

Unlocking Potential for Learning

Effective District-Wide Strategies
to Raise Student Achievement
in Literacy and Numeracy

Case Study Report
York Catholic District School Board

Series Editors:
Carol Campbell
Michael Fullan
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Carmen Maggisano and Carol Campbell

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PREFACE

Schools and school systems all across the world are seeking ways of improving student achievement to respond to the growing public recognition of the importance of education for individual and societal progress and success. Ontario has adopted an exciting approach to supporting school improvement that is research and evidence based. Unlike many jurisdictions around the world that have adopted simplistic practices, Ontario has recognized that sustained improvement depends on schools, districts, and provinces adopting an aligned approach that builds the capacity of teachers, school leaders, boards, district leaders, parents, and community allies. Ontario is putting that approach into practice in elementary schools through the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and Secretariat, and in secondary schools through the Student Success Strategy. In both strategies, the Ministry of Education is closely working with schools and school districts to develop common approaches to meaningful change focused on improved school and classroom practices. We recognize that within these broad parameters there can be many different ways to proceed, taking into account the diverse demographics and contexts of Ontario schools. The initial evidence is that these strategies are working. All the indicators of student progress are improving, and there is a renewed sense of energy and optimism in schools about the future. At the same time, we recognize that we are only at the beginning of the road.

The case studies in this collection illustrate the terrific work being done in boards as well as the significant challenges that must be addressed. The researchers and authors describe in detail the strategies being used by boards to create enthusiasm, to build teacher skills, to develop strong leadership, to involve the community, and to use data to guide improvement. They show that improvement must always be a collective effort no matter how significant a role some individuals may play. They show that the school cannot do it alone although the school must also be committed to the possibility of improvement. They show the importance of tenacity and, as Robert Slavin put it, “the unrelenting pursuit of success for students.”

The cases in the *Unlocking Potential for Learning* series also show that while this great work is going on boards and schools must also manage a diverse range of other tasks and pressures. The realities of day-to-day schooling and board management cannot be left unattended either. It is indeed a fine balancing act, but these very diverse cases show how it can be – is being – done. They provide inspiration, ideas, and a map of sorts for other school leaders while also making it clear that the route will look a little different in each situation.

I am honoured to write some words of introduction to this collection, but even more to work with Ontario educators and communities for the benefit of our children.

No cause is more worthy of our effort.

Ben Levin

September, 2006

INTRODUCTION

This publication contains a case study of a district in Ontario, the York Catholic District School Board, which is demonstrating strategies to achieve district-wide improvement in literacy and numeracy at the elementary school level. This is one of eight case studies from the Effective District-Wide Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy research project conducted by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. In this introduction, we put the case studies in context. First, we outline the provincial commitment and strategy for raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Second, we describe the Effective District-Wide Strategies project, from which this case is derived, and highlight the overall findings from this project.

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 independent agency – the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO).

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 2007–08.
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 reform engagement in improvement – 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) 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 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.

The Effective District Strategies project began in summer 2005. The purpose of the project was to identify districts in Ontario that are demonstrating improvements in literacy and numeracy and to evaluate the strategies, actions, and outcomes associated with such improvements. We identified eight districts from 72 districts in Ontario for the project. The eight districts were deliberately selected to represent a wide range of sizes, locations, and contexts. In terms of student populations, three of the districts are small (fewer than 500 students in Grade 6 in 2004–05), three are medium sized (1000–2000 Grade 6 students), and two are large (over 3000 students in Grade 6). However, the student numbers only tell part of the story. The districts with small student numbers cover large geographical areas, with the challenges of remoteness and dispersed communities. The large districts contain concentrated urban and suburban communities, with diverse populations combining areas of affluence in close proximity to disadvantaged communities.

Ontario has French, English, public, and Catholic education systems. The eight districts were selected across each of these systems. One district is French-language and seven are English-language. Five districts are within the Catholic education system, whereas three are in the public system. All eight are publicly funded.

All eight districts are committed to raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy and have demonstrated improvement over time. The provincial goal is to have 75 per cent of students at or above the provincial standard in EQAO Grade 6 assessments. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat is working in partnership with boards across Ontario to achieve this result. This project is part of The Secretariat's work to unlock potential for learning by sharing successful practices. The project has, however, not just focused on high-achieving boards, but also on growth and improvement in both lower- and higher-performing boards. This has enabled The Secretariat to identify effective practices for districts at different stages of improvement and achievement levels and to learn lessons across the range of contexts and experiences in Ontario.

The case study districts do not offer exact blueprints for success, but rather provide concrete examples of what effective strategies look like in practice. The project's research questions focused on three key areas of enquiry. We list these here to

enable the reader to reflect on how one would answer these questions in relation to individual context:

1. District's Strategy and Actions

- What is the district's approach to improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy?
- What is the main purpose driving this approach and what are the goals to be achieved?
- What strategies and actions are in place on a district-wide basis?
- What is the structure and operation of the district to support a focus on student achievement?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of key individual postholders within the district?

