

ONTARIO DISTRICT EMBRACES *an* EVOLVING APPROACH *to* LEARNING

By Denese Belchetz and Kathy Witherow

The York Region District School Board is recognized as a high-performing district in Ontario, Canada, and has also garnered international attention. Visitors from across Canada, as well as Singapore, Finland, England, Scotland, Holland, Bahamas, Korea, China, and Taiwan, have come to learn about its system and observe the teaching, learning, and leadership practices underway in its schools and classrooms.

The district's achievement and resulting recognition is no accident. Through its commitment to intentional capacity building at all levels of the organization, the district has worked to cultivate a culture of collaboration and continuous learning that focuses on and positively impacts improved student achievement and well-being.

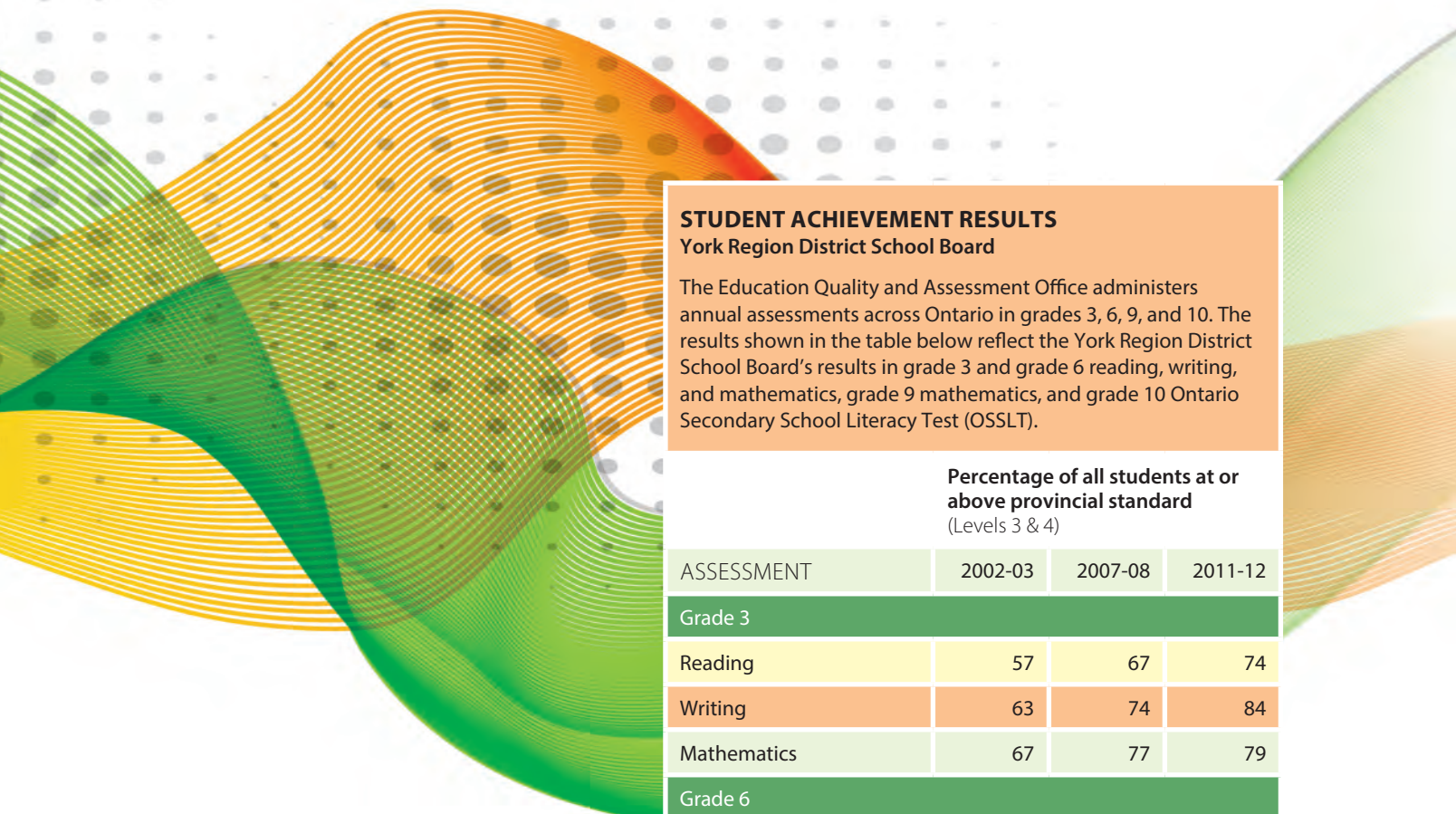
OVERVIEW

Over the past decade, the York Region District School Board's plan for continuous improvement has focused on improving student achievement through its literacy and numeracy strategy. A case study by the Ministry of Educa-

tion's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (2008) describes six areas of this work:

1. The district has implemented a systemwide focus on professional learning through a centrally organized and delivered literacy collaborative (p.23).
2. Numeracy is embedded in the work of literacy development and literacy learning.
3. There is a systemwide understanding that, given time and support, all students can learn.
4. School leaders and teachers gain the capacity to support assessment for learning practices and data-informed decision making about student learning.
5. The district carefully allocates and identifies resources within the budget.
6. The district encourages partnerships and interactions with critical friends from outside the board. These partners serve as content specialists and bring a research-based lens to the process.

Following a change in district leadership in 2009, student well-being became part of these improvement efforts. While literacy, numeracy, and student achievement remain a core focus, the work became grounded in an understanding that caring and safe learning environments are as vital



STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT RESULTS

York Region District School Board

The Education Quality and Assessment Office administers annual assessments across Ontario in grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. The results shown in the table below reflect the York Region District School Board's results in grade 3 and grade 6 reading, writing, and mathematics, grade 9 mathematics, and grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT).

ASSESSMENT	Percentage of all students at or above provincial standard (Levels 3 & 4)		
	2002-03	2007-08	2011-12
Grade 3			
Reading	57	67	74
Writing	63	74	84
Mathematics	67	77	79
Grade 6			
Reading	64	74	84
Writing	62	77	84
Mathematics	65	73	71
Grade 9			
Academic mathematics	70	84	90
Applied mathematics	20	41	50
Grade 10: OSSLT			
Percentage of fully participating students who were successful in their first attempt at writing the grade 10 OSSLT.	77	88	89
Grade 9 cohort			
Cohort starting year	2000-01	2003-04	2007-08
Five-year graduation rate	85	87	91

Source: EQAO Achievement Result, www.eqao.com.

as contextual leadership and differentiated instruction to ensuring equitable achievement outcomes.

“Literacy continues to be a key priority for the York Region District School Board. It is the ever-evolving underpinning of our society and fundamental to what we wish to achieve in public education,” says Ken Thurston, the district’s director of education, outlining the strategic directions to the organization as part of the board’s improvement plan.



Ken Thurston

The district is also focused on developing school leaders (Belchetz, 2009). Building this capacity has brought intentional awareness to the scope and sequence of capacity building across the system. Not only are leaders required to think about the context of schools, they are also required to reflect on their own development as a leader.

In addition to all of that, leaders also “had to tailor their leadership practice based on the magnitude or ‘order’ of change they were leading” (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). Heifetz and Linsky (2002) refer to “techni-

cal” versus “adaptive” change. Technical change is described as people having the necessary know-how and procedures to address solutions to problems (p. 13), while adaptive change requires learning new ways — changing attitudes, values, and behaviors in order to thrive in the new environment. The district’s work addresses technical changes surrounding the ongoing efforts to build capacity for leading, learning, and teaching.

Achievement results (see table on p. 19) show that the district has made significant progress over time but that there is still much work to be done.

ALIGN WITH MINISTRY INITIATIVES

Ontario’s approach to improving school and district outcomes puts capacity building at the heart of its education strategy. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, established within the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2004, developed, coordinated, and delivered the government’s literacy and numeracy strategy while ensuring that initiatives resulted in greater instructional effectiveness at the classroom level. Leadership from the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat has significantly impacted the province over the years.

Michael Fullan points out that capacity building involves the use of strategies that “increase the collective effectiveness of all levels of the system in developing and mobilizing knowledge, resources, and motivation, all of which are needed to raise the bar and close the gap of student learning across the system” (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2008, p. 4).

