

# Solidifying Our Leadership Alliance

## Leadership Support Letter #1



Dear Colleagues,

We recognize your outstanding commitment to improving student achievement in Ontario public schools and we thank you for the work you do every day to help our students succeed.

In these few pages we share some lessons learned from the field and strategies for instructional leadership based on current research. In future letters we will explore other aspects of the crucial role that you are playing in raising the bar and closing the achievement gap for all of our students.

We invite you to take this journey of learning with us as we deepen our understanding of our role as instructional leaders.

With appreciation,

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The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

## SUPERINTENDENTS AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

Strong skills in reading, writing, and mathematics are critical to a child's education. They are the basic building blocks of learning. From mathematics to music, from science to history, a child's ability is unleashed to its fullest potential by our efforts in literacy and numeracy. This is why the Secretariat's mission to raise student achievement in these skills is an urgent one. And this is why your role as superintendent is crucial. You ensure that the basic building blocks rest on a solid foundation. Your ability as an instructional leader is critical to providing this foundation.

It is this type of leadership that is detailed in Section 286 of the *Education Act*. The first duty of a supervisory officer is to assist teachers improve the quality of education. The responsibilities in this area include:

- Visiting schools and classrooms
- Ensuring that schools best serve the needs of students
- Keeping boards informed about practices to support student achievement

### What Research Says

Equally, research highlights instructional leadership as a critical aspect of effective district school board leaders (Institute for Education Leadership, Ontario Ministry of Education). Recent Ontario research shows that supervisory officers need to take on the role of instructional leader to support student achievement (Campbell, Fullan, & Glaze, 2006).

In Ontario's most effective school districts, superintendents of schools are knowledgeable about school and system improvement, assessment literacy, and classroom teaching and learning; they set meaningful goals for student improvement and are present in schools observing practice and providing knowledgeable feedback. Additionally, CODE's 2006 study of the role of Ontario supervisory officers found a shift in practice for the province as a whole – system leaders are increasingly acknowledging that instructional leadership is a key part of their role.

## Some highlights from CODE's 2006 study ...

This ministry-supported study explored in focus groups and online surveys the broad parameters of the supervisory officer role, including: district leadership; preparation, recruitment, and succession planning; on-going professional development; and appraisal systems.

Forty per cent reported spending up to half of their time on instructional leadership.

*"There is a shift happening; principals comment that they see supervisory officers more involved and trying to understand/lead some of the instructional initiatives; all have school responsibilities; we are accountable; system improvement plans/EQAO scores responses reside with us."*

*"The education system needs stability. We need to change the role of the supervisory officer so that they can spend more time at the school level. Many principals view the 'job description' of the S.O. as something that they don't want to do. By redefining the role to someone who plans for 'achievement results', boards could once again attract educators to the S.O. position."*

*"The role has changed in my almost 20 years as a supervisory officer. There is now more focus on student achievement and accountability for student outcomes; my challenge is to match my calendar with all of the demands; accountability demands are keeping me out of schools; my goal is once a week, it is currently one day a month."*

In their review of research on the role of the district central office, MacIver and Farley (2003) identify four district-level responsibilities that influence student achievement. They are: hiring practices, curriculum/instruction support, support for principals, and professional development for teachers. In the UK, Davies and Hentschke (2003) looked at new and emerging relations within Local Authority/consultant partnerships as a means to better student performance. They emphasize that the ability of board personnel to take an active role in school improvement is a key facet of effective board leadership. In the U.S., a recent study from The Wallace Foundation (2006) highlights the need for leadership within school districts to align their strategies in ways that focus on student learning in the classroom.

This research points towards the need for superintendents to bring instructional leadership to their work with schools, though this is not always an easy thing to do. Richard Elmore (2000) stated that "direct involvement in instruction is among the least frequent activities performed by administrators, and those who do engage in instructional leadership activities on a consistent basis are a relatively small proportion of the total administrative force" (p. 7). This point underscores the challenge that superintendents face in embedding instructional leadership in their daily work. It also signals a need for us to look more deeply into what instructional leadership looks like for superintendents.

Instructional leadership means that superintendents set goals to support student achievement and engage principals and teachers in thinking about ways to individually and collectively refine practices to improve student learning (Wallace Foundation, 2006). In returning to Campbell, Fullan and Glaze's (2006) findings for effective districts, some key points emerge for the role of superintendent. In these districts, superintendents:

- Are accountable for the achievement of *all* students
- Focus on equity of outcome
- Measure and monitor leadership effectiveness through student achievement
- Demonstrate support for student improvement goals
- Align school targets with district and provincial targets
- Use system and school data to make instructional decisions
- Are knowledgeable about effective pedagogy and assessment
- Engage principals and teachers in professional learning
- Provide ongoing and effective communication with schools and communities
- Share leadership for improvement

But for superintendents, as Elmore (2000) cautions, the role as an instructional leader is sometimes overshadowed by a long list of administrative duties. So what does instructional leadership look like in the busy life of a superintendent of schools, and how does it align with the current demands for accountability and improvement? What follows is a way to locate these points within your daily work.

