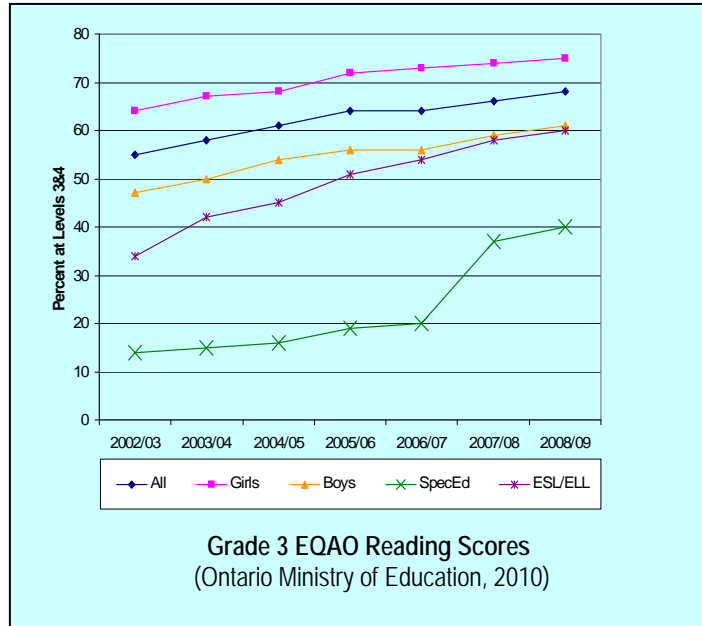


STRONG AND  
SUSTAINABLE  
LEADERSHIP  
FOR IMPROVED  
STUDENT  
ACHIEVEMENT





Leadership development in Ontario’s education system is linked to the province’s overall education strategy, which has resulted in measurable improvements in student outcomes since 2003 (see, for example, the graph on Grade 3 reading scores included here). Without effective leadership in our schools and districts (school boards), the goals of Ontario’s education strategy – improving student achievement, closing achievement gaps, and increasing public confidence in public education – would be difficult to attain. Research shows that school leadership, especially by the principal, is second only to teaching in terms of the impact on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004).



While leadership is clearly important, the challenge is to develop the best strategies for improving leadership across our entire school system. This paper describes the [Ontario Leadership Strategy](#) (OLS), a long-term systematic leadership development initiative, outlining the strategy, the way it has developed, the barriers and constraints that have been or need to be overcome, the theory of action, the results so far, the lessons learned from the process, and a forecast for the future.

*Real and lasting improvement in Ontario schools requires every school to have a culture of collaborative professionalism, in which educators work together to use evidence to improve their practice and students’ learning. The creation of thousands of such schools is a call for high quality leadership throughout the system. In addition, development of school and district leadership can improve the ability of leaders to act together within and across districts to implement the three core priorities and provide the supporting conditions for learning.*

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010)

The OLS was formally launched in the fall of 2008, following a process of experimentation, formative assessment, and consultation. This process had pointed to the need for a strong province-wide strategy for improving leadership across Ontario’s 5000 schools and 72 districts. With the OLS, we now have a strong and sustainable leadership strategy that has broad acceptance from all major stakeholders and is increasingly well-integrated with other aspects of education policy (Pedwell et al., in press).

## BACKGROUND

Ontario is Canada’s largest province, with about 2 million students and 120,000 teachers in its publicly funded education system. The system is made up of four types of school boards – English public, English Catholic, French public, and French Catholic – and is spread across both urban and rural areas, with schools ranging in size from small (100 students) to very large (over 2000 students). There are 7,500 principals and vice-principals, 72 superintendents

(directors), and about 500 assistant superintendents (supervisory officers).<sup>1</sup> Ontario's school enrolment is diverse: 27 per cent of students were born outside Canada and 20 per cent are visible minorities.

