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Unlocking Potential for Learning

Keewatin-Patricia District School Board

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

Case Study Report
Keewatin-Patricia District School Board

Series Editors:
Carol Campbell
Michael Fullan
Avis Glaze



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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

Deputy Minister of Education

September, 2006

INTRODUCTION

This publication contains a case study of a district in Ontario, Keewatin-Patricia District School Board, that 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) 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 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 around three key areas of enquiry. We list these here to

enable the reader to reflect on how you would answer these questions in relation to your own 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

Board Profile

The Keewatin-Patricia District School Board (KPDSB) is located in the Thunder Bay region of Ontario and is one of the most geographically dispersed school boards in the province. The school board's population is highly diverse, with a large and growing Aboriginal population. KPDSB has a student population of 6300 in 24 schools (18 elementary schools and 5 secondary schools). In 2004–05, there were 410 students in Grade 3 and 425 students in Grade 6.

Data Collection

Data collection included: interviews with the senior leadership team, five school principals, school and classroom observations in five schools, a review of board documents, and EQAO data.

Key Features of the School Board's Overall Approach for Improvement

The school board's focus is on:

- promoting literacy and learning for all children
- providing support for the “critical window” of opportunity from ages four to seven
- closing the gap in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students
- basing achievement decisions on research and best practices
- building capacity throughout the system for instructional change/improvement in order to initiate and sustain change
- providing teachers with ongoing support and training in order to effectively change instructional strategies rather than one-time events delivered intermittently
- using “at the elbow,” job-embedded professional development

- clearly identifying learning expectations, resources, instructional strategies, and assessment/evaluation practices that are critical for system change and for improvement to be initiated and sustained
- ensuring that implementation is carefully planned and staged one year at a time in order to ensure resources and professional development for staff; “think big, start small”
- ensuring that incremental capacity building will be sustainable
- recognizing that principals play a critical role in sustaining change and improvement
- including lead principals in the senior administration team
- ensuring that the superintendent of curriculum is pivotal in overseeing the literacy and numeracy initiatives with appropriate strategic planning
- ensuring the superintendent of special education and the special education resource teacher involved integrate special education and curriculum planning
- providing mentorship in order to have a highly trained teaching force
- believing that system leadership is a shared responsibility
- finding the necessary financial resources to support the literacy and numeracy focus
- using assessment and data that validate effectiveness
- creating a strong shared vision accompanied by a solid plan of action, along with consistent messaging
- including everybody involved in the system to move an initiative forward
- ensuring lateral capacity building (partnering with neighbouring district school boards and school authorities)

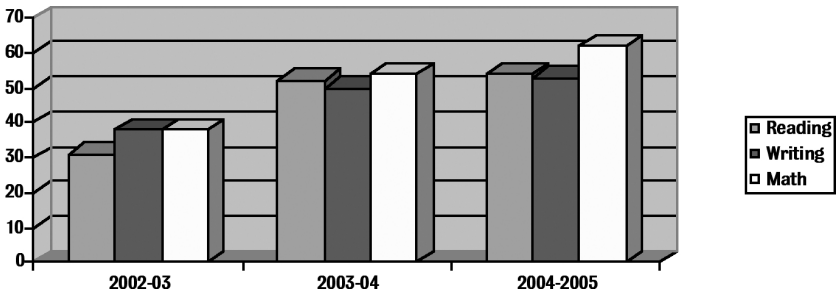
Case Study Report

1. Board Context and Performance

Since the establishment of KPDSB, following amalgamation, the board has demonstrated significant improvement overall in achievement scores.

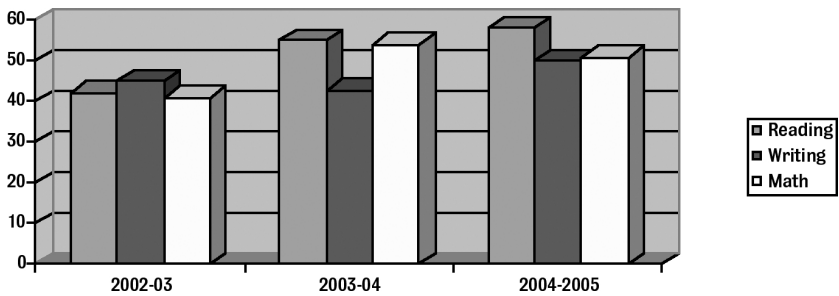
GRADE 3: PERCENTAGE OF KPDSB STUDENTS AT LEVELS 3 AND 4 IN PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENTS

