

Making the Most of Accountability Policies

Is There a Role for the School District?

GETTING STARTED

It was January. The test scores were out and according to the parents at Rosehill Public School their kids were the lowest in the district. Again! Even lower than the provincial average! “No other school in our district has had such consistently poor results since EQAO (the test) was initiated.” The parents wanted the school to become “the most improved school” in the district and threatened to take drastic action to make it happen.

Days later, as Superintendent new to the area, I accompanied the Principal to the Rosehill School Council meeting to face an angry parent delegation. I heard their angry questions and accusations: “Our children deserve better, so what are you going to do about it? This has been going on for 10 years. Why weren’t we designated a Performance Plus School (a special district program for high-needs schools)? Why has the Board ignored our pleas for help?” And on it went, concluding that I’d be like all the rest of “them.” I knew that whatever I said was not going to calm them.

The entire school had shifted to a “garrison” mentality. Relationships were strained at every level. The Principal had his reasons for feeling defensive and disheartened. He felt that whatever was put in place to improve performance would be criticized. The staff was definitely a target of parental displeasure. The teachers tried to avoid speaking to the angriest parents. They didn’t want parent “volunteers.”

The School Trustee and the Director of Education received calls from the parents demanding to be seen *and* heard. The callers demanded action and no more “lip-service”

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paid to their requests for help, particularly in becoming designated a “special school.” The Trustee briefed me on the long history of low achievement at the school. “It has been underperforming for years,” she said, “so what can you expect now? The problems are persistent.” She described the area as having “low socioeconomic” housing, but that it was changing somewhat as new “estate homes” were replacing older homes and now some “educated” folks were demanding more from the District, the Principal, and the teachers. She acknowledged that a higher number of parents from the area self-selected out of the school by choosing French Immersion programming in a nearby school. “Others,” she suggested, “choose private schools. Nothing can be done. It’s a shame.”

I was determined to come back with a plan. I promised the parents that we would work together to find solutions and, of course, some resources to make a difference. They were skeptical, to say the least, and asked, What would make a difference in my opinion? I listened carefully to their concerns, angry comments, and anecdotes about the school’s

ONE SCHOOL’S EFFORTS

This is a success story, of Rosehill Public School in the York Region District School Board. The account illustrates the amount of effort required to make the province-wide achievement data useful for assessment purposes. It also highlights the complex set of additional factors that must be addressed in school improvement planning. Lastly, the journey emphasizes the critical role that school district involvement plays in supporting especially troubled schools.



history. However, my promises did not stop the flood of phone calls and letters to everyone they felt might influence change. The Director and I met with the parents. He paid attention to their concerns and promised them some resources and serious consideration of their requests, assuring them that Trustees and Senior Staff did care, would listen, and take action through the School Superintendent.

As the pressure continued to escalate, the Principal and many teachers sought relief by transferring to other schools. Energy for change was very low.



WHAT THE RESEARCH TOLD US

In answer to parents' questions about what made a difference and what they could be doing to help, I had agreed to review with them current literature on school improvement. At the next School Council meeting, we explored an overview of the recent research on school effectiveness and school improvement. Specifically, we examined School Improvement Plans as a key factor for success when the planning considered:

- ▼ Teamwork, dialogue, and a sense of ownership by all the stakeholders (Fullan, 1991)
- ▼ Data collection in the form of diagnostic student assessments to inform the priority setting of the plan (Hopkins, 1985; Joyce, 1986)
- ▼ Connections among the school plans, classroom practice and student learning (Stoll & Fink, 1992)

As well, we talked about the change literature and the importance of understanding the "implementation dip" (Fullan, 1991) which describes the tendency for new initiatives to get worse before they get better. We talked about understanding that a united effort to improve meant support for parents, staff, and students working together. We learned that an ongoing evaluation of our integrated school improvement plan and strong transformational leadership needed to occur (Leithwood, 1995). Leadership that included:

