

How **Ontario** spread successful practices across **5,000** schools

By building and supporting networks of educators throughout the province, Ontario was able to develop a system now highly regarded for both equity and excellence.

By Avis Glaze

“There is such a range of rich professional learning opportunities that fuel a culture of collaboration among us. This investment by the Ontario Ministry of Education has nurtured meaningful dialogue about student achievement in our schools. It has fostered a contagious desire that helps us delve into deep conversations about teaching and learning. The networks that have been created challenge and stretch the boundaries of current pedagogical knowledge. We reflect on best practices and examine school-based data meticulously. We uncover the innovative practices that become the springboard to move student thinking forward. As this cycle continues, we become increasingly vested in unraveling further questions, hypotheses, and challenges while seeking out our colleagues to enrich their understandings as well . . . It is through these empowering networks that we continue to share promising practices across schools and districts.”

— Susan Wright, elementary school teacher, Windsor, Ontario

Before 2003, many would have said that the Ontario school system was in crisis. Today, the province has been recognized as one of the fastest-improving jurisdictions in the world. Ontario is lauded for achieving both excellence and equity, goals that many believe are mutually exclusive. One of the many lessons that Ontario learned is the importance of building capacity among teachers and principals to sustain strategies that work. When this happens, teachers are motivated, and they strive to do what they do best — educate all children, regardless of background or personal circumstances, to the maximum of their capabilities.

During the years of its most intensive improvement work, Ontario educators could rely on support from the highest political levels of the province. Teachers’ unions, and superintendents’ and principals’ associations also played a key role supporting the strategy by developing their members. I am convinced that systems do better when they take time nurturing trusting professional relationships with the individuals who are expected to do the daily work of implementation. Without the deep commitment of the adults, Ontario would never have been a success story.

AVIS GLAZE is president of Edu-quest International, Inc., and was chief student achievement officer of Ontario and founding CEO of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat.

The Ontario Context: Then and Now

Then (2002-03)	Now (2012-13)
Flat-lined achievement result	Continuous improvement in student achievement
Poor morale and lack of involvement	High motivation and commitment to continuous improvement
Inequity in student achievement results	Narrowing of achievement gaps
Disparate goals and priorities	Clear strategic goals; specific student achievement targets
Multiple, disjointed priorities	Selected high-impact strategies
Limited reliance on research and data	Research-based and data-driven
Focus on compliance	Focus on professional accountability
Eroding confidence in public education	Increased confidence in public education
Labor unrest within education	Extended period of labor peace
Rising enrollment in private schools	Increased public school enrollment
Disconnect between provincial and local priorities	Alignment of priorities at all levels of the system

Source: Glaze, A., Mattingley, R., & Andrews, R. (2013). *High school graduation: K-12 strategies that work*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Ontario improvement strategy

Although the success of the Ontario approach was driven by decisions initially made at the provincial level, the Ontario strategy included opportunities for negotiable variations and local adaptations. Providing for local adjustments based on achievement levels on literacy and numeracy, for example, demonstrated respect for the professional expertise of educators that is characteristic of the Ontario improvement strategy.

Systems often waste time on too many priorities instead of targeting a few key areas for focused attention. In Ontario, we identified three main goals and provided professional learning to help districts identify a small number of SMART (Strategic and specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound) goals to address larger provincial goals. That is where local decision making came into play, allowing professionals in each community to identify what would work best in their settings. “Too often, when districts and schools engage in developing an improvement plan, they try to do too much, and the reality is that not much actually gets done” (Glaze, Mattingley, & Andrews, 2013, p 29).

Simply stated, the ministry’s three main goals were to:

- Improve student achievement;
- Reduce gaps in student achievement; and
- Improve public confidence in the public education system.

The system redoubled its effort to achieve the specific goal to ensure that 75% of 12-year-olds reach the provincial standard of “B” or 70% within the specified time. At the secondary level, the intention was to raise graduation rates so that 85% of students would graduate from high school — up from 68%. The goal of improving public confidence in public education was important since some individuals were losing faith in the ability of publicly funded education to improve schools in general and those in challenging circumstances in particular.

The premier added a class-size reduction strategy so that classes in grades 1 to 3 would have a maximum of one teacher for every 20 students in at least 90% of classes.

With those overarching plans in place, we worked with schools to implement the research-informed strategies known to improve student achievement.