2. Connections Between District and Schools

- Has a shared focus on literacy and/or numeracy been fostered across all schools?
- At the school level, what initiatives and actions have taken place to improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy?
- What is the relationship between the district and schools in supporting literacy/numeracy improvements?
- How does the district challenge all schools to improve?
- What types of support do schools receive from the district?
- How is professional learning shared within and across schools?

3. Impact of District's Strategies and Actions and Future Developments

- Overall, how effective is the district's approach to improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy?

- What specific strategies and actions have been most effective?
- What have been the main difficulties encountered and how have these been addressed?
- How can improvements become sustainable?
- What further developments are planned or required to improve student achievement district-wide?
- What has been the key learning for the district in improving student achievement in literacy and/or numeracy?
- What lessons have been learned of relevance to other districts and/or for province-wide reform?

The research method involved visits to each of the eight districts. Interviews were conducted with members of the senior administrative teams (directors of education and supervisory officers/superintendents) and other relevant central staff (e.g., curriculum co-ordinators, consultants, coaches). A sample of school principals was interviewed in each district. School visits involving further discussion with principals and with teachers and other staff, plus classroom observations, were also undertaken.

Through this approach, the project attempted to gather views from the central office and from the school, and to compare and contrast these perspectives. We were interested in exploring the connections between districts and schools in system improvement and the ways in which effective districts foster collective commitment and responsibilities for student achievement.

Across the eight districts, we identified 12 key components of effective practices that link to four broad strategic areas (see Figure 1). Our focus in this project was on effective district-wide strategies for both system and school improvement. The 12 components are relevant at district, school, and classroom levels. Indeed, in effective districts these features form an interactive framework for action, district-wide and within schools.



Figure 1

One strategic area is *Leading with Purpose and Focusing Direction*. This area encompasses three key components. The first component is *leadership for learning*, which involves both individual and collective leadership to support improvement in professional learning and student learning. The second component is establishing *vision and shared focus* on student achievement as the priority. The third component is ensuring that a sense of *moral purpose* informs strategies and practices to unlock potential for improvement. This moral purpose includes the overall importance of education for economic and social development plus daily practices to support students' character, emotional, and social development.

Another strategic area is *Designing a Coherent Strategy, Co-ordinating Implementation, and Reviewing Outcomes*. This includes four key components. The first component is the development of a *coherent overarching strategy* for student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The second component is the *identification and allocation of resources* prioritized to the system focus on improved student achievement. A third component is the effective *organization* at district, school, and classroom levels to support student achievement, including attention to the roles and responsibilities of staff. The fourth component is the routine use of system and school-level *monitoring and review* of targets and outcomes achieved, reviewing progress to inform future action and holding to account schools and system leaders for improvement.

The next strategic area is *Developing Precision in Knowledge, Skills, and Daily Practices for Improving Learning*. This involves three key components. One component is attention to *capacity building* to extend professional learning, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy instruction, assessment for learning, classroom management, and instructional leadership. A second component is careful attention to *curriculum development, instruction, and interventions* to improve teaching and learning for all students system-wide and within schools.

The third component is the regular use and understanding of data at the system and school level and the development of assessment literacy within schools to ensure instruction is informed by data about student learning and progress. The final strategic area is *Sharing Responsibility through Building Partnerships*. This involves two key components. First is the fostering of partnerships within the system, for example, between central office and schools and across schools, and with parents, communities, and other organizations and agencies to build shared involvement in, and responsibilities for, supporting student learning. This requires the second component of clear *communication*, where a consistent message about raising student achievement is communicated widely, frequently, and with a sense of urgency.

While each of the above four broad areas can be explored in isolation, for example, focusing on leadership or on instruction, it is their combined strength that is vital. As Figure 1 indicates, each is a piece of the jigsaw of unlocking the potential for district-wide reform. A district that is strong on only one or two of these components will not achieve its full potential. It is important to note that the components are not mutually exclusive; rather, they interact and influence each other in practice.

In the *Unlocking Potential for Learning* series, we will be publishing selected case studies from the districts involved in this project to share their experiences, strategies, and practices for raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy.

Unlocking the potential for learning through district-wide reform involves several requirements. First, the overall system – the province – must expect, foster, and support districts to take focused action. Second, it is necessary, as we have shown in this initiative, to identify cases in which specific strategies are in place so that we can examine what they look like in practice. Even with this increased precision, it is difficult to detail specifically how to make all districts effective, as there are no universal blueprints for success. The combination of strategies and the influence of

local contexts, needs, and experiences will vary in the implementation and outcomes of similar practices in different contexts. To a certain extent, districts must identify and review their own particular current state and their future development, drawing on the best knowledge from evidence of successful practices locally and beyond. This could include comparing a district's existing strategies and actions against the 12 components identified above and reviewing the examples provided in the case study report.

We know from past research that neither top-down, prescriptive strategies nor bottom-up, site-based strategies alone work. What is needed is a blend of the two. In trilevel reform, the district, as the mid part of the “tri”, is in a vital position to reconcile and harness top-down and bottom-up forces needed for large-scale reform. In essence, this is what unlocking potential is all about.

