

Improving Student Achievement in Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances

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**Prepared for:
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Executive Summary

The Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat contracted two district school boards in Ontario and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT) to determine the factors that contribute to success in schools facing challenging circumstances. The project has two major components: a research investigation and the creation of learning modules for administrators and teachers. This report constitutes the research contribution to the project. The purpose of the project was to contribute to the knowledge base regarding student success in schools facing challenging circumstances, with a particular emphasis on innovative leadership practices.

The two boards each identified 10 schools that were facing 'challenging circumstances' and improving their EQAO scores. The researchers used interviews, observations, a survey and focus groups to gather data. A team of researchers from OISE/ UT visited each of the 20 schools for one day, to interview the principal, three teachers, a focus group of students and a focus group of parents. A school life survey was completed by every school staff and analyzed to provide scores on items like school leadership, school culture, positive attitudes to school change, professional development, teacher efficacy, use of data in decision making, and shared decision making. All qualitative data were transcribed from the audiotapes and used in the school reports and the data analysis.

Subsequent analyses of the survey data were conducted to confirm the relationships of the categories reflected in the framework and identify school cases. The survey data were analyzed in comparison with the results from the qualitative data analysis. One problem that we encountered was that dimensions measured in the school life survey did not correspond directly to the thematic categories that emerged from the qualitative data. We then reorganized the survey data to match the themes that emerged from the interview data.

The credibility of the claims was established through triangulation of data (four stakeholders providing input), accurate recording of the data (audio-taping and transcriptions), maintaining an audit trail (keeping notes of analysis meetings, audio-taping analysis meetings, recording nodes in the qualitative research analysis software), member checks, and rich description.

The findings of the study are embedded within the school stories. Each school had a number of programs that they put into place to encourage student involvement in school. We found that, in schools that face these issues, social emotional and behavioural issues must be addressed so that children's academic potential can be reached. The schools stated that the primary challenge is managing social, emotional, and behavioural issues. Participants in the study report that these issues must be addressed before academic goals can be realized.

When schools begin to address these social, emotional and behavioural issues, it is then that participants report the introduction of programs targeting these issues. When schools address these issues, participants report that students in these schools come to school with a high readiness to learn, and as a school they are then able to set and achieve literacy and numeracy goals.

The findings reveal that all twenty sampled schools are doing more than providing students with the academic basics. Rather, they are deeply connected community hubs that give students social and emotional support in addition to literacy and numeracy curriculum. Principals, teachers and parents all agree that academic objectives can only be realized once social and behavioural issues are addressed and that solving these issues begins in the

community and the home of every student. This recognition is a key factor to what makes these schools, their principals, teachers, students and parents, successful learning spaces.

Key Findings

Building Literacy Capacity

- Many schools have Leadership Teams, Literacy Committees, Literacy Coordinators, or Core Literacy Teams. The focus of these groups is to assess and evaluate data, and instructional strategies and resources.
- Some schools took their focus to develop literacy into after-school and night programs.
- One program was targeted to pre-school children and parents, and was run with the aim of teaching parents literacy skills so that their children may have a structured advantage before starting school.
- One school, after finding gender differences in EQAO literacy scores, started a boys reading club. This club chose books that would appeal distinctly to boys' tastes and interests.
- Another school ran a parent volunteer reading program in which parents of children would come into the school and sit with children who needed extra reading time. Administrators commented that this program had the dual effect of providing struggling readers with focused attention on their literacy development, as well as social and emotional attention from a parent other than their own.
- One program, Snuggle-Up- and-Read, was run in the evening by the principal and staff. The purpose of this program was to have parents and children come in the evening so that bedtime reading practices could be modeled for parents.
- Many schools benefited by having individuals who are literacy specialists to help guide and mentor beginning teachers in their literacy practices. This individual coaching has the effect of beginning teachers developing their teaching skills quickly, which influences outcomes on literacy scores.
- Examples of literacy programs that are created by schools but run outside of traditional instructional period include Lunch-hour Tutoring which provides students with extra instructional time developing reading and writing skills,

Using Data Effectively

- Many of these leaders have the perspective that, in order for a teacher to be effective, the teacher must understand and value the process of data collection and data evaluation, so that they may shape their instruction around the needs of students' abilities.
- Some administrators reported holding review sessions where all grade-partners attend a meeting in which they identify students at-risk, monitor student progress and plan further data collection and evaluation strategies.

Distributing Leadership

- A large majority of these administrators use data to make instructional decisions and to set achievement goals for their schools.

