

What America Can Learn From Ontario's Education Success

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In the last decade, the Canadian province dramatically improved its education system to become one of the best in the world. Its innovative strategy can provide a blueprint for U.S. reform.

Ontario is Canada's largest province, home to over 13 million people and a public education system with roughly 2 million students, 120,000 educators, and 5,000 schools. As recently as 2002, this system was stagnant by virtually any measure of performance. In October 2003, a new provincial government (Canada has no federal agency or jurisdiction in education) was elected with a mandate and commitment to transform it.

Improvements began within a year, and now some eight years later its 900 high schools have shown an increase in graduation rates from 68 percent (2003-04) to 82 percent (2010-11), while reading, writing, and math results have gone up 15 percentage points across its 4,000 elementary schools since 2003. Morale of teachers and principals is stronger (fewer teachers leave the profession in the first few years), and achievement gaps have been substantially reduced for low-income students, the children of recent immigrants, and special education students (although not for "First Nation" students). In short, the entire system has dramatically improved.

These accomplishments have not gone unnoticed outside Canada. The McKinsey group, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in Paris, the National Center on Education and the Economy in Washington, D.C., and Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance have all done recent case studies on Ontario's education system, concluding that it is one of the most improved and highest performing in the world. They especially admire the impressive, innovative strategy that got the results. So, what's the secret?

It's simple. Ontario public schools follow a model embraced by top-performing hospitals, businesses, and organizations worldwide. Specifically, they do five things in concert -- *focus, build relationships, persist, develop capacity, and spread quality implementation.*

In practice, this meant refocusing the way Ontario schools delivered education. Like many school systems, Ontario had too many "top" priorities. The Ministry of Education selected three-- literacy, math, and high school graduation--with a commitment to raise the bar for all students and close achievement gaps between all groups. There are other goals, of course, but these three are non-negotiable and take precedence because they leverage so many other learning goals.

Focus and persistence ensure that these priorities are not going to be discarded along the way. The history of education innovations has generated a "this too shall pass" mindset among teachers. One of our colleagues calls this phenomenon "the law of innovation fatigue." Any

attempt to create a high-leverage priority (like the three adopted by Ontario) requires that the education system as a whole commits to them long-term.

But priorities don't mean anything if you don't develop the relationships necessary to enact them. The provincial government set out to develop a strong sense of two-way partnerships and collaboration, especially between administrators and teachers, and in concert with teachers' unions. This required providing significant leeway to individual school districts to experiment with novel approaches to reaching the province's three main educational goals, and focusing significant reform efforts on investments in staffing and teacher development.

By focusing on teacher development, Ontario was also able to raise teacher accountability. Decades of experience have taught Canadian educators that you can't get greater accountability through direct measures of rewards and punishments. Instead, what Ontario did was to establish *transparency* of results and practice (anyone can find out what any school's results are, and what they are doing to get those results) while combining this with what we call *non-judgmentalism*. This latter policy means that if a teacher is struggling, administrators and peers will step in to help her get better. (There are, however, steps that can be taken if a situation consistently fails to improve.)

The final element of the strategy involves identifying and spreading quality practices. Most education systems are loosely coupled to say the least -- behind the classroom door, teachers are islands unto themselves. In such isolated systems, two problems emerge. The first is that good ideas do not get around; they remain trapped in individual classrooms or schools. The other problem is that poor teaching can remain entrenched, because good practices are not being disseminated. A big part of the Ontario strategy has been to break down the walls of the classroom, the school, and even the district by increasing communication, cataloging and sharing best practices, and fostering a culture of teamwork. To that end, the Ministry of Education guides local school districts in developing more collaborative professional environments, while also acting as a clearinghouse for innovation and best practices.

The net result of these five forces is an education system that has the characteristics of a high-performing organization: relentless focus, interactive pressure and support, a preoccupation with results and how to improve them, a culture of mutual commitment, and what we call collaborative competition, where there is no limit to what is being attempted. The fact that this strategy develops leaders at all levels -- leaders who focus on results, as they help develop other leaders -- means that sustainability is built into the whole enterprise. Ontario isn't perfect. But it proves that large-scale reform can be accomplished in school systems in fairly short periods of time.