

## **Leadership and Innovation in the York Region District School Board**

By Dr Denese Belchetz

With its vision of a sustained focus on improving student achievement and wellbeing for each student, the York Region District School Board recognizes the key impact that strong leadership has in this process. Grounded firmly in the Province of Ontario's education strategy, the board has adopted a coherent and aligned research based approach to fostering school and system leadership in support of the evolving roles and responsibilities of its school and system leaders.

This paper outlines the provincial context and addresses the leadership development approach that the York Region District Board has taken to date in support of its school leaders. Recognizing that each school has its own specific context, the approach is one that establishes a framework of system understandings, resources and supports within which schools and school leaders – teachers, managers and school administrators - can do their work.

### **The Province of Ontario**

The Province of Ontario's change strategy embodies 'vital principles, grounded in research that are associated with meaningful and sustainable change' (Levin, Glaze, Fullan, 2008). With the advent of a government committed to improving education outcomes and graduation rates in 2003, a focus has also been given to strengthening school leadership along with a number of other key strategies including a commitment to smaller primary class sizes, labour stability, character education, safe and healthy schools and, key to the strategy, improved public confidence in education. This commitment has been paired with a significant and very welcome influx of funding and resource support for education. In the 2006-2007 year alone, Ontario's total education expenditure was around \$18 billion (Levin, Glaze, Fullan, 2008).

This government's approach has been one that is respectful of staff knowledge and skill and has drawn significantly on successful practices underway in schools across the province. At this time, there are many opportunities for leadership learning for teachers and school leaders in schools across the province. In the York Region District School Board, that learning is actively evident in our schools, within networks of schools and at the district level. It is also evident in the learning that we promote and encourage beyond the borders of our own district with other districts, nationally and internationally.

In addition to its focus on literacy and numeracy, the province has supported other key curricular areas including science, physical education and the arts. Much has also been done to increase the voice of parents in the education of their children through their involvement with the schools' School Council as they support their schools' Plan for Continuous Improvement. In recent months, the government has continued to encourage the building of strong connections and relationships with district schools and other relevant organizations. One of these groups is the Ontario Principals Council with whom the government has worked to address on-going supports for leadership capacity building.

It is clear that when one takes into account the improvement strategies employed in other jurisdictions (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008) Ontario's approach has been to bring about large scale change in an

intentionally positive manner. As Levin, Glaze & Fullan (2008) note “It is respectful of education, fair to students and communities and based on the best available knowledge. It helps people get better at their work and builds support for public education.” The Ontario approach has put capacity building at the heart of its education strategy. In so doing, we see the moral purpose of our work as that of improving each student’s achievement and success. In our public education system, we hold ourselves accountable rather than see accountability as imposed on us.

## **The York Region District School Board**

As one of the larger boards in the province (the board has 110,000 students and approximately 10,000 teachers, 150 elementary schools and 33 secondary schools) the York Region District School Board is a board that has grown significantly in size over the past decade. As a result of this growth, there has been a significant growth in the changing nature of the board’s demographics and its diversity. York Region as a district is seen to reflect the province with similar demographic permutations to those noted across the province. There are large urban areas, some smaller rural areas, examples of urban and suburban poverty, areas where there is significant population diversity and other areas where there is greater homogeneity. There are areas where there is significant population turnover and other areas where there is some evidence of shifting demographic patterns in terms of slower growth and lower enrolments.

The Board of Trustees in the York Region District School Board is committed to supporting the Board’s strategic direction and ensuring effective stewardship of the Board’s fiscal resources. In so doing, trustees engage in the process to develop and implement the Board’s annual Plan for Continuous Improvement, develop and maintain Board policy and communicate effectively with staff, parents and community in order to support and build public confidence in education. The Board’s Plan for Continuous Improvement aims, through its focus on the district’s core literacy strategy, to support curriculum implementation, parent, family and community engagement and school and workplace climate. Ultimately, the vision is one that is intentionally focussed on improved student achievement and success for each student in our system.