# Questions we have heard from the field ...

## Guiding Reflective Practice

<p><b>1. Make goal setting a collaborative process ...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Involve key stakeholders</li> <li>■ Review school improvement plans with school improvement teams</li> <li>■ Establish measurable and coherent goals</li> <li>■ Create consensus to support the goals</li> <li>■ Communicate clearly and consistently with the entire school community</li> </ul>	<p>What are the key initiatives in your family of schools? In individual schools?</p> <p>What is the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement?</p> <p>How is consensus typically managed? How might it be?</p> <p>What are the critical messages, key beliefs, understandings?</p>
<p><b>2. Define the non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction ...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Adopt a common framework for effective instruction (results-based, consistent with the ministry's expert panel reports, etc.)</li> <li>■ Model behaviour to support goals for achievement and instruction by visiting classrooms, engaging teachers in conversation, etc.</li> </ul>	<p>How will the goals ensure high achievement for all?</p> <p>What are the effective instructional practices that are supported at the district and school level?</p> <p>How are these practices implemented and monitored?</p>
<p><b>3. Align, school, district, and provincial goals ...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Provide professional development for trustees and engage their support</li> <li>■ Expect principals to fulfill instructional leadership responsibilities</li> <li>■ Develop intentional instructional leadership to support principals in their role</li> </ul>	<p>How can we convey the importance of ensuring alignment among families of schools?</p> <p>How does each school plan align with the district plan?</p> <p>Where is there coherence and where do differences occur and why?</p>
<p><b>4. Monitor school goals for student achievement, interventions, and instruction ...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Observe classrooms during school visits</li> <li>■ Review evaluations and appraisals of principals</li> <li>■ Use data to determine discrepancies and facilitate meetings where various data are the focus</li> <li>■ Target interventions to address discrepancies</li> <li>■ Coordinate efforts in schools</li> <li>■ Publicly report achievement data</li> </ul>	<p>Which groups are underachieving in each school and across schools?</p> <p>Which targeted interventions are being used? Why and based on what?</p> <p>What are the commonalities in the family of schools? What are the indicators of success?</p>
<p><b>5. Allocate resources to support goals for achievement and instruction ...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Direct resources to maximize effects on achievement and instruction</li> <li>■ Coordinate professional learning so that it is aligned with goals for targeted groups</li> <li>■ Provide resources for extensive, job-embedded professional development</li> <li>■ Train staff in common but flexible instructional practices</li> </ul>	<p>How is professional learning being delivered to improve achievement and instruction?</p> <p>Which practices demonstrate instructional leadership?</p> <p>How do supervisory officers ensure that they understand the current program and that they are having a positive effect on student achievement?</p>

*See Ontario Ministry of Education (2006); Waters & Marzano (2006)*

## In other words ...

*Share the vision, use strategies grounded in research and evidence, foster professional learning, and provide the resources to establish an environment that is supportive of change.*

### 1. Share what you know

- Communicate your district's vision that *all* students can achieve and provide measurable targets for improvement and share improvement plans with the entire school community
- Share improvement plans with the entire school community, as this helps build public confidence
- Align school visits with all superintendents of schools and develop a clear set of common questions
- Develop learning teams and encourage them to share ideas and research on student achievement and improvement to build capacity
- Provide scheduled time at meetings for discussion on student improvement

### 2. Model it

- Demonstrate what instructional leadership looks and sounds like
- Use the district's and schools' disaggregated student data to make school and system decisions – turn data into action for targeted interventions
- Schedule formal visits to engage principals in ongoing conversations about their school plans and ask the

tough questions about student achievement – Who is succeeding? Who isn't? Why? What are we going to do about it?

- Coach your administrators and be readily available on issues of student success, learning, and safety

### 3. Encourage/motivate

- Be an optimizer – foster a positive climate and celebrate success
- Build networks among administrators, providing support with challenging parents and providing opportunities to visit one another's schools and learn from each other
- Acknowledge administrators who are demonstrating instructional leadership and encourage learning across schools
- Foster teacher leadership

### 4. Provide Support

- Provide administrators with professional resources to help build capacity and demonstrate leadership
- Provide coaching and mentoring to administrators
- Provide funding, time, and opportunity for job-embedded professional learning for administrators

- Provide speakers on topics such as skills improvement, equity, and other administrator interests

- Align MISA initiatives with improvement strategies and use technology effectively
- Negotiate with other senior administrators to provide equity of resources in areas of demonstrated student need

### 5. Doing it

- Review student data from schools and families of schools and revise district plans when required
- Encourage administrators to work with their teachers and take ownership of instructional leadership
- Share evidence-based, high-yield strategies from other schools
- Schedule regular formal visits with the administrator and review school data, targets and school growth plan with a view to improving student achievement so that the process of monitoring and revision is ongoing
- Build and nurture learning teams characterized by mutual respect, risk-taking, and experimentation

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