- ▼ An articulated vision of student improvement
- ▼ Knowledge of productive instructional strategies
- ▼ High expectations
- ▼ Support/resources for teachers

Parents heard that research also suggests that long-term student improvement only results from the simultaneous implementation

of four critical elements from which we can measure teachers' changed practices, increased skills, increased capacity, and reflective practices (Sharratt, 1996). These critical elements are:

- ▼ District Commitment
- ▼ Strategic Leadership
- ▼ Effective Instructional Strategies
- ▼ Parental Involvement

▼ **DISTRICT COMMITMENT:** Teachers change practices when the school district provides support through Professional Development (PD) that is congruent with the district's vision. Teachers feel that in-service training is essential to their learning, especially when the Principal supports the PD (Sharratt, 1996, p.100).

▼ **STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP:** Teachers feel that leadership influences their learning and change practices most when it is strategic. This includes leadership in school planning that encompasses developing a shared vision aligned with the district vision; using collaborative decision-making processes; establishing a collective, problem-solving environment; ensuring flexible school structures, and giving time and support to teachers (Sharratt, 1996, p.101).

▼ **EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES:** Teachers need an expanded repertoire of strategies that integrate with the collection of valid assessment data and an accurate image of the learner (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001). Strategies need to embrace structured group work, focused time on task, and uninterrupted blocks of instructional time.

▼ **PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT:** Research reveals that families who are involved in their students' schooling significantly increase their performance (Epstein, 1995). By taking a collaborative approach to the development of family-involvement programs, schools can form successful partnerships with families and community groups to improve the educational achievement of all students. "With frequent interactions among school, families, and communities," notes Epstein, "more students are more likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another,

and of staying in school." As a result, school-family-community partnerships enable students and families to produce their own successes. Further information on a variety of successful parental programs is located at www.yrdsb.edu.on.ca/plus.

We agreed that it was critical to provide professional development for staff and to educate parents so everyone would understand what would produce improved student learning.

PICKING THE LOW-HANGING FRUIT

There was an immediate need to respond! We implemented some short-term strategies while beginning to think about the longer term need to develop a School Plan for Continuous Improvement (SPCI), focused on our goal of increased student achievement.

A small committee consisting of the Principal, Superintendent, a staff member, the School Council Chair, and two interested parents met regularly to brainstorm concrete ideas for immediate improvement. The following things made a difference to the spirit of learning in the school almost immediately:

▼ **DISTRICT COMMITMENT**

The School Superintendent made a commitment to be in the school often, attending staff meetings, committee meetings, School Council meetings, and presenting at some of the parent workshops. As the leadership changed, the district committed to not moving the new Principal for at least five years. Three "Literacy Tutors" were hired (casuals, used only for the short term) from Board funds and trained by the Reading Recovery™ teacher to read to and hear students read. These people had interests in becoming Educational Assistants in the Board, so had some experience/incentive to work in the school. Work was also begun to establish a Summer Reading Camp with financial support for some students to ensure universally available access. There is an attempt to increase the retention of learning over the summer months.

▼ **STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP**

This is leadership that demonstrates focused consideration of student learning. The Principal intentionally reached out to staff, parents, and the community to find strategies that

made a difference to students. The Behaviour Code was updated and the Homework Policy reviewed by a small staff committee. Both policies were shared with all teachers, changes were made, and then both were discussed and implemented with students and parents. The Principal strove for clear understanding, consistency, fairness, and logical consequences in accordance with the renewed policy. One Child and Youth Worker (CYW) refocused on classroom student behaviour, focusing on teaching “manners” to all. School Volunteers were found to start a Breakfast program with donations from the Salvation Army and the United Church. Two Curriculum Consultants with a Math/Science/Technology focus “adopted” the school. Money was found to purchase agenda books for students in all grades (not just in Grades 4–8) so that homework and study habits could be emphasized. It was an expectation that all teachers would routinely check agenda books and parents would communicate using them. Sports and Club activities were initiated during lunch hours. Six student teachers from the university were placed in the school for a three-month term to increase the number of professionals available to work with the lowest readers.