Ontario has all the challenges one might anticipate – large urban areas and remote rural areas, significant urban and rural poverty levels, high levels of population diversity, and some areas with sharply declining enrolments and others experiencing rapid growth (Levin, Glaze & Fullan, 2008). In spite of the challenges in serving its diverse population, Ontario has shown excellent results in student achievement, as measured through the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\) tests](#). The PISA results have put Ontario on the international stage, inspiring a large number of other jurisdictions to visit the province to find out how this improvement has been achieved.

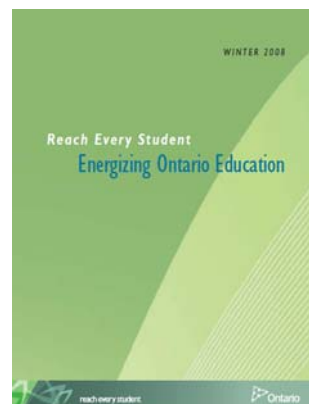
- 91% of Ontario students met or exceeded the Level 2 achievement benchmark in science
- Ontario students performed at the Canadian average in overall science achievement, with Canada being among the top performing countries in the world
- Ontario is among the few jurisdictions with an above-average science performance and a below average level of disparity in student performance

PISA Results, 2006 (EQAO, 2007)

When the current government came into power in 2003, education was among its highest priorities, and it brought in a strong emphasis on improving education outcomes for students. Ontario has had the same three core educational priorities since 2005:

- high levels of student achievement and well-being
- reduced gaps in student achievement
- increased public confidence in publicly funded education

The strategy to support these priorities has been implemented in a coherent way that has provided the necessary supports and resources, has been respectful of educators, and has engaged the broader public (Levin, 2008). The strategy has been supported by significant financial investments – nearly a 50 per cent increase in provincial funding per student between 2003 and 2010. In its second term, starting in late 2007, the government noted that, although significant progress had been made on its core educational priorities, there was more to be done. With the release of a paper entitled



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<sup>1</sup> Ontario has a long-standing tradition of certification requirements for teachers, principals, and supervisory officers. Teachers are certified by the Ontario College of Teachers following successful completion of an undergraduate degree and a pre-service program. Principals and vice-principals must have five years' experience as teachers, progress towards or completion of a master's degree, and successful completion of the two-part Principal's Qualification Program (PQP). Supervisory officers are certified through one of two pathways: for the business pathway, experience in a professional field related to board operations and successful completion of the business Supervisory Officer's Qualification Program (SOQP); for the academic pathway, five years' experience as a teacher and successful completion of the academic SOQP. The PQP and SOQP are administered by the Ontario College of Teachers and offered by a variety of providers such as principals' associations and faculties of education at universities.

[Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education](#) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008), the government renewed its commitment to the core priorities while maintaining a focus on safe schools, parent involvement, early childhood learning, labour peace, and other key supporting conditions. This paper also highlighted leadership development as an important supporting condition.

## EARLY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS, 2004–2006

From the beginning of Ontario’s education improvement effort in 2003, leadership has been recognized as an important element in any attempt to improve student outcomes. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) was charged with improving elementary school literacy and numeracy outcomes. It engaged in a number of leadership initiatives including the Leading Student Achievement project, which fostered networked learning for principals across many elementary schools. The ministry funded Student Success Leaders in every district and every secondary school to lead improvement in secondary school education. The ministry released the discussion paper [Leading Education: New Supports for Principals and Vice-principals in Ontario’s Publicly Funded Schools](#) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005), which outlined five goals to support school leaders:

- ensuring the conditions exist that enable school leaders to perform their functions as instructional leaders;
- providing high quality training and supports;
- increasing principals’ and vice-principals’ input within the system;
- improving respect and security for school leaders;
- better defining the role of school leaders.

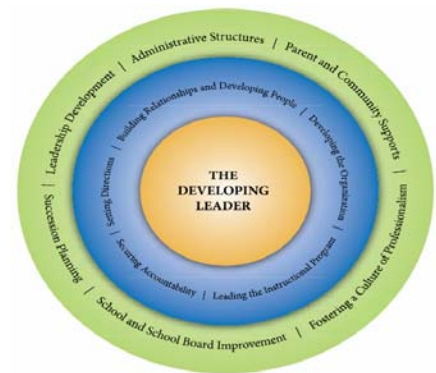
This paper included over 20 recommendations aimed at improving supports for school leaders. Virtually all of them have now been, or are in the process of being, implemented.

