

Accomplishing District-Wide Reform

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## Abstract

This is a mystery story. It is about a district that apparently did the right things but seemed not to get commensurate results across all classrooms and schools. In this paper we look closely at the details and discover a very important lesson about district-wide reform. The district is York Region District School Board (YRDSB), which is a large multicultural district just north of Toronto, Ontario. YRDSB is a rapidly growing district with a diverse socio-cultural and linguistic population with over 100 different languages spoken in York's schools. The school board has been opening, on average, at least 5 elementary schools a year for the last five years. There are a total of 140 elementary schools and 27 secondary schools with over 108,000 students in total and 8,000 teachers.

District wide reform has become increasingly important over the past decade as educational leaders have sought to achieve larger-scale, sustainable school improvement across the system. Our paper delves deeper into what such reform looks like, and what we must do to obtain substantial success in student learning.

Since we don't provide a review of the research on school district reform, please see Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn (2004) for lessons learned from several cases. Another source of information on district reform can be found in the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2005) which focused on case studies of reform in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle. In each of these efforts, the three districts had the attention of political leaders at all levels of the system; all focused on many of the "right things" like literacy and math; they used obvious choice strategies such as concentration on 'assessment for learning' data; all invested heavily in professional development, developed new leadership, and focused on system-wide change. And, they had money—Seattle 35 million in external funds, Milwaukee with extra resources and flexibility, and Chicago with huge amounts of additional funds. While there was great pressure and success was not expected overnight, there was not corresponding success. The upfront conclusion of the case study evaluators was:

The three districts we studied had decentralized resources and authority to the schools in different ways and had undergone significant organizational changes to facilitate their ambitious, instructional improvement plans. The unfortunate reality for the many principals and teachers we interviewed is that the districts were unable to change and improve practice on a large scale. (Cross City Campaign, 2005, p. 4)

Pursuing these curious findings of from these districts in which doing the right things but not getting results, our paper gets inside district reform in a way that explains why doing the apparent right things is not sufficient. We address this mystery of districts doing the right things but, not getting results, by sharing information from a district in Canada that did get results. The paper is organized in four sections: the right model; the wrong results (or were they?); diamonds are in the details; and next steps.

The first author of the paper is a supervisory officer in the district who leads the literacy initiative; the second author helped lead the school team capacity building for 170 schools in four cohorts. We drew on achievement results from the independent provincial agency (Education and Accountability Office-EQAO), examined plans and accountability reports from each school, interviewed key staff who were working with these particular schools, and surveyed the school leadership teams from all schools.

### **The Right Model**

In 1999 when the district began its improvement strategy in earnest, the Director of Education set out to develop the best possible model for reform. He drew heavily on external ideas, but also focused on developing leadership capacity within the district to lead the reform at all levels and focused the system by stating that “all students will read by the end of Grade One”. With support from School Plans for Continuous Improvement, a decision was made to focus on improving literacy, i.e., the Literacy Collaborative (LC). Key features of the approach (Sharratt, 2001) included:

- Continuous communication of a clearly articulated vision and commitment to a system literacy priority for all students;
- A system-wide comprehensive plan and framework for continuous improvement (SPCI);
- Use of data to drive instruction and determine resources;
- Building administrator and teacher capacity to teach literacy for all students; and,

- Establishing professional learning communities at all levels of the system and beyond the district.

The district developed a strong team of curriculum coordinators and consultants focused on literacy, and linked into external expertise, particularly with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). Effectiveness of the implementation was evaluated annually (Mascall et al, 2005). Capacity-building focused on assessment, literacy, instructional strategies, and on change management. Any strategy that develops the collective efficacy of a group to raise the bar and close the gap of student achievement through 1) new knowledge competencies and skills, 2) enhanced resources, and 3) greater motivation was identified as capacity-building. The operative word is *collective*, that is, what the group (school or district) can do to raise the bar and close the gap of student achievement.