▼ EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION

Teachers focused on “Instructional Intelligence” (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001) in their teaching and developed many initiatives that could be implemented in a timely way. Their strategies included starting a homework initiative involving weekly Homework Packages with Level 4 assignments (Ontario Curriculum) at each grade level. Teachers also participated in a variety of workshops given by curriculum consultants on “First Steps Writing” (a new year-long commitment), “Assessment,” and “Effective Instructional Strategies.” This led to teaching parents about some of that learning. Staff organized and led four-evening workshops for parents entitled “Raising Readers,” “First Steps Writing,” “Assessment and Evaluation,” and “Family Math.” Academy of Reading software was purchased and an intermediate teacher was trained in its use. The Reading Recovery™ teacher in-serviced and modelled the effective use of the Observation Survey, Running Records, and Guided Reading approach for all staff.



▼ PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

One parent applied for and received money from Shell Oil to purchase Science Kits that included materials focused on problem solving with cross-curricular impact in the areas of Reading, Writing and Mathematics. More volunteers were recruited by the School Council, and the staff trained them to become “Reading Parents,” increasing the number of volunteers in the school from 3 to 15 in just a few weeks! It appeared that parents came when they knew that they would have a specific, meaningful task to do and be trained to do it. It took another two of the concerned parents eight weeks to raise over \$4000.00 in the community. This money was used to support the literacy thrust by enhancing the Borrow-a-Book Program with levelled books (Reading Recovery™ for Primary and Junior readers.

It was tempting to stop here! Visible gains had been made in a short time. However, from our literature review, we knew that school and student improvement result from the systematic planning and implementing of a singular goal and the four elements above in a thoughtful, planned way, using classroom data as the base for that planning (Heck & Hallinger, 1996). Too often, short term, shotgun approaches typify school improvement efforts that fail.

ESTABLISHING A LONG-TERM SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Mortimore (1997) states, “the more effective the school plan, the more complex are the characteristics.” We discovered this fact not only to be true but also to be challenging as we tried to establish a plan that everyone felt they were part of from the beginning. Not understanding the process, many parents just wanted the improvement ASAP and did not want to waste time on the planning. The short-term initiatives satisfied their need for action. Others became part of the planning team process.

Improved student achievement is not an easy business. Astute educators know that relationships and chemistry really impact powerfully: What do parents say about the school at home? Do emotional interactions at school influence student performance? The questions continue for us to this day. More research needs to be done to answer all of our questions.

In this article, I have identified results we achieved using short-term strategies and a longer term commitment to the school planning process. However, our quest for more knowledge about what factors influence increased student achievement never ends.

The comprehensive plan that was developed together first involved school data collection:

- ▼ Grade teachers developed rubrics which are examples of student work at four levels of performance for each grade in each subject area, 1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest. Development of rubrics and assessing student work using levels of achievement reflect the scoring of the provincial test. The grade partners/teachers then marked one assignment collectively each term to determine their consistency in what constituted a Level 1, 2, 3 or 4 student response. They then established numbers of students obtaining levels 2, 3, 4 in Writing, Reading and Mathematics.
- ▼ Examination of classroom data by grade level was initiated to ensure consistency with report card and test score data;
- ▼ Test score data were used to inform P/J/I instructional strategies; and
- ▼ Review of data from Homework Survey, Behaviour and Suspension records.

After assessing the data, the staff at Rosehill Public School committed to focused work on increased student improvement in literacy, agreeing to look at the four priority areas described here to develop the plan. A sample of the collaborative planning template that was developed follows:

GOAL 1: DISTRICT COMMITMENT

Performance Target:

Seventy five % of the students will be Reading and Writing at the Provincial standard (level 3 and 4); the remaining 25% will be working toward the goals set out in the Individual Education Plan.