One such recommendation was to establish a Minister’s Principal Reference Group (MPRG), which would comprise 20 practicing principals and vice-principals from across the province, to guide the implementation of the recommendations in *Leading Education* and to provide grass roots input on a wide variety of education policies under development by the government. With over 7000 principals and vice-principals in the province of Ontario, large-scale consultation with this group is all but impossible. Principals and vice-principals have generally chosen to join principals’ councils – professional associations that represent the English public, English Catholic, and French constituencies. The ministry regularly consults with representatives from these associations on issues facing the full range of their membership and to solicit strategic advice on province-wide policy and its implementation. By contrast,



the MPRG members are able to provide insight into their unique contexts and environments and can speak authoritatively about what policy implementation looks like in their own backyard. The MPRG has proven highly effective in giving principals and vice-principals a voice at the ministry level, and their comments confirm the value of the on-going conversation.

Other early efforts to support leadership included pilot and field-test activities to introduce mentoring for new school leaders and performance appraisal for all school leaders. Both of these initiatives, which focused on supporting the work of principals as instructional leaders seeking to improve student outcomes, were informed by research and developed in consultation with practitioners. In order to provide a solid foundation for such work, the ministry developed the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF). Based on research and professional practice, the OLF outlines core leadership practices and competencies in five domains and describes what good leadership looks like. The OLF makes explicit the connections between leaders' influence and the quality



of teaching and learning in schools. The OLF is the foundation for all aspects of the Ontario Leadership Strategy.



Leadership practices, along with knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for successful leadership, are described in some detail in [Putting Ontario's Leadership Framework into Action: A Guide for School and System Leaders](#) (Institute for Education Leadership, 2008a). This guide “is a support for career-long professional learning, helping to stimulate and guide learning-focused conversations about effective leadership practices and approaches for resolving specific issues and challenges facing school and system leaders” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

As its leadership development efforts continued, the ministry decided that a more systematic approach to supporting and developing leadership in schools and districts was required. The Leadership Development Branch was created to lead the coordination and alignment of efforts to this end. A consultation process was put in place to gather opinions from teachers, school and district leaders, and academics on the formulation of what became the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS), launched by the Premier of Ontario in the fall of 2008.

### THE ONTARIO LEADERSHIP STRATEGY'S THEORY OF ACTION

The OLS is being implemented over a three-year period (2008/09–2010/11). Its goals are to attract, retain, and develop people for school and district leadership roles so that schools are led by passionate, skilled educators with the capacity to effectively support the province's overall educational strategy.