Carol Campbell, Michael Fullan, and Avis Glaze
Series Editors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case presents lessons learned from the experiences of one Ontario district school board in its efforts to build school and district capacity and coherence while implementing strategies to improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy.

Board Profile

The York Catholic District School Board serves one of the fastest growing areas in North America – the Regional Municipality of York, located in the Greater Toronto Area. The district has schools in each of the region’s nine area municipalities – Aurora, East Gwillimbury, Georgina, Markham, Newmarket, Richmond Hill, Vaughan, Whitchurch-Stouffville, and the Township of King. The board covers a wide geographic area, including urban and rural areas, and is demographically very diverse.

Currently, the district has 83 elementary schools and 13 secondary schools, with new schools opening annually and over 3,900 instructional staff members who serve approximately 54,000 students.

Data Collection

Data collection included interviews with the senior leadership team, the elementary curriculum coordinator, school principals, regional student achievement officers of The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, and a review of school board documents and EQAO data.

Board’s Approach

“Our shared vision, the board’s strategic themes – Quality Learning for All, Catholic Learning Communities of Faith and Safe and Caring Schools – and the ministry’s key priorities for education guide us as we prepare students for their future, set high expectations, focus on continuous improvement, promote learning opportunities for all students, and reflect our values as a Catholic learning community.”
(Director of Education)

The overall approach to success revolves around the following commitments and strategies:

1. Quality Learning for All

The board embraces a holistic view of student learning and achievement and offers professional learning opportunities to support the literacy and numeracy skill development for learners of all abilities. The following principles guide planning and delivery of curriculum:

- integration of the Catholic faith in curriculum implementation
- development of a universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, and assessment and evaluation
- consideration of the specific learning styles of male and female students, English language learners, and students with special education needs

2. Catholic Learning Communities of Faith

Capacity is built across the York Catholic system via Catholic learning communities which foster safe, caring and collaborative learning environments in support of improvements in learning and achievement. Catholic learning communities, committed to and accountable for quality learning by all, reflect upon and tailor their professional practice both to the evidence and to the local context to maximize student learning outcomes. They strive to achieve the shared vision of the board by posing the following questions:

- What are the student outcomes we need to achieve to live our shared vision?
- How will we use our resources to ensure we achieve our student outcomes?
- What changes do we need to make to our core processes to achieve our outcomes?
- What skills, competencies, and culture do we need to put in place to make the necessary changes to our processes?"

3. Safe and Caring Schools

The knowledge, skills, attitudes, and supports needed to ensure safe and caring learning environments are supported through the collaborative efforts of all Catholic learning communities, community partners, and the home-school-parish relationship.

Lessons for District-Wide Strategies – Key Learnings

The following key lessons include suggestions for action at the school and board level:

- Build commitment to the vision and stay focused on student outcomes.
- Foster a positive climate and culture for learning through a focus on relationships across all levels.
- Invite parents to become active participants in the improvement planning process.
- Recognize the role of school superintendents as pivotal. To create and sustain change, school superintendents need to know their schools and the needs of their local communities.
- Build capacity of superintendents and principals to support school staff and school councils in the achievement of their goals and targets.
- Support the collaboration of the Curriculum, Special Education and ESL/ELD departments in the review, development and implementation of curriculum and professional learning opportunities.
- Differentiate financial, human, and material resource support based on student data and the needs of individual school communities.
- Review central supports and strategies to provide more opportunities for job-embedded learning.

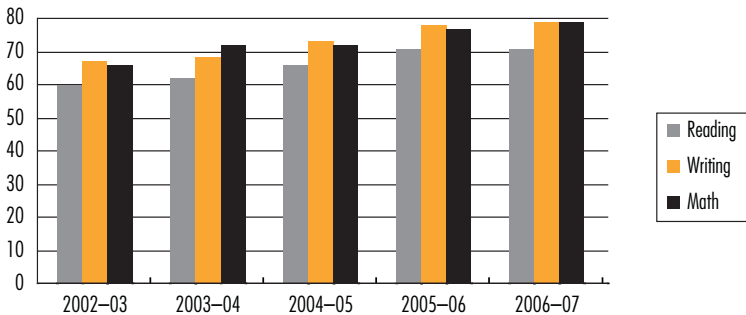
Case Study Report

1. Board Context and Performance

The York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB) is a growing school board in a region with a diverse population. Currently, there are 83 elementary schools and 13 secondary schools with over 54,000 students and 3,900 instructional staff. As indicated in the tables and charts which follow, the results for YCDSB demonstrate improvement over time in all subject areas on both the primary and junior division assessments administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). The most recent results indicate that York Catholic leads the province in achievement on the elementary assessments. In the past five years, the percentage of Grade 3 students who performed at or above the provincial standard increased by 11 percentage points in reading to 71 per cent, by 12 per cent in writing to 79 per cent, and by 13 per cent in mathematics to 79 per cent. Results show that in Grade 3 writing and math scores, York Catholic has already exceeded the 75 per cent provincial expectation and is approaching the provincial target in Grade 3 reading.

