

MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

*Seven Questions at the Heart of Principals' Leadership*¹

I recently overheard a perturbed and less-than-thrilled woman describe her spouse's imminent retirement as "twice the husband and half the money." Admittedly stretching the analogy a bit, this captures the reaction many principals have to the presence of more *help* from the usual suspects. Districts have priorities that arise from their strategic plans. Within districts, superintendents of curriculum initiate activities aimed at improving literacy across the board, while superintendents of human resources launch campaigns for safe school environments and superintendents responsible for leadership development advocate the creation of principal networks.

Meanwhile at the provincial level in Ontario, officials earn their salaries by developing leadership frameworks, insisting on the development of school improvement plans in response to EQAO results, arguing for attention to school effectiveness frameworks and by field testing new principal performance appraisal systems. I have no doubt you will agree that this is not an exhaustive list - not even close.

Some of these external initiatives come with new money, but many do not. Considered separately, most outside-the-school initiatives are well thought out and many hold significant potential for improving schools. We should not be surprised, since their creators are among the most knowledgeable and committed educators we have in the province. Furthermore, pressed on the matter, almost all of these educators will argue that they do not intend their initiatives to be an *add on* to what teachers and principals are already trying to do. On the contrary, the purpose is to help them do their jobs better. So what is the problem?

Of course, "half the money" is part of the problem. Many initiatives come with a bit of start up money, but almost none provide money for long term sustainability. This is a perfectly reasonable state of affairs if you believe that these initiatives are just helping people do their jobs better. Pilot programs, field tests and demonstration projects typically assume added initial costs but these are costs that implementers will either be able to absorb or just not incur, in the long run. This assumption, however, is one of the best explanations for the very high proportion of promising innovations that have been implemented with impressive effects, but have never been institutionalized. Liberally adapting the title of one of Nicholas Cage's more engaging movies, most educational innovations are "Gone in Three Years."

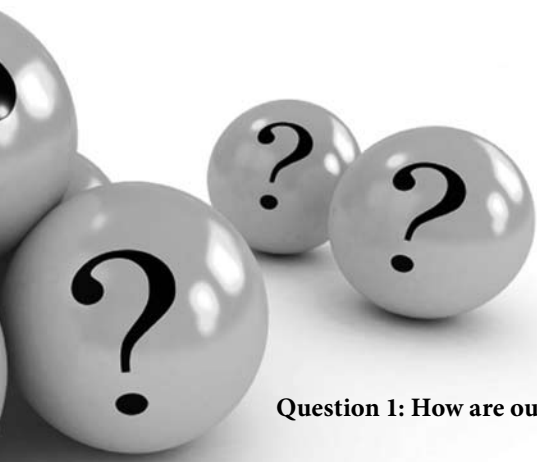
Ontario's publicly-funded education system is in much better fiscal shape today than it was half a dozen years ago. So "twice the husband" is likely a bigger part of the problem and the one on which the remainder of this article is focused. If you are a reasonably

experienced principal creating your school's priorities with your staff based on the artful combination of local community needs, what your district is holding you accountable for and the initiatives at the top of the provincial mind, *less* would definitely be *more*. This is hardly a new problem or one unique to Ontario. For many years we have heard about "Christmas tree schools" - schools that attempt to adopt every new thing that comes along. A recent Ontario study of teacher working conditions² found that external initiatives were sufficiently prominent in teachers' minds that they considered the pressures to deal with them as one of the more stressful parts of their jobs.

For principals and teachers in Ontario today, however, the abundance of external-to-the-school initiatives is a qualitatively different order of problem than it is in many other jurisdictions. It is a quite different problem than it has been in Ontario in the past, as well. What makes this problem different in Ontario today is the remarkable degree of coherence and alignment the provincial school system has achieved over the past five years. The province has few rivals on this matter, whether the comparison is with other Canadian provinces or with other large educational jurisdictions around the world. What makes this significant is that a very high proportion of the district and provincial initiatives knocking on the school house door are actually built on similar assumptions about education and change, similar visions of what the school system as a whole should be trying to accomplish and similar levels of commitment to capacity development as the key to increasing the performance of schools. Such coherence and alignment transforms the problem from "twice the husband and half the money" to "how to use the increased availability of my spouse's considerable energies to make our lives easier, more satisfying and so on."

Helping colleagues make sense of their work is a key part of leadership; some have even argued that it is the fundamental definition of leadership.³ For Ontario principals this often means helping their staffs understand the relationships among the many district and provincial initiatives bumping up against them and the local priorities that are actually driving their work and passions. It sounds like a complicated challenge, but I think the leadership task of principals boils down to finding answers to seven questions. The many district and provincial initiatives I have been alluding to are no more and no less than attempts to help answer one or more of these questions. Sometimes you will need help, sometimes help will be unnecessary, and sometimes the help will be less helpful than its advocates imagine.





Question 1: How are our kids doing?

Cognitive scientists typically think of a *problem* as consisting of three elements - a current state, a goal state and operators, which transform the current state into the goal state.⁴ When we think of school improvement as the problem, then “How are our kids doing?” is a question about the current state. The province tries to help you figure out this part of the problem by collecting the results of your students’ performance on tests administered by EQAO. You may be in a district that also helps you answer this question by administering additional achievement tests.