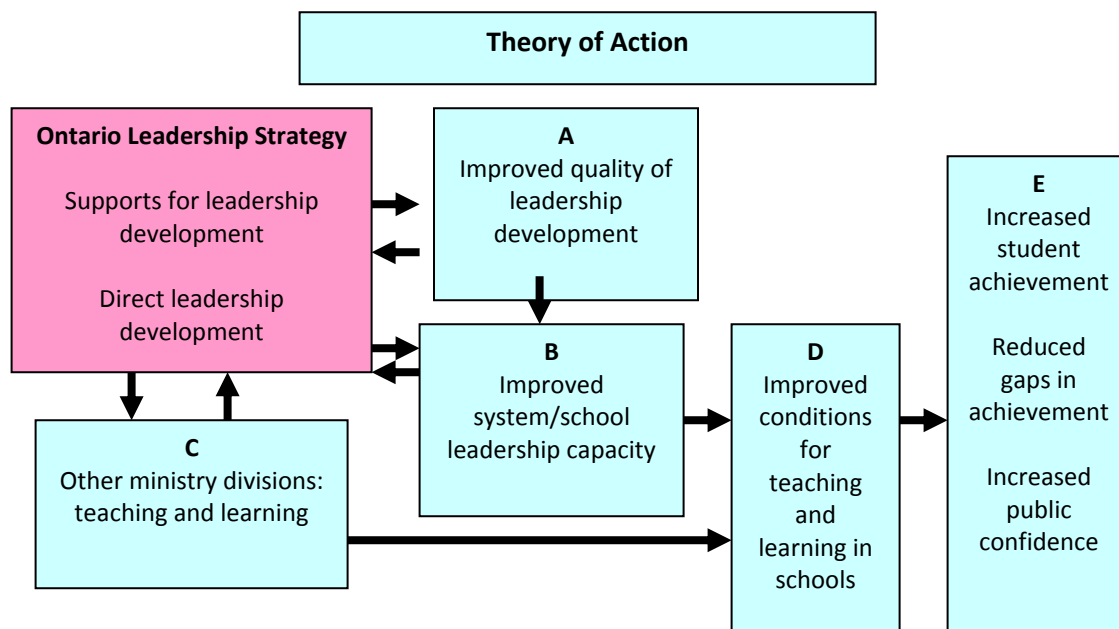
Even the most sophisticated leadership development initiatives are unlikely to have a significant impact on student learning unless they recognize the importance of and work closely with partners in more comprehensive efforts aimed at this goal.

The OLS exemplifies a “synergistic effects” approach, which recognizes that many different sources of influence on the school and classroom conditions responsible for student learning lie outside the control of even the most skilled local leaders. An appreciation of this wide range of influences underlies the approach to leadership development that has been adopted by Ontario (Leithwood et al., in press).

As illustrated in the figure below, the theory of action for the OLS is that significant progress towards the province’s three core educational priorities can be made by:

- supporting and adding value to the efforts of those responsible for leadership development (box A);
- directly improving the quality of school and district leadership (box B)
- working in concert with other ministry divisions (box C) to improve the conditions for teaching and learning in schools and classrooms.

In combination, these efforts result in improved system and school leadership capacity in the province. This improved leadership capacity, in conjunction with the contributions of other ministry divisions with primary responsibility for curriculum, instruction, and student assessment (e.g., the Student Achievement Division, the Curriculum Branch), produces improved conditions for teaching and learning in schools and classrooms (box D), which, in turn, underpin progress towards our core educational priorities (box E).



## OLS ACTIVITIES

The OLS is a comprehensive plan of action. Its \$4 million annual budget supports activities such as those enumerated below. These activities directly and indirectly improve the quality of leadership development and improve school and system leadership capacity.

### 1. Distributing Ownership: [The Institute for Education Leadership](#)

“The OLS is strategic, intentional, sound, clear, research-based, and practical, and supports new leaders.”

Member of IEL focus group

The Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) was established in 2006 with leaders from multiple levels and all four types of professional associations. IEL members engage in collaborative deliberations about how to foster leadership development across the province; supplement the work of the ministry to address the full range of needs and demands of leaders; deal

constructively with dissent and gain active support from stakeholders for initiatives; and enlarge the capacity required to extend, adapt, and refine leadership initiatives. The IEL serves as a hub allowing more complex connections among the organizations represented by its members – the three principals’ associations, the three supervisory officers’ associations, and the three directors’ councils –

together with the ministry as a participating IEL member. Through a series of workshops it developed and delivered in virtually every district in the province, the IEL was instrumental in securing large-scale understanding and acceptance of the OLF as a basis for leadership development activities. The IEL has sponsored a number of applied research projects, such as *Leading the Future: A Project of the Directors of Education in Southwest Ontario* (Hoshizaki et al., 2010). It maintains a website that includes a wide variety of resources for leaders, and has commissioned research on succession planning (see Institute for Education Leadership, 2008b).

