Supporting Low-Performing Schools in Ontario, Canada

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This case study describes the school turnaround programs underway as of summer 2009 in Ontario, Canada. In particular, it focuses on the policies and efforts of the Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) and an MOE department, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS), to support low-performing schools across the province. The report begins with a description of public schooling in Ontario, followed by a review of the existing school improvement efforts, especially those related to specific turnaround efforts for low-performing schools. It highlights the relevant MOE priorities that have guided the ministry's policies and directions. It then focuses more intensively on the work of the LNS, the provincial government organization responsible for supporting the improvement of students' literacy and numeracy achievement. Finally, the report offers the authors' recommendations, based on recent evaluation findings and other relevant empirical work.

The Ontario Context

Canada is the second-largest country in the world geographically, but it has a relatively small population of not quite 34 million people. The country is divided into 10 provinces and three northern territories. Canadians enjoy a high standard of living, including easily accessible public education and a well-established postsecondary education system that is largely supported by federal, provincial, and municipal government revenues. Provincial governments are responsible for public education (commonly kindergarten through grade 12), having jurisdiction over education policy, curriculum development, and system monitoring. Ontario is the country's most populated province, with approximately 13 million people living in its 415,000 square miles. (As a comparison, Texas is 270,000 square miles in size.) Its population is largely Anglophone, but there is a substantial Francophone population (approximately 5 percent), English and French being the two official Canadian languages. Its large urban centers, particularly Toronto and Ottawa, have substantial immigrant populations. Ontario also has the largest population of Aboriginal people in the country, although they represent just over 2 percent of the Ontario population.

Public education in Ontario encompasses both elementary (kindergarten through grade 8) and secondary (grades 9 through 12) school programs. Ontario is somewhat unusual in Canada in that it has two years of kindergarten and, until 2003, had grade 13. Public funding from the province covers students' K–12 education, including the two years of kindergarten. It also covers education costs for any students returning for one or two semesters after grade 12. Although the secondary program no longer includes grade 13, 15 to 20 percent of Ontario students return to school for one or

Editor's Note

This is one of four case studies developed in mid-2009 for the U.S. Department of Education that focus on how countries other than the United States have been addressing the challenge of turning around their low-performing schools. The other three case studies focus on Australia, England, and New Zealand. This case study has not been updated since it was initially developed.

two semesters after they have completed grade 12. Secondary schools most commonly use a semester system, with students taking four courses each semester. Some secondary schools operate on a full-year timetable, with students taking eight courses during the year.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) is responsible for overseeing public education in the province. The MOE develops and implements both broad education policy and specific education curriculum. As an example, the current goals of the MOE are to ensure high levels of student achievement, reduce gaps in student achievement, and instill high levels of public confidence in public education. Other MOE policies address special education; English as a second language (ESL) students; assessment, evaluation, and reporting; and system monitoring. Curriculum documents developed by the MOE, often in conjunction with teachers and curricular experts, contain the overall and specific learning expectations for the provincially mandated curriculum at all grade levels (e.g., arts, language arts, mathematics, physical education, science and technology, social studies), along with specific guidelines for student assessment and evaluation. The MOE develops education materials for educators and provides professional development, either directly or through designated funding given to school boards or teachers' unions.

Ontario has five types of publicly funded schools: (1) secular Anglophone, (2) Catholic Anglophone, (3) secular Francophone, (4) Catholic Francophone, and (5) Aboriginal. Aboriginal schools receive their funding from the federal government. The provincial government funds the other four types of publicly funded schools. There are also a small number of private schools located throughout the province, which are not publicly funded. All of the secular and Catholic schools serving the English- and French-speaking student populations are located within one of the 72 provincially recognized school boards or 11 school authorities (serving schools in remote areas or schools associated with hospitals). While all of these schools are publicly funded, the secular schools are commonly referred to as "public" schools and the Catholic schools are commonly referred to as "separate" schools. Within the province's Anglophone education system, there are 31 public boards responsible for the secular schools and 29 separate boards for the Catholic schools. Within the Francophone system, four public boards oversee the secular schools and eight separate boards oversee the Catholic schools. In Ontario, the public funding for the separate schools and boards is in accordance with guarantees dating back to the formation of Canada as a distinct dominion in the British North America Act of 1867.