Grade 3	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	Percentage Point Difference from 2002-03 to 2004-05
Reading	31	52	54	23
Writing	38	50	53	15
Math	38	54	62	24



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

Grade 6	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	Percentage Point Difference from 2002-03 to 2004-05
Reading	42	55	58	16
Writing	45	43	50	5
Math	41	54	51	10



2. Data Collection

Interviews were held with the following senior leadership team at the school board's head office: Janet Wilkinson, Director; Wendy Parkin, Superintendent of Curriculum; Jack McMaster, Superintendent of Special Education; and two literacy principal leads: Carol Hron and Larry Hope. An informal meeting was also held with Maury Swenson (oral literacy specialist), and Jeannie McMaster and Janice Radburn (literacy lead teachers).

Individual interviews and a tour of the school were held with the following principals at their respective schools: Susanne Bastable, Riverview School; Deanna Pacheco (numeracy lead principal), Oxdrift School; Max Bernauer, New Prospect School; and Carol Hron (literacy lead principal), Wabigoon School.

Data collection also included: a review of the *Literacy and Numeracy K to Grade 6* resource binder compiled by school board staff; a power point presentation entitled *Focus on Literacy*; and follow-up telephone conversations with the director of education and the superintendent of curriculum.

3. Board's Approach to Support Improvement

The KPDSB initiated an Early Literacy Plan in September 2000, which was based on research cited in the 1999 Fraser Mustard Report (*Early Child Development and Human Development*) and focused on the critical window of opportunity (ages four to seven) for children to acquire literacy skills.

Senior school board leaders acknowledged that the children in their system were consistently achieving well below the provincial averages in all areas of the EQAO reading, writing, and mathematics assessments. The school board goal was to provide a learning foundation focused on literacy for all students in the primary division in order to raise achievement levels in the long term. Further, the director had to convince the trustees that putting financial resources into a literacy initiative would prove to be a good investment.

This Board has a clear focus on literacy with a philosophy of “think big, start small” in terms of implementing the strategy for literacy improvement:

We carved off small groups to work with at a time, rather than trying to change everyone at the start. We had a five-year plan and started with one grade at a time. (Janet Wilkinson, Director)

The school board’s goal was to establish consistent, long-term practice across the school board.

Key Features of the School Board’s Approach Overall

The school board’s focus is:

- basing achievement decisions on research and best practices
- providing support for the “critical window” of opportunity from ages four to seven
- building capacity throughout the system for instructional change/improvement in order to initiate and sustain change
- providing teachers with ongoing support and training in order to effectively change instructional strategies rather than one-time events delivered intermittently
- using “at-the-elbow,” job-embedded professional development
- clearly identifying learning expectations, resources, instructional strategies, and assessment/evaluation practices that are critical for system change and for improvement to be initiated and sustained
- ensuring that implementation is carefully planned and staged one year at a time in order to ensure resources and professional development for staff

- ensuring that incremental capacity building will be sustainable
- recognizing that principals play a critical role in sustaining change and improvement
- including lead principals in the senior administration team
- providing mentorship to have a highly trained teaching force
- believing that system leadership is a shared responsibility

In terms of overall approach, all participants stressed the school board's use of data to inform decision making and the establishment of a shared language for literacy and numeracy across the school board. Principals commented on KPDSB's involvement of school staff in system planning and its shared vision for improvement. As our principal commented, "The school board has a philosophy of inclusion not just prescription."

4. Strategies and Actions in Place to Support Improvement

The focus for this board is on improving instructional strategies. This means that the senior leadership team would have supported the system in the following areas:

Human Resources

KPDSB has recruited and resourced teachers with expertise in literacy to provide dedicated support in each school and across the system. These include:

- Early literacy teachers (K-3) and later literacy teachers (4-6) are staffed in each school and the school board provides:
 - training regarding instructional strategies and components of a balanced literacy program
 - ongoing professional development within schools (e.g., running record workshops, guided reading workshops)
 - "at the elbow" training for teachers (e.g., team teaching, coaching, modelling)
 - Reading Recovery programming for at-risk students
 - monitoring of the administration of the Early Literacy Assessment Plan within schools (e.g., recording, compiling, analyzing assessment data)