Knowing the current status of your students’ achievement is clearly a necessary condition to meet if you are to solve your school improvement problem. But you and your teachers can stare at your achievement results for days on end, disaggregate those results in many different ways and they still will not do more than inform you about the current status; they are necessary, but they are not sufficient. Furthermore, they provide you with only a partial answer to the question because they only assess learning about a portion of the total curriculum you are teaching. Therefore, inside-the-school estimates of current status, while sometimes seeming to be devalued by those outside of your school, are very likely to be essential for estimating the current status of student achievement in your school.

You and your staff should be aware that those high profile and very influential external measures of your students’ achievement have all kinds of limitations for the purpose of assessing the current status of students in your school.⁵ They are quite different limitations than those associated with inside-the-school estimates, but every bit as troublesome. So do not let your teachers become intimidated or overwhelmed by results from such external measures. Their own judgments about how their students are doing remain absolutely vital contributions to accurately answering this first question. That said, it is important to insist that those judgements be based on such explicit evidence as, for example, teacher designed tests, marked assignments and one-on-one conversations with students, not simply unsystematic impressions.

Question 2: Where would we like our students to be better?

This question is about the goal state of the school improvement problem and the answer typically emerges from the several varieties of forward planning efforts in which you and other stakeholders engage. These forward planning efforts should, but do not always, acknowledge what you know about the current state of your students’ achievement.

The provincial government has certainly been clear about its answer to this question.⁶ “We want students to be much more literate, especially those who do not now achieve at level 3 on EQAO tests.” But this will be an irrelevant priority for those schools in which most students already exceed this standard by a large margin or for groups of students in schools who already exceed the standard. These are schools and groups of students for which provincial achievement standards provide little help in answering the goal state question that is part of your school improvement problem. That amounts to a lot of students. One might be inclined to argue that if literacy is so important to one’s life chances, then simply adding to the literacy capacities of those already doing well is a promising priority. But it is very likely that there is an upper limit on the value associated with increased literacy. Beyond that ceiling more value would be added to students’ learning by focusing on issues other than literacy, no matter how broadly literacy might be conceived.

Your district certainly has developed a strategic plan which aims to establish a set of priorities that almost all schools are expected to include as part of their own answer to this second question. But the same limitations on helping you answer this question for your school apply as is the case with provincial priorities.

No doubt you and your staff do some form of school improvement planning, perhaps with some involvement of community members. The aim of such planning is to somehow arrive at a set of clear goals for student growth that acknowledges provincial and district priorities, your estimate of students’ current status and perhaps also gives voice to aspirations your parents have for their children. Parent engagement, perhaps through school councils, might be an instrument for helping you answer the goal state question for your school. Working productively with your community has other advantages, such as helping with one of the province’s three core priorities, increasing public confidence in publicly-funded education.⁷

Question 3: What will we need to change for this to happen?

This is a question about the operators or mechanisms for transforming current states into goal states. You and your staff typically draw inferences from analyzing your students’ achievement results about how you might go about improving those results that find their way in to your priorities. These are inferences about what needs to change in order to improve the current status of students’ learning.

On what do you now base these inferences? On what should you base these inferences? By far the most common basis for these inferences is the expertise of you and your staff, as it should be. After all, you and your staff have considerable amounts of professional training and expertise, not to mention a mountain of experience and much better local knowledge than anyone outside of the school has. But sometimes this expertise and experience does not extend to the particular changes that are needed. Board consultants, lead teachers, literacy consultants and student achievement officers are among those paid to help you in such circumstances. Exploit them (in a good way) for all they are worth, would be the best advice here.

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) has developed a *School Effectiveness Framework* which, among other features, identifies nine elements of the classroom and school that some research indicates have significant influence on student learning. Improvements to these elements or variables might well generate greater learning. These variables ought to be considered part of the menu for your consideration in trying to answer this third question.



You should not, however, limit yourself to the nine components featured in the *School Effectiveness Framework* as you grapple with this third question. Substantial evidence has been found for the significant contribution to student growth of such additional operators as, for example, academic press, disciplinary climate, teacher efficacy and collective leader efficacy. Indeed, these are among the priorities for attention in the third and current phase of the LNS-sponsored *Leading Student Achievement* project.⁸

Question 4: How can we make those changes?

Academically engaged time on the part of students might be on your menu, if you are looking at the right menu. With good justification, “protecting instructional time” is included as part of the meaning of instructional leadership in the *School Effectiveness Framework*. You and your colleagues might well conclude that increasing the proportion of classroom time that is academically engaged would improve your students’ learning. But *knowing that* is quite different from *knowing how* and even though you might want to protect instructional time, you may not have a clue about how to begin.

