

A Strategy for Large-Scale Improvement in Education: The Ontario Approach

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A Strategy for Large-Scale Improvement in Education: The Ontario Approach

Schools in Ontario are exciting places these days as educators lead and manage change. After more than a decade of struggle and conflict there is a new optimism in the sector, illustrated by positive developments in teaching and learning in schools all across the Province. In this article we outline some of the main elements of the Ontario government's approach to supporting educational change and contrast it with many other large-scale change strategies.

In many parts of the world, educational change might aim for the right results – better outcomes for students, including students from groups that had previously lagged behind average achievement levels. However, many of these efforts have used wrongheaded approaches or failed to pay enough attention to what we are learning about effective large-scale change. In particular, many strategies place too much emphasis on test results as the main way to drive improvement.

In contrast, the Province of Ontario's education change strategy embodies vital principles, grounded in research, that are associated with meaningful and sustainable change. Changes are respectful of professional knowledge and practice. Main elements of change are coherent and aligned at the provincial, district and school level. Key partners – the provincial Ministry of Education, school boards, schools, and provincial and local organizations of teachers, principals, and other partners – work together. Change strategies are comprehensive and emphasise professional learning, strong leadership,

necessary resources, and effective engagement of parents and the broader community.

We believe that this strategy provides an example of large-scale change that is effective and sustainable.

Ontario has about two million children in its public education system. The provincial government provides essentially 100% of the funds for all four sets of locally-elected school boards, reflecting Canada's constitutional requirement for public support of minority-language and Catholic schools. School boards range in size from a few hundred students to about 250,000 in the Toronto District School Board. In total there are nearly 5000 schools extending across 400,000 square miles – the size of the eight southeastern states put together. The average elementary school has about 350 students and the average secondary school fewer than 1000. Ontario also has a very diverse enrolment, with 27% of the population born outside of Canada and 20% visible minorities. Ontario's 120,000 or so teachers and most of its support staff are unionized. There is a mandatory provincial curriculum.

Education in Ontario thus has all the challenges one might anticipate – large urban areas and very remote rural areas; significant urban and rural poverty levels; high levels of population diversity; areas with sharply dropping enrolment and others with rapid growth.

From the early 1990s education in Ontario was troubled for about a decade. The province had significant labor disruption, lots of public dissatisfaction, increasing private school enrolment, and poor morale leading to high turnover among teachers. However in 2003 a new government was elected with the renewal of public education as one of their highest priorities. A Premier with a deep commitment to education and talented Ministers

brought strong political leadership to this file. This government was re-elected in 2007, with support for public education once again a major issue in the election.

The Ontario education strategy that began in 2003 has two main components – a commitment to improving elementary school literacy and numeracy outcomes, and a commitment to increasing high school graduation rates. These priorities were chosen because public confidence in and support for education depend on demonstrated achievement of good outcomes for students. These core goals are each supported by a large-scale strategy based substantially on Michael Fullan's work¹.

The core strategies are also complemented by a range of other initiatives. Some of these initiatives, such as strengthening school leadership or renewing curricula, are necessary to support the key goals. Of particular importance was a commitment to reduce class sizes in the primary grades. Other initiatives, including provincial support for the negotiation of four-year collective agreements with all Ontario's teachers in 2005, are necessary so that all parties can focus on improving student outcomes instead of being distracted by labor issues. Still other initiatives, such as attention to character education, safe schools and healthy schools, are important because public support for improved outcomes can only be sustained if people know that these fundamental needs of students are being attended to. Even where there is a strong focus on a small number of key goals, the ancillary and potentially distracting issues still require attention. The challenge is getting the balance right among all the concerns.

A strategy for improved student outcomes. Ontario's Literacy and Numeracy strategy is aimed at improving these skills for all elementary school students. The goal is to have at least 75% of grade 6 students able to read, write, and do mathematics at the

expected level by the spring of 2008. While this represents a substantial gain from the approximately 55% of students who met the standard in 2003 (after several years of static results), the public will not accept, and the education system cannot be satisfied with, a situation in which even one in four students fails to develop key skills that they will need to participate fully in our society.