- An early literacy special assignment teacher is assigned to coordinate and monitor the Early Literacy Program
- Two elementary curriculum special assignment teachers work with the superintendent of education to plan and provide professional development for staff
- Three oral language special assignment teachers work with teachers in four schools with high numbers of Aboriginal students

Curriculum Resources

Through board resourcing and system committees, KPDSB has developed system-wide plans and implemented programs to support curriculum and instruction for literacy and numeracy, for example:

- Early Literacy Implementation Plan
- Guided Reading programs
- Early Literacy Assessment Plan
- Keewatin-Patricia DSB mid-year assessments
- First Steps Writing Program
- Literacy Look-For Chart for teachers and principals
- Assessment & Evaluation Resource
- First Steps oral language program
- *Early Reading Strategy Expert Panel Report* and the report's *Technical Guide*
- Early Math Strategies

Allocation of Financial Resources

Working with the board of trustees, the director has ensured that the necessary financial resources are identified and allocated to support the literacy and numeracy focus. According to the director, the following “tough decisions” needed to be made regarding the reallocation of budget from one area to another:

- **Review of budget** – A review of custodial hours took place. Custodians were removed from elementary schools during school hours when they were unable

to attend to most cleaning duties. In order to maintain the same quality of cleanliness in the building, these shifts were moved to 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. and resulted in a reduction in overall hours. A reduction from seven to six hours work per day to link with the school day for education assistants (EA) was also implemented. The school board was in a 14-week strike over this reduction in EA hours/pay. Although this was not an “employee friendly” decision, it was one that the school board felt needed to be made to contribute to the reallocation of funding to support curriculum.

- **School closure** – Since the time of amalgamation, eight schools have closed. Resources that otherwise would have gone into supporting these schools were reallocated to support literacy initiatives.
- **Professional learning approach** – Rather than investing in one day/one time professional development events, the school board had established an “at-the-elbow” type of professional development whereby a teacher or principal works with his/her colleague to implement a teaching practice. For example, this board saved \$50,000 on a specific training initiative by deciding to send one teacher outside the board to be trained as a trainer rather than send one person from each school. This person then provided training to other teachers in the board. The expense to the board was release time for teachers as opposed to release time, travel/accommodation outside of the board, and cost of training.
- **Learning opportunities grant** – The early learning grant was allocated to support implementing instructional practice. These funds could have been allocated for other purposes, but were directed towards the board’s priority of improving achievement in literacy.

Ensuring all resources are directed towards student achievement initiatives also results from a focused approach and close collaboration across program areas. In the area of special education, there is strong and ongoing communication and collaboration between special education and curriculum superintendents and departments. This results in a shared focus and understanding of how everyone can work together to improve achievement of students and resources can be optimized in every area.

Professional Development

The school board provides professional development to classroom teachers in the aforementioned instructional and assessment strategies.

Principals receive professional development in: components of balanced literacy programming and “look-fors,” instructional leadership, curriculum/school improvement planning, walk-through training, and professional learning communities.

All principals participate in training that focuses on specific board and ministry initiatives. For example, each time there was training, principals received one full day’s training regarding specific instructional strategies for both the KPDSB early literacy and later literacy programs as the programs were being developed and introduced. Principals also received one full day’s training regarding each of the Expert Panel reports on reading and mathematics at each of the grade levels – primary, junior, and intermediate/senior – as the documents were released. As the Expert Panel reports were released, connections were made between the goals and strategies of KPDSB literacy and numeracy programs and the Expert Panel report beliefs and recommendations. As initiatives move forward, additional full-day training has been provided to assist principals in consolidating knowledge regarding literacy or numeracy programming, to ensure principals know the “look-fors” to be aware of when they do walk-throughs, to share best practices within schools, and to have an opportunity to raise concerns or issues.

For many full-day training sessions, principals are asked to bring a teacher from their school. Early literacy, later literacy, and classroom teachers from a variety of grade levels have all been invited on different occasions. In this way, principals have an opportunity to further develop a team approach in sharing information with staff and in developing school improvement/curriculum plans.

In addition to full-day training sessions focusing on a topic/initiative, mini-workshops and additional training regarding specific topics are incorporated into all principal meetings. This training is provided by the superintendent, lead principals, curriculum support staff, or classroom teachers.