All of us in the York Region District School Board are proud of our achievements to date. When we consider our Board’s targets for student achievement in relation to the province’s goal that 75% of 12 year olds will attain provincial standards (level 3) by 2008, in reading, writing and mathematics, our Board is currently achieving at above this standard making it one of the higher achieving boards in the province. We have much to be very proud of – but there is still much more we must do. Sustaining these improvements will be crucial as we move forward.

Our Board’s achievement data demonstrates there is a need to focus more intentionally on closing the achievement gap in subgroups of students – specifically those of our English language learners (where English is an additional language, special needs students, aboriginal students, students living in poverty and students underperforming on Student Success indicators). The achievement data also points to a need for further study of attendance patterns and gender differentials as these apply to their impact on school achievement and success.

As a result, our efforts to “go deeper” into our understanding of what it takes to improve student achievement and success have required that we adopt innovative approaches including structural revisions to enhance our collaborative workplace culture, distributing leadership more deliberately across the system and fostering a collaborative environment where learning with, from and on behalf of each other is the norm of operation. Dufour, Dufour and Eaker (2002) have described collaboration as ‘a systematic process in

which we work together, interdependently, to analyse and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results'. This refocusing (or journey into second order change as we refer to it within our system), has led us to significantly address the barriers that hamper our progress at the same time as we have made efforts to sharpen our focus on the leadership skills required of those who are charged with leading our system's schools and the changing knowledge, skills and attributes required of these school and system leaders.

The goals for student achievement and success are embedded within our Board's Literacy Collaborative focus and our core literacy strategy. This is an all encompassing system-wide approach to support and deliver training to teachers and school leaders as well as to provide focussed support in networks and schools. The key initiatives that have comprised the Literacy Collaborative (delivered to teacher leaders and school leaders) include:

- Continuous Improvement Sessions
- Networked learning in schools
- Content Training (in our secondary schools)
- Walk-through training
- Intensive Support for identified schools
- Action Research training
- Literacy @ School (learning centre classrooms)
- Literacy Learning Fair (our culminating activity)

The Literacy Collaborative strategy has been effective in significantly impacting our system's student achievement results since its inception almost a decade ago. In our district's efforts to ensure that the impact of the Collaborative was able to reach each teacher in each of our district's schools and classrooms, the senior leadership team has clustered schools into networks based on student data indications. In a general sense, we have learned (as Fullan pointed out in 2004), 'that successful educational change is driven by a pervasive commitment to improving education for all'. He further pointed out that this 'includes raising the bar and closing the gap of pupil achievement, treating people with respect, improving the environment for learning and changing the context for learning at all levels'.

In our learning networks, there is an intentional focus on improved learning in each of the district's 24 elementary learning networks (Bryk et al., 1999; Firestone & Pennell, 1997; Hopkins & Levin, 2000). Though our efforts to learn with, from and on behalf of each other, we have come to understand that this intentional learning focus is likely to have a more direct impact if it is focussed in ways that are concrete and useful (Timperley & Robinson, 2003), compelling, challenging and shared (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Firestone & Pennell, 1997).

Our district's elementary schools have been engaged in networked learning for a number of years now. In some, this model of learning has been in place for over five years. Essentially what this model supports is the idea of schools working with schools to support their mutual learning. Schools are able to examine their progress relative to other schools whose data indicates they are improving. Essentially, what we are finding is that there is a greater distribution of leadership in our schools. This growing culture of distributing leadership among others in the school is also serving to prepare future formal leaders for that responsibility.

Harris (2008) points out that 'tomorrow's schools will need new forms of leadership. The old hierarchical models of leadership simply do not fit any longer'. She continues that 'we need to develop new leaders at

all levels of the system if we are serious about sustaining improvement and change'. Earl and Katz (2005) explain that 'networked learning communities include many levels of leadership – both formal and informal. Several years ago, Allen and Cherry (2000) proposed a concept of developing leaders at all levels of the system as follows: 'Leadership in organic systems is not the kind of leadership that one person can do. It is leadership that requires many people – a leader-full organisation. In an organic system, one person cannot control the system, nor can one person fully understand it. Therefore, models of collaborative, shared, or multi-level leadership become more important and critical in organic organisations'. It is essential therefore that extensive consideration must be given to developing the capacities of others in building a leader-full organisation.