Like local school districts or "central offices" in the U.S., Ontario's school boards and school authorities oversee and support the operation of the elementary and secondary schools within their geographic region. The school boards represent logical community regions and, thus, vary in size and in number of schools overseen. For example, the Toronto District School Board, the biggest in Canada, oversees K–12 education in the city of Toronto, which includes more than 550 schools. In contrast, the Rainy River District School Board, serving the communities surrounding Fort Frances, oversees 14 schools. Each school board is governed by a board of trustees, which hires a director of education — akin to a district superintendent in the U.S. — to lead the operation of the school board. The director approves other school board positions, including superintendents (the administrative level below the director), board-level principals, and consultants. School principals and vice-principals (also called school administrators) are also hired through the board offices. The director, working with other senior managers, then places each principal and vice-principal in a specific school. It is common policy for boards to move school principals and vice-principals to different schools periodically, although the length of time principals and vice-principals stay within specific schools varies highly within and across boards.

Board-level superintendents, curriculum consultants, and support staff have a variety of responsibilities depending on the size and operational structure of the school board. Typically, superintendents provide board-level leadership for the schools, addressing specific school needs and expectations. In some boards, there may also be board-level principals who work with or in place of superintendents. In contrast, consultants commonly work with teachers, providing instructional leadership, support, and professional development. Superintendents and consultants are also likely to be a conduit to the provincial MOE, with individuals

having specific ministry-related responsibilities to keep administrators and teachers aware of new and upcoming policies and practices to be adopted or reviewed. School boards conduct contract negotiations with the teaching and support staff unions, although teachers may be hired by either the board or individual principals. Regardless of the hiring process, the board must approve all teachers before they can be employed.

Teachers throughout Canada belong to a teaching union or federation, but the unions are specific to each province. Once again, Ontario is somewhat unusual, having both a central federation (the Ontario Teachers' Federation) and separate federations for different groups of teachers. For example, elementary-level public school teachers are represented by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, which has approximately 70,000 members, while the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, with some 60,000 members, serves teachers at the secondary level in the public school system. Teachers in the Catholic Anglophone system are represented by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, which has some 34,000 members. A smaller union, L'association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens, represents the approximately 8,000 public- and Catholic-school Francophone teachers. The primary responsibility of these federations is to represent their members, for example, through contract negotiation. These unions are politically strong, and they influence education in Ontario. Contract negotiations have been strained at times, although there have been no strikes in the past 10 years. The unions have also played a role in professional development; in light of the recent initiatives from the MOE on the previously listed goals, this particular union role has grown.

Ontario Student Demographics

Given its size and location, Ontario encompasses a very diverse geography and has an equally diverse population. The province has large urban centers (most notably Toronto, the Greater Toronto Area [GTA], and Ottawa); several smaller cities (e.g., Kingston, London, Windsor, Hamilton); and rural populations. The vast majority of Ontarians live in the southern portion of the province, in the regions surrounding Lake Huron, Lake Erie, and Lake Ontario. There are also smaller cities in the central and northern parts of the province, close to upper Lake Huron and Lake Superior (e.g., Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury). Northern Ontario, which encompasses almost 90 percent of the province's landmass, is home to less than 8 percent of its population. Northern communities have larger proportions of Aboriginal people compared to communities in the southern part of the province. The standard of living is relatively high in Ontario, especially in the metropolitan regions — working families with children report a median income of approximately $75,000 per year — but some areas, especially some of the northern communities, face economic hardships, and other regions may be differently affected by economic shifts in manufacturing or demands for resources.

Approximately 1.4 million students attend Ontario's 4,000 publicly funded elementary schools. An additional 700,000 students attend its 850 publicly funded secondary schools. Although the majority of schools are configured as either elementary or secondary schools, there are some other grade configurations as well: middle schools (typically grades 7 and 8), early elementary (grades 1 to 5), and grades K–12. Female students are more likely to graduate than male students (graduation rates are estimated at 78 and 70 percent, respectively), indicating that males have slightly higher dropout rates in upper secondary school. Immigration is an important facet of Canadian culture, and the diversity of Ontario's population is reflected in its schools, especially in its larger cities. Approximately 20 percent of Ontario's students belong to a cultural minority, although only 6 percent are identified as English language learners (that is, recent immigrants having a first language other than English). The majority of the Francophone population is in eastern and northeastern Ontario. Francophone Ontarians are also more likely to live in rural areas. Approximately 90,000 students attend Ontario's 450 publicly funded Francophone schools.