The senior administration recognizes the importance of the role of principal as instructional leader in schools and, in fact, throughout the system. As the superintendent of curriculum commented:

It is always a challenge to ensure the right balance between the time principals are out of their schools participating in professional development and committee work and the time they are in their schools. We recognize the importance of principals being available to students and staff within schools to move instruction/learning forward and to ensure a safe and orderly school environment. It is, however, crucial that we continue to provide training, support, and time for reflection/networking with colleagues for principals if we want to continue to move our system forward. It is, therefore, very important that every time we meet with principals at principal meetings, workshops, and leadership retreats, the main focus is student achievement and instructional leadership.

All of the participants interviewed referred to the professional strategy used in this board as being school-based, often referred to as “at the elbow,” in which two professionals work together to solve a dilemma of professional practice. Principals commented that the walk-through training they received enabled them to identify what to look for in terms of literacy improvement strategies.

Also of particular interest in this school board is that they have established an extensive mentorship program. Initially, the program was developed as a strategy for recruitment and retention of teachers due to a teacher shortage. It began with 32 mentors and 32 beginning teachers, but these numbers grew year by year. According to director of education Janet Wilkinson, the program “changed the culture in the school board. It [now] resembles a professional learning community in that we prefer to use the language of ‘a culture of dialogue and teamwork’.”

The director is considered to be very “in tune” with the system and responsive to teachers’ needs. For example, by trying to see things from the teachers’ perspective, notions such as “professional learning communities,” which might be construed as buzzwords by the teachers, are rephrased in such a way that they take account of teachers’ views.

Curriculum Implementation Support

The school board has struck a variety of committees and developed a number of board policy documents to support curriculum implementation:

- System Curriculum Council Committee
- System Early Literacy Steering Committee
- School Early Literacy Committee
- Steering Committee for Mathematics K – 8
- Board Assessment & Evaluation Policy
- Board Curriculum Implementation Policy
- Board School Improvement Policy
- Math Focus Groups

There is both principal leader and teacher representation on all of the aforementioned committees. The lead principals work hand in hand with the superintendent of curriculum and provide training to other principals and teachers in the school board. These lead principals take ownership of, and pay attention to, the needs of those who have difficulties implementing the particular curriculum strategies needed to see student achievement.

5. Board's Operation to Support Improvement

The director put together a senior administration team that included principal representatives and was instrumental in bringing the trustees on board and putting committees in place to include them.

The director's goal was to establish literacy expertise systematically across the board, starting with herself and including classroom teachers, literacy teachers, principals, superintendents, and trustees. A Curriculum Implementation and Professional Development Plan was developed by the school board to help frame the implementation of literacy improvement. To date, every administrator and every teacher in the school board has received professional development with respect to literacy instruction.

6. Role of Board Staff

The director is viewed by the principals interviewed as an instructional leader. She sees herself as providing vision and she sees her role as inspiring staff. According to the superintendent of curriculum, the director “is truly an instructional leader who has a passion for and understanding of the teaching/learning process.” The director is described by staff as having vision and seeing the big picture. She recognizes what is needed and has the determination to get there. She also recognizes that “you get there in an incremental way.” Literacy, for example, has been the main focus for the last five years. Staff commented also that the director understands that “you just can’t have a vision without providing the support before saying, ‘it must be so’.” The director described the style of leadership throughout KPDSB as “disciplined passion.”

The superintendent of curriculum is pivotal in overseeing the early literacy, later literacy, and numeracy initiatives. She is involved at every level of the system in putting the school board curriculum implementation/improvement plan together, ensuring there is connection and coordination between initiatives within the plan, and effectively communicating the plan throughout the system.

Planning and coordination of initiatives takes place through many planning processes, including board strategic planning, system curriculum council planning, board steering committee work, and school curriculum/improvement planning. Planning processes are cyclical in nature. As staff involved in different planning processes interact and reflect, individual plans are reviewed, revised, and often enhanced. The superintendent of curriculum must be involved in or continually updated regarding planning within each area in order to ensure coordination and continuity within and across initiatives.

The superintendent of curriculum works with committees of the school board to facilitate planning and to ensure that the pieces of the plan are implemented. The work of committees is key to implementation in identifying and putting in place strategies to address gaps that exist between teachers’ knowledge and instructional delivery, professional development that is necessary (who, where, and when), and resources that need to be developed or purchased to assist teachers in classrooms.