The district has invested in on-going, systematic professional development in literacy, assessment, knowledge of the learner, and instructional intelligence, as well as, understanding the change process, dealing with resistance, building professional learning communities, leadership and facilitation skills. The full model is shown in Figure 1 below.

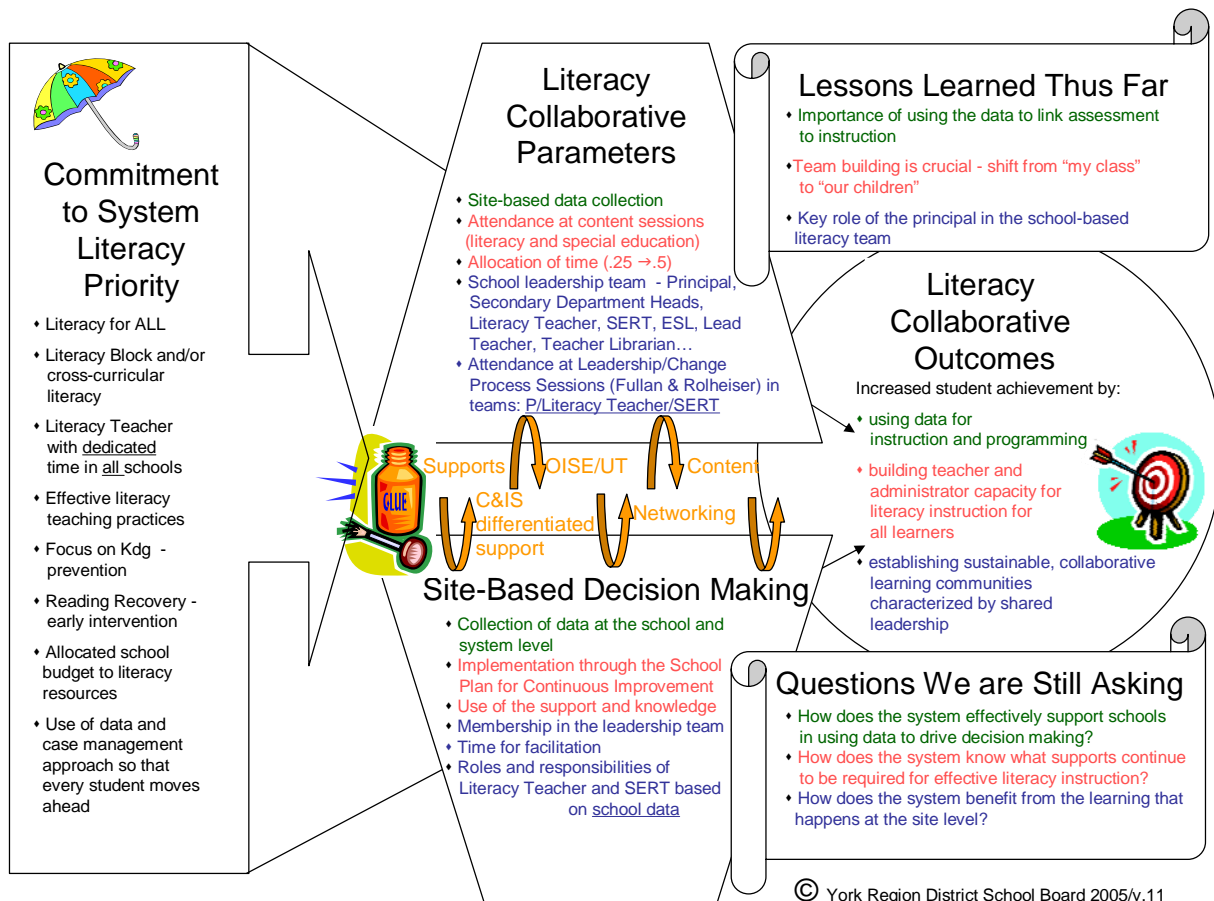


Figure 1. Literacy Collaborative Vision

The model was developed over time and is presented, discussed and modified on an ongoing basis within the system to clarify and refine the overall vision and approach. Based on the findings presented in this paper, it will again be revised. The model is explicit and comprehensive and reflects and guides the work of the district through instructional leaders at all levels of the system.