Organized education ministry to lead effort

Within the Ministry of Education, Ontario established the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and appointed the author as its CEO and the chief student achievement officer. In addition, the premier and the minister of education established a Guiding Coalition, of which they were members, to remove barriers, support change, and monitor improvement. This signaled the importance of this undertaking and made it possible to circumvent bureaucratic challenges. We

hired student achievement officers (SAOs) at the elementary level and, later in the mandate, student success leaders (SSLs) at the secondary level.

The secretariat focused on district and school improvement planning and developed strategies to monitor progress and to provide timely support and feedback to schools. The province also committed to an early learning strategy and provided funds for multimedia and other resources to support teachers, making it easy for them to select strands that reflected their individual professional learning needs.

Focused on research and data-informed decision making

We worked hard to establish a culture of inquiry and experimentation, used a variety of data extensively, worked with faculties of education to publish research monographs, and conducted and disseminated research on promising practices. We encouraged and provided financial support for teacher inquiry projects on topics that teachers and principals said were important to them. Examples included how to improve boys’ literacy, nonfiction reading and writing, and how to assist students with guided reading and self-assessment techniques.

Established a sense of urgency

To mobilize the system, the ministry had to provide a solid rationale and the necessary data to persuade others of the need to revisit strategies they were using. At that time, only 54% of students were

achieving the provincial standard. Figure 1 shows the upward and steady improvement in the graduation rates.

Established a culture of high expectations

In the early stages of the process, one could predict outcomes based on factors such as poverty or family circumstances. We supported schools in setting ambitious targets and asked them to commit to raising the bar and closing achievement gaps for those who were not improving. We disaggregated data to expose the gaps and, with that information, we provided early and ongoing interventions and differentiated support based on the expressed needs of each school.

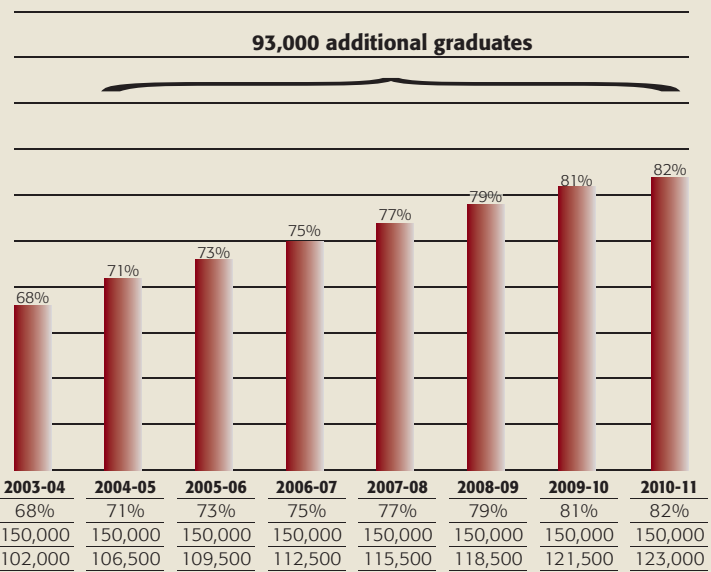
To aid this process, we developed the Statistical Neighbors tool, which linked schools with similar demographics so that low-achieving schools could learn from more successful schools. When we identified schools in challenging circumstances that were performing above expectations, we essentially removed excuses for low performance.

Removed distracters

Systems must remove factors that impede progress so individuals can commit themselves fully to the core priorities. We engaged teachers’ unions and professional organizations, settled collective agreements, and made every effort to circumvent bureaucratic barriers. We engaged principals in identifying factors that thwart their efforts and, where feasible,

FIG. 1. Ontario graduation rates, 2004-11

- Graduation rates have increased from 68% to 82%.
- Each 1% increase represents 1,500 students.
- 93,000 more students have graduated than would have had the rate remained at 68%.



Source: Ontario Ministry of Education

worked with them to remove or circumvent those barriers. One of the popular actions was reducing the paperwork related to accessing funds for school improvement. We required shorter school improvement plans, providing examples of how schools could reduce the 'history-of-the-school compendiums' that many had prepared in the past.