As well, committees continually review and analyse board assessment data and results. For example, the Early Literacy Steering Committee identified writing as an ongoing area of concern reflected in students' achievement on board midyear assessments and EQAO assessments. Teachers have been using the First Steps writing program and have been completing “quick predicts” to determine where students are developmentally. Instructional strategies are then developed for the class/groups of students based on the developmental level.

While the committee felt that quick predicts are taking place and overall strategies are being used from the program, specific strategies are not being implemented for individual or small groups of students at the appropriate level:

We are not quite there in many classrooms in using assessment to inform practice. Committee members then determined we needed to move further into the program and have teachers put students on to the First Steps writing continuum to facilitate teachers identifying and using specific teaching strategies. When the program was first introduced, the committee felt that to have teachers use the continuum would be too overwhelming and not meaningful, and in fact turn them off using the program entirely. The committee now feels differently – teachers are ready to go the next step and in fact need to go there in order to improve writing skills to the next level. The work of committees is very important in monitoring progress and determining what is needed to move forward (Superintendent of Curriculum)

The superintendent of special education was brought into the process in order to help integrate special education and curriculum planning. One initiative has been to bring in SERTs and involve them more and more with classroom teachers. As the superintendent of special education said, “We started seeing it more as a proactive approach to literacy versus a diagnostic/symptom approach.”

Principals also see themselves as instructional leaders. They are required to attend the same professional development as teachers. A principal commented: “We engage in respectful interactions at all levels.”

7. Connections between School and School Board

The relationship between the school board and the schools is characterized by the term “pressure and support.” Even though there are high expectations, the school board offers a great deal of support – starting with the director who holds the vision and knows how to “get there.” She is in every school at least twice a year. She has a deep understanding of what good teaching looks like and she is there both to celebrate success and to ask tough questions when schools are encountering challenges. As one teacher commented, “She does not accept, regardless of their background, that kids can’t learn; she does not accept excuses.” Principals consistently and overwhelmingly expressed how well the board supported them in the implementation of the literacy plan.

The attitude among staff is a positive and optimistic one, with a motto of “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” A principal explained the importance of fostering a commitment to whole-school improvement for all students, not just the individual work of classrooms in isolated classrooms: “We try to encourage teachers to be school teachers not classroom teachers – the critical message is to work as a team.” Principals were clear that their role included making the board’s vision operational at the school level: “We have a cheerleader role.”

Shared Direction/Vision

Everyone interviewed, from the director to the principals, was able to articulate the focus for the board. Literacy is the focus, and learning for all children is the target. The senior leadership team recognizes the importance of consistent messaging and has articulated this as the “rule of 9.” The director expressed her exasperation at one point in the early days of implementation of the Early Literacy program when she was speaking to a group of principals and mentioned a specific point regarding the program. Many puzzled faces told her that they did not understand what she was talking about. She was very frustrated in that she knew that this topic had been part of earlier training and discussion. She then attended a human resources seminar where the instructor talked about the fact that individuals have to hear a message nine times before they remember the message. The director of education returned to the next principals’ meeting and recounted the story, including her frustration, and that she shouldn’t have been frustrated because principals had only heard the message five times and therefore she had to tell them four more times.

According to the director of education, the lesson for senior administration and principals was that:

When we are moving forward with an initiative we are continually having training and conversations – we are immersed in the topic and we sometimes lose sight of the fact that others are not immersed to the same degree. When we are tired of repeating the same message and we think everyone is tired of hearing the message, the reality is that many are just “getting” the message. It is absolutely necessary to make sure we are getting our important messages out there all the time and continually reviewing and reflecting on those messages.”

There are many layers to this notion of the rule of 9. In the telling and retelling of a message, one creates a story. A shared vision and shared direction is a human enterprise, and as such the director has engaged in storytelling as a way to engage the heart and mind in order to build a system culture.

8. Lateral Capacity Building

In terms of lateral capacity building, the KPDSB has partnered with the Northern Ontario Education Leaders group (NOEL), which includes various public and Catholic district school boards as well as various school authorities regarding the Improving Student Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy K-6: Aboriginal Student Success project. Each of the school boards and district school authorities who are part of NOEL has targeted literacy improvement and Aboriginal education as a major focus from JK to Grade 12, collectively as a group and independently.

In order to build regional capacity, NOEL has sponsored regional conferences in literacy skill development for teachers and administrators in order to share successful practices among schools and school boards. Additionally, online professional development has been a component of reaching all teachers, regardless of remote locations throughout the north.