School literacy teams were developed and supported, starting with an initial cohort in 2001-2002 and adding schools over a four-year period until all schools in the district (elementary and secondary) were involved. Each school team consisted of three people - the principal, the Literacy Teacher (a leadership role typically released for .50 to 1.0 time to work along-side the principal and teachers during the school day), and the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT). The teams committed to professional development once a month and in change knowledge sessions, led by Carol Rolheiser and Michael Fullan, about 5-6 times a year.

The cohorts joined LC, starting with the most disadvantaged elementary schools: in 2001-2002, 17 elementary schools formed cohort one; in 2002-2003, 21 schools were added with cohort two; in 2003-2004, 45 more schools joined; and, in 2004-2005, the remaining 57 schools joined as cohort four. By 2005 all schools were involved, including all 27 secondary schools.

Their longstanding saying that “change is a process not an event” was actualized in York Region District School Board. Not only were professional development sessions continuous over multiple years, but school teams, working with their staffs, were also required to continually build instructional strategies into everyday practice. It was what happened in the schools between sessions that counted. Ideas were constantly applied and discussed as the district emphasized “learning in context.”

Comprehensive in coverage, the model was constantly shared and refined with all stakeholders---the school teams, the curriculum consultant/coordinator staff, the community, school board trustees, and the system as a whole. Moreover, there was a multi-year commitment funded at the Board table and outlined in a comprehensive System Plan for Continuous Improvement (SPCI) to keep the district on course. There was no mistaking that LC was clearly the system priority.

Each June, Literacy leadership teams from all LC schools present what they have accomplished and learned at an annual Literacy Learning Fair. The event is part celebration and part pressure and support to keep schools reading for new levels of achievement. Schools must report on the three goals of LC, i.e., increasing students’ achievement by

- using data to drive instruction and the selection of resources;
- building administrators’ and teachers’ capacity for successful classroom instruction; and,
- establishing professional learning communities across the district.

The York Region is a district engaged in continuous reflection and development. So, what results are they getting?

### **The Wrong Results (or were they?)**

York Region is strongly committed to raising the bar and closing the gap of student achievement; thus, a major interest is to find out how students are performing relative to literacy achievement. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) is an arms-

length government agency charged with assessing and communicating on the achievement of all students in Ontario. We do not hold EQAO results as the only measure of achievement. nonetheless, as a standardized assessment, EQAO scores are a significant barometer of progress over time.

EQAO results for Grade 3 (reported as the percentage of students who achieved levels 3 and 4, which is the province's standard of proficiency) show the following. LC cohorts 1 (17 schools) and 2 (21 schools) did only moderately better than the third and fourth cohorts. In Grade 3 Reading, for example, the first two LC cohorts moved from some 57/52% to 61/64%, compared to the second two cohorts, which advanced from 55/61% to 58/61%, indicating very modest gains. Compared to the provincial average, York Schools as a whole moved from 59 to 61% compared to the provincial averages of 48 to 54% - not very impressive. So what was happening and what are some possible explanations? Four possible explanations occur to us.

First, perhaps the model was not the right one, or the most powerful. Second, it might be that the model has not yet had enough time to take effect. Cohorts 1 and 2 have been engaged only three years, and the largest cohorts have had little time –the 2003-2004 cohort of 45 schools has been involved for only one year, and for the largest group, 57 schools has not yet had a chance to see first year results as they began only in 2004-2005. Thus, 102 of the 140 elementary schools have been implementing the changes for a very short time.

Third, the results may indeed be impressive, given that the district is supporting an increasing number of students who are learning English as an additional language. The percentage of ESL/ELD learners that have reached the provincial standard on the EQAO assessments has improved over the past five years in reading, writing and mathematics (i.e., Grade 3 reading – 34% to 47%, Grade 3 writing – 47% to 63%, Grade 3 mathematics – 62% to 70%,). To hold one's own, and to move forward albeit in small steps, may be a significant accomplishment under these challenging conditions.

