

# LEADING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

## Working Together Matters

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*For the past four years the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO) has worked in partnership with the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) and the Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO), the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and Curriculum Services Canada on one of the most successful and longest-running research projects sponsored by the Ministry of Education. The goals of the Leading Student Achievement (LSA) project are straightforward: improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy and build the instructional leadership capacity of school leaders to support effective classroom practices in literacy and numeracy.*

*As capacity in the province has grown, the project has evolved to meet the changing learning needs of participants. This year a new dimension was added with a focus on Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCPs), hubs and networks.*

### Feeling Inspired - Making a Difference

Educators have always understood that *implementation matters*. However, it is only recently that we are beginning to understand what implementation looks like right down to the individual classroom. We are seeing power beyond measure in professional learning communities (PLCs), hubs and networks when they are connected to the TLCP. Teachers had felt isolated but are now feeling connected and energized because of the work they are doing with others in TLCPs, PLCs, hubs and networks. Sharing and moderating student work, resources and practice have made them feel like they are part of a team working toward a common vision. Teachers feel empowered and confident in their practice.

We have always believed that the *answers are in the room* and we are beginning to understand how this statement plays out in schools (PLCs), hubs and networks. We are seeing and hearing about PLC, hub and network meetings where the strengths of each educator contributes to the collective efforts of the group by creating solutions for the challenges that come forward. Creative and innovative practice is being shared and educators are learning with and from each other. When the conversation begins, the *buzz factor* is evident in the room.

Educators are creating safe places and are regaining their self-confidence. Teachers are telling us that programs no longer drive their teaching but instead, they are being guided by the evidence of student learning. Our work is about our actions and TLCPs, PLCs, hubs and networks produce results. Educators are making a difference as well as feeling connected and valued.

### How Individual School PLCs Operate and Contribute

In our model, school-based PLCs focus on assessment and are the unit that connects each of the schools in the hubs and network. Schools decide how long the TLCP will run (usually

6-8 weeks) and the network decides on a date on which the culminating task will occur, as well as when the network celebration session will take place. Teachers bring samples of student work from their classrooms to the network celebration session to moderate along with their learning, insight, innovative practice and next steps.

The school-based PLC connected to the TLCP provides schools with the best opportunity to imagine ways and means to improve student achievement. These assessment PLCs are driven by evidence of student achievement; in other words, what are student work samples showing and telling us? What are our next steps in relation to student needs?

In our *Learning Leads Teaching* model, student work samples are shared and moderated. This process provides educators with insights into capacity building needs, collective enquiry into teacher practice and a commitment to action between PLC sessions. Professional learning is driven by a focus on student learning and the power of learning together on the job. Discussion and actions are centered on the interdependence of curriculum expectations, assessment of and for learning, and thinking and teaching strategies.

Educators who are using the TLCP are telling us that there is a noticeable change in their school cultures. Staffs are working together and emerging from this work is a compelling vision for change and ways to sustain the change and build on successes.

### Hubs and Network - Getting out of Your Building

It is important for schools to meet with other schools. It is at these meetings that the following takes place: swapping student work - moderation; trading secrets - classroom practice; making new friends - collegiality; and letting the sparks fly - innovation.

Hubs support the work of the school based PLC. Three to five schools cluster together forming a hub. The most effective method of forming hubs is to allow schools the opportunity to select which hub they wish to join. A principal and at least one member from each school's PLC attend the hub meeting. Each hub has a leader. Sometimes hub leaders are elected by the group, sometimes they volunteer and sometimes they are appointed. Usually hub leaders are recognized as those who have been successfully doing this kind of work.

Hubs meet at least twice during the TLCP. During the Stage 1 meeting schools share the start-up work of their PLCs. It is not important that all schools in a hub are working on the same curriculum expectations. It is important that they declare which expectations they are working on, why they are working on these expectations and how they will know if they have made a difference in student learning. At the Stage 2 meeting, evidence of student work and teaching is shared.

The network is comprised of all the hubs. Hub leaders meet prior to hub and network meetings to plan and support each other. The network meeting takes place when the PLCs have completed their TLCPs. The network meeting signals an end date for the TLCPs. Having an end date provides a sense of urgency to complete the TLCP.

The first order of business in a network meeting is to moderate student work. Teachers form small groups of three or four people, working with staff from other schools that also teach at the same grade level. Each teacher brings several demonstrations of student work. These may be a very good sample, an emerging piece of work and a confusing piece of work. Student work may be samples from the beginning of the TLCP and from the culminating task. The group moderates the work and states next steps to support student growth. This is an opportunity for teachers to see work from other schools. Teachers see if their expectations of student work are close to those of their colleagues. The conversation always leads to teaching practice. Often, teachers will ask, "How were you able to get this kind of work?"

In the next segment, several teachers with interesting, promising or innovative practice are asked to share. Teachers present the new learning arising out of their work. This is a capacity building activity. The remainder of the network time is spent on school-to-school sharing. They describe what happened in their journey, what they want to do next and seek advice and solutions to interesting issues that arose in their TLCPs. They are anticipating finding solutions to common issues or barriers that will make their next TLCP better.

Hubs and networks provide wonderful opportunities for educators to share their work with others. Improved student learning does not happen by accident; it happens because of intentional efforts and commitment. The hubs and network are a way of providing maximum opportunity to grow the work together.

## Five Leadership Lessons Learned from the Field

### Lesson 1: Student work is the work.

Leaders' actions are always connected to improving student work through demonstrations of student thinking. Leaders in the TLCP emerge because of collective actions to improve student achievement. Deconstructing student work is the most powerful collective action to improve student learning and to inform practice.

### Lesson 2: Leaders emerge as a result of working together.

Members of a PLC, a hub and a network fully engage when they see that what they are doing is making a difference. Making a difference builds confidence. Leadership is ten per cent knowing *what to do* and 90 per cent *doing it*. PLCs, hubs and networks are powerful venues for social actions at work - the 90 per cent factor. Believing that we are educating students for tomorrow's world of work motivates and urges the PLC to stay the course, seeing students as a mission not as a product. A large part of the work is to engage students with *big ideas* of character and social justice, and to seize every opportunity to see PLC actions as acts of passion and commitment. PLCs value working with others and demand high tolerance for truth among members while creating a safety zone for enquiry and reflection.

### Lesson 3: Leaders are people of action. They just do it.

Leaders demonstrate actions that get results. Leaders live with the messiness that comes with enquiry. They mobilize the work of the PLC around their colleagues who have been doing this kind of work but may have been working in isolation. Leaders see that differing points of view and resistance are opportunities to learn from each other. They stay the course, sticking with the PLC (TLCP), the hub and the network process. Leaders celebrate student work and student thinking as the sole reason for their work.

### Lessons 4: Leaders attend to the learning agenda.

Leaders who believe they are *learning leaders* find time for the learning agenda. Interestingly, the managerial and operational work also is completed. Those who feel that they will get to the learning agenda after the managerial work is completed, never get to the learning agenda.

### Lesson 5: Leaders live in the world of *what if* thinking.

Leaders constantly *make meaning* in conjunction with others by asking questions, by inventing, by finding solutions and by simply trying. Leaders reflect, share and refine practice. Leaders put their thinking on the line. This is a leader's gift to others. It is in their genuine act of giving that receiving is made possible.

We have seen educators living out the belief and understanding that *all students can learn* and that *all teachers can teach to high standards*. Educators tell us that the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway is the difference that is making a difference.

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For more information concerning Stage 1 TLCP and Stage 2 TLCP, go to [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/teaching\\_learning.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/teaching_learning.pdf).