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Ontario Pins Hopes on Practices, Not Testing, to Achieve

By [Lynn Olson](#)

Toronto

Americans who want to understand what school improvement might look like if it focused less on test-score results and more on engaging teachers and principals should catch a plane for Ontario.

Like the United States, the Canadian province of Ontario has committed itself to reaching key numeric targets: at least 75 percent of 6th graders able to read, write, and do mathematics at the “provincial standard” by 2008, and at least 85 percent of entering 9th graders graduating from high school by 2010.

But the province’s education strategy focuses less on public ratings and rankings of schools and more on identifying and spreading effective practices from the ground up.

Michael Fullan, a special adviser to the premier and the minister of education in Ontario, described it as “capacity-building with a focus on results.”

“The core question is how do you get large-scale change in a way that motivates the field to see the agenda is in their interest and not just a government agenda,” said Mr. Fullan, a former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto and an internationally recognized expert on educational change. “The essence of this is to have the direction from the center and to end up with joint ownership from the field.”

‘Learning From the Field’

Ontario is roughly equivalent to a U.S. state, with 2 million students, 72 school districts, and some 4,800 publicly financed schools. But unlike in the United States, the province encompasses 12 French-speaking, 29 Roman Catholic, and 31 public districts, all fully paid for by the provincial government. The national government has virtually no role in K-12 education. Both the curriculum and tests are set at the provincial level.

Read the accompanying story, [“‘Peace and Stability’ Campaign Prevails for Ontario’s Unions.”](#)

In the general election of 2003, the Ontario Liberal Party formed the provincial government, taking 72 of 103 seats, with 47 percent of the vote. Premier Dalton McGuinty ran on a commitment to improve health care and education, following 10 years of low teacher morale, bitter labor-management relations, and decreasing investments in education.

Student achievement, as measured by provincial tests and high school graduation rates, was static. And parents were fleeing the public schools.

Ontario's leaders were familiar with England's national literacy and numeracy strategy under then-Prime Minister Tony Blair. (Mr. Fullan led a team from the University of Toronto that evaluated those reforms from 1998 to 2003.)


That strategy had relied on a system of pressure and supports to improve schools, and had produced significant test-score gains between 1997 and 2000, followed by a period of leveling off. The University of Toronto evaluation team thought the stagnation was partly a function of an "informed prescription" strategy that dictated too much from the center and failed to adequately motivate teachers and principals.

So Ontario created a dedicated secretariat within the ministry of education to lead its [literacy and numeracy strategy](#), staffed by outstanding practitioners on loan from districts. But it also provided nearly \$34 million (about \$34.7 million U.S.) to local school boards for some 250 "lighthouse projects," promising local initiatives that could be evaluated and spread across the province if they produced results. Findings from those projects eventually led to tighter boundaries around what constitutes "evidence-based strategies."

"I think there's a tremendous receptivity around the leaders provincially learning from the field," said Mary Anne Alton, the director of education for the Bluewater district school board in Chesley. "The feedback that we provide them is shaping what's going on provincially."

"It was very frustrating that first year because we didn't have enough direction," said Frances Jacques, the principal of 1,865-student St. Joseph Secondary School, part of the Dufferin Peel Catholic district school board in Mississauga. "But in retrospect, it was wise because you're not giving people a set of parameters that a particular school can't fit itself into."

Although targets exist, said Ben Levin, a former deputy minister of education in Ontario, the ministry negotiates annually with each district to set local targets that are "ambitious but achievable." And though the government publishes school-by-school test results, it does not rate schools based on achievement, and it does not publicly identify "failing" schools.

Instead, it's developed an information-management system, known as the [Ontario Statistical Neighbors](#) , that enables districts and schools to identify whether their results

are improving, declining, or static over a three-year period, and to compare themselves with similar schools or districts based on demographics and other information.

The provincial government has used the system to identify just shy of 800 schools for support, including a number of “coasting schools” that perform above average but are not making gains. It’s also identified a set of “schools on the move”—ones that have been particularly successful in raising student achievement. Staff members at those schools are expected to share their knowledge and practices through networking with other schools across the province.

Some 250 of the lowest-performing schools can voluntarily enter into a turnaround schools program that provides them with intensive support for three years, including the help of an expert coach.

‘Empowered Teachers’

The strategy also includes a number of supports for schools and districts as they work to improve, ranging from “student success teachers” at the secondary level to serve as advocates for students, to more specialist teachers in art, music, and physical education at the elementary level to give classroom teachers time for planning and collaboration.