Fourth, perhaps there is more than meets the eye. We decided to examine more closely these seemingly rather average results given the effort of the district. And this is where we found "Diamonds in the details".

## **Diamonds in the Details**

The 13 specific components of the LC model are embedded in Figure 1. We wanted to know to what extent each of the 17 schools in Cohort 1 had implemented these core components. The components are briefly described as follows:

1. **Shared Beliefs and Understandings:** Leaders in LC schools must believe and take action to demonstrate that they believe: a) all students can achieve high standards, b) all teachers can teach to high standards given the right assistance, c) high expectations and early intervention are essential, and d) teachers need to be able to articulate what they do and why they teach the way they do (Hill & Crevola, 1999).
2. **Embedded Literacy Teachers:** This role was initially .5 Reading Recovery Teacher/.5 Literacy Teacher – allocated from within school staff who work along-side classroom teachers modeling/demonstrating successful literacy practice. Literacy Teachers model assessment literacy that drives Instructional Intelligence (Bennett, Sharratt, Sangster, 2003).
3. **Timetabled Literacy Block:** At least 100 uninterrupted minutes each morning must be allocated to focused time on task on balanced literacy assessment and instruction. No distractions, nor interruptions, such as announcements, field trips, assemblies can occur during this dedicated literacy time, and the Literacy Teachers’ daily timetables must align with the Literacy Block.
4. **Principal Leadership:** Principal’s deep structural understanding of successful literacy practices in classrooms is key. Therefore, principals in LC must be committed to attending all regional literacy professional development sessions with their literacy leadership team, focusing on data to improve student achievement, and staying the course by maintaining the literacy plan until improvement is achieved.
5. **Full Implementation of Reading Recovery (RR):**  
This program identifies the lowest children in every grade one class and moves these lowest achievers to read and write at the average level so that they are able to benefit from good classroom instruction.
6. **Case Management Approach:** A case management approach is used in order to use data to drive instruction and select resources. These cases put individual faces on data so that teachers know which students need more support. This helps ensure that all teachers in the school have collective responsibility for all students by monitoring student progress

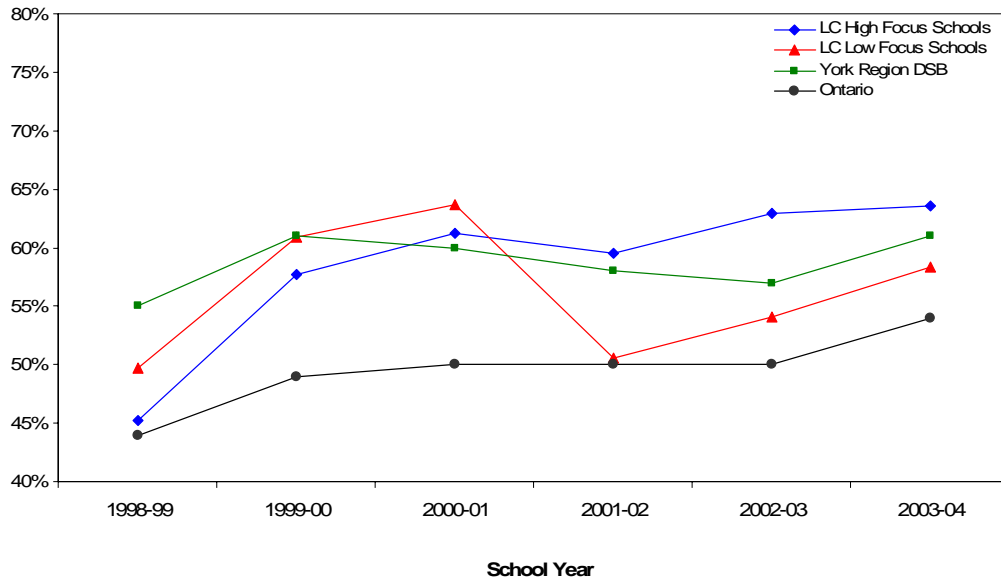


and using diagnostic and assessment tools for data gathering. This helps to identify needs of each student but also to determine the needs of the system regarding professional development.