As of 2003-04, only about 60% of Ontario students were graduating from Ontario's 800 high schools in the normal four years, and only about 70% were graduating even after taking an extra year. These are clearly unacceptable levels in a knowledge society. The province has set a target of having at least 85% of students entering grade 9 graduate from high school in a timely way by 2010. This target would put Ontario near the top among Canadian provinces but would still leave the province below a number of other OECD countries.

The two strategies – elementary literacy/numeracy and high school graduation – share many common elements, such as:

- creating a dedicated infrastructure in the Ministry and school boards, staffed by outstanding educators, to lead and guide the overall initiative (though the Literacy/Numeracy infrastructure is organized differently than the high school strategy infrastructure);
- engaging school and district leaders to set ambitious but achievable targets and plans for gains in student achievement;
- developing leadership teams for each strategy in every school district and every school;

- providing extensive, carefully targeted professional development for educators to support the strategies through improved instructional practices;
- targeting attention to key underperforming groups, including some minority students, ESL students, students in special education, Aboriginal students and boys;
- supporting effective use of data to track students and intervene early where problems are occurring;
- supporting research to find, understand and share effective practices;
- supporting ancillary practices such as an expansion of tutoring and a fuller engagement of parents and communities.

Some other key elements of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy are:

- adding thousands of new teaching positions to reduce class sizes in primary grades to a maximum of 20, and providing support to teachers to make most effective use of these smaller classes;
- adding specialist teachers to enrich teaching in areas such as art, music and physical education while also providing more preparation and professional learning time for classroom teachers;
- implementing a 'turnaround' program that provided additional support and expert advice for interested schools facing the most significant challenges in improving achievement.

Increasing high school graduation rates. In addition to the common elements already mentioned, key components of the high school graduation strategy include:

- supporting a ‘student success teacher’ in every high school as a champion for success for all students. A key element of the strategy is to ensure that every student in high school is well known to, and supported by, at least one adult on staff;
- building stronger transition models between elementary and secondary schools so that students get off to a good start in grade 9;
- increasing the focus on and resources for literacy and numeracy in all areas of the high school curriculum;
- expanding program options through more co-operative education, credits for genuine external learning, and dual credit programs with colleges and universities;
- creating a ‘high skills major’ that allows school boards to work with employers and community groups to create packages of courses leading to real employment and further learning;
- introducing legislation to embody the changes in the overall strategy and also requiring students to be in a learning situation (school, college, apprenticeship, work with training, and so forth) until high school graduation or age 18;
- revising curricula in some key areas such as mathematics and career education;
- creating a Student Success Commission with representatives of the teacher federations, principals and superintendents to support effective implementation of the strategy in schools and prevent disputes at the local level.

The two strategies have also been backed by significant new resources. In 2006-07 the government provided about \$300 million annually in additional funding just for

the reduction of class sizes in the primary grades. The total annual value of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is at least \$450 million, while the high school graduation strategy is worth some \$300 million annually. (To put this in perspective, Ontario's total education expenditure in 2006-07 was about \$18 billion.).

SUSTAINING ELEMENTS

In addition to their specific elements, the Ontario approach embodies the key principles mentioned at the start of this paper – respect, comprehensiveness, coherence and alignment – as elements that will make the changes significant and sustainable.

Respect for staff and for professional knowledge. The Ontario focus on student outcomes rests on the belief that staff in our schools are committed professionals who have enormous skill and knowledge to contribute to school improvement. Respect for professionals is shown in a variety of ways.

- The public statements of the government and ministry are supportive of public education and the work of educators and support staff.
- The government abolished some policy elements (such as paper and pencil testing of new teachers) which were seen by teachers as punitive, and replaced them with policies (such as induction for new teachers and changes to teacher performance appraisal) that are supportive of professionalism. Despite declining enrolment, staffing has increased, teacher workload has been reduced and preparation time has increased.