Furthermore, while the focus is firmly on improved student achievement, the Ontario approach has deliberately inverted pressure and support (Barber, 2001) to put a firm emphasis on support first, through capacity building for educators as the central strategy, with pressure through professional responsibility, as well as external accountability, as a supporting strategy.

Kenneth Leithwood (2013) describes nine critical features of characteristics of strong districts and their leadership. Among these are job-embedded professional learning for all members, a comprehensive approach to leadership development, and a learning-oriented organizational improvement process. Through all these efforts, the underlying approach to building capacity in the York Region District School Board has been to ensure alignment and coherence of all initiatives so that they are consistent with all improvement planning processes.

As the district has moved from technical to adaptive change modes, district leaders have come to realize the importance of learning from the practice of others. The Ministry of Education offers districts opportunities to learn from other districts, and district leaders keep abreast of improvement efforts in other jurisdictions. Their goal is to be cognizant of the bigger picture of school improvement, student achievement, and well-being as they strive to situate the district and its schools on the cutting edge of high-yield teaching, learning, and leadership practice. As noted by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), districts should build

on the best of what they have learned from the past while also looking ahead for intelligent alternatives that will guide them forward in the future.

To this end, the district has engaged in reciprocal professional learning with global partners such as the United Kingdom and Finland for the past decade. While these relationships began informally, they have become an opportunity for continued learning and reflection by school, system, and classroom leaders. These exchanges inform district practice regarding well-documented high-yield strategies that make a difference in schools.

Research from the British experience to improve schools has shown significant alignment with issues in Ontario (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Recognizing this, York Region district leaders have learned much from these partnerships.

APPROACHES TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

York Region’s approach to professional learning has evolved over the past decade. Sustaining the improvement the district has experienced requires a more personalized approach to professional learning.

In the past, capacity building for teachers focused on centrally determined content delivered in large settings. This was an essential element of the district’s improvement process, setting system expectations and allowing the district to determine key parameters for classroom practice. Since then, the belief that learning happens best when it is close to the classroom and based on student learning needs has influenced how the district engages teachers and leaders in capacity building.

In recent years, the district has taken a much more responsive approach to professional learning. District leaders shifted the location of the learning to as close to the classroom as possible. Schools are organized into learning networks with locally determined learning foci. These networks meet in each other’s schools on a monthly basis and involve teachers and school leaders as co-learners in the process.

Because they are organized around a school-determined challenge of practice based on student learning evidence, learning networks are a highly effective approach to professional learning. Student learning needs determine teacher and leader learning needs. Locating network meetings in schools has helped personalize the learning and proven to be an engaging strategy for teachers and school leaders in collaborating with colleagues.

Understanding that developing the conditions for shared ownership in the learning is critical for sustainable improvement has prompted the district to examine multiple approaches to professional learning. One size does not fit all in building capacity that will change classroom practice and improve student learning.

For the past several years, the district’s focus has been on the instructional core (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). The relationship between student, teacher, and content in the presence of robust tasks is at the core of any long-lasting improvement. Learning about the instructional core through a process

of collaborative inquiry has proven to be a high-yield strategy for professional learning.

The district has developed a protocol in which educators work together to make evidence-based decisions about student learning. There are four stages to the process: co-planning, co-teaching, co-debriefing, and co-reflecting. The learning comes from observing student learning stances in the classroom based on lessons co-planned and co-taught by the teachers involved. In the co-debrief and co-reflect stages, participants co-construct their own learning to take back to their classrooms.

The district has learned much over the past decade about how leadership impacts student learning. Two key components of the district's professional learning are that leader learning must align with teacher learning and that adult learning emerges from an analysis of student learning needs. The more school leaders understand the core elements of teaching and learning, and the more they are seen as co-learners in the process, the more impact their leadership has on student outcomes.

SUPPORT

As the district strives to sustain its improved results of student achievement and well-being in a new context, it is working to create the conditions to support professional trust and judgment. District leaders need to shift the dialogue from continuous improvement to continuous learning.

Professional learning needs to be differentiated and personalized, depending on the context. Schools are working along a continuum of collaborative practice and learning (Wise, 2009). Therefore, professional learning needs to be designed so it meets the individual and collective needs of teachers and school communities.