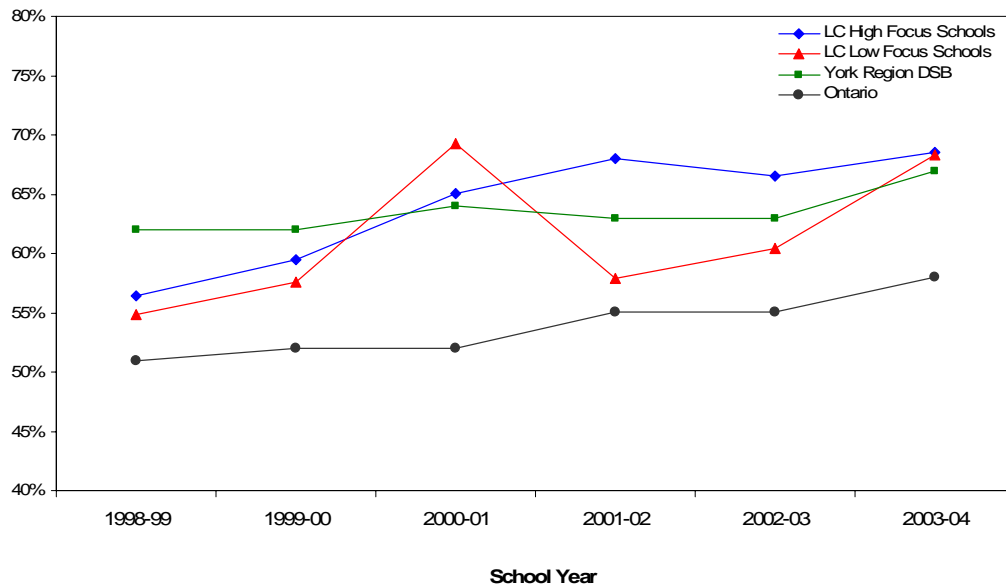
7. Literacy Professional Development (PD) at School Staff Meetings: Principals are committed to literacy PD at staff meetings by reducing operational items to memo format. Teachers work together on Assessment Literacy and Instructional Intelligence as experienced in classrooms through the literacy lens based on the school's own data.
8. In-School Grade Meetings: These weekly meetings focus on literacy achievement of individual students by using common assessment tools or exemplars so that same-grade teachers can come to common understandings of the expected standards across a grade level.
9. Book Rooms of Leveled Books: Principals and literacy teams established book rooms at primary and junior levels where Literacy Teachers place leveled books for classroom teachers' use in order to bring all students to the next reading level, Kindergarten to Grade 6.
10. Allocation of School Budget for Literacy Resources: Administrators and the literacy leadership team agreed to allocate resources. These resources for use with students and with teacher study groups are recommended by district curriculum consultants at literacy content sessions.
11. Action Research Focused on Literacy: School literacy teams pose questions concerning literacy and student achievement related to their school's data. They collaboratively explore the answers through Action Research teams. One thousand dollar grants per school for on-site work were provided by the district office. Annual reports on the results of these grants were compiled into a Board report for use by other schools and at the district level.
12. Parental Involvement: School literacy teams worked towards establishing community-home-school relationships. Many teams reached out to establish pre-school literacy programs in community places, with teachers going out to community centres as part of school readiness programs (Sharratt, 2004).
13. Cross-Curricular Literacy Connections: Although the Literacy Collaborative began with a primary focus, all teachers, JK-8 in these schools began to discuss and then implement teaching literacy in the content areas across the grades.

To determine the extent of implementation of the 13 components, we analyzed the annual reports from the 17 schools, and interviewed the two initial leaders of the initiative about which schools had incorporated the strategies more fully. We found that there were 9 schools that had consistently followed the above 13 specific components of the model. When we compared their performance to other groups, the results were dramatic. Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate these results in the 9 schools.