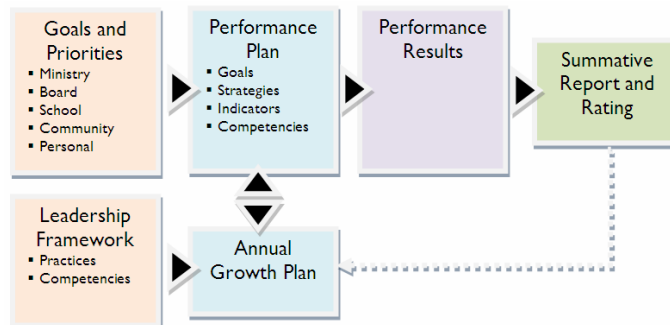


### 2. Embedding the Vision: [Principal Performance Appraisal](#)

Based on a desire to more closely connect the work of school leaders with the goals of the ministry and district, the ministry has developed, piloted, and implemented a model for principal and vice-principal performance appraisal (PPA). The strategy supports the professional growth of principals and vice-principals across the province while providing a measure of accountability for their performance. It has been welcomed by practitioners as a consistent, transparent, process-oriented mechanism for fairly assessing performance. After considerable consultation and revision, the PPA is now mandated for all principals and vice-principals; it is to be conducted on a five-year cycle in conjunction with an annual growth plan to support capacity building in the intervening years. As part of the PPA process, principals and vice-principals must develop a performance plan outlining the goals, strategies, and indicators that

will guide their work in schools. An assessment at the end of the evaluation year, conducted by the supervisor, looks at results achieved and the effectiveness of methods used to achieve those results.

### Principal Performance Appraisal Process



### 3. Differentiating Support: [Mentoring New School and District Leaders](#)

The mentoring initiative represents the heart of the leadership strategy to attract and develop skilled leaders. It provides support for principals, vice-principals, supervisory officers, and directors in their first two years in their new role. The province provides funding to districts to develop and implement mentoring for leaders based on a set of requirements laid out by the ministry. These requirements include careful mentor selection and matching with mentees, high quality mentor training, the use of mentee learning plans, the development of exit strategies, and district-wide support for a mentoring culture. Mentees report increased confidence and self-esteem, improved technical/problem analysis, and increased professional growth in leadership skills and understanding. Mentors report significant improvement in their own leadership capacity through training received and involvement in the practice of coaching skills.

**Mentee:** "I found the first year in the role 10 times more challenging than I had anticipated and I was supported in every way by the mentors who were assigned to me and by the mentors whom I had connected with through various interactions. They were a huge part of my completing the year successfully."

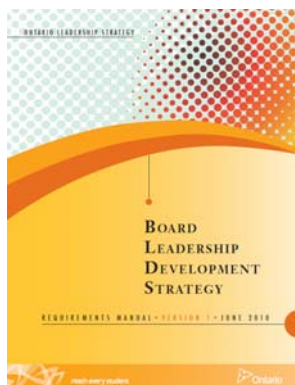
### 4. Mobilizing What Is Known: [The Principal Congress](#)

The Principal Congress, which was launched in February 2009 and expanded in February 2010, provides a way to tap into the collective practical knowledge of about 200 principals and supervisory officers who have been selected from boards based on their success as instructional leaders and their commitment to strategies to close achievement gaps for students. The congress has helped individual leaders identify their own leadership capacities and it has brought forward collective leadership knowledge that otherwise would have remained untapped. Participants were asked to write about their own processes and strategies that they have used to improve instructional practice in their schools and districts, the challenges they have met, and the theories of action that have guided their work. Their narratives have proven to be particularly insightful, honest, and personal. Collectively, the participants' knowledge of gap-closing strategies has matched or even exceeded the leading-edge research in this area. The following excerpts reflect the thoughts of two participants about leading change:



are based, and how they support instructional leadership. Each successive issue focuses on one of the five CLCs, providing a deeper analysis of the core capacity and more detailed supports and resources. Each issue is posted on the ministry website for reference and is sent to school and district leaders.

## 6. Consolidating Initiatives: [Board Leadership Development Strategy](#)



Moving into the third year of the OLS, it was decided that board implementation of strategies such as mentoring, appraisal, and succession planning needed to be coordinated by districts to maximize impact. Each district is now required to develop a Board Leadership Development Strategy (BLDS) to strengthen the connectivity and synergy between leadership development initiatives that support student achievement; to position leadership development as a central part of human resources management; and to align diverse leadership development initiatives. In the previous two years of the OLS, separate funding had been provided for each of these strategies, and districts were required to report on each strategy separately.