As of 2007, all elementary schools in the York Region District School Board have been participating in a learning network. Evidence indicates that this model of leadership learning is having a positive impact in schools. As school and system leaders conduct their learning walks through these schools together, it is progressively more evident that their school cultures are evolving as teacher and school leaders engage in reflective dialogue about what it takes to improve student achievement and success in increasingly intentional and focused ways. As of 2009, secondary schools in the district will also be moving forward to learn together in networks.

Fullan (2008) points out that 'capacity building concerns competencies, resources and motivation. Individuals and groups are high on capacity if they possess and continue to develop these three components in concert'. Our Board Plan for Continuous Improvement provides that all staff routinely participate in leadership learning and training opportunities needed to support the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for their current and prospective roles. Clearly defined competencies for school leaders serve as a guide for aspiring, newly appointed and experienced leaders. Through our district's Professional Learning and Training Framework, all school leaders are able to access both required and self directed learning opportunities in support of their annually reviewed Leadership Plans.

The district's leadership strategy - informed as it is by research and effective practice nationally and internationally, works from the core of the organization to support all staff – including system managers, educational assistants, secretarial supports, caretaking supports as well as teacher and school leaders. This ensures that there is an alignment among and understanding of the various initiatives across the system.

The leadership development focus includes support for the continued implementation of the Province's School Effectiveness Framework across the System. In York Region, the leadership model that we use to engage with this process is one that is completely aligned with our core literacy strategy. The School Effectiveness Framework serves two purposes. It provides for a school self-assessment. It also involves a District Support Process. The purpose of this strategy is to intentionally build leadership capacity in schools as they strive to support reaching every student based on local context and needs. They do this through:

- Curriculum training and learning practices
- Programs and pathways that address the learning needs of all students
- Home, school and community partnerships
- Assessment for, as and of learning
- Fostering a culture that seeks appropriate interventions to close the learning gap

- School and classroom organizational cultures that reflect and respond to the needs of all students
- Engaging student voice in the school's education process.

The School Effectiveness Framework is an integral part of our district's school planning process. As a self-assessment tool, the Framework allows schools to identify their strengths and areas in need of further development in order to determine next steps in the school's improvement planning. The District Support Process provides schools with feedback outlining strengths and areas for professional learning. The whole process is based on a collaborative approach to school improvement and addresses capacity building and continuous learning in schools – both in terms of classroom practice and leadership development. As Fullan (2008) explains, continuous learning 'depends on developing many leaders in the school in order to enhance continuity. It also depends on schools being confident in the face of complexity and open to new ideas'. Information mined from the process helps target resources, determine professional learning needs and focuses improvement planning. Funding supports provide added release time for teachers and school teams. This work is delivered collaboratively in identified schools in our district with staff from Curriculum, Leadership Development and the superintendents of education who are directly involved.

The district's leadership strategy serves as a support to current and aspiring formal leaders. It recognizes that leadership can be manifested at all parts of the learning continuum. As such, supports are in place to address the desired learning needs of leaders at all stages of their learning. The Professional Learning and Training Framework – accessible online within the district – describes the required and self directed learning opportunities available to leaders. As part of their annually reviewed and revised Leadership Plan, and in the context of the districts Leadership Competencies for School Administrators, personal and professional growth opportunities are selected.

A key support for newly appointed school leaders is the opportunity to receive coaching support in their first year (for those in the vice-principal role) and in their first two years (for those in the principal role). In the district, coaching support is also available for experienced leaders coming into the district from elsewhere. The notion of coaching support that we offer in the district is based on the work of Costa and Garmstonxxx. The underlying concept behind this work is that each person has within them the resources that will help they grow and change. The coaching process brings enables each person to become a confident and competent part of the organization. As the authors point out, cognitive coaching is based on four principles:

- Thought and perception produce all behaviour
- Teaching is about constant decision making
- To learn something new requires engagement and alteration in thought
- Humans continue to grow cognitively.

Increasingly, we are looking to build coaching capacity within our system and, just in the past year have offered training to interested leaders for this purpose.

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