

Realization

The Change Imperative for Deepening District-Wide Reform

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CROSBY HEIGHTS PUBLIC SCHOOL CASE STUDY

Crosby Heights is a K–8 school of 662 students in a low-income neighborhood in a growing York Region community. It was designated by the district as a Performance Plus School over the years, that is, a school in challenging circumstances requiring attention. After five years of focused work, the principal, Ryan Friedman, and his team have overcome the following obstacles to begin producing the impressive results shown in Figure 5.1:

- No focal point (lack of clear vision)*
- Toxic culture (negative culture)
- A facility that was in poor shape, with nonfunctional lighting, paint peeling, nonexistent or torn blinds, a shabby play yard, and drafty windows (structural barriers)
- Demoralized unionized staff (negative culture)
- Unsafe school environment, including violence and oppositional students (negative culture)
- Critical parents wanting to get their children out (negative culture)
- Huge discrepancy between report card results and provincial standardized assessments, indicating that assessments did not match curriculum expectations (assessment and instruction issues)
- Lack of common language regarding instruction (assessment and instruction issues)
- Low achievement on the provincial assessment (assessment and instruction issues)

*The categorization in parentheses is our way of organizing Ryan's actions using the five factors or conditions that principals must consider when developing schools as a learning organization (Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 2000).

The ongoing commitment and engagement of the Board's senior staff with the union has proven to have been invaluable in promoting and sustaining positive labour relations and a focus on student achievement. This commitment to engaging and collaborating with secondary union officials includes

- routine informal contact (telephone, e-mail) several times weekly;
- formal meetings held two to three times monthly on topics related to personnel matters, program, staffing, policy and procedure, and school operations; and
- union leader membership on key Board committees (Assessment and Evaluation, Student Success, Digital Literacy, Board Planning, etc.).

The Board and union commitment to inclusive leadership has enabled the most significant of differences to be resolved proactively, constructively, and amicably; grievances are rare and filed on impasse and as a last resort. Our focus on student achievement is enhanced and sustained through this approach.

(Bob Harper, Coordinating Superintendent of Education,
York Region District School Board, personal communication, April 2009)

In the years before there was a forward plan (2000–2001 to 2004–2005), student performance as measured by the provincial assessment agency was low and jumping around in a nonlinear manner. Ryan entered as principal in 2004. In the following three years, the school dramatically increased the percentage of its students in Grades 3 and 6 achieving the province's demanding proficiency level (3 or 4 on a 4-point scale).

Figure 5.1 shows the results in Grade 6 reading, writing, and math compared with the scores of the *same* students when they were in Grade 3. Note the significant and impressive 33 percent to 47 percent increase in the Grade 3 students achieving Level 3 and 4 from 2004–2005 to 2007–2008.

How did this happen? Crosby Heights is one example of how a principal and his team, with district support, implemented the 13 parameters. As a new principal in 2004, Ryan quickly established a

Figure 5.1 Increase in Crosby Heights Students Achieving Level 3 or 4, 2004–2007*

	<i>Baseline Year: 2004–2005 As Grade 3 Students</i>	<i>Year 3: 2007– 2008 As Grade 6 Students</i>	<i>Baseline to Year 3: % Increase by Same Students</i>
Reading	44%	90%	46%
Writing	40%	87%	47%
Mathematics	50%	83%	33%

*EQAO (See also Figure 4.1.)

vision for his school that mirrored the district’s vision and priority of literacy. He shared this vision and priority every chance he got and made time to meet all his teachers, working with them at whatever level they were at in their professional lives. His personal version of the district vision for the school amounted to five nuggets:

- Learning for all, whatever it takes
- All equals *all*
- Students and staff can articulate their potential
- A focus on literacy, that is, balanced literacy
- Excellence in all that we do

He clearly articulated the vision to staff and found ways to share it everywhere, including newsletters to staff and parents, presentations at parents’ nights and school council meetings, and focused learning for staff on professional activity days. Over time, after the teachers had begun to experience success in the classroom, Ryan felt safe sharing the following beliefs and understandings more explicitly, looking for buy-in:

- All students can achieve at high levels given adequate time, the right support, and effective instruction and resources
- High achievement is not an accident
- We are all responsible for all of the students
- Equity does not mean equality
- Be responsible for your own actions
- Share decision making
- Practice an ethic of care and mutual respect