Significant funding supports those strategies. In the 2006-07 school year, the government provided about \$300 million (about \$306 million U.S.) in additional funding just for reduced class sizes in the primary grades.

The total yearly cost of the literacy and numeracy strategy is at least \$450 million, according to Mr. Levin, now a professor of education at the University of Toronto, while the high school graduation strategy is worth about \$300 million annually. (Ontario’s total education expenditure in 2006-07 was about \$18 billion.)

Support Strategies

Ontario’s school improvement strategy is heavy on capacity building to help schools meet targets.

At the elementary school level, the chief components include:

- Adding thousands of new teaching positions to reduce class sizes to a maximum of 20 in the primary grades.
- Adding specialist teachers in such areas as art, music, and physical education to provide more preparation and professional learning time for classroom teachers.
- Adding some 50 “student achievement officers” in the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. Drawn from the ranks of highly respected superintendents, principals, and classroom teachers, the officers work directly with schools and districts to achieve results and provide feedback to the government about its strategies.
- Setting up a system of lead literacy and numeracy teachers in all 4,000 elementary schools.

At the high school level, chief components include:

- Providing money for a “student success teacher” in every high school to ensure students are well known and supported by at least one adult on staff.
- Developing a focus on and resources for literacy and numeracy across the high school curriculum.
- Expanding options for students, including credit-recovery programs for those who have fallen behind and dual-enrollment programs with colleges and universities.
- Passing legislation requiring students to be in a learning situation (school, college, apprenticeship, work with training) until high school graduation or age 18.
- Creating a “high skills major” that allows local school boards to work with employers and community groups to craft packages of courses leading to employment and further learning.

SOURCE: Ontario Ministry of Education; *Education Week*

The effect, according to superintendents, principals, and teachers, has been a wave of changes that—while fast and furious—have engaged Ontario educators in the process.

“I think it’s empowered teachers, really. I think they feel like they can manage and shape the change,” said Barbara Gibb, the principal of the Levi Creek Public School in Meadowvale, “and the release time in school has had a tremendous impact because teachers had the time to talk.”

Lisa Bursay, a 4th grade teacher at the 592-student elementary school, which has been identified as a “school on the move,” said: “We’ve been in-serviced a lot. We have had a lot of training, especially in the last five years. It keeps us hopping and busy, but it’s good.”

“There’s a real sense of alignment and connection between what’s happening in the ministry and what needs to happen in the classroom,” said Clayton LaTouche, the principal of the William Berczy Public School, a K-8 school of some 750 students in the Hogarth district. “It didn’t seem as though, as a board, we were being asked to throw out good practice. It seemed like good practice was allowed to be built upon.”

Scores on Ontario’s curriculum-based tests have improved substantially in each of the past four years. Overall, about 10 percent more students, or 15,000 per grade, are now achieving the provincial standard, according to Mr. Levin. The number of schools with very low performance has fallen by three-quarters. And the system as a whole is halfway toward the target of 75 percent, though he admits that many residents do not view the target as sufficiently ambitious.

Trends at the high school level are also headed in the right direction. Graduation rates have risen from 68 percent in 2003-04 to 73 percent in 2005-06, still a long way to go, but positive. Results on a grade 10 literacy test, not a particular focus of the reforms, have improved substantially over the past two years. And credit accumulation in grades 9 and 10, a strong predictor of graduation, is improving.

“We’ve been in the boat rowing together like we’ve never rowed before,” said Bill Hogarth, the director of education for the York Region district school board in Aurora. “Now, we have a clear focus on the destination and a shared understanding of what it takes to get there.”

“We know where we’re going,” agreed Ruth Mattingley, a senior student-achievement officer in the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. “There’s truly an alignment of focus and buy-in at all levels, and that’s really a driving force.”

On Oct. 10, Premier McGuinty’s Liberal Party easily won re-election, ensuring that the strategy will continue. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t challenges. Union contracts need to be renegotiated when the current ones expire in 2008, more traction must be gained in the lowest-performing districts, and principals have to be prepared to lead the changes. Roughly half the elementary principals in the province have five years’ experience or less.

“The pace has been an issue,” said Ms. Jacques of St. Joseph Secondary School. “I’m glad to hear this is going to be more of a year of consolidation.”

Still, she said, “I can’t remember a time when there have been more positive initiatives.”

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