**Figure 2. Grade 3 EQAO Reading: % of All Students at Levels 3 & 4**



**Figure 3. Grade 3 EQAO Writing: % of All Students at Levels 3 & 4**



Nine (9) schools implemented the model components consistently and with high focus, despite being well below other York Region schools at the beginning of the strategy in 1998-1999. Despite being at the lowest end of the provincial average, these schools outperformed both of these groups within four years. For example, in Grade 3 Reading, the 9 LC schools were at 45% in 1998-99, and progressed above both comparison groups within two years and have remained above the other groups since then. High-focused schools started below the district and provincial average and maintained steady gains. The low-focused schools started low, and had erratic patterns of performance, inconsistencies that we would expect in schools without a sustained focus.

The explanation for better performance seems to lie in more careful attention to the details of the LC model. The 9 schools that did especially well were initially among the lowest performing schools in the district, yet they moved beyond the district average in a relatively short time. The explanation in our view is that these schools were led by principals and literacy teacher leaders who understood and were committed to the specifics. For example,

- a. school leaders clearly understood the model and most importantly lived the Beliefs and Understandings in the design;
- b. school leaders clearly understood that they needed to do *all* 13 components;
- c. school teams did constant self-evaluation, striving to align of beliefs and understanding among the Principal, Literacy Teacher, Reading Recovery teacher and Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT). This involved “accountable talk” and corresponding action in an on-going way during the school day; and
- d. school leaders did not let the “distracters” divert their energies and focus.

We have, then, an explanation to the mystery of lower than expected overall results, but what can we make of it? First, we are learning that effective change involves far more precise and detailed work than we thought (for elaboration of what it takes to achieve breakthrough results for all, see Fullan, Hill and Crevola, in press). Second, 9 of 17 schools is a good starter. And we expect the schools in other cohorts to determine how well the model components are being pursued with diligence and perseverance. Thus we have the makings of a critical mass of leaders. A tipping point to achieve system change may be near.

We pushed further to see how widespread support for the model and for associated changes was in the region. In April 2005, we conducted a survey of all school teams in the

district—a total sample of the response rate was an impressive 76%, or 387 respondents. We asked school leaders, not full-time teachers as a group at this point, questions pertaining to the effectiveness of the LC strategy. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. The percentages in Table 1 refer to those who reported “somewhat” (4) or “great impact” (5 on a five-point scale) with respect to the question asked:

Table 1.

*Survey Results*

The Literacy Collaborative has:

1. Provided teachers with a wider range of teaching strategies.	90%
2. Helped teachers and administrators ensure adequate resources to support students.	78%
3. Raised the expertise of the teachers within their schools.	88%
4. Increased the school-wide focus on literacy.	95%
5. Clarified the role of all teaches in support of literacy instruction.	78%
6. Provided more attention and assistance to students at risk.	83%
7. Helped students at risk become identified earlier.	79%
8. Helped the school raise literacy expectations for all students.	90%
9. Produced more consistency and continuity in literacy across different subject areas.	75%
10. Ensured that the school is organized around the learning needs of students.	80%
11. Fostered a more positive attitude among staff regarding the teaching of literacy.	85%
12. Involved individual teachers in sharing expertise and effective practices with teachers from other schools.	69%

Our conclusions are as follows. First, there is widespread support throughout the system for the model and the strategy being pursued, which could represent a tipping point for breakthrough change. On virtually every item, 8 or 9 out of 10 school leaders responding report widespread and beneficial presence of and press for literacy across the school and

district. Even on the demanding matter of lateral capacity building across schools (sharing effective practices between schools), 69% indicate that this is occurring. Our hypothesis is that if you have a critical mass of distributed school leadership it is bound to have a major beneficial impact on teachers as a whole. The next step is to survey a sample of teachers.