GRADE 3: PERCENTAGE OF YCDSB STUDENTS AT LEVELS 3 AND 4 IN PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENTS

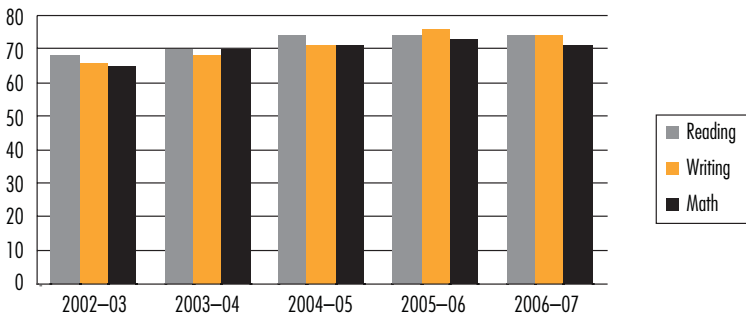
Grade 3	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	Change 02/03-06/07
Reading	60	62	66	71	71	+11
Writing	67	68	73	78	79	+12
Math	66	72	72	77	79	+13



Over the previous five administrations of the assessment, the percentage of Grade 6 students who performed at or above the provincial standard (Levels 3 and 4) increased by 6 per cent in reading to 74 per cent, by 8 per cent in writing to 74 per cent, and by 6 per cent in mathematics to 71 per cent. Results for Grade 6 students in the board indicate that the York Catholic is virtually at the 75 per cent provincial standard in reading and writing and is approaching the target in mathematics.

GRADE 6: PERCENTAGE OF YCDSB STUDENTS AT LEVELS 3 AND 4 IN PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENTS

Grade 6	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	Change 02/03-06/07
Reading	68	70	74	74	74	+6
Writing	66	68	71	76	74	+8
Math	65	70	71	73	71	+6



2. Data Collection

The information in this report was gathered through interviews with members of the senior administration team: Susan LaRosa, Director; Patricia Preston, Associate Director; John Sabo, Associate Director; Mary Anne Di Sebastiano, elementary programs coordinator. A sample of elementary school principals was interviewed by phone. Also interviewed were regional student achievement officers of The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat.

Board documents were reviewed as well as EQAO achievement scores.

3. Board's Approach

The YCDSB inspires its Catholic learning communities to achieve successful outcomes for all learners through its shared vision:

We are a Catholic learning community of collaborative partners, called to serve one another by being committed to and accountable for quality learning by all, with Jesus as our inspiration.

The director of education emphasizes the importance of articulating a shared vision and building an infrastructure of support in order for a culture of improvement to develop. The district is committed to continually improving its schools, creating an environment where innovation and improvement are built into daily activities. As a Catholic learning community, the board supports and encourages staff to come together to reflect on their best practices, assess their effectiveness, and make decisions about what needs to be done to become even more effective. All are engaged in a common purpose to achieve successful outcomes for all students; they rely on one another to reach agreed-upon goals that could not be achieved independently.

The director is responsible for leading the school system by promoting a sense of community and shared vision among the many partners in Catholic education – students, parents, teachers, staff, and community.

Background for Change

For the last eight years the board and the federation have engaged in interest-based bargaining rather than traditional style bargaining. This has enabled us to clearly understand our respective issues. Relationships, mutual respect, and trust have improved immensely as a result of this approach. We have been on the road to transformation.
(Director of Education)

Leadership issues are key, especially our director's belief in building relationships. Ten years ago, we had a major deficit and labour unrest. Today we have a dramatic change, including excellent employee relationships. (Associate Director of Education)

1. Quality Learning for All

The board embraces a holistic view of student learning and achievement and offers professional learning opportunities to support the literacy and numeracy skill development for learners of all abilities. The following principles guide planning and delivery of curriculum:

- integration of the Catholic faith in curriculum implementation
- development of a universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, and assessment and evaluation
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- What are the student outcomes we need to achieve to live our shared vision?
- How will we use our resources to ensure we achieve our student outcomes?

- What changes do we need to make to our core processes to achieve our outcomes?
- What skills, competencies, and culture do we need to put in place to make the necessary changes to our processes?”

3. Safe and Caring Schools

The knowledge, skills, attitudes, and supports needed to ensure safe and caring learning environments are supported through the collaborative efforts of all Catholic learning communities, community partners, and the home-school-parish relationship.

Key features of the board-wide approach included:

- a clearly articulated vision and commitment to a system literacy priority for all students which is continually communicated to everyone in the system
- continuity of focus
- a system-wide comprehensive plan and framework for continuous improvement
- using data and results to drive instruction and resource allocation
- building and sustaining administrator and teacher capacity to teach literacy for all students
- establishing professional learning communities at all levels of the system and beyond the district.