- Another focus of the instructional leader is that they value and create professional learning communities for the teachers within their schools.
- Administrators who are aware of the tenuous dynamics of encouraging individuals to develop areas that may reveal professional weakness have often situated specialists or experts (such as literacy coaches or mentors) other than themselves within the school.
- Administrators encourage teachers to become lead teachers in specific content areas, and to form committees and sub-committees around areas of specific areas of evaluation and instruction.
- Some principals have stated that strategic hiring is their most important strategy in achieving student and school success.
- Some administrators reported that they look for distinct qualities in prospective staff. These qualities include open cognitive dispositions, critical thinking abilities, and a desire for professional development.
- Many administrators stated that creating a safe school environment was their top priority, not only for the safety of the general student population, but so that children who come from chaotic and violent family backgrounds can perceive school as a place of safety

Building Parent and Community Relationships

- These administrators build relationships by being personally visible within the community. This is accomplished by walking through the local parks during the summer, by visiting local apartment complexes to meet mothers and caregivers, and by staying and meeting with parents during the evening.
- Administrators report that fostering community/school partnerships is a key way to create programs, which are supported by students, parents, and community members, which may ultimately facilitate student success.
- Some administrators make it a priority to bring parents into the school through programs that focus on parenting issues.
- Some administrators run literacy programs that have parent volunteers train in literacy practices, and then come into the classroom and read with struggling readers. Administrators express that these programs not only have functional value, but also have a relational value as these parent and community interactions with the school create opportunities for partnerships and bi-directional support between community and school.
- One school offers Triple P – a parenting skills workshop run by the school’s Community Coordinator.
- One school has a program where the Special Education teacher goes into the homes of students to model instructional practices and strategies for parents so that there is consistency across the school and home environment.
- Some parents have also been able to participate in an Anti-Bullying parent program, which teaches parents strategies to help their child deal with the socio-emotional effects of being bullied.
- Another program, Healthy Lifestyles teaches parents about proper nutrition, discipline issues, and study skills to use in the home.
- One school has a parent Mental Health Support Group to help parents cope with personal and interpersonal issues that they may be experiencing.

- Some schools have held literacy education nights in which the school's Community Coordinator trains parents in literacy practices.
- Administrators and teachers make significant efforts to heighten communication with parents.
- In those schools with large portions of parents who are English as second language (ESL) speakers, there are attempts at sending newsletters home in languages other than English.
- Teachers are the crucial frontline communicators within schools. Whether to students, parents or principals, teachers form a communicative hub between all stakeholder groups. Therefore, student, class and even school success can be dependent upon a teacher's ability to communicate.
- Teachers, principals and fellow parents expressed repeated frustration at a general lack of parental involvement.
- To remedy these barriers the schools make varied efforts to communicate with parents. For example, some schools provide translation services to parents who do not speak English during parent-teacher interviews, although other schools expressed that they do not have enough funds to meet their needs for translating services.
- Some of these schools reported that they have parent volunteers, who were once immigrants themselves, act as translators for the new families.
- Numerous schools have Community Coordinator positions that focus on fundraising and community building within and beyond schools.
- Administrators and teachers, who strive for and achieve school success, show remarkable awareness and sensitivity to the variables of diversity within their school communities. This knowledge enables them to effectively identify, assess, and address the unique challenging circumstances that their schools face

Creating Opportunities beyond the Classroom

- Many schools express that athletic programs and interest-based programs provide recreational and social experiences that their students would not be exposed to or able to participate if the school does not provide them.
- The teachers and administrators believe that field trips offer children experiential learning opportunities, and that these trips help to compensate for the cultural and experiential deficit of children who have "empty backpacks".
- Homework clubs have the compounded advantage of providing students with extra academic support, and these after-school homework clubs provide students with opportunities to socialize and with places to go to and congregate after school.
- Schools that have populations of immigrant children specifically articulated and expressed the breadth of need of ESL students and some schools have created programs to directly target this need.

Supporting Professional Learning

- These administrators encourage, support, and put constructive pressure on their staff to develop their knowledge of instructional practices and instructional theory.

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- Many administrators encourage teachers who have taken professional development outside of the school, to bring back what they have learned and too disseminate to other teachers within the school.
- If teachers are able to safely express a lack of knowledge or skill, they are free to seek out learning opportunities without concern of judgment.
- Principals notify teachers of upcoming sessions of interest and organize supply teachers and class resources to make it possible for teachers to attend.
- There is an expectation that teachers who attend professional development outside of the school will share workshop content with teachers when they return.