School boards in Northwestern Ontario pool their funding for implementing and managing projects that will be of benefit to all the partner boards. This is a strategy that works very well for small boards with relatively little infrastructure.

Encouraging teachers and principals to work and learn together is fostered also through joint membership of system committees and through professional development activities. For example, the Early Literacy Teacher Group and the Later Literacy Teacher Group have met for six days of training in order to build a network. The philosophy of a professional learning community is embedded in practice. Principals also feel connected through the instructional leadership training they receive. The unintended results of the professional development organized by the senior administration team is that teachers and principals spend a considerable amount of time together. Since the geographical distances are so great in the KPDSB, teachers and principals travel together for hours to get to and from meetings. This results in continued conversations after the professional development sessions are over.

The district school board is also part of the Principal Learning Teams initiative organized by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in conjunction with the three Ontario principals' councils: the Ontario Principals' Council, the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario, and the Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes. This is seen by staff as "an excellent opportunity for principals to connect and share best practice and to further develop learning teams within schools."

9. Evaluation of Effectiveness

According to the director of education, "EQAQ validates effectiveness" of KPDSB's strategies and actions. There has been significant improvement in board results over the past years.

Between 2002–03 to 2004–05, the results for Grade 3 improved by 24 percentage points in math, 23 percentage points in reading, and 15 percentage points in writing. During the same time period, results for Grade 6 also improved by 16 percentage points in reading, ten percentage points in math, and five percentage points in writing.

The KPDSB has also established and fostered a system-wide focus on student achievement in literacy and numeracy that was evident at board and school levels. The following indicators of effectiveness were seen in schools visited:

- Same message heard in all schools

- Classrooms visited:
 - were welcoming, bright, orderly with quite a bit of student work well displayed
 - showed reading strategies and prompts posted on the wall for students to reference
 - showed word walls being used interactively as a learning tool
 - showed book rooms which were well organized and well supplied
 - showed evidence of read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading activities.

10. Challenges Encountered

The first major challenge encountered by the school board was closing the gap. As their plan was implemented, the senior leadership team found that although student achievement in literacy was improving overall, the gap in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students continued. This precipitated a review of programming for Aboriginal students and the implementation of a pilot program focusing on oral language programming in sample schools with high numbers of Aboriginal students.

The second major challenge encountered by the school board was amalgamation and the political issues associated with it. The KPDSB was formed through a process of amalgamation. While the director of education recognized that this posed challenges in terms of building a unified board, she also took this as an opportunity to develop a coherent direction forward:

There was an urgent need to create a new board focus as a single entity. The focus is “students come first and foremost”. This was a focus identified for the board. Amalgamation was a reality that needed to be turned into an opportunity.

The KPDSB recognizes challenges in ensuring its commitment to higher literacy levels for all students. Initially students were reaching the reading benchmarks, but they had difficulty with the comprehension. This resulted in a plan for deepening teachers’ skills in the area of helping students develop their comprehension skills.

A further challenge at the system level was the poor attitude regarding data collection and how to use it. At the start of the assessment planning for the primary division, the emphasis was on summative data collection; this has now shifted to balancing both summative and formative data collection.

11. Sustainability of Improvement

Staff indicated the following as being elements required for sustainability of improvement:

- An understanding that change takes place in an incremental way
 - the KPDSB took a staged-approach to early literacy, later literacy, and numeracy
 - the district school board remained focused on literacy over time
- Supporting teachers to change their practice with support “at the elbow”
- Creating stability with experienced, stable staff
- Mentorship program for new teachers that provides a professional growth experience for both new teachers and mentors (30 of each)
- Paying attention to the data

12. Future Developments

Senior board staff identified numeracy as the next major initiative for the board’s future development.

13. Lessons for District-Wide Strategies – Key Learnings

The following key lessons learned by staff include suggestions for learning at all three levels of implementation: school, board, and province:

- Require a strong vision and solid plan of action.
- “Never stray from the vision, stick with it, and believe in it” – this starts at the central level and filters all the way down the system.
- Require a systemic approach to planning, implementation, and support that is focused on the schools.
- Take everybody involved in the system to move an initiative forward (team effort).
- Celebrate success, as this fuels passion.
- Distribute financial resources intelligently.
- Require a plan for continual improvement. One of the strengths of the KPDSB is that they continue to monitor their programs by going back into the data and research and find what gaps exist and intentionally choose ways in which they can close the gaps.