Funding is now *consolidated*, and only one report is required. Such an approach is intended to increase the opportunity for districts to tailor their activities to their identified needs and to enhance synergy across leadership initiatives.

## 7. Adding Value to Other Key Initiatives: The Leadership Implementation Team

The Leadership Implementation Team (LIT) is an internal ministry committee that meets three times a year to lead the discourse on leadership development across the ministry and to ensure that activities are aligned and proceeding as intended. Members of LIT include senior management of the ministry, such as the deputy minister and assistant deputy minister, along with the ministry's leadership adviser, Dr. Kenneth Leithwood, and directors of branches with a connection to leadership. Discussion centres on the role of leadership in supporting effective implementation of key ministry initiatives. The work of LIT has been particularly helpful in launching new plans such as the School Effectiveness Framework, a self-assessment tool for schools to engage teachers and the school community in the improvement-planning process, and the Early-Learning Strategy, an initiative that provides full-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds. Both of these initiatives present significant new challenges for school and district leaders. As well, the members of LIT will form a steering committee to guide the formative and summative evaluation of the OLS.

## 8. Connecting Internationally

As mentioned earlier, Ontario has become the destination of many international delegations as representatives of other jurisdictions have come to the province to find out how leadership strategies have been conceptualized and actualized. In addition, the ministry has sought out opportunities to discuss leadership on an international scale, both to promote efforts in

**“The objectives in Ontario are very clear, shared and relevant. Everyone speaks the same language. Decisions in Ontario are evidence-based and this was observed at every level, even in the classroom. Schools are using sophisticated tools to measure student progress and using this to inform their practice. There is a positive culture of support and political processes and policy development are seen as very positive.”**

**(Pont, 2010)**

Ontario and to learn from other jurisdictions. In May 2010, Ontario participated in a week-long OECD project in partnership with Harvard University that aimed at improving educational outcomes for students in schools in Mexico. This project provided an opportunity for participants from Ontario to reflect on progress to date on leadership and to share their learning with the Mexican delegation of about 25 decisions makers from districts across that country.

**“We found the informal chat between Michael Fullan, Ben Levin and Kevin Costante (Deputy Minister) very informative, relevant and open. The lens of the Ontario system was an excellent way to explore many of the challenges we all face around common issues. The inclusion of key system leaders and board members from the Ontario province provided depth to our discussions”.**

**Blog by GELP delegate, April 27, 2010**

Ontario is also one of four jurisdictions invited to participate in the Global Education Leaders Program (GELP) sponsored by Harvard and other partners and aimed at transforming education systems to address twenty-first century teaching and learning. GELP was launched in New York City in September 2009 and held its mid-term meeting in Toronto in April 2010. Delegates from New York, Victoria (Australia), and England joined Ontario representatives for this week-long forum. The four directors of education who are the Ontario delegates to GELP are now working with the ministry to design a ministry-wide strategy for teaching and learning in a digital world.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Efforts to improve educational leadership on a large scale over the past six years have resulted in a series of lessons learned:

- **Lesson 1:** *To have the potential for significant influence on student learning, the leadership development strategy must be intentionally and logically aligned with more comprehensive education improvement goals and initiatives in school, district, and provincial contexts.*
- **Lesson 2:** *The leadership development strategy should not only enhance leadership capacity but should also generate rich evidence about the strengths, weaknesses, and impact of the larger education improvement strategy.*
- **Lesson 3:** *The strategy should aim to increase the capacities of practising leaders to better address not only the current set of education improvement goals and initiatives but also as yet unforeseen future goals and initiatives.*
- **Lesson 4:** *The strategy should acknowledge, in both its content and design, distinct challenges faced by those in different leadership roles and contexts.*
- **Lesson 5:** *The strategy should consist of a small number of powerful initiatives worth pursuing over a significant period of time and informed by ongoing formative data.*
- **Lesson 6:** *Those intended to benefit from the strategy should have significant participation in its design and ongoing development. They have a critical stake in the value of the strategies and should have opportunities to ensure that these strategies effectively contribute to their own development.*