Ontario also has definitions and procedures for identifying learners who have behavioral, communication, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities. Approximately 200,000 students have been formally identified as having education needs that cannot be met through regular instruction. A further 100,000 have not been formally identified as such but receive special education programs and services. Their needs

may be met through accommodations and/or an education program that is modified above or below the age-appropriate grade-level expectations for a particular subject or course. In addition to accommodations or program modifications, students with learning disabilities receive support in ways that reduce the impact of their disabilities.

The Focus on School Improvement

Given that education is a provincial responsibility, there are no national efforts focused on school improvement. Ontario shows well on international tests of literacy, with standings near the top in the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Survey (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), although it tends to lag behind the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Quebec. Currently, every province uses a provincially mandated large-scale testing program. These assessments are given on an annual basis to students in specific grades, most commonly on a three-year cycle beginning in grades 3 or 4, with a focus on literacy (reading and writing) and numeracy. Normally, the assessments are developed by the respective provincial MOE. Teachers are often part of the provincial assessment process, serving as item developers or markers. The assessments in the elementary schools are low-stakes assessments, with no direct impact on students' marks. Students usually receive a report summarizing their results on the assessment. School-, system-, and province-level results are made public, with previous results available in order to provide an indication of change. These provincial large-scale assessment programs play an accountability and monitoring role, providing an overall picture of student achievement in the province. Provincial testing at the secondary level is also prevalent in Canada, although the structure and purposes are much more variable by province. For example, Alberta, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland administer curriculum-based graduation exams to students in their final year of academic courses. These exams contribute up to 50 percent of each student's mark in these courses. New Brunswick and Ontario administer a provincial literacy test that students must complete successfully prior to graduation.

Ontario entered into an accountability framework in the mid-1990s. At that time, the Ontario government created the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Although created by the provincial government, EQAO acts as an independent, arm's-length agency. EQAO is responsible for the creation and administration of provincially administered examination programs, with the intention to use these examinations to provide accurate and reliable student achievement information to parents, teachers, and the public. Its mandate is to help ensure greater accountability and better quality in Ontario's publicly funded school system. EQAO also makes recommendations that educators, parents, policymakers, and others in the education community can use to improve learning and teaching.

Large-scale, high-stakes testing had been common in Canada until the 1960s, when it fell out of use for a period. More recently, provinces began using it again, and Ontario was one of the last to reinstate this type of assessment program. Today, such assessments are administered, with few exceptions, to Ontario students in grades 3, 6, and 9. The grades 3 and 6 assessments cover reading, writing, and numeracy. The grade 9 assessment only includes numeracy. The grades 3 and 6 assessments are not used for grading purposes, whereas teachers in grade 9 are able to use provincial assessment results in grading their mathematics courses (assessment results usually contribute 10 percent of the grade). While there are score scales for the assessments, results are reported using a 4-point rubric loosely based on the province's Achievement Charts, in which Level 1 equals "below provincial expectations," Level 2 equals "approaches provincial expectations," Level 3 equals "meets provincial expectations," and Level 4 equals "exceeds provincial expectations."

The provincial assessment program is an important aspect of the provincial government's focus on education. The provincial assessment results are the primary mechanisms for monitoring overall student achievement and the state of education in the province. The provincial premier established a long-term goal that 75 percent of Ontario's students will obtain Level 3 (the provincial standard) on the grade 6 provincial assessments and 85 percent of students will graduate from secondary school. The initial promise was that this goal would be reached by 2008.

Although it was not reached by that date, overall student achievement appears to be moving slowly toward this goal. The MOE has three other broad policy priorities: (1) increase student achievement, (2) reduce the gaps in student achievement, and (3) increase public confidence about education.

