To get to the next level of sustainable reform, educators must become change experts. Schools have made a radical shift in the last decade from site-level innovation toward districtwide change, and many districts have focused on literacy to achieve large-scale reform. But evidence suggests systemwide reform requires more — a focus on professional development in literacy plus change.

The Early Years Literacy Project (EYLP) in the Toronto (Canada) District School Board (TDSB) is an example of the kind of capacity-building needed for systemwide, literacy-driven reform.

BUILDING SUCCESS

The Toronto District School Board is the fourth largest district in North America, with more than 200,000 elementary students. The district serves an increasingly diverse student population: 41% of elementary students speak English as their second language, and more than 24% of elementary students (47,000 total) were born outside of Canada, representing more than 175 countries.

In 1998, the superintendent led a team of consulting staff and principals to design the Early Years Literacy Project, targeting K-3rd graders in the
district’s highest needs schools — 93 of the district’s 451 schools. Half of the EYLP schools are in the bottom quartile of district schools on the district’s Learning Opportunities Index ranking, an index the district created to allocate funding based on a school population’s social and economic characteristics. The EYLP is funded through an Ontario Ministry of Education grant and district funds targeting early literacy.

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

• Between May 1999 (the year before implementing EYLP) and May 2002, the percentage of 3rd graders in EYLP schools who were at or above the standard on provincial standardized reading assessment increased from 33% to 46%. This 13% gain over the first three years of implementation compares with 7% for the district as a whole and 5% for the province. The decrease in the gap between student reading achievement in the EYLP schools and those in the district is more significant because of the large portion of high-needs students in EYLP schools. One of the program’s major goals is to reduce the achievement gap.

• Between 1999-2000 and 2001-02, the number of students exiting the Reading Recovery™ program in the district, a component of the EYLP, increased from 458 to 1,109. Overall, more students districtwide participated in Reading Recovery, but most of the additional students exiting the program were from EYLP schools.

 • Based on 2001 implementation surveys, more than 90% of principals, coordinators, and teachers reported that the EYLP contributed moderately or greatly to helping their schools to:
  - Improve primary students’ reading performance;
  - Increase the schoolwide focus on literacy; and
  - Ensure that adequate resources are available to support students’ learning.

 Teachers say their students, often the highest-needs children in the district, are learning and experiencing literacy differently.

“The project has shown us what we can do to make a difference,” one commented. “It has given me a new way to unlock the doors for children to read.”

Another said, “I wasn’t happy with the way I was teaching literacy. I wanted better reading strategies. The EYLP has been so specific. There is so much philosophy behind it. There are lots of practical strategies and practices.”

DEVELOPING LITERACY EXPERTISE

The Toronto District School Board literacy initiative uses complementary strategies at the school and district levels to help teachers focus and collaborate on literacy.

Shared leadership. Leadership for literacy professional learning is shared at each school between the principal and a literacy coordinator, who has been key to the EYLP’s intensive, job-embedded approach to professional learning. The literacy coordinator is an in-school literacy expert who visits classrooms, models literacy instruction and assessment strategies, and helps build a collaborative culture. In smaller schools, the literacy coordinator is a half-time allocation, while larger schools have two educators sharing the full-time allocation.

The literacy coordinators take part in professional learning to enable them to facilitate study groups, joint planning, and action research with their own school staffs. The district offers training sessions for literacy coordinators twice a month using a range of learning formats (e.g., modeling, video analysis, case studies, analyzing student work) to explore topics such as cognitive coaching, two-hour literacy block planning, and using specific assessment approaches (e.g., Development Reading Assessment). Outside consultants, in-district staff, and the literacy coordinators themselves provide the expertise and learning experiences.

Summer institutes. An annual two-day summer institute allows entire schools to participate in intensive professional learning, including grade and/or content-specific workshops. Experienced district teachers, principals, and literacy coordinators facilitate these sessions, a process that builds the district’s instructional leadership capacity.

Additional Qualification Courses. The district sponsors EYLP teachers’ enrollment in university courses.
Additional Qualification Courses in reading. Teachers in these 125-hour courses delve into current literacy theory and research while taking part in case studies, student work analysis, portfolio assessments, and other pedagogical approaches that deepen their practical understanding. Teachers who take these courses report that they feel more confident and competent in applying new learning in their classrooms. As a result of their learning, teachers also are better able to analyze the issues and practicalities of school and district-level literacy reform.

**Literacy resources.** Each EYLP school is assigned a part-time Reading Recovery™ teacher, and each EYLP classroom receives a leveled library, big books, and assessment tools. The management team also provides support through a school literacy-planning template, leadership rubrics, and books.

**Principals as learners.** EYLP recognizes that principals need a deep understanding of literacy reform, so they participate in monthly dialogues and regular development sessions where they talk about how the program is being implemented, problem-solve, assess instruction and leadership, and build a literacy team. Principals use these sessions to collaborate, recognize accomplishments, and support each other in their own literacy learning.

**DEVELOPING CHANGE EXPERTISE**

The district wanted to use literacy as a base for large-scale reform. To do so, it focused not only on developing literacy skills, but also on change expertise.