4. Strategies and Actions in Place to Support Improvement

Professional Development and Capacity Building Activities

In addition to the dedication of its staff and parent communities, one of the great strengths of York Catholic has been its commitment to a holistic view of student learning and achievement. The board, in its support of a differentiated approach depending on student need, has implemented the following strategies:

- targeting low-performing and under-achieving schools
- allocating resources and supports

- planning and delivering professional learning opportunities and instructional strategies

Collaborative endeavours of school teams are supported through the implementation of a variety of initiatives and strategies to build and sustain capacity across the system including:

1. Catholic Learning Communities (CLC)

Principals are responsible for taking the lead in building professional CLCs.

Teachers are given release time in order to facilitate collaboration and consolidate their learning; share best practices; and collect, analyze, and score student work to guide teaching and planning next steps. Teachers and administrators continuously reflect on DuFour's four critical questions for collective inquiry:

- What do we want our students to learn?
- How will we know if they have learned it?
- What will we do if they have not?
- How will we continue to focus and sustain improvements in learning?

2. Literacy and Numeracy Initiatives

Kindergarten and Primary

The board continues to build staff capacity and improve student outcomes through target setting, job-embedded professional learning and collaborative team planning. Schools continue to develop their capacity to use data to inform decision making and determine appropriate instructional strategies. Inservices promote the use of high-yield, research-based instructional practices aligned with ministry documents including the new Kindergarten Curriculum documents, *Early Reading Strategy*, *Early Math Strategy*, *Guides to Effective Instruction* in early reading, writing, and mathematics, *Me Read? No Way!*, *Many Roots*, *Many Voices*, and *Education for All*.

Junior

Balanced literacy and math problem solving continue to be the focus in the junior grades. Schools continue to develop their capacity to use data and evidence to inform decision making and instruction and improve student learning outcomes. Inservicing and collaborative team planning focus on assessment and evaluation strategies, differentiated instruction, and high-yield instructional strategies and

are aligned with ministry documents including *Expert Panel Reports* in literacy and numeracy, *Guides to Effective Instruction* in literacy and mathematics, *Me Read? No Way!*, *Many Roots, Many Voices*, and *Education for All*.

3. **New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP)**

First-year teachers are introduced to board personnel, resources, and instructional strategies and paired with a mentor. Sessions for mentors and mentees have focused on the following: planning and preparation, enhancing faith development, classroom management, EQAO-recommended strategies, supports for students with special education needs and English language learners through differentiated instruction strategies, communicating with parents, assessment and evaluation, and effective instructional techniques. Superintendents of schools complete one teacher performance appraisal for every new teacher. Opportunities for additional support are made available as needed and include on-site visits by consultative staff.

4. **Model Classrooms**

There are six model classrooms in the board, one in each of the five elementary areas and one numeracy classroom in Area 5 of the board. All of these classrooms are used by curriculum staff as an ideal location for workshops and inservice sessions. These classrooms display visual aids and anchor charts which benefit all learners. Lessons are demonstrated in this setting and professional development is offered to teachers in classrooms that are fully equipped with support materials and resources.

5. **Integration of the Arts**

Integration of the arts throughout the curriculum is promoted in workshops and inservices throughout the year. Music, visual arts, drama, and dance activities engage students in learning. This year, for example, four itinerant music resource teachers provided job-embedded professional development for all Grades 6 and 7 teachers in the board. They modeled a series of 10 lessons that the teachers will implement independently next year when the Grades 5 and 8 teachers benefit from this professional development opportunity.

6. Daily Physical Activity (DPA)

A half-time daily physical activity consultant provides support, training, and materials for Kindergarten to Grade 8 teachers to implement DPA in their classrooms. Students have either two 10-minute sessions or one 20-minute session of vigorous physical activity during the instructional day. DPA strategies are included and modeled at all curriculum inservices to reinforce the importance and benefits of daily physical activity for all learners.

7. Catholic Virtues – A Character Development Initiative

York Catholic has promoted the integration of Catholic virtues and the teaching of Gospel values through the alignment of religious education with curriculum expectations, high-yield research-based instructional practices, differentiated instruction strategies, assessment and evaluation, and the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations. The development of resources, including the “Virtue Books” project, supports the integration of the Catholic virtues through the curriculum. The virtue of the month is promoted through a series of lesson plans and a selection of books. Displayed in each classroom is a poster, which connects the 10 Catholic virtues with the character traits and communicates the virtues in the context of character communities.

8. Intervention Programs

For students who are achieving at Levels 1 and 2 in reading, successful supports have been provided through Reading Recovery™ and Later Literacy. Additionally, the following programs are offered to students who require remedial support: Saturday Primary Remedial Program, Summer Primary Power, Summer Junior Power program, and Junior Skills Development Programs. School-based resource teams, core resource teachers, and literacy support teachers share early intervention strategies with classroom teachers. Family literacy and numeracy programs as well as after-school remedial classes are offered in most schools throughout the district.

9. Assessment and Evaluation Strategies

In 2006, the board revised its assessment and evaluation document and provided inservice to all Kindergarten to Grade 12 teachers on assessment for learning and differentiated assessment strategies. Standardized assessments used in the board include: Early Development Inventory (EDI) for Senior Kindergarten students; Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) for students in Senior Kindergarten to Grade 3; Comprehension, Attitudes, Strategies and Interest (CASI) for students in Grades 4–6; and the EQAO’s resources for the Primary and Junior Division Assessments of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics. Inservices are provided to assist with the implementation of all standardized assessments.