To help schools progress toward the goal of having 75 percent of students perform at Level 3 and to support the MOE priorities, the provincial MOE established the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) in 2004. The LNS is a ministerial organization responsible for supporting the improvement of student achievement across Ontario, especially in literacy and numeracy. "At its inception, the primary purpose of The Secretariat was to establish a visible and transparent presence in the education system — one that conveyed a sense of urgency, optimism, and commitment to system improvement" (Glaze & Campbell, 2007). LNS staff work both directly and indirectly with schools and teachers "to build capacity and implement strategies to improve our students' reading, writing, and math skills." As described by the LNS strategy, the LNS:

» works with school boards to set ambitious student achievement targets tailored to individual schools and to develop detailed plans to meet those targets;

» works with school boards to identify ways to improve student achievement and to provide the resources necessary to do so;

» provides professional learning opportunities for all educators in the system;

» shares research on effective teaching;

» builds partnerships with principals' councils, teachers' federations, faculties of education, and other organizations;

» shares successful practices within and across school boards;

» provides funding to boards to hire tutors who work under the direction of classroom teachers to reinforce previously taught concepts and skills; and

» develops materials (in 14 languages) to help parents support their children's learning.

At the time the LNS was created, the MOE was also engaged in several other initiatives designed to further student achievement, including increased resources for professional development, reduced primary (kindergarten through grade 3) class sizes, increased curricular focus on literacy and numeracy, and board-directed funds for local achievement-related initiatives. Of particular relevance is the Turnaround Schools Program (TSP). Underperforming schools with the lowest proportions of primary students achieving the provincial standard (Level 3) — less than 34 percent of students in two of the previous three years, based on EQAO results for grade 3 — were identified. These schools could then choose to participate in the TSP. Fourteen schools volunteered initially, and these schools received additional funding and resources and access to external expertise to support their efforts to improve their students' levels of success. The TSP exemplifies the underlying principles guiding Ontario's efforts to support student achievement. The Ontario government does not use a punitive model to increase achievement. Rather, its policies are designed to provide extra supports and resources to schools having the greatest needs and largest proportions of struggling students. Subsequent evidence indicates that the targeted support through the TSP benefited schools, which demonstrated substantial increases in student achievement (Glaze & Campbell, 2007).

Several of the MOE projects were slowly put under the control of the LNS after it was formed. In 2006, the LNS took over the TSP, revising it into a new program, the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP). OFIP focused on improving student achievement at the school level, using a whole-school approach, with a focus on kindergarten through grade 6, whereas TSP had focused primarily on kindergarten through grade 3. The OFIP strategy substantially increased the number of schools targeted for support, albeit with different levels of support. OFIP 1 schools are those with less than 34 percent of students achieving the provincial standard in reading for two out of the past three years, based on grades 3 and 6 results. OFIP 2 schools are those in which between 34 and 50 percent of students were reaching the provincial standard, with either static or declining results over the past three years. A third category of schools was subsequently

created: OFIP 3 schools are those with between 50 and 74 percent of students achieving the provincial standard, but with results that have been static or declining over the past three years.

One of the challenges of the OFIP strategy has been the inherent cost of increasing directed resources to schools. It was acknowledged that the funding attached to TSP was not sustainable in the long term. With the introduction of the OFIP strategy, the nature of the supports provided to schools changed. The amount of funding for individual schools has been reduced, but OFIP 1 and OFIP 2 schools receive two years of support from LNS Student Achievement Officers (SAOs). The SAOs work with the schools and their boards to devise and build school- and district-based strategies to address student improvement efforts. OFIP 1 schools receive the greatest amount of support, and OFIP 2 schools receive less direct support. The SAOs are expected to continually track and share their experiences, with the intention of identifying successful strategies that may require fewer resources or have more impact in the future. OFIP 3 schools do not receive direct support from the SAOs. Rather, OFIP 3 schools are the responsibility of the school boards and are provided with board-level resources and targeted by several school board initiatives. In 2007–08, there were 128 OFIP 1 schools, 230 OFIP 2 schools, and 706 OFIP 3 schools across the province.