Provided positive pressure and targeted support

We monitored progress, provided effective and timely feedback, and engaged in extensive coaching initiatives. We developed the School Effectiveness Framework tool to enable schools to assess their own effectiveness. This also enabled districts to select a few schools each year for a system review, making it possible for principals to serve on teams and see what other schools were doing. But the primary emphasis was on self-assessment and evaluation.

We used nonpunitive intervention strategies to help struggling schools. We were convinced that if schools knew what to do to improve achievement they would have done it. If they continued to struggle, we had to be more prescriptive. But at all times, the modus operandi was to treat principals and teachers with respect and to work with them in a true spirit of collegiality. So we developed the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP). All OFIP schools implemented these common expectations, plus others tailored to their individual needs:

- Uninterrupted literacy and numeracy blocks;
- A common assessment tool;
- A school improvement team;
- A brief school improvement plan with few priorities;
- Specific examples of how resources would be targeted to address specific needs;
- Regular monitoring and feedback on performance; and
- A professional learning community (PLC) with a focus on improving achievement.

We asked OFIP schools to identify a few non-negotiables based on current research on how to improve student achievement. Some schools included the implementation of a balanced literacy program or requiring students to use higher-order thinking skills; others chose strategies to differentiate instruction or early and ongoing intervention for struggling students or teaching math content through problem solving.

Made capacity building an intrinsic element

School-based capacity building and developing people at all levels of the education system have been and continue to be the strategies that made the most

difference. The sine qua non of school improvement is the extent to which school systems invest in, support, and develop their people. We strengthened leadership capacity, focused on instructional leadership, encouraged networks, established professional learning communities, and provided direct support for schools through SAOs at the elementary level and SSLs at the secondary level. We organized conferences and summer institutes and established a leadership alliance to support senior officials in their school improvement agenda. The network's main intent was to share successful practices across the school system.

One of the many lessons we have learned in Ontario is that when schools focus on equity, improved achievement for all students inevitably follows.

Engaged students, parents, and communities

All individuals involved in the strategy had to provide regular input about its effectiveness. We established a Working Table of key partners, established and supported a Parent Engagement Office and funded local projects to facilitate parent engagement. We emphasized policies that encouraged student voice and choice, making sure students were engaged to the fullest extent possible in the improvement strategy. Legislation to ensure that students had a role on school boards was also part of Ontario's improvement efforts.

Implemented character development

The ministry required all schools to implement character development programs. This helped address behavior issues so teachers could focus on teaching rather than discipline. We also provided examples and encouraged districts to implement Building Communities of Character initiatives to support the focus in schools. As well, I spearheaded a "character-in-the-workplace" initiatives in two districts.

When schools assume their role of educating hearts as well as minds, a character development focus can be very helpful in achieving that goal. A good education is holistic in nature, emphasizing knowledge, attitudes, values, behavior and sensibilities. Having initiated character development programs in two districts and also provincially, I have seen firsthand the impact on school culture, behavior, interpersonal relationships and self regard. Teachers

reported on the change in classroom discipline and interpersonal relationships as students became more concerned about each other's feeling and well-being; vice-principals talked about the reduction in suspension rates, absenteeism, tardiness, name-calling and

When we identified schools in challenging circumstances that were performing above expectations, we essentially removed excuses for low performance.

other negative behaviors. Others told stories of students being more courteous and respectful toward their classmates and their teachers.

In Ontario, school districts were asked to engage the widest possible cross-section of their communities, identify the attributes that were important to the community and infuse them into all that happens in the school — the policies, programs, practices, and interactions. But more important, an effective character education program is one in which teacher and students are demonstrating through their behaviors their beliefs in the attributes that have been chosen with community input.

Of all the initiatives that I have championed over

the years, I have been most passionate about the potential of character education to help create the graduates we strive to nurture, the neighbors we want to live next door, the communities we wish to create and countries we all want to call our own. I am convinced that character development does, indeed, represent education at its best and that it should continue to be one of the most important outcomes of schooling.

Blending equity and excellence

One of the many lessons we have learned in Ontario is that when schools focus on equity, improved achievement for all students inevitably follows. Early in the process, we decided to highlight factors that educators can control rather than mentioning family or other issues over which they had minimal, if any, control. In retrospect, that was an important aspect of the work. Ontario educators now believe they have the will and the skill to improve achievement; excuses for low performance that blame parents and community are now quite rare.