10. Target Success Schools Project

York Catholic provides differentiated resource support for low-performing and under-achieving schools. Each year, approximately 15 schools are provided with additional financial, human, and resource supports, as well as focused training for principals of Target Success Schools. Implementation plans are collaboratively developed to address identified needs and program resource teachers prioritize these schools for support. Many of these schools also receive support from a literacy coach.

11. PA Day Strategy

Quality Learning for All is promoted at two system-level professional activity days each year. Superintendents and principals are involved as instructional leaders on these days. For the past two years, these sessions have focused on *Education for All* and the implementation of differentiated instruction strategies.

Development of Resources

The following board documents and resources were developed to support teaching and learning in the classroom:

- Curriculum Connections (includes long-range and daily plans, recommended resources, and grade level skills charts)
- Kindergarten Program Binder

- Virtue Books Binder
- family literacy and numeracy programs
- DVDs to demonstrate exemplary teaching (power writing, literature circles, learning carpet, public speaking)
- assessment and evaluation document
- information pamphlets for parents on a variety of topics
- electronic conferences with curriculum resources in all subject areas
- resources posted on the board website for access by parents and students

The following human resources were put into place:

- *Program Resource Teachers*

Five elementary program resource teachers provide job-embedded professional learning opportunities to each area of schools. They work collaboratively with teachers to model lessons, provide resources, and assist with unit and lesson planning. Teachers are provided with release time to work with program resource teachers as needed.

- *Literacy Coaches*

Eight literacy support teachers provide coaching to instructional staff in 17 schools. They support early literacy development by working directly in classrooms to model effective literacy strategies and support collaborative planning activities.

- *Divisional Program Teachers*

Approximately 40 exemplary teachers host visiting teachers in their classrooms. Each day of the two-day visit consists of 1.5 days of observation of best practices in the classroom and 0.5 day for planning, sharing, and problem solving.

AQ Course Subsidies. York Catholic offers a subsidy to assist all teachers with the cost of Additional Qualification courses in Religious Education Parts 1, 2, 3; Reading Parts 1, 2, 3; Adolescent Literacy; Music, and Math.

Communication and Collaboration

Consistency of messaging on a board-wide level has been a crucial aspect of the board improvement strategy:

System-wide:

- A system memo is distributed weekly to communicate items related to curriculum, student services, finance, etc.
- Director's Council meetings are held monthly with all principals.
- A video message from the Director of Education is communicated to the system at the beginning and end of each school year.
- Board and ministry documents and resources are distributed and implemented.
- The board improvement plan is shared with all school stakeholders.
- The board website (www.ycdsb.ca) provides links to all departments and areas.
- An Instructional Services Department newsletter is published biannually.

Catholic School Councils:

- The board offers an annual conference for Catholic school council members.
- Board staff regularly provides presentations to York Catholic School Councils on a variety of topics.
- School administrators include council members in the life of the school community and in supporting sustained improvements in student learning and achievement.

Parents, Guardians, and Students:

- The board website and First Class conference provide resources on curriculum and grade-appropriate content for parents/guardians and student use.
- Booklets and brochures on various topics are developed and distributed to parents across the system.
- School administrators share provincial assessment results and school continuous growth plans with parents

The Learning Partnership. The board promotes involvement with The Learning Partnership (TLP). York Catholic schools have benefitted from programs such as Passport to Prosperity, Change Your Future, Entrepreneurial Adventure, and Take our Kids to Work Day. In collaboration with TLP more than half of the elementary schools in the board and over 1,700 families benefit from the Welcome to Kindergarten program. Parents of Junior Kindergarten registrants receive a welcome bag containing materials to prepare students for the start of Kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers provide parents with an information session to support successful entry to school.

5. Governance and Accountability

Trustees

In collaboration with the director and staff, trustees promote high expectations and standards and strong positive relationships to ensure that the governance of the organization meets the needs of school communities across the system and positively impacts student learning and achievement. Board meetings are structured to include items that highlight the Journey Toward our Vision. This focuses the dialogue about student achievement among trustees and staff who seek answers to the following questions:

- What are the outcomes or results that we need to achieve to live our vision?
- What changes do we need to make to our core processes to achieve these outcomes?
- What enablers, skills, competencies, and culture do we need to put in place to make these changes?
- How can we finance these enablers?
- How well are we serving schools?
- How are our actions benefiting students?
- What can we do to better leverage our resources?

Through a governance accountability structure that maintains its focus and continuously engages in reflection on the board's progress and achievement of the shared vision, positive outcomes result for all.

6. Role of Board Staff

Role of the Director

My own personal belief is that the three most important aspects of governance are: relationships, relationships, relationships.

