams to share their success stories. The symposia in August 2007 and May 2008 included carousels where board teams were able to present to their colleagues. The carousels were enthusiastically received as the practical implementation of the research that experts had presented in past symposia. The *Leading Student Achievement* project embodies the practice of “research into practice.” At the May 2008 symposium there were two teams from Catholic school boards represented in the carousels - Thunder Bay CDSB and Toronto CDSB.

As first year participants in this project, the Thunder Bay CDSB team, made up of superintendent Frances Garofalo and principals Lorella Costanzo, Leona McEwan, Barb Van Hatten and Debbie Weiler enthusiastically described their journey to embed professional learning to improve student achievement at all levels of their organization. They talked about research projects with the focus on literacy improvement and provided many examples of success stories in their board.

The Toronto Catholic team has been in the *Leading Student Achievement* project since the beginning. Principals Laurie Levay and Joanne Melo presented their Teaching-Learning Cycles based on the Critical Learning and Instructional Pathway (CLIP)

created by Crévola, Hill and Fullan. Participants learned how the model was implemented in families of schools using data to guide instruction based on individual student needs. They also heard how principals and teachers came together to use this powerful tool which has proven successful results in student achievement, teacher efficacy and professional learning. This presentation was a good example of how participants in the LSA project have progressed in their understanding and implementation of the *how-to* of student improvement. Teaching-Learning Networks is the topic of the upcoming Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat two-day symposium on July 3 and 4, 2008 and will be a focus for the *Leading Student Achievement* project next year.

Developing a lateral capacity of principals at a provincial level has included the use of web conferences. With the help of Curriculum Services Canada, over 80 principals from across the province were able to connect with each other and deepen their understanding of how the *Leading Student Achievement* project aligned with the School Effectiveness Framework. The web conferences were highly interactive and participants discussed not only with the whole group but also with smaller groups and then received an electronic copy of all the ideas, which were generated. An auxiliary benefit to the web conferences was the excellent individual training, which participants received from the Curriculum Services Canada staff before the web conference took place. This certainly increased everyone’s comfort level with the technology. Curriculum Services Canada is an invaluable partner in the *Leading Student Achievement* project, maintaining the website for the project as well as producing DVD resources and facilitator guides for all of the symposia.

As the *Leading Student Achievement* project moves into its fourth year, it continues to deepen the understanding of principals within the project on what it takes to meet the learning needs of all students in Ontario. The focus will be to help principals be precise in their school improvement goals, differentiated according to the needs of their students and school communities. There will also be a focus on continued networking amongst principals and boards by using technology to diminish the distance gaps within the province. With the number of provincial initiatives, the *Leading Student Achievement* project is dedicated to demonstrating connections between and amongst the initiatives. Finally, “Leadership is about helping people make sense of their work.” Here are some questions that Dr. Leithwood asked that may help to clarify our work in schools.

- How are our kids doing?*
- Where would we like them to get better?*
- What will we need to change for this to happen?*
- How can we make these changes?*
- Who will do what and when will they do it?*
- What do they need to get the job done?*
- How can we help them to get what they need?*
- How will we know we are making progress?*

For further information on the LSA project visit the CPCO website www.cpco.on.ca or contact Patty Orecchio at porecchio@cpco.on.ca.