- Provide an emotionally and physically safe and supportive learning environment

Ryan then set about to model, share, and guide practice so his staff would become interdependent, that is, achieve realization. He became even more precise about the literacy focus and guided his staff, through pressure and support, toward four key goals:

- Creating proficient, independent readers and writers
- Understanding that reading and writing are the important parts of the curriculum
- Understanding that reading and writing work across all subject areas
- Having students see themselves as readers, authors, critics, researchers, and artists

Ryan knew that his own attitude and performance were his most powerful tools, so he modeled those beliefs consistently for staff. Because of that positive influence, and the resulting willingness to work with him, teachers came to share the beliefs slowly but steadily, and eventually Ryan broke the previously toxic school environment.

To their professional credit, the school staff members who stayed the course have become inspirational to each other and to other school teams. Subtly and not so subtly, Ryan believes that he changed beliefs and understandings in a number of ways:

- Establishing job-embedded learning, that is, right in the school, with staff as a professional learning community between the bells; he stayed true to his course, saying, “Professional learning is not an option here at Crosby Heights” (culture)*

When dealing with union issues, I try to listen attentively, behave with integrity, act with conviction, and keep moving forward with perseverance.

(Ryan Friedman, Principal, Crosby Heights Public School, personal communication, April 2009)

* Similar to our earlier note, the categorization in parentheses represents five key conditions to consider when evaluating schools as effective learning organizations (Leithwood et al., 2000, pp. 99–124).

- Building relationships with teachers and support staff and the school community (culture)
- Transferring a few teachers who struggled to buy into the vision (vision and structure)
- Modeling hope, optimism, life-long learning, and caring for others (culture)
- Having high expectations of teachers to rise to the teaching challenge (assessment and instruction)
- Providing needed resources for teachers (resources)
- Celebrating small incremental successes (vision and assessment and instruction)
- Seizing opportunities daily, weekly, and monthly through constant newsletters to teachers and parents to remind staff, parents, community to stay the course (structure)
- Staying current with research on the most successful practices to increase school and student improvement—and then applying the research he found (assessment and instruction)
- Doing whatever it takes to get additional resources, whether it was speaking to the superintendent of schools, the plant department, or the Reading Recovery teacher-leader (resources)
- Putting in place multiple teams to distribute the leadership and to accept the responsibility for teachers' practice and student improvement (structure)
- Changing the attitudes of teachers, students, staff, parents, and district leaders to understand that improvement could happen at Crosby Heights (culture)

One can see that Ryan and his leadership team found ways to embrace our pressure-and-support mantra—to guide the learning—in turning around this large school. He is an unabashed, informed risk taker who routinely asks for staff feedback on his leadership. One young staff member commented:

[The principal] does an excellent job of promoting and reinforcing a shared sense of purpose. He uses data to inform us of the progress toward our goal, sends articles to read to enhance our PD [professional development], and lets us know about district workshops that we may want to attend. He is very approachable and easy to talk to about issues, concerns, or questions that I have as a first-year teacher. His caring about the needs of his staff is greatly appreciated and admired. He trusts us as

educators in our field and in our ability to make good decisions. When he feels strongly about an issue, he is very diplomatic in his delivery of his point of view, which contributes to his respect of others and his approachable nature.

Another teacher on staff who has been at the school for a long time commented positively as well:

[He] is consistently approachable and visible within the school. He works hard to resolve conflicts and build good relationships with staff and students. He is respectful of others as demonstrated in his mannerisms, language, and actions. He encourages teachers to take on new leadership roles, involves community and family participation in the school, and most definitely demonstrates a deep knowledge of teaching and the learning process. I admire the fact that he is constantly willing to learn new things and share what he has learned with others. His use of data to drive instruction has helped us all see that this is an important tool. He has built consensus around the school plan and delivers on his commitments. He has made a significant change in our school and made it such a positive place to be.