- The strategies build on successful practices in Ontario. Almost everything that is happening at the provincial level draws on practices that were already underway in schools somewhere in the province.
- There are many opportunities for teacher learning at all levels, from schools to families of schools to districts to provincial activities.

Comprehensiveness. As outlined earlier, our approach to improvement is not based on just one or two elements. For example, the focus on literacy and numeracy is complemented by strong support for other curricular areas such as physical education and the arts. The theory of improvement recognizes schools as ecologies, so gives attention to building capacity in teachers, improving leadership, involving parents, changing policies, adding resources – all at the same time. It is also important to pay attention to the issues that could turn into huge distractions – such as avoiding labor disputes, dealing with safety issues, or ensuring school buildings are in good repair.

Coherence and alignment through partnership. Because public attention and political direction can change quickly, sustainable improvement in schools therefore requires real commitment and participation by all the partners – teachers, administrators, boards and the broader community. Fullan² advocates about the ‘trilevel solution’, in which governments, school districts and schools work together on common approaches and strategies. An explicit part of the Ontario approach involves building strong relationships and close connections with districts, schools and other organizations. The staff of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat work very closely with school district leaders to ensure that strategies are fully aligned and complementary. At the secondary

level, student success leaders in each board, funded by the Ministry, play an important role in ensuring greater alignment.

The Ministry of Education has put in place several mechanisms for consultation with partners. A 'partnership table' brings the Minister of Education together with all the major stakeholders on a regular basis. The Minister and senior ministry staff meet regularly with the main provincial organizations, including teachers, principals, and superintendents. Parent and student organizations also play an important role in policy development and implementation.

The Ministry has worked hard to build positive relationships with school boards. When boards and the Ministry fight in public, for example over funding levels, the whole public education system suffers because citizens (who after all pay the bill) get a negative message about our ability to provide quality education.

Given the problems created in Ontario education over the last decade because of conflict with teachers and support staff, steps were taken to involve teachers and their organizations. The ministry works closely with the teacher federations by involving them in policy development and by providing them with funds to recognize their important role in professional development. Efforts are also made to work more closely with support staff groups and recognize their need for involvement and for professional development.

Principals also play a vital role in the Ontario strategy, since they are widely recognized as playing key roles in school improvement. Ontario principals were forcibly removed from the teacher unions in the late 1990s, creating some very difficult relationship issues. Professional development for principals has been expanded, and

efforts are being made to improve some of their key working conditions, though the job of principal remains very challenging.

Changing the negative and combative public discourse around education in order to build public confidence was itself an important policy goal. However the efforts to build and sustain strong partnerships all take place within the common emphasis on improving student outcomes. They therefore have a common value core, and a strong focus on building capacity everywhere in the system to support students' success more effectively. In the end, people will support public education if they believe it is delivering good results for the province's children and young people.

HOW IS IT GOING?

The two main strategies are relatively new. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat only began operating early in 2005, and the most important elements only came into place in 2005. However, neither started from zero but built on work already underway in a number of school boards. Because of this foundation, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was able in less than two school years to have a substantial impact on teaching practices and on students' results, as recently confirmed by an independent evaluation³. Results on Ontario's provincial assessment have improved substantially and broadly over the last three years. Overall about 10% more students, or 15,000 per grade, are now achieving the provincial standard. The number of schools with very low performance has fallen by three quarters. The system as a whole is half way towards the target of 75%, though that target itself is not an end-point. Nor are these results just a matter of test-taking. Gains on tests only matter if they represent real improvements in

students' skills, and teachers across the province confirm that we are seeing real skill improvements for students, not just increases in test results. Ontario has avoided a focus on test preparation and drill.