FOCUS

Professional development (PD) focused on school plan

Strategies

- ▼ First Steps Writing initiated
- ▼ Assessment Study Group formed and group attends District PD sessions
- ▼ All teachers commit to ongoing PD in Literacy

Indicators of Success

- ▼ Staff meetings have PD component
- ▼ Teachers share student successes in Literacy at meetings

Increased Resources

- ▼ Re-examine use of school budget
- ▼ Fundraising \$\$ aligned with School Plan priorities
- ▼ \$\$ from School Superintendent for books
- ▼ Books purchased for Borrow-a-Book program

- ▼ All students reading nightly
- ▼ Borrow-a-Book program in place

GOAL 2: STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Performance Target:

The School Leadership Team will identify areas in need of improvement and will develop a plan with involvement of all stakeholders.

FOCUS

Builds consensus around goals for student improvement

Strategies

- ▼ Leadership Team established
- ▼ Teacher PD and School Plan align
- ▼ School plan reviewed and revised with staff and School council each term
- ▼ Early Learning Team established
- ▼ Principal regularly assesses staff implementation of the school improvement plan and supports PD reflective of plan

Indicators of Success

- ▼ Teachers own and articulate goals and components in plan
- ▼ Parents have been part of process and support plan
- ▼ All teachers have individual goals that reflect school plan goals
- ▼ Information on student achievement is collected regularly
- ▼ Students prepared to learn daily
- ▼ All students and parents know behaviour and academic expectations



GOAL 3: EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Performance Target:

Teachers are using a variety of instructional strategies to achieve: 1) All students reading fluently (level 16 Reading Recovery™ by the end of Grade 1 2) 20% of students move from Level 2 to Level 3 (Ontario Curriculum) in Reading and Writing at all grade levels.

FOCUS	Strategies	Indicators of Success
Use of a variety of instructional strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▼ Reading Recovery strategies used by all Primary Teachers ▼ Analyze report cards and determine strategies to move students to Level 3 ▼ Administer pre- and post-tests of units of study ▼ Class reviews 3 times a year ▼ Use exemplar booklets to mark student work collectively at each grade level ▼ Professional Development focuses on instructional intelligence (Bennett, 2001) and Assessment Literacy (York Region District School Board, 2001) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▼ Increased teacher and student knowledge of rubrics ▼ Evidence on the use of a variety of assessment tools in classrooms noted during classroom visits ▼ Assessment information used to inform instruction ▼ Teachers use student growth plans to identify "next steps" for students not meeting the standard ▼ Teachers have consistent understanding of Level 3 (Provincial Standard) student work ▼ Evidence of a variety of instructional strategies used in classrooms

GOAL 4: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Performance Target:

Increased parental involvement: 1) 10% of parent population work with students in school 2) 60% of parents attend Curriculum nights 3) 100% of students complete Homework weekly.

FOCUS	Strategies	Indicators of Success
Builds consensus around goals for student improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▼ Teachers assign meaningful homework in a weekly package ▼ Nightly reading homework expected at all grade levels ▼ Homework and Behaviour policies developed and reviewed by staff and parents, then communicated to students and the community ▼ Students invited to bring an adult to Curriculum Nights ▼ "Grade parents" make reminder calls to parents ▼ "Reading Parents" trained by Reading Recovery™ teacher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▼ More volunteers visible consistently in school ▼ Increased attendance at school events ▼ School Council proactively recruiting parents ▼ All students and parents know behaviour and academic results ▼ All students, teachers, and parents use agenda books nightly for communication ▼ Incidents of inappropriate behaviour reduced

DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

After three years of work and reflection, we are sure that more factors than just preparing students to write the provincial test did make a difference. In our school improvement planning, we collected other forms of impor-

tant data that indicated not only an improvement in achievement, but also a critical cultural change in attitude among students, parents, and teachers. Some of the other factors that we feel made a difference are reported here.