Research Review

Ontario, like Canada in general, does not have a rich history of monitoring or examining low-performing schools or of intervention efforts. Hence, this section is short and lacks empirical evidence regarding the impact of turnaround efforts. Part of the problem is that findings from many Canadian studies tend to suggest that there are relatively few differences in teaching or achievement between schools and that, rather, the majority of differences occur at the student level. The following research findings from Ontario are highlighted, recognizing that there are generally few concerns about the overall quality of education in Canada. Much of the research underpinning Ontario's approach to underperforming schools is found in work by Fullan and colleagues (e.g., Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Fullan, 2007), who advocate alignment of reform efforts at three crucial levels and place a major focus on capacity building at all three levels: school, district, and province.

Although existing evidence is weak, research on the successful turnaround schools points to leadership as a key factor. Leithwood and Strauss (2008) identify direction setting, capacity building, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program as the four core practices of leadership in successful turnaround schools. Of the specific practices associated with these core leadership practices, the three most highly rated by school personnel are providing resources, building a collaborative learning culture, and enabling a sufficient amount and type of professional development. Leithwood and Strauss describe three phases of the turnaround process, noting that the core leadership skills were enacted differently at each stage. They report that 75 percent of the leadership in elementary turnaround schools was attributed to teachers who had formal, content-based leadership roles; principals; and MOE staff who led diagnostic and professional development activities in the schools. Job-embedded professional development in the form of coaching and mentoring was perceived by teachers to be more effective than traditional presentation-style, in-service models, but school board and MOE personnel also offered the latter type of workshop. Classroom visits and visits to demonstration classrooms in other schools were popular models of professional development, as were opportunities for conferencing with peers and regular meetings of professional learning communities. The findings about the important role of leadership are intriguing, especially since previous research has tended to report that the roles of teachers and parents are more important (e.g., Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993).

A focus on literacy was evident at all levels in the turnaround schools. The coordinated literacy strategy allowed for the alignment of support structures from professional development for teachers, timetabling, and provision of resources to assessment to work in an integrated fashion, with all school personnel sharing a common vision. Leithwood and Strauss (2008) report that a shift in attitude was required in order for school

leaders to move low-performing schools into the "crisis stabilization" phase. When achievement levels were low, teachers tended to feel no connection between their efforts and expertise and the performance of their students; responsibility for outcomes was placed primarily on students' home backgrounds or inherent learning ability. For sustained improvement to occur, teachers needed to believe that all students could achieve, contingent on appropriate instruction and collective effort; that schools can teach students to read despite their home backgrounds; and that there is an evidence base that could be accessed to learn effective teaching strategies.

The question of future needs in school turnaround research is an important area for review in Ontario at the moment. The strong teacher union presence limits the capacity to conduct research into teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices. The data that are available also limit researchers' abilities to pinpoint the "active ingredients" or to rank the impacts of specific interventions and strategies on improvement of student and school performance. Inferring causation from an undifferentiated collection of new strategies is dangerous; there is the risk of confusing causation with correlation. There is a need for supporting some controlled studies in certain school boards to determine which strategies are the most effective and worthy of implementation, although Ontario does not have a history of doing so.

The Impact of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat on Education in Ontario

In spite of provincial autonomy, the education systems across Canada are generally similar, having shared values and similar policies and practices (Klinger, DeLuca, & Miller, 2008; McEwen, 1995). Every province and territory administers some form of large-scale assessment, designed to measure and monitor student achievement over time. However, there are no examples in Canada in which the results of these assessments are used to penalize or reprimand schools or teachers. Ontario was one of the last provinces to reintroduce provincial assessments, but it was one of the first to introduce specific government-directed initiatives to increase student achievement. These initiatives began with the government's declaration that 75 percent of Ontario's students would meet the provincial standard in literacy and numeracy, and the LNS that was created by the MOE was intended to be the primary vehicle to support underperforming schools and improve student achievement in general. The creation of the LNS is the first instance in which a provincial government in Canada has actively engaged in efforts to improve student achievement. The following review of the LNS and its initiatives illustrates the impacts of a government organization whose role is to help improve student achievement across the system. The review focuses on specific LNS initiatives related to supporting underperforming schools, with a primary focus on the OFIP.