Is there an external-to-the-school initiative to help you with this *how* question? The answer is no. There is not even a respectable body of research to fall back on. For this question, you and your staff are on your own. This means time to *reflect* together on the question, possibly some *action research* in your classrooms or visits to other schools with a reputation for having some expertise on this matter. Perhaps the same groups of external experts available to help you to answer Question 3 will have some thoughts on this; it is certainly worth asking. Otherwise, this is something that you and your staff will need to figure out on your own.

I am sure the irony here has not escaped you. This is, arguably, the hardest of the seven questions to answer but the one for which there is the least help available.

Question 5: Who will do what and when will they do it?

Usually this question is answered through your school improvement planning processes. It is absolutely crucial that you and your staff have well worked out and widely understood answers to this question or nothing much will actually happen. It is not a complex question and you and your staff are likely to enjoy a reasonably high degree of autonomy in answering it. But external

targets for your school’s performance and other expressions of urgency might well erode this autonomy - not always in a bad way. For example, the Ministry’s recently piloted *performance appraisal system* is intended to create a type of structured relationship between you and your superintendent that you may not have at the moment. Such a relationship offers opportunities for your superintendent to become part of your school improvement planning activities, including having an influence on your timelines, on your own role in school improvement and (if you get lucky) the money needed to do justice to that effort.

Under ideal circumstances, implementing the performance appraisal system will result in more support for your own school improvement efforts and opportunities for further developing your own leadership capacities. Ensuring that performance appraisal serves such largely positive ends depends just as much on you, the appraisee, as on your superintendent, the appraiser. If you and your district become involved in the new, provincially-sponsored performance appraisal process, the best advice is to aggressively take the initiative in ensuring that it becomes a valuable resource for your own leadership and for your school’s improvement efforts.

Question 6: What do my staff and I need to get the job done and how can we get it?

“Implore the superintendent to send more money” is a tempting, all purpose answer to this question. While additional resources of one sort or another never go wrong, more money is not often what schools need most and it is never the only thing needed by schools struggling to meet challenging improvement goals. Our current study of schools that were involved in the Secretariat’s *Turnaround Teams Project*⁹ indicates, for example, that the instructional expertise and the collaborative approaches to developing teachers’ expertise provided by the turnaround teams was a key to the success of many participating schools; more expertise from outside the school and teachers working together were what was needed in these schools. One school became significantly more successful when the mobility rate of their students decreased dramatically through the provision of stable housing in the community; a reasonable opportunity to teach their kids was what was needed in this school (and no doubt in many others like it). Other schools changed principals with a consequent increase in the success of their students. These schools needed new leadership from their administrators.

The three examples cited here depended on someone thinking about this sixth question in a fresh way, rather than automatically assuming the solution was the usual one (e.g., more time for professional development). Let’s face it. If it is the usual solution, you can likely assume diminishing returns from continuing to use it. These examples also depended on external-to-the-school assistance. In one case, assistance was from outside the educational system entirely.

While I have mentioned external assistance in answering other questions, the external assistance associated with answering this question may hold the greatest value for your school.

Question 7: How will we know we are making progress?

Part of this question is the same as question 1, but it is to be asked after you have taken some action. The same types of data are used to answer this question for comparison with the data you used to answer Question 1.

This question should likely also be expanded to include the operators you have chosen as a focus for your school improvement activities. Expanded in this way, the *School Effectiveness Framework* has the potential to be very helpful because it offers indicators of progress for each of its nine components; a useful addition to how we typically go about monitoring school improvement progress. If your school decided to focus efforts on one of the nine components in the Framework in response to Question 3, those indicators will be useful tools for answering Question 7.

Conclusion

In this brief article, I have tried to reduce what often seems like a buzzing confusion of external initiatives that threaten your chances of getting on with the agenda you and your staff believe to be important for your school. These are the seven questions to which you need answers for your school improvement efforts. If external-to-the-school initiatives do not help you answer one or more of these questions, then you are likely wise to ignore them. On the other hand, these questions may provide you with a framework for better appreciating the uses you could make of some of these external initiatives, the current set and the large number of future ones that you can be absolutely sure will appear a little further down the road.

¹I am grateful for the comments on an earlier draft by Laurie Pedwell and Tiuu Strauss.

²See Leithwood, K. (2006). Teacher working conditions that matter: Evidence for change. Toronto: Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario.

³See, for example, Smircich, L., and Morgan, G. (1982). Leadership: The management of meaning. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 18, 257-273.

⁴Frederiksen, N. (1984). Implications of cognitive theory for instruction in problem solving. *Review of Educational Research*, 54(3), 363-407.

⁵Space does not permit a description of these limitations here, but for a review see Leithwood, K., & Levin, B. (2006) Assessing leadership effects on student learning: Selected challenges for research and program evaluation, in W. Hoy & C. Miskel (Eds.). *Educational leadership and reform*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing 53-76.

⁶See Energizing Ontario Education (2008).

⁷See Energizing Ontario Education (2008).

⁸Evidence about these and other variables have been reviewed as part of the Leading Student Achievement project in Leithwood, K. (2007), Taking the project to the next level. Toronto, OISE/University of Toronto.

⁹This is a Ministry/CEA sponsored study entitled Turnaround School Leadership being carried out by K. Leithwood and T. Strauss.

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