- **Lesson 7:** *There are no reliably effective models for educational leadership development, so all those involved in the process will have to “learn their way forward”. The initial design of the strategy should be strongly influenced by evidence from previous research about what works and how. Thereafter, it should be closely monitored, should be adapted in response to the evidence, and should continue to remain dynamic.* (Adapted from Leithwood et al., in press)

## RESULTS SO FAR

Effective leadership is taking its rightful place as a necessary supporting condition for large-scale improvement of educational outcomes in Ontario. The OLS has been well received in the sector, and feedback on specific initiatives has been positive. Highlights of the results include:

- Over 4500 principals and vice-principals have benefited from the support of a trained mentor, and over 3700 have acted as mentors.
- A principal performance appraisal (PPA) system, which is focused on student results, has been mandated for all principals and vice-principals across the province and came into effect in September 2010.
- Succession planning has been targeted as a significant activity to be implemented by districts; funding and resources have been provided to districts to support this work.
- There is a high level of acceptance and broad use of the Ontario Leadership Framework. The OLF is a foundation for mentoring and appraisal; is used by districts to select leadership candidates; is used as a framework for the Principal’s Qualification Program (PQP) administered by the Ontario College of Teachers; and is used by principals’ associations to organize and plan for their calendars of professional learning offerings to members. Most recently, elected board trustee organizations are looking at the OLF as a starting point for planning professional training for trustees.
- Feedback from boards indicates increased understanding of the OLS and the ways that individual programs complement and strengthen each other. There are many examples of excellence in the development of mentoring programs, succession plans, and training for the implementation of the PPA.
- Directors of education are engaging in professional learning activities, including reviewing research and case studies that help to identify effective district practices. The Institute for Education Leadership has sponsored action research that allows each of the six regions across the province to work with Kenneth Leithwood. Such work will ultimately result in a revised set of district practices to support effective district leadership. As well, the collective work of the regions will contribute significantly to our understanding of the practices and strategies that enhance the effectiveness of districts.

## THE FUTURE

Looking to the future of leadership development in Ontario, there is a commitment to wide implementation of current initiatives, so that they result in broad improvement and not just pockets of excellence. Ensuring improvement across the province may require the provision of more supports and of resources and assistance to help all sectors make sense of the array of supports that are available. Ontario's "international footprint" in leadership development will be strengthened to ensure that there is a productive two-way exchange of information and understanding about leadership development between Ontario and other key jurisdictions. In addition, we need to learn more about instructional leadership in secondary schools, which may have some unique characteristics given the complexity of the role of secondary principals. While much has been accomplished, there is more to do to move from research to policy to practice, and to achieve more precise and effective outcomes.

Three key areas will be the focus going forward:

1. **Evaluation of the OLS:** Both formative and summative assessments of various elements of the OLS are in progress. The assessment process will be ongoing and will respond to emerging research, issues, and feedback from the sector (e.g., the leadership implications and needs related to the Teaching and Learning in a Digital World strategy).
2. **Career Cycle Approach:** Working with Kenneth Leithwood, the ministry is developing a career cycle approach to expand upon the core leadership practices from the OLF, with a particular focus on those practices that show the strongest evidence of positive impact on student achievement. The intended outcome is more detailed information on what good leadership looks like with respect to key practices at different phases of leaders' careers and in different contexts.
3. **District Effectiveness Framework:** Building on the action research being carried out by district directors with the assistance of Kenneth Leithwood, as well as case studies and surveys of school and district leaders, a set of district practices will be articulated, aimed at describing the leadership needed for effective districts.

To achieve Ontario's core priorities to improve learning and prospects for all our students, the ministry will continue to partner with districts and stakeholders to embed innovative leadership practices that are informed by reliable evidence.

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