The LNS has based some of its initiatives on other recent and similar initiatives elsewhere, most notably those in England, and on relevant research on how to increase and sustain higher levels of student achievement. However, the manner in which the LNS has gone about building capacity and supporting low-performing schools is noteworthy. Based on the government's promise to ensure Ontario students' attainment of specific education performance targets, the LNS helped to create a sense of urgency with respect to these targets. LNS staff challenged schools — and challenged themselves — to set high expectations for reforms, asking for a deep commitment to student achievement. The primary work of the LNS has focused on capacity building, both within the LNS itself and among Ontario educators. The LNS developed a long-term strategic plan and began its efforts to enact its initiatives. Throughout this process, there has been recognition that systemic change requires time and patience but also requires expectation for success and some form of pressure. This recognition was the basis for the nine strategies supported by the LNS (CLLRN, 2009; Glaze & Campbell, 2007):

1. Help school boards set ambitious achievement targets with high expectations for student learning and assist boards and schools to develop improvement plans to meet their targets.

2. Establish and support teams of educators at the regional, board, and school levels to drive continuous improvement in literacy and numeracy.

3. Provide smaller class sizes in the primary grades and provide training on effective teaching practices and the use of assessment data to guide instruction.

4. Provide resources and professional development to build the capacity of board and school leaders to implement effective instructional practices in literacy and numeracy.

5. Distribute resources to support board and school target setting and planning that reflect local contexts.

6. Provide professional development to target interventions for selected groups that continue to underperform (e.g., Aboriginal students, English language learners, special education students, male students).

7. Embark on a process of community outreach and engagement to build support for the LNS.

8. Demonstrate a commitment to research- and evidence-based inquiry and decision-making and find effective ways to share this information with educators.

9. Establish Ontario's presence, nationally and internationally, as a jurisdiction learning from and contributing to its knowledge about improving literacy and numeracy achievement.

Two other important aspects of the LNS have been its efforts to create partnerships with other education stakeholders in Ontario — most notably the federations (i.e., unions), the principals' councils, and the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) — and the OFIP strategy, which provides resources and expertise to low-performing schools. Throughout its work, the LNS executive team has endeavored to include other education stakeholders in its planning. The relationship has been strained at times, especially with the various teachers' federations, which feel a loss of autonomy because of the LNS and also have concerns about external accountability. The federations are concerned, as well, about the increased time teachers must provide to support the LNS initiatives. Nevertheless, the federations have benefited from directed funding to support federation-led literacy and numeracy initiatives, and members of the federations have been actively involved in the development of many of the teaching resources put forward by the LNS and its parent agency, the Ontario MOE. Principals' councils have also been concerned about the increased expectations and time requirements for their members, especially those in the OFIP schools. However, these councils acknowledge the potential value of a directed focus for education improvement. Lastly, the school board directors, through CODE, have worked with the LNS to ensure that they retain their autonomy while, at the same time, they are able to access the types of resources and expertise they need from the LNS.

The previous TSP and the current OFIP are particularly important aspects of the LNS. These programs reflect the philosophy guiding the LNS's turnaround and improvement efforts. Underperforming schools are not chastised. Rather, there is a recognition that the educators in these schools are often working in very challenging conditions. Therefore, supports (funding and expertise) are provided to help them meet the challenges that may be preventing their students from being successful. Ideally, the SAOs who work with OFIP schools provide guidance and expertise or are able to help the school staff focus their own instructional improvement efforts. The SAOs have access to a wide variety of resources and are able to direct administrators or teachers in the OFIP schools to these resources.

What Have Been the Results?

The Canadian Language & Literacy Research Network (CLLRN) completed an external evaluation of the LNS and its 2009 mandate. The review's overall conclusion was that the LNS has had an impact on capacity building, on increases in student achievement in low-achieving schools, and on focusing school efforts on literacy teaching and learning in Ontario. The review also noted ongoing challenges, including the need for better research-informed initiatives, the effective distribution of supporting materials to principals and teachers, the rapid pace of implementation, the focus on literacy over numeracy, and the turnover and training of the SAOs. Nevertheless, the LNS has worked to meet these challenges while continuing to provide the supportive pressure it believes

is required to sustain education improvement in Ontario.