HOMEWORK PACKAGES: Packages were distributed by all teachers on Mondays, completed by students, and discussed and marked in class on Fridays. Surveys used to collect data from teachers, students, and parents about this new process revealed:

- ▼96% of the parents thought homework should be assigned and marked on a regular basis;
- ▼91 % of the parents felt nightly reading to children should be part of homework expectations;
- ▼85% of parents felt that the homework packages helped them monitor their children's strengths and weaknesses;
- ▼65% of students from the Junior Division preferred the Homework Packages, while only 4% of the Intermediate students reported that they did ...most would prefer regular homework assignments only;
- ▼100% of the teachers reported assigning additional homework, as well as the Homework Packages;
- ▼60% of the teachers felt that the Homework Packages were an effective way of increasing student work habits;
- ▼70% of teachers felt Homework Packages ensured parental monitoring, and, in fact,
- ▼100% of the teachers had had parental feedback since the Homework Packages were initiated.

NEW BEHAVIOUR CODE: Negative student behaviour patterns changed and lessened with the establishment of a Behaviour Code known to, shared with, and signed off by staff, parents, and students yearly. In three years, the number and types of major office referrals changed as shown in the chart below.

**BEHAVIOURAL INCIDENTS
REQUIRING RESOLUTION**

BEHAVIOUR	1997	2000
Aggression	47	9
Rudeness	21	3
Opposition	49	0
Intimidation	13	0
Harassment	17	0
Homework	4	0

This only occurred with the administrator's consistency of action and constant reminders to students of the school's theme, Respect and Responsibility.

Student suspensions were tracked. The number reduced by approximately 50% in three school years, from a ratio of 1 suspension

per 13 students to a ratio of 1 suspension per 24 students.

It is clear that improvement data can be displayed in many areas including, and not limited to, provincial test scores. In creating a culture of student improvement, it is essential to pay attention to creating a "community of learners" (Sergiovanni, 1994). It is as important to observe and assess the culture of learning as it is to record and analyze the statistics linked to testing (Sharratt, 1996).

LESSONS LEARNED

Just as it takes a whole community to raise a child so does it take an integrated school/community plan to ensure continuous student learning. Different schools face different challenges, and hence have differing scores at different times; however, one thing remains clear: learning about increasing student achievement, collecting a variety of data, priority planning and taking action are everybody's business.

The test scores did improve astronomically! Students in grades 3 and 6 at Rosehill Public School not only exceeded the provincial average, but also achieved at, and beyond, the district average—the highest performing district in the province. Parents were pleased. Trustees, senior administrators and staff took note. But that result did not demonstrate the total picture. As classes of grades 3 and 6 children change in chemistry and the provincial tests change in content yearly, clearly the test scores remain only one small piece of a larger puzzle: identifying the critical factors to deliver long-term student improvement.

Throughout this experience, parents became committed to improvement strategies. Sergiovanni (1994) believes that community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort. Although there were varied beliefs on how improvement should be accomplished, the end result was the formation of a strong partnership, focused on students, connecting staff, School Council, and the community. Parents have made many calls to express their appreciation for the amount of support given by the district and for the ongoing positive work done by the staff. Over the three years, the School Council has held appreciation lunches for the staff, and the staff members have recognized the parents'

work by hosting Volunteer Teas and giving awards. However, students have benefited most by the spirit of learning that pervades the school. Now teachers are pleased to have parents working as partners throughout the school.

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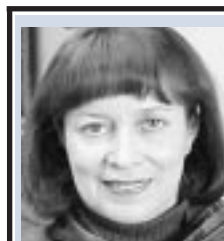
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Dr. Lyn Sharratt is a Superintendent in the York Region District School Board (north of Toronto, Canada) and is responsible for the School Operations and Information Technology K–12. Lyn is an Associate with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto and teaches Leadership Development.