

INTRODUCTION

This publication contains the overall report from the Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy research project conducted by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. The purpose of this project was to identify school boards that are demonstrating improvements in literacy and numeracy and to evaluate the strategies, actions, and outcomes associated with such improvements.

Eight school boards participated in the project – all boards are demonstrating improved student achievement. The boards were also selected because they represent the diversity of contexts and experiences in Ontario – urban/suburban/rural locations, small/medium/large numbers of schools, public/Catholic systems, French/English language and with improvement starting from existing higher or lower achievement levels. A selection of case study reports with details of strategies, practices, and outcomes in individual districts will also be published as part of the Unlocking Potential for Learning series.

We want to express our thanks to the directors of education in each of the eight districts for agreeing to participate in this project. We want also to thank all the educators we met with in these districts and schools for their insights and willingness to discuss effective strategies and for their work every day to support student achievement. We want to acknowledge also our colleagues on the Effective District Strategies project team, Dr. Carmen Maggisano and Dr. Carolyn Rees-Potter, Student Achievement Officers with The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, and Professor Marie Josée Berger of the University of Ottawa, and to thank them for their contributions to the case studies and to the project overall.

In this introduction, we put the Effective District Strategies project into context by outlining the provincial commitment and strategy for raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy.

In 2003, as part of a new government initiative, Ontario launched a major province-wide strategy to achieve substantial improvements in student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The starting point for reform was a five-year period of limited

improvement in the percentage of 12-year-old students (Grade 6) achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy, based on provincial assessments as carried out by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), an independent agency.

A key element of the government's strategy included the establishment of The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to work in partnership with school districts and schools to support improvement in student achievement. Nine key strategies have underpinned The Secretariat's work:

1. Work with school boards to set achievement targets.
2. Assemble and support teams at all levels to drive continuous improvement in literacy and numeracy.
3. Reduce class sizes in the primary grades to a maximum of 20 students per class by 2007–2008.
4. Build capacity to support student learning and achievement.
5. Allocate resources to support target setting and improvement planning for literacy and numeracy.
6. Mobilize the system to provide equity in student outcome.
7. Embark on a process of community outreach and engagement to build support for the literacy and numeracy initiative.
8. Demonstrate a commitment to research and evidence-based inquiry and decision making.
9. Establish a growing presence on the national and international scene in learning from and contributing to the knowledge base about how to improve literacy and numeracy achievement.

The proposition was how to mobilize trilevel engagement in improvement involving the school and community, the district, and the government. We undertook to proactively use the change knowledge – what we call “capacity building with a focus on results” – to achieve major results within a short period of time. Some schools and districts were already moving in this direction – in this sense they were ahead of the government, but the new goal was to have system-wide change in all districts and school authorities.

The Secretariat is committed to fostering inquiry and identification of effective practices. This is reflected in our mission to challenge ourselves, educators, and the community to seek out best thinking and build upon effective practices to maximize student achievement in literacy and numeracy. One initiative along these lines – the one we report here – was to identify what is known on the ground about district-wide reform. We set out to identify districts that a) had seemed to have sound strategies at work and b) were getting results as indicated by trends in EQAO assessments. What we wanted to know was what was going on under different conditions as districts went about this difficult and important work. The district case studies reported on in this series are part of our strategic approach to inquiry in which we derive lessons from Ontario’s education system on an ongoing basis and report these findings and learning back to Ontario’s educators to inform practice and contribute to improvement. We know that together we can make a significant difference for student achievement through unlocking potential for learning.