(Director of Education)

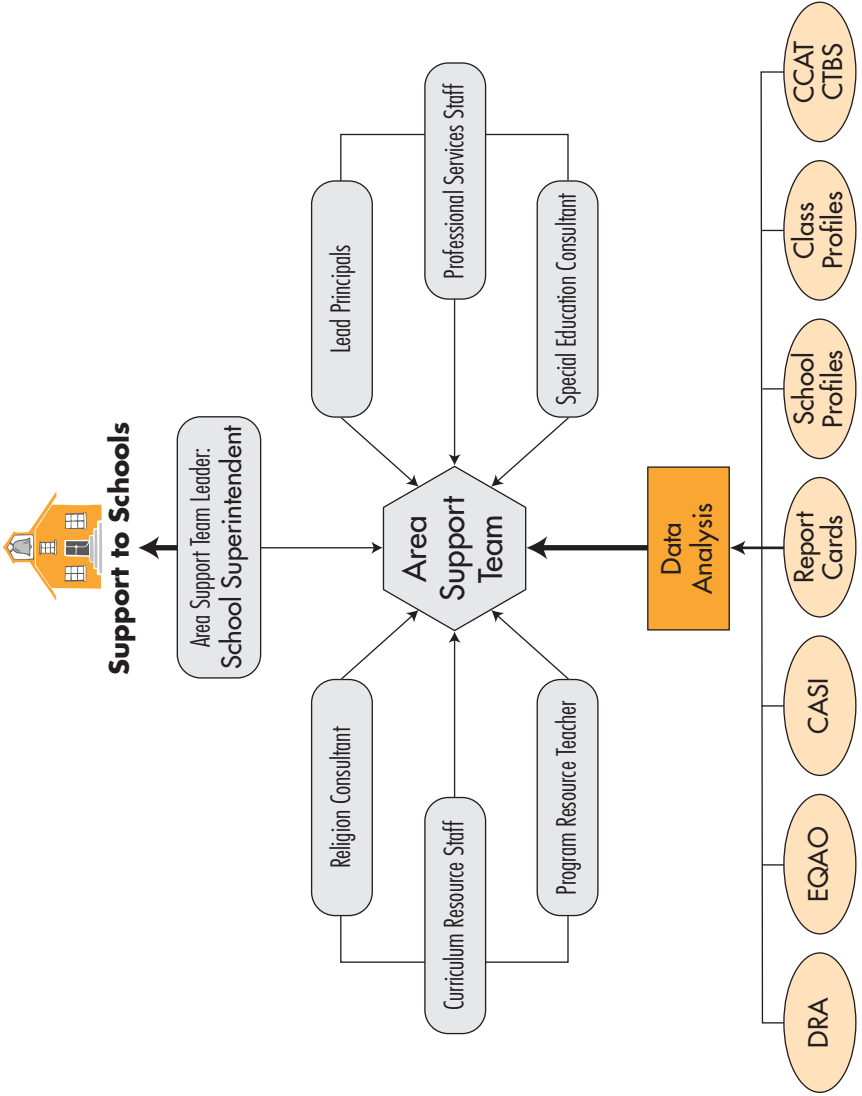
The director's role is to actively promote and articulate the vision for student learning and achievement, foster collective commitment to that vision, and provide direction and support for implementation. The director and members of the senior administration share a common understanding that they are all accountable for student learning and have an enhanced sense that they must be able to respond proactively to issues at the school level. This collective vision for the success of all students helps maintain the focus, motivates staff and students, and increases the sense of shared responsibility for student learning.

Role of the Supervisory Officer

The role of the school superintendent in York Catholic is pivotal in achievement of the shared vision. All other members of the senior team from Curriculum, Student Services, Plant, and Human Resources are in service to the school superintendents allowing them to focus on their schools. The primary role of the school superintendent is to provide instructional leadership, coaching, and mentoring to school administrators. Support is provided to principals through school visits focused on student data and the development, implementation, and frequent monitoring of continuous growth plans. School superintendents work with their principals to foster Catholic learning communities through the regular sharing of promising and best practices.

School superintendents meet monthly with their area support teams to share school and area data, discuss supports provided to each school, align resources provided to schools within the area, and strengthen achievement of student outcomes (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2



Role of the Principal

Principals are instructional leaders who bring the vision of the board to their schools and foster a collective commitment among their staff. Principals are involved in developing capacity-building activities at bimonthly meetings with school superintendents. The sharing of promising best practices is an important part of every agenda.

Principals provide leadership and build local capacity for sustained student achievement in their schools through supporting:

- meaningful relationships among home, school, and parish that support faith development, student achievement, and school success
- a whole-school approach to cross-curricular integration of religious education and literacy and numeracy instruction
- high standards, effective discipline, and a safe atmosphere of caring and commitment to student learning through inclusive Catholic learning communities

Role of the Teacher

A belief that every child can learn is central to all that York Catholic does. Teachers enthusiastically participate in workshops and access supports provided through the curriculum department. Awareness of high-yield instructional strategies continues to be valued. Teachers participate in Catholic professional learning communities at school, divisional, and grade level meetings where the focus is on student achievement.