Second, we endorse one of our basic change findings namely that shared vision or ownership is more an *outcome* of a quality process than it is a pre-condition. You have to develop shared vision. We know from our change work, that to a certain extent, behavior change often precedes change in beliefs. We think that survey participants have had new experiences and it is this that has made them more positive. Third, the work requires much more precision and focus than we or others thought. It is not surface beliefs that matter but rather commitment, staying the course, and detailed know-how that comes from learning by doing and reflecting on practice.

In short, when we get to a more fine-grained analysis, we see that it is the details that count. In turn, this means we must develop strategies that help school leaders experience and learn more about how precisely to engage in continuous improvement in classroom practice. Such leaders conceptualize and carry out their roles with ever increasing precision and commitment. They can walk the talk as well as talk the walk.

### **Next Steps**

There are essentially three broad themes that we believe are necessary to go beyond where we are—staying the course, becoming more specific, and widening the sphere of involvement.

Staying the course means holding the focus on the existing model. We saw that the intensive involvement of most schools is only recent, yet there is widespread support for the direction undertaken. Staying the course means more intensive learning about focused balanced literacy practices, early intervention, and parental and community involvement and ownership. Above all, staying the course means that leaders across the district—school and district levels—understand that they are at the early stages of an improvement strategy that requires ever-increasing attention. We have also made the case that you can “appear” to be doing the right things, but that it is necessary to look and go deeper. Deeper is where *precision* lies, and doing the right things means being more focused and persistent because this is where future breakthroughs will be accomplished (see Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Fullan, 2006).

Second and related, precision and detail are key. Therefore, new strategies are needed which increase the specificity and the opportunity to learn in context – more precise and intensive literacy support for selected schools will be needed. During 2005/2006, 33 schools will receive intensive school-based support focusing on improved student achievement in literacy. According to needs indicated by patterns in EQAO results, each of the 33 schools identified for intensive support will receive assistance from two curriculum consultants and leadership from one curriculum coordinator, who will work directly with the school administrator and Literacy Teacher in each school to extend school-wide capacity for improved student achievement in literacy.

It is critical to become more intensive in selected situations of underperformance and to place this work in the context of whole district reform. Most turnaround school strategies are partial, short-term and, as such, fail to activate the conditions for and motivations necessary for continuous improvement (Fullan, 2006). In preparation for this intensive support, curriculum coordinators met with the principal and Literacy Teacher of each school selected to clarify the focus for literacy support, using a carefully developed diagnostic tool to assess not only needs but status of school results and perceptions of administrators, Literacy Teachers and community.

Third and finally, extending the net of learning outside the district is a new strategy for accessing ideas and contributing to the development of others. For the 2005/2006 school year, the York Region District School Board has received a special funding allocation from the Provincial Secretariat to support the expansion of the Literacy Collaborative program to include the involvement of leadership teams from 10 other regional school boards. The districts involved in this journey will join York Region administrators and teachers to take part in change leadership training sessions in order to address knowledge, skills, structures and strategies that promote region-wide literacy capacity-building led by curriculum and OISE/UT research staff. The general notion is that districts develop best in the long run if they take the intellectual (knowledge based) and moral (commitment to the system as a whole) stance that it is their responsibility to learn from other districts and to contribute to the learning of other districts.

In sum, there is more to getting it right than meets the eye. The experience of York Region is instructive in that it shows that a great deal can be accomplished in a short period of time, but that this really just represents the beginning of a much deeper journey, which has

only just begun. The goal of district-wide reform is to transform the culture of the district at the school and district levels—vertically and horizontally in terms of how schools relate to the district (and vice versa) and to each other. We see in this work that the movement is from a *we-they* orientation to a *we-we* commitment. Classroom teachers begin to identify with “my school” not just “my classroom”; school staff develop commitments to “my district”, not just to the narrower “my school”.

Once the new culture reaches a critical mass, we believe that sustained district-wide reform will be within our grasp. In other words, as system capacity increases, given efforts yield greater return because the whole system gets better at what it does. The extraordinary becomes possible without superhuman effort. And when this happens, continuous improvement on a large scale becomes a reality.

## About the Authors

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