Student achievement in literacy and numeracy, as shown through the provincial assessments, appears to be increasing in Ontario. However, several challenges have been identified with the use of EQAO results. First, equating of the provincial assessments has been an ongoing challenge, making it difficult to ensure that the standards are consistent from year to year, especially on the grades 3 and 6 tests. Second, given the diverse geographic contexts in Ontario, there are many very small schools throughout the province. The provincial assessment results in these schools are rarely consistent from year to year, making it difficult to know if reform efforts are actually having an impact. Lastly, the cutoff scores for each of the OFIP categories appear to be based primarily on convenience and logical groupings, rather than on a research-supported definition of what qualifies as an underperforming school. Together, these challenges make it difficult to determine whether and to what extent improvement from year to year is real or, instead, is due to random measurement error.

Nevertheless, evidence suggests that, overall, the LNS has been successful. In 2003, only 53 percent of elementary students demonstrated literacy achievement at the provincial standard; in 2007 (the most recent year for which EQAO scores were available at the time of this writing), 64 percent did so. Similarly, the percentage of schools in which fewer than 34 percent achieved the provincial standard fell from 19 percent in 2003 to 5 percent in 2007. In 2003, 13 percent of elementary schools had 75 percent of students reaching the provincial standard; in 2007, 25 percent of schools did so. While there were more low-achieving schools than high-achieving schools in 2003, the opposite was true in 2007. Furthermore, the specific programs developed by the MOE and the LNS to target low-performing schools also appear to have been successful. For example, all 14 schools that joined the TSP in the first year saw improvement in their EQAO reading outcomes, with an average increase of 15 percent more students meeting the provincial standard. The LNS has tracked shifts that have occurred in the schools connected with the OFIP strategy, and it has found that the proportions of students meeting the provincial standard on the grade 3 literacy test improved in 66, 77, and 50 percent of OFIP 1, 2, and 3 schools, respectively (Canadian Society for Studies in Education, 2008). Improvement was even more marked in grade 6, with improvements in 76, 67, and 61 percent of OFIP 1, 2, and 3 schools, respectively. The number of schools meeting the criteria for OFIP 1 (i.e., having fewer than 34 percent of students at the provincial standard) fell from 110 schools in 2006–07 to 18 schools in 2007–08.

Unsurprisingly, the extent of the increases has diminished over time, but the trend remains positive, which is unusual for most large-scale achievement testing programs. School principals in the OFIP schools acknowledge the pressures placed on them from the LNS, but they also comment that these pressures are reasonable. As one principal noted during the CLLRN (2009) evaluation, "I don't feel pressure [or] support from the board — I feel it from the LNS. Yes, it is appropriate. We need more practices mandated as 'non-negotiables.'" While teachers were somewhat less supportive of the OFIP designations of their schools, 20 percent of the teachers surveyed from the OFIP schools during the evaluation were very positive about the LNS. One teacher commented, "I have found parts of this process so wonderful for both myself and the success of my students with respect to written communication. Seeing how to use exemplars in my class helped me tremendously. I feel guilty for not using them before, but I had never been shown [how]." Given the historical mistrust that has typically existed between teachers and the provincial MOE, such levels of positive support are noteworthy.

The recent addition of an OFIP 3 designation for schools is also a potentially important aspect of the OFIP strategy, since schools with that designation are the "average" schools, those that are neither grossly underperforming nor meeting provincial expectations. It remains to be seen how successful these schools will be in the long term. They are an important part of the long-term provincial goals because they make up the majority of the underperforming schools in Ontario.

OFIP Schools and the SAOs

While the original TSP was an optional initiative available to schools having less than 34 percent of their grade 3 students meeting the provincial expectations, participation in OFIP is not optional. As previously described, well-defined

selection criteria exist for the program. The two years of support the OFIP 1 and 2 schools receive are believed to be sufficient to provide a framework for subsequent, ongoing improvements toward meeting the provincial targets. OFIP 1 schools receive the greatest support, including five to eight visits per school year by an SAO to work with the school. OFIP 2 schools receive three to five visits per year from an SAO, including support for developing their improvement plans. The SAOs also work with district staff to help the district implement capacity-building strategies for the schools (Glaze & Campbell, 2007).