The indicators for high school improvement are also positive. Graduation rates are rising – from 68% to 73% in 2005-06. Results on the provincial grade 10 literacy test – not a particular focus of the changes – have improved substantially. Credit accumulation in grades 9 and 10 is also improving, so there should be further significant improvements in graduation rates in the next few years. Here, too, an independent evaluation has confirmed positive changes.⁴

Just as importantly, there is a level of energy and enthusiasm in Ontario schools that has not been seen for quite some time. Fewer young teachers are leaving the profession and fewer teachers are choosing early retirement – tangible indicators of improved teacher morale. Thousands of teachers are participating voluntarily in summer professional development programs offered by the teacher unions and school districts. More teachers are giving positive responses to surveys of their level of satisfaction with their work.

CHALLENGES

No change of this magnitude occurs without challenges. Two are particularly important to note. First, there is no question that Ontario schools and teachers are feeling that there are many initiatives all at the same time. Even though people are positive about the elements of change, putting them all together has brought stress. One might describe

the situation as being a bit like eating all the Halloween candies at once; each one tastes good but too many at one time does not produce a happy result!

This situation is improving as there are fewer new initiatives and more focus on deeper implementation of those already underway. Ongoing capacity building and support also reduces the stress of the new. Nonetheless, at all levels of the system there is still a need for more alignment and coherence, and fewer distracters, than we have had in the last two years.

The second challenge has to do with resources. The government has increased funding for public education by nearly 30% since the fall of 2003. However, schools and boards still face financial pressures in matching resources to demands. All partners will need to re-examine current practices and allocations of staff and funds and ask whether these actually are the most effective ways to use resources in support of students. In many areas – from transportation to special education to professional development to use of substitute teachers – there may be opportunities to improve efficiency. Effective use of research evidence and data will be critical in this effort as we learn more about practices that are more effective, and share that knowledge more widely.

RELEVANCE TO AUSTRALIA AND CURRICULUM

Many of the strategies outlined in this paper are in place in various parts of Australia, either in schools or at the state level. However the sustained, large-scale commitment described here, including its larger political dimension, goes beyond what has been done, to my knowledge, anywhere in Australia. In my view, real and lasting improvement in student outcomes requires the scope and scale of effort outlined here.

Australia has certain advantages in doing so, notably the fact that the education system is more centralized than it is in Ontario, with its multiple independent school boards.

Although Australia and Canada are both federal states, with all the tensions this implies, Australia also has a better history of federal-state collaboration and state-state collaboration than has been the case in Canada on issues of education (where our federal government plays little or no role).

Conference attendees will also note that this strategy gives a relatively minor role to curriculum. Ontario actually de-emphasized curriculum efforts and shifted resources out of curriculum development into other parts of the strategies over the last few years. Curriculum is, in my view, only one support to effective teaching and learning, and the real focus of a school improvement strategy must be on changing and improving teaching and learning practices in large numbers of schools. Too much curriculum change can be counterproductive by overwhelming teachers with the demands of new curricula instead of allowing them to focus on teaching, learning and assessment practices.

CONCLUSION

Change researchers have long argued that there is a body of knowledge that can support effective and satisfying improvement in public education. The Ontario case is an example of large-scale change in education that is respectful of educators, fair to students and communities, and based on the best available knowledge. When many of the right elements can be brought together, energy and positive results ensue. We can have results without rancor or ranking.

AUTHOR

Ben Levin has just completed a term as Deputy Minister (Chief Civil Servant) for Education for Ontario; he was previously Deputy Minister of Education for the province of Manitoba. His career spans work in government and as an academic and researcher. He now holds a Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

¹ Michael Fullan, *The new meaning of educational change*. 4th edition. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

² Michael Fullan, *Turnaround Leadership*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin; Toronto: Ontario Principals Council, 2006).

³ Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (CLRNET). *The impact of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat: Changes in Ontario's education system*. (London, Ontario: CLLRNET, 2007).

⁴ Charles Ungerleider, *Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success Strategy, Phase 1 report*. (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).