With the strong focus on closing achievement gaps and ensuring that equity and excellence go hand in hand, we engaged principals, teachers, and superintendents in deep conversations about what it takes to improve schools and systems. We asked questions that put the spotlight on equity of outcomes. We produced the related document, *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Equity and Excellence in Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009), which identified concrete and specific actions that ministry, districts, principals, and teachers had to take over a four-year span.

During this process, we asked educators to reflect on and discuss at the school level, questions such as:

- Who are the students who have historically underperformed?
- What factors contribute to low performance?
- What are the obstacles to success?
- What specific interventions have we instituted?
- How will we measure progress?
- How will we provide meaningful feedback?
- How will we ensure that students move to the next level of attainment?

Networks provide opportunities for educators to engage in deeper conversations about what equity and inclusivity looks like in practice. "Understanding issues of marginalization and oppression and coming to terms with the impact on students and their achievement is complex at best. This impact is also experienced differently in each context. School leadership teams were able to explore what the characteristics of an inclusive school environment were with colleagues in neighboring schools and were expected

To learn more . . .

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of the Ontario Ministry of Education, in conjunction with Curriculum Services Canada for teachers and principals, produced a wide array of materials to support its work.

Principal Learning Teams

<http://resources.curriculum.org/secretariat/snapshots/principal.html>

What Works: Research in to Practice

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/whatWorks.html

Capacity-building series

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/capacityBuilding.html

Webcasts for educators

www.curriculum.org/secretariat/literacy_en.shtml

Inspire: The Journal of Literacy and Numeracy for Ontario

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/index.html

to share these practices to build truly equitable and inclusive learning communities,” said Camille Logan, a principal in the York Region District School Board.

Using networks to improve schools

Ontario’s focus on capacity building was, to my mind, the most important factor in its success. The cornerstone of network building was disseminating successful practices and building a learning culture throughout its 5,000 schools.

At the core, networks are about building relationships and sharing information to build further capacity. Ontario developed a variety of networks to address these goals. One of these was Leading Student Achievement (LSA): Networks for Learning, developed by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in cooperation with the three associations of principals in the province. This network initially focused on elementary schools but in the past three years has expanded to include high schools. The network supports district and school leaders. It is about networks of school teams learning together about what works, how to how to implement and learn from the new practices, and to share that information with others to expand the circle of influence.

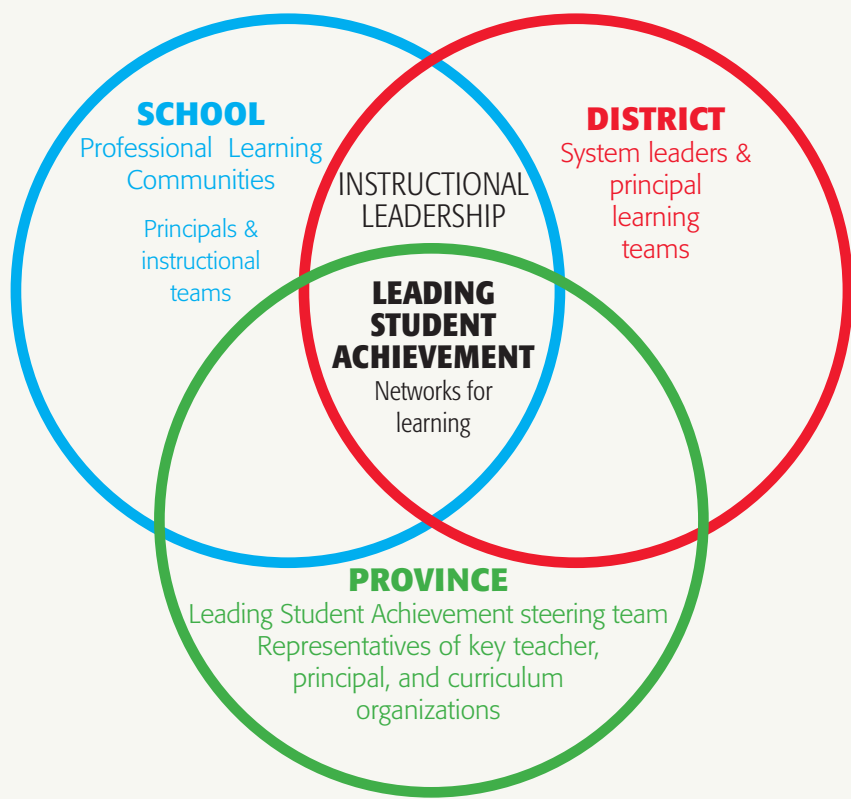
The overlap of the three circles in Figure 2 demonstrates the collaborative roles of principals, teachers, and system leaders as they work to increase their own capacity and spread the innovation to meet student achievement targets.

