

WHAT IT TAKES

What do we mean by success?

- a. Success in schools means that students are learning.
- b. Success in schools means that more students are learning.
- c. Success in schools means that all students are learning.
- d. Success in schools means that all students are learning at higher levels.
- e. Success in schools means that all students are learning at the highest levels.

Success in schools can mean all of the above. When a school starts from a point where low-performing students outnumber high-performing students, it is success to be able to make the first statement — to know with confidence that students are learning.

Of course, all schools aim for higher benchmarks. In the U.S., improving schools are recognized in state accountability systems, and those schools celebrate their moves from underperforming up a ladder that they hope

will take them to ever-higher levels of success. Ultimately, educators hope that all students will learn at high levels.

In this issue of *JSD*, we examine schools and school systems in a range of contexts and circumstances that have made great strides in taking student learning to higher levels. They start from different points — many are already high-performing and can point to years of sustained excellence. Regardless of where they start and where they end, we're particularly interested in understanding the professional learning and leadership practices that were central to improvement.

While each success story is unique, in these pages you'll see some common themes to help glean lessons for consideration in your own contexts and practices. Highlighted here are several themes. What others are important in your experience?



COLLABORATION

Ongoing collaborative learning supported by structures such as learning teams and resources including time and coaches are essential to most successful examples.



“Teachers pointed to the power of collaboration, both among themselves and among students. ‘We’ve developed trust and relationships through synergy with each other, and it’s important to maintain that synergy if we want to continue the momentum,’ one teacher said. Science teacher Lauren Pennock described how she adapted reciprocal teaching practices for science articles and, as a result, her students were reading more closely and with more engage-

ment than they had in the past” (Lent & Voigt, p. 34).

“Collaborative groups made the extra work of action research possible, allowing teachers to divide the work, keep each other on track, and serve as a source of encouragement when the task was daunting. Additionally, the teams connected highly motivated professionals who shared commitment to their learning and student success” (Pett, Strahan, & Gates, p. 40).

“Ensuring that all students have equitable access to high-quality, rigorous instruction requires a collaborative approach between teachers and administrators to clearly identify the elements of instruction that need to be in place in every classroom” (Kind, p. 46).

TO SUCCEED

COMMITMENT TO ALL STUDENTS

Built into all improving schools and systems are expectations that every student will learn rigorous content. Professional learning provides educators with relevant support to share those expectations and help students to meet them.



“The expectation is that all adults are responsible to work together to ensure that all students will reach benchmark goals — no exceptions. And because teaching is a complex profession, all teachers will be supported to improve and grow to meet that expectation” (Gleason & Garzon, p. 25).

“Educators at Grant knew that the adults in the school had to make changes. Teachers had to be more effective in reaching the school’s rural, high-needs students, many of whom are Hispanic English language learners. Teachers needed to examine their own practices and embrace learning new strategies and ways of reaching all students” (Lambertson, p. 45).

ALIGNMENT

To have a sustained impact, professional learning cannot stand alone from school and district goals and must be integrated across a district’s systems, departments, and initiatives.



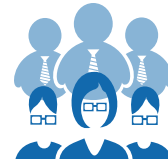
“The district’s high level of achievement is attributed to the alignment of systems such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional learning, supervision, and resources with the vision, mission, core values, and beliefs outlined in the strategic plan. The administrative team and teacher leaders work collaboratively to assure that goals, action plans, and strategies among these systems are cohesive” (McCommons, p. 12).

“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” (Belchetz & Witherow, p. 20).

DIFFERENTIATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Recognizing adults as learners with varying levels of expertise allows schools and systems to create learning experiences that will fill gaps and tie adult learning to student learning.

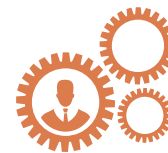


“One size does not fit all in building capacity that will change classroom practice and improve student learning” (Belchetz & Witherow, p. 20).

“As school communities sought to understand students as persons and learners in order to best support and challenge, they understood they needed to do the same with the adults. The more adults were understood for who they were, the more it was possible to help them make progress helping students” (Gleason & Garzon, p. 28).

TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Identifying, encouraging, and leveraging the leadership in classrooms helps to create schoolwide cultures of learning and build shared leadership and responsibility for student learning.



“The culminating experience for participants has been presentations of results that elevate the work of individual teachers and teams to influence policy, program, and resource decisions to the district level” (Pett, Strahan, & Gates, p. 39).

“Areas of expertise and talent should be identified, fostered, nurtured, and made public. Teachers should find themselves regularly consulting with peers in areas of expertise. This is observable and measurable and rarely happens in schools” (Zimmerman, p. 55).