

Foreword

A Literacy Leadership Tool Kit

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Improving literacy has become the core priority of many countries around the world. Research is clear — a literate society prospers personally and collectively. However, we are finding that it is easier to espouse literacy for all but much more difficult to mobilize the system to engage in quality implementation and continuous improvement. The good news is that we do know a lot more about what it takes to improve large systems; the bad news is that it is very difficult requiring a strong and continuously developing knowledge base and relentless pursuit in putting the knowledge base into action.

The Literacy Leadership Took Kit is the best resource by far that I know that combines thorough knowledge and strategies and resources for implementation. It is a fabulous resource kit because the authors have crafted it out of a decade of building the ideas by toiling in the classrooms, schools, and district of a large school system, while simultaneously drawing on and contributing to the world wide field of improving literacy. This is knowledge that is embedded in the 151 elementary schools and 31 secondary schools of York Region District School Board — a highly diverse, urban district just outside Toronto, Ontario.

Most of all, the ideas have been honed inside the schools while sending teams around the world to seek new practices, and by receiving scores of visitors who come to visit, critique and learn from York's experiences. The resources underpinning the Took Kit have been vetted by the 10,000 teachers and administrators in York Region, and also by the scores of visitors from Australia, China, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and more.

The knowledge base is powerful. At its core, the Took Kit integrates curriculum, instruction and assessment to provide a pedagogical synergy in each and every classroom. Above all the model combines knowledge of pedagogy and knowledge of change. Let us consider each of these in the wider context. My colleagues, Peter Hill and Carmel Crevola, and I have addressed this in our recent book, *Breakthrough* (2008). At the deep core of all this work is a *moral purpose* — the pervasive commitment to raise the bar and close the gap for all students. *Breakthrough* is doing this for virtually all students in entire provinces or countries.

We have organized this approach further through what we call 'the Triple P model' — personalization, precision and professional learning. Personalization is getting at the mechanical learning needs of each child as they develop. Precision involves relating to the needs with just the right instructional response that engages the student in the learning required in order to move forward. Professional learning — and this is where it gets hard — requires *each and every teacher* to learn how to do this as instructional classroom teachers, and collectively as teams, within the school, and across schools.

In addition to moral purpose and the Triple P model there is one more big concept required, namely that the *entire system* must be working in concert to achieve this, in what we call, 'Tri-level reform'. Tri-level reform is system reform which combines school and community as one level of the tri, districts or regions as the middle level, and government or the state as the third level. Thus, large systems, of course, can be sub-divided within a given level (such as classrooms within schools) but conceiving of the three big pieces makes the main point.

Within the model, teachers learn from each other (in what is sometimes called professional learning communities), and schools and indeed districts learn from each other (what we call lateral capacity building). And there is greater two-way rapport and learning across the levels — school-district; district-government; parents and communities vis-à-vis schools, districts and government.

There is certainly the need for coherence and alignment across the three levels, but the dynamism of tri-level rapport is best described as 'permeable connectively' — lots of two-way streets in which mutual knowledge, influence and commitment flow. This is not just theoretical. It is based on developing the theories and practices on the ground. By using this knowledge England improved literacy and numeracy by an average of 17 percentage points across its 20,000 schools in less than 10 years; Ontario by 10 percentage points in four years, and York Region by more than 10 percent in its 181 schools, including improved literacy in high schools, as measured by the performance of 16 year-olds in grade 10.

But the work is not nearly done, hence the timelines and value of the Literacy Leadership Took Kit (LLT). LLT has it all. There are five components that make LLT a powerful resource:

1. Leadership at all levels
2. Planning
3. The 13 parameters
4. Video resources
5. Organizers, activities, and tools

First, the model requires developing and mobilizing literacy leaders at all levels: literacy coaches within schools; new roles for principals and assistant principals as instructional leaders; district staff including superintendents who for the first time get deeply into issues of instruction and assessment, not just curriculum; Ministry of Education staff; university personnel with respect to initial teacher education; and continuous professional development within and across schools and districts.

Second, LLT has the right purchase in 'planning'. Improving literacy is not about big strategic plans. It is about balancing and integrating plans and action: getting the right focus, defining the plan in action-based terms, careful facilitation of the myriad of learning sessions, and constantly monitoring, reviewing and refining the cycle. LLT helps you do all of this.

Third, the 13 parameters are at the heart of the Tool Kit. They are solid, comprehensive, specific, essential, and dynamically intertwined. I have participated in and witnessed their evolutionary development. They were created by teachers, principals, community members, district staff, university facilitators, and Ministry of Education personnel working together.

The parameters share a characteristic of all effective organizations as I have just found in my book *The Six Secrets of Change* (2008). Secret 4 is 'Learning is the work'. Learning is not about external courses and professional development sessions, it is about getting it right day after day by purposeful learning on the job. Whether we examine school systems, business firms or hospitals, I found that the best organizations pursue their work with relentless *precision and specificity*. The 13 parameters are specificity — this is what makes them so valuable. They can be clearly understood and implemented. They really work. I also found that the most effective organizations combine precision with creativity, that is, they implement what they know works with consistency as they search for even better ways to improve. Consistency and creativity go hand in hand, and the 13 parameters reflect this fundamental assumption.

Fourth, the parameters are not just clearly described and recommended for use: they are backed up by 13 video vignettes that show them in action. One of the hallmarks of effective organizations is that they have leaders at all levels of the system who not only practice what they preach, but are impressively articulate about a) what they are doing, (b) why they are doing it, c) what results they are getting, and d) what they need to work on to get even better. The video vignettes are all of this. We hear from scores of teachers and administrative leaders talking about and demonstrating each of the parameters in action. In the videos, combined with the text, we have a powerful combination that focuses on and enables us to get into the issues of literacy reform with a degree of clarity and confidence (although always recognizing there is more to learn).