At the end of the first year implementing EYLP, many school leadership teams were challenged. Some literacy coordinators found teachers were reluctant to adopt EYLP-supported strategies and tools. Principals worried that focusing on K-3rd grade literacy might balkanize the higher grades in the school. Principals and literacy coordinators felt ill-equipped to deal with these challenges. The management team addressed the issues by designing professional learning experiences in change for school leadership teams. These strategies also were used in a similar partnership with Edmonton Catholic Schools in Alberta.

**School-university partnership.**

At the end of the first year, the EYLP management team contacted the authors, Carol Rolheiser and Michael Fullan of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT), to explore adding another focus to an existing partnership. The program management team wanted to develop principals’ and literacy coordinators’ change expertise.

**Professional development series.**

The district scheduled seven professional learning sessions, facilitated by Rolheiser and Fullan, to help principals and literacy coordinators understand and manage educational change. Using various forms of adult learning, participants explore building collaborative cultures; gathering dependable student/school data; examining and making sense of data; using data to make changes in teaching and schools; dealing with resistance; job-embedded professional learning strategies; and leadership challenges. In a typical session, principals and literacy coordinators work in support groups, study video cases, use cooperative learning strategies such as three-step interviews or jigsaws, and discuss how they are applying the concepts they’ve learned to their own school situations.

**The Learning Fair.** The professional development series and training focuses on building knowledge at both the school and district levels (Fullan, 2001). One knowledge-building strategy the Toronto district used (based on large-scale work in Edmonton Catholic Schools, see Edge, Rolheiser, & Fullan, 2002) is the Learning Fair, where each EYLP school showcases its literacy journey, including:

- Visual or storefront displays of literacy achievement and strategies in use;
- Literature showcases;
- Showcases of leadership teams;
- Student showcases;
- Teacher showcases;
- Student work displays;
- Student writing samples;
- PowerPoint presentations;
- Visual displays of parent involvement;
- Waivers of portfolio assessments, and other pedagogical approaches that deepen their practical understanding.
acy change work, including successes and challenges;
• 15-minute presentations to an audience of five other schools;
• Cross-school discussions; and
• A contribution to a districtwide resource book summarizing each school’s presentation.

Establishing cross-school knowledge sharing practices like the Learning Fair are as much a route to creating collaborative cultures as they are a product of a collaborative culture (Fullan, 2001).

Data for change. The district’s research office collected data that support the ongoing design and development of EYLP. Each year, EYLP teachers, literacy coordinators, and principals participate in an annual survey of their experiences and perceptions of the initiative. Results are shared districtwide, and school-specific findings are circulated to allow school staff to compare themselves with other EYLP schools. The findings also are used to plan EYLP professional development workshops and to guide implementation.

RESEARCH BASE

The OISE/UT team interviewed eight to 12 teachers, including administrators and literacy coordinators, in seven EYLP schools. The team produced a case study of each school’s change journey and analyzed the cases to understand what helped and what hindered implementing the EYLP (Edge, Rolheiser, & Fullan, 2001). Participants in the study said EYLP influenced their professional practice and their students’ learning. One educator said, in a typical comment, “I am blown away by the progress of students this year.” Another said, “Kids are more excited about reading.” The EYLP, said a third, “made a difference that has percolated through the school.”

The research served additional purposes:

**EYLP**

The EYLP program is based on current literacy, educational change, and professional development research. The program uses intensive professional learning, in-school support, and literacy resources to meet goals of:

**Student achievement**

• Improve literacy.
• Meet provincial achievement standards by the end of 3rd grade.
• Reduce special education referrals.

**Teacher development**

• Increase teachers’ capacity and knowledge of how children learn to read and write.
• Increase teachers’ capacity and knowledge of a variety of instructional strategies and assessment tools.

**Leadership development**

• Enhance shared leadership at the school and system levels.
• Create professional learning teams that focus on school improvement.

• Schools used cases for discussion and professional learning;
• The district used the case studies in training sessions;
• Research data were used to refine planning and develop future EYLP programs;
• The professional development series was fine-tuned based on input from surveys;
• EYLP received districtwide recognition and support; and
• Educators opened a dialogue about important early literacy policy issues.

**INCREASING SUSTAINABILITY**

Through the EYLP, schools have focused on improving literacy, and the district has examined its role in promoting change and developing leadership capacity for school improvement (Edge, Rolheiser, & Fullan, 2001). Schools have made considerable progress, especially those in their second or third year of implementation, as is normal in large-scale reform efforts. In year one, staff experience the challenges of getting started and express some misgivings about the initiative’s top-down nature. In year two, if the combination of strategies is effective, staff share initial successes. By year three, educators can see that their skills, and especially the collective skills of teachers and leaders together, have developed. They see the results of their efforts, can pinpoint problems in student learning, and are more confident about how to address problems.

Two key challenges remain for the program: increasing its use districtwide and sustaining growth. In the Toronto district, less than one-fourth of the district’s elementary schools are involved in EYLP. And even in schools that were successful three years into the initiative — especially in successful schools — the biggest worry is sustainability. Having literacy expertise is not enough to achieve large-scale, literacy-driven reform. Change expertise increases the chances of sustainability — a goal for all of us in our educational systems.

**REFERENCES**