Ryan himself says that all the improvements and positive comments are due to the contribution of his staff members. He notes that school improvement starts in the classroom surrounded by the 13 parameters (see Chapter 2) working in concert. However, our research says that two arenas must come together in improvement at every level: first a focus on classroom practice, followed by leadership with pressure and support. Ryan has had no end of questioning about how he accomplished the improvements to date and continues to maintain energy for his school and students. One of his staff members, who is working on her master's degree, wrote a paper about his leadership style, in which she answered the questions:

I chose to interview Mr. Friedman, because in my opinion, he is such an awe-inspiring, dynamic, and results-oriented principal. Since he joined our school three years ago, he has brought about many changes that not only have worked (affectively) [*sic*], but have also improved student learning scores (empirically). He was able to bring about those changes by motivating the staff, getting them on board with the ideas, and then charting the path

for them. All along the way, he would continue to support the staff, listen to them, and empower them. (Dattoo, 2006, p. 1)

Through the gradual-release-of-responsibility learning model (modeled, shared, guided, and interdependent practice), Ryan led the staff to experience school and student improvement. There wasn't just one single silver bullet or one single action that he took to overcome all the obstacles he initially faced. It was a concerted leadership effort to delve deeply into each of the 13 parameters (see Chapter 2) that has resulted in interdependent practice at Crosby Heights.

Ryan may be one of the better school leaders in York Region, but this is a matter of degree, not kind. Our capacity-building-to-realization model has systematically engaged all leaders, teachers, and students. Aligned leadership at the district and school levels is a key to staying and deepening the course, and this too is consistent. Not coincidentally, such alignment and deep implementation results in a very powerful wave of a thousand and more change agents who have tasted success and "want more, please." They will not be satisfied with less.

The 14th parameter is about whole-system accountability. Who is responsible and accountable for realization in all schools at all levels? In the past decade, we have increasingly focused on trilevel reform—school, district, and state. So far this book has centered on the first two levels of the work in a large multicultural district. Capacity building with a focus on increased student literacy achievement for all has occurred in all 192 schools of the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) and is consistently reinforced within schools, across schools (through the Literacy Learning Fair, networks, and site visits), and between schools and the district (the comprehensive literacy implementation known as the Literacy Collaborative).

In 1999, the focus was on identifying and implementing what turned out to be 13 core parameters (see Chapter 2) that establish the focused learning environment. The process, while not linear, progressed through modeled, shared, guided, and finally interdependent practice. In each phase, more and more people became involved. Ownership shifted from leader led to learner led until it became a fully developed interdependent phenomenon whereby leadership came from all levels in the district. All 192 schools are now engaged in this interdependent practice. In Chapter 5, we cited the example of Crosby Heights PS and its principal. In this chapter, we present a second example to further illustrate the powerful impact of not only the 13 parameters when they are fully implemented by a knowledgeable and highly skilled leader but also the energy created by the 14th parameter in action.

Jill Maar is the principal of Armadale Public School, the district's largest elementary school, serving a highly diverse and multilingual community. Using the parameter self-assessment tool developed by Sharratt and her district curriculum staff (see Resource A as an example), Jill and her school leadership team developed and implemented a plan of action based on the following nine components:

1. Improve the learning conditions: clean, organized, bright, well-lit plant. Regular maintenance and urgent repairs were needed in some areas because structure guides school behavior (Parameter 4).
2. Give access to current and inclusive resources: clearing out classrooms of all school-based resources (some were well stocked with resources dating back to the 1970s, while others had very few resources) through centralization across the

school; creating a literacy room, math room, science room, including text resources, technology software, and math manipulatives (Parameters 9 and 10).

3. Centralize and streamline budget decisions: developing a clear and transparent process to address essential needs and division/teacher accountability (Parameter 10).
4. Examine data and identify trends; reshape teacher thinking about the importance of data when making instructional decisions (e.g., at-risk identification, case management approach; Parameters 6 and 1).
5. Engage district curriculum consultant experts: facilitate professional learning based on teacher need and ensure consistency of practice within and across grades, for example, they assist in implementing the First 20 Days (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001), daily literacy walks in every classroom throughout the school, targeted long range and unit planning, and class meetings (Parameters 1 and 11).
6. Strategically build a leadership team: support implementation and share in the building of a school plan with SMART goal language (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, time-bound; “What Are Smart Goals?” 2007; Parameters 2, 7, and 11).
7. Renew focus on parent and family engagement: extended library hours, parent/family town hall sessions, street festivals, and heritage and English language classes (Parameter 12).
8. Attend to early and ongoing interventions: kindergarten/Grade 1 programs focus on oral language and use of the Reading Recovery Observation Survey as a valuable assessment tool to guide instruction (Parameter 5).
9. Hold our nerve: protecting instructional time, honoring the literacy block, and designating specific time to meet in school to discuss program needs and students’ increased literacy achievement (Parameters 3, 8, and 13).