Teachers facilitate student learning in their classrooms through:

- quality instruction, assessment, and evaluation
- development of class and learner profiles which inform the design of formative assessments and delivery of instructional practices to better meet the needs of all learners
- activities that promote moral, spiritual, and cognitive development across the curriculum and student engagement in learning

Role of the Literacy Coach

Literacy support teachers (LSTs) develop capacity at the school level through peer coaching, professional development, and modeling of exemplary classroom teaching strategies. Literacy support teachers assist with divisional targets setting, collaborative planning, and assessment strategies. Aspects of the role of the LST reflect the unique needs of individual school communities and their progress in the literacy journey.

7. Connections between School and School Board

In collaboration with the superintendents of schools, Student Services, and Curriculum and Assessment, board resource teams support improvements in student outcomes and increased local capacity through the provision of resource support, professional development, and collaborative partnerships.

The board improvement plan outlines a number of focused system-wide annual SMART goals for curriculum implementation to support improvements in student learning and achievement. As discussed above (pages 19–20), the three main goals for York Catholic are as follows:

- Catholic Communities of Faith
- Quality Learning for All
- Safe and Caring Communities

Through the school superintendents, the board supports the process of planning and action and provides direction to schools in the development, review, and refinement of their own continuous growth plans in the above-mentioned areas through a focus on *knowledge and skill capacity building* and *student learning and engagement*.

8. Lateral Capacity Building: Increasing Professional Exchanges Among Schools

For the past three years, York Catholic has served as the lead board coordinating literacy and numeracy training for Greater Toronto Area boards on behalf of The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. The board has also organized conferences at the regional level inviting both Barrie and GTA-area boards to attend sessions on early literacy strategies. Members of the curriculum team and senior administration have facilitated sessions across the province for school districts, faculties of education, provincial associations, as well as aspiring and experienced principals and supervisory officers. Most recently, the school superintendents shared their model of instructional leadership with Barrie-area boards.

9. Evaluation and Effectiveness of Implemented Practices

Over the past six years, the board has implemented several strategies to evaluate the impact of its initiatives on student learning and achievement. The Managing Information for Student Achievement (MISA) initiative has allowed the board and schools to enhance decision making based on a wide range of data sources including provincial assessment data, standardized assessment results, report card data, and other contextual information. Other evidence of the board's effectiveness has been gathered from staff surveys and focus groups of principals and parents. Survey results and student data are analyzed and shared with school board stakeholders. Effectiveness of the board improvement plan and school continuous growth plans are monitored through monthly school visits by superintendents, sharing at area and curriculum team meetings, and ongoing review of school and student outcomes.

10. Challenges to Overcome

Board staff have identified several challenges. First, the provision of time for meaningful and focused dialogue and reflection at all levels is a challenge. At the school level, principals have used creative strategies to release teachers for collaborative planning and learning; however, this is an inadequate solution and inconsistent method of sustaining the capacity of Catholic learning communities.

As a growing board, it is a challenge to provide consistent professional development strategies and adequate resources and supports to all schools. Another barrier has been the absence of a comprehensive long-range plan which includes all branches and ministries for Kindergarten to Grade 12. It would be beneficial to have a three-year improvement plan outlining provincial direction.

11. Sustainability of Improvements

In any organization, building commitment to the vision involves distributed leadership, collaboration, time, and a clearly articulated focus. Enhanced relationships with all stakeholders are essential for inspiring change and building and sustaining a culture of high expectations and standards for student learning. With common understanding, shared commitment and vision, learning communities then become cultures of co-operation and collaboration.

12. Future Directions

To further improve student learning, educational outcomes, and strengthen instructional processes and practices across the school system, York Catholic has identified the following priorities for the coming year:

- enhance capacity at all levels in the areas of high-yield instructional strategies and student learning and engagement
- use group problem-solving activities as a vehicle for improving student knowledge and understanding of math concepts
- refine the area team model to ensure the sustainability of leadership and target capacity building;
- differentiate resource support to meet the needs of local school communities
- support systematic processes that encourage leadership and innovation at all levels
- promote environmental education in the context of addressing literacy and numeracy curriculum outcomes and as a component of character education
- nurture existing and new relationships with school board partners

13. Lessons for District-Wide Strategies – Key Learnings

Relationships are everything. If we don't have good relationships and trust, we can't work together and move forward.

(Director of Education)

- ✓ Build commitment to the vision and stay focused on student outcomes.
- ✓ Foster a positive climate and culture for learning through a focus on relationships across all levels.
- ✓ Invite parents to become active participants in the improvement planning process.
- ✓ Recognize the role of school superintendents as pivotal. To create and sustain change, school superintendents need to know their schools and the needs of their local communities.
- ✓ Build capacity of superintendents and principals to support school staff and School Councils in the achievement of their goals and targets.
- ✓ Support the collaboration of the Curriculum, Special Education and ESL/ELD departments in the review, development and implementation of curriculum and professional learning opportunities.
- ✓ Differentiate financial, human and material resource support based on student data and the needs of individual school communities.
- ✓ Review central supports and strategies to provide more opportunities for job-embedded learning.