Each school has a Professional Learning Community in which principals and teachers collaborate in teams to improve instructional practice and school conditions. Each district has Principal Learning Teams in which principals across the district work to increase their capacity as instructional leaders, to impact teacher practice and school conditions that lead to improved student learning. The province has a steering team composed of the principal organizations and the Ministry of Education. The LSA Steering Team supports principals and system leaders through a variety of professional learning opportunities and resources.

Several initiatives contributed to the dissemination of successful practices across the system:

- Key stakeholders discussed the provincial strategy, provided input and shared learning and insights from their jurisdictions in meetings at the Secretariat.

FIG. 2.
Roles of principals, teachers, and system leaders



- A Partnership Table from a broad cross-section of stakeholders heard regular updates and provided a way to communicate strategies laterally and horizontally.
- A forum for directors of education (superintendents) from highly successful boards facilitated networking with colleagues whose districts were struggling to improve results. Group members identified their challenges and shared their insights, expertise, and strategies to overcome barriers.
- Regional meetings enabled school principals and board leaders to share practices that were working in their schools.
- The Schools on the Move initiative identified successful schools, which were linked together as a network of schools to share their strategies. An annual Schools on the Move conference provided another forum where principals and teachers could share promising practices.
- Provincial symposiums brought people together to learn about research-informed strategies such as coaching, differentiating instruction, shared reading, nonfiction writing, and to hone their skills in assessment literacy and other topics.
- Networks of schools worked together to

strengthen instructional practice.

- Student Success Leaders in every district and Student Success Teachers in every school met regularly to share strategies

Sharon Moss, a principal in the York Region District School Board, whose students have posted impressive achievement gains, points to the value of the networks in her district. “In the past, administrators and system leaders operated and learned in silos, rarely sharing effective teaching and learning strategies that were the focus of their board and school improvement plans,” she said. “The focus on learning through networks has helped break down the silos and has brought precision to our learning as system leaders. This is having a direct impact on our students in their classrooms and on the general effectiveness of our school district.”

The sine qua non of school improvement is the extent to which school systems invest in, support, and develop their people.

Ontario is not alone in its belief that networks of educators focused on building their capacity are key to school improvement. Andreas Schleicher, for example, who leads the PISA team at OECD, concluded in his analysis of Finnish education that “building networks among schools that stimulate and spread innovation helps to explain Finland’s success in making strong school performance a consistent and predictable outcome throughout the education



“I know I’m having trouble reading at 3rd-grade level . . . that’s why, when I grow up, I’m going to be a 2nd-grade teacher.”

system with less than 5% variation in student performance between schools” (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 40).

Conclusion

High levels of student achievement are possible in all schools and all districts, regardless of demographic composition. Identifying the greatest area of need for students and tightly focusing on a few key priorities is important. But investing in people and supporting them professionally is what really makes the difference. In cases where there is minimal improvement, one has to conclude that if individuals knew what to do, they would have done it. If improvement is elusive, it means that we must build capacity to get the job done.

It also means that in those cases, it is quite defensible to be more prescriptive about what needs to be done. The children cannot wait. We must question the status quo and take action if students are not succeeding. Improvement will only happen if everyone at all levels of the system takes ownership for the strategy and strives valiantly to raise the bar for all students to close achievement gaps.

In Ontario, we eschewed the one-size-fits-all, shame-and-blame modus operandi, recognized local needs, and provided a wide range of capacity-building strategies. It has been proven time and time again that the quality of instruction and the leadership within schools and districts are the critical factors that influence student success. As educators, we must ensure that all students have access to high-quality instruction and the best possible learning experiences. By working together and spreading practices that we know result in improved student achievement, schools and districts in the most challenging circumstances can build upon their success, improve their results, and address areas requiring more intense focus.

In Ontario, teachers and principals take this mandate seriously. While they recognize that they have every reason to celebrate their current success, they also acknowledge that much remains to be done. Their dedication, resolve, and belief in continuous improvement represent professionalism at its best. ■

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