Jill is a dedicated instructional leader who as lead-learner—with will and perseverance—is a living example of how the 13 parameters can bring support and focus to every administrator and teacher in

every school. Jill demonstrates modeled, shared, and guided practice when necessary, not lock-step but in concert, matching the parameters at the right time with the varied needs of her staff. Jill is an interdependent leader who understands how to bring all the parameters to life in a school with 890 students and 67 staff members. The answer lies in the 14th parameter—shared responsibility and accountability—and Jill’s narrative below demonstrates how to reflect and integrate the parameters in order to increase literacy achievement for each student.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY AT ARMADALE PUBLIC SCHOOL: AN EXAMPLE OF THE 14TH PARAMETER

Our sense of urgency to improve student achievement for all students while closing the achievement gap for at-risk students crystallized after analyzing a variety of data sources. As a team, we needed to firmly establish our shared beliefs and understandings to ensure that *all* teachers can support *all* students in reaching *high* expectations in *all* subject areas (Hill & Crévola, 1999). Initial student gains have been achieved, as evidenced in the latest data collected both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Jill reports that her team has collaboratively set high expectations for the literacy learning of both teachers and students. In taking responsibility for implementing the parameters, they have achieved the following:

- Job-embedded professional learning, based on student needs, has increased the consistency of practice within and among classrooms. Teachers are beginning to model lessons in one another’s classrooms on a monthly basis, thereby building capacity and understanding.
- Professional learning is active in each division. The identified focus is assessment-based instruction with teacher moderation of student work.
- Teachers are using a variety of assessment tools and instructional strategies to meet the learning styles, interests, and needs of every student.
- Teachers are building class and student profiles and attending case management sessions to identify high-yield strategies.

- Teachers and students can clearly articulate what the learning targets are and what success criteria are needed in order to achieve the targets, as evidenced through daily literacy walks.
- Two teams (of five teachers each) are engaged in action research and meet bimonthly to review their data, actions, and research.
- Ninety-eight percent of the staff have volunteered to participate in a biweekly professional book club and bring supporting student evidence to their discussions.
- An increase in the usage and frequency of centralized resources has been acknowledged through not only centralized tracking systems but also the observations and comments of teachers and students who are accessing them.
- Student needs are at the forefront when making budget decisions with grade/divisional teams.
- Attendance at family/community school events has increased by 200 percent (School Council sessions have grown from 8 members to 67; Early Years parent sessions on average have 48 to 50 parents attending now on a regular basis).

The quantitative data also confirm that by continuing to improve learning conditions, celebrating collaborative practices, and sustaining a climate of trust and transparency, students are beginning to show performance gains (see Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 shows significant reduction in the number of students at risk in kindergarten through Grade 5—especially those at Level 1—in one year of intense, focused activity. While the at-risk numbers still need to be improved further, Jill considers the skill sets used in kindergarten–Grade 5 interventions to be necessary in Grades 6 to 8, and she will train or move staff to provide for that increased instructional capacity. What is impressive is that Jill knows every student and has her finger on the performance pulse at Armadale. She is able to provide up-to-the-minute assessment results for each student. She and her teachers can name the at-risk students individually and clearly articulate what they are doing for each one. We believe that this is the essence of the 14th parameter. In implementing all of the parameters, including the 14th, Jill has daily conversations with teachers and works alongside them to coplan and coteach. She is truly an evidence-based, knowledgeable, and passionate leader.

Figure 6.1 Summary of Armadale Students Identified as At Risk in Reading*

Grade	October 2008 Planning Process				February 2009 Planning Process			
	Enrollment October 2008	Number of Students At Risk			Enrollment February 2009	Number of Students At Risk		
		Level 1 or Below	Level 2	Total At Risk		Level 1 or Below	Level 2	Total At Risk
Kindergarten	75	68	0	68	77	11	35	46
1	92	42	13	55	83	29	17	46
2	94	23	28	51	87	11	23	34
3	82	26	14	40	78	8	21	29
4	70	7	15	22	70	6	12	18
5	83	14	26	40	83	7	26	33
6	106	11	24	35	107	5	29	34
7	87	14	19	33	86	14	17	31
8	109	18	16	34	108	17	20	37
Total	798	223	155	378 (47%)	779	108	202	233 (30%)

* "At risk" defined as Level 2 or below on a 4-point scale.