The district's challenge is to create job-embedded learning that is relevant to teachers and creates a sense of shared ownership. District leaders integrate collaborative learning opportunities into current structures and processes so they are not seen as add-ons. The district wants teachers and school leaders to see that "learning is the work" (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Leveraging internal expertise and knowledge and combining that with what is known from the best evidence of research is part of the district's strategy for creating collaborative learning cultures within its schools and across the district. Engaging teachers in learning in their local settings is essential — it is no longer enough to have a few innovators implementing new practices in isolation.

Mobilizing the learning so that everyone takes an active role has become part of the district's professional learning strategy. District research shows that simply creating the time for teachers to meet does not guarantee that learning will occur. Teachers must make the personal commitment to engage with colleagues in collaborative learning (Witherow, 2011). Leadership plays an important role in creating the conditions for

engagement in learning.

Focusing on the what, why, and how of professional learning compels educators to become more reflective in their practice. It also calls for a more inclusive approach to professional learning where scale means more than just the spread of an innovation. Coburn (2003) argues that "scale must include attention to the nature of change in classroom instruction; issues of sustainability; spread of norms, principles, and beliefs; and a shift in ownership" (p. 3). These factors can only be achieved when teachers and school leaders feel engaged in the learning and build in time for collaborative work, reflection, and feedback.

Building relationships and creating the conditions for professional learning to occur are high priorities for York Region's system and school leaders. If school leaders are to purposefully create the conditions for improvement in student learning, they need to focus on creating the conditions to build professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Professional capital is built when teachers and leaders focus on engagement, leverage expertise and knowledge, and develop a learning community among the staff. These conditions will go a long way to develop professional trust among teachers and shared ownership for improving learning — their own and that of their students.

SHARED COMMITMENT

Focused capacity building and development of professional capital in schools and across the district are critical to the success of the York Region District School Board. An international study of the world's best-performing systems notes that improving a school system is a complex task (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). Three key elements are: Get the right people to become teachers, develop them into effective instructors, and put in place systems and targeted supports to ensure that every child is able to benefit from this excellent instruction.

The district's achievement has been the result of hard work, shared commitment, collaboration, and input from school and system leaders and from critical friends across Canada and abroad. The district values opportunities to learn with and from others, input and leadership of senior leaders and stakeholders, and the expertise and skill of its teaching and support staff. The relationships that the district has developed and continues to foster with all its stakeholders are pivotal to supporting the district's work.

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students respond to them arise during grade-level data review meetings, vertical team meetings, and through the weekly meetings focused on developing innovative practices. The learning informs not only Leblond and Moore, but also the entire professional community.

Using this mindset, no teacher is pure genius or low performer, as no student is.

Everyone has strengths and weak spots and needs to be honored for his or her gifts and supported when there is not enough progress. The schools integrated everything they were learning about students and brought it to bear on instruction and assessments.

Dissemination of new knowledge and practices happened through a clear team structure, whereby innovations were practiced, evaluated, and shared with faculty, with the expectation that teachers will work to adopt these new practices. Follow-through was built in, with experienced teachers and academic coaches on hand to support schoolwide implementation, and the feedback loop tightly monitored to ensure teacher use of these identified high-impact strategies.

Just as teachers are the point persons for understanding how each student learns and where they are in terms of what they need to learn next, a range of school leaders were responsible for understanding teachers' knowledge and skills base, tapping their areas of strength, and supporting their growth in pointed ways.

Ontario district embraces an evolving approach to learning

Continued from p. 22 in the York Region District School Board. Prepared for the 2009 Scottish International Summer School on School Leadership. Available at <http://dhackshaw.abel.yorku.ca/leadershipdevelopment/questjournal2009/LeadershipInnovation.pdf>.

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POWERFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IS A DEAL-BREAKER TO ADVANCING EQUITY.

The idea of all students learning is not just for dreamers and philosophers. It is practical and doable, and these four schools are the advance team for what is possible. Schools everywhere can help every student succeed, but not without consistent, powerful professional learning that helps teachers scaffold rigorous and engaging learning.

Values and aspirations require steadfast and thorough implementation, alongside professional learning that ensures teachers achieve the goals that support student learning. A range of formal and informal leaders can facilitate educator support and progress in the same way that teachers must support student learning. When rigorous and supportive learning happens for everyone in the educational enterprise, every person can make substantive progress.

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