SAOs are expected to tailor their support based on the individual and specific needs of the boards and schools with which they work. Typically, these supports involve providing access to professional development or relevant resources or guidance with respect to school improvement plans and the enacting of these plans, or some form of instruction and direct guidance about instructional practices. School leaders from both administrative and teaching staff have been identified in the OFIP schools, and these literacy and numeracy leaders have been provided with extensive professional development on change initiatives and literacy instruction. Principals also have strong control over the manner in which the funds available to them are used.

The SAOs are divided into regional teams but work individually or in pairs with each of the schools. Each regional SAO team has a lead SAO who is responsible for the coordination and functioning of the team. SAOs have been recruited from the ranks of experienced teachers, principals, and board-level directors, superintendents, and consultants who have ample expertise in literacy and numeracy instruction or capacity building; previously they have served as SAOs on secondment, or temporary assignment, from their school boards for terms of a few years before returning to their regular positions. Recent changes in the larger Ontario public service sector have brought the secondment system to a halt, and the influence of that change on LNS recruitment practices has yet to be completely felt. While the secondments increased the interaction between the provincial and district levels of the system and acknowledged the expertise of Ontario's educators, they also have led to significant SAO staff turnover and differences in levels of professional knowledge among SAOs. The SAOs meet relatively regularly as a regional group and also have several joint meetings with other SAOs at the MOE offices in Toronto. These meetings are used for professional development and training, as well as discussion and exploration of ongoing challenges, issues, and discoveries. Nevertheless, the capacity and training of SAOs continues to be a challenge; according to the CLLRN (2009) evaluation, SAOs reported spending less than 5 percent of their time on their own professional development.

Systemic Aspects of the LNS and the OFIP Strategy

The major purpose of the LNS is to support systemic change in the efforts of Ontario's educators, increasing the focus on foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes. The annual provincial assessment results provided by the EQAO form the basis for decision-making and identification of schools and boards requiring support. School principals and school board leaders have maintained the responsibility for student performance. There are no direct consequences for not achieving the provincial standards, nor are there incentives for achieving them. Boards have also begun to use their own assessment procedures to monitor student progress over the year. These assessments are typically from commercial vendors (e.g. CASI, DRA) and, although they were developed as summative tools, they are being used in a formative manner to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and to support subsequent teaching and learning. These formative assessment practices have become increasingly promoted in Ontario in alignment with the "assessment for learning" framework also being promoted in Ontario (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004). Currently, there remains only tentative evidence for these formative approaches to assessment as tools to support increased student achievement.

The LNS model has continued to focus on professional responsibility and accountability, as opposed to external accountability. While a major portion of the work completed by the LNS has been to support the identified underperforming schools in the OFIP strategy, the LNS and the Ontario MOE also develop resources and materials

that are made available to all educators in Ontario. Examples include DVDs and webcasts focused on differentiated instruction and shared reading, and a set of print materials focused on math instruction. Experts and researchers have been key partners in the production of these education resources and materials. External reviews have generally been supportive, concluding that these resources are commonly based on sound instructional practices and current thinking about teaching and learning.

Generally, the resources focus on what have been called "high-yield" strategies. Examples include differentiated instruction; specific reading practices largely focused on comprehension; ongoing, consistent assessment strategies; and dedicated blocks of instructional time for literacy. The majority of the instructional strategies for literacy target higher-order thinking skills around reading comprehension to construct meaning from text. These materials have formed the foundation for the work of the SAOs in OFIP schools and school boards, with shared and guided reading being two of the strategies most strongly advocated. This has resulted in less individualization of the types of support OFIP schools receive, but has also resulted in a consistent and common message throughout the province. The strategies address learning expectations commonly required to meet the provincial standards in literacy and numeracy. One potential challenge is that many of the students in the OFIP 1 schools may not have the foundational literacy and numeracy skills required to benefit greatly from these high-yield strategies. None of the web or print resources designed by the LNS focus on basic reading skills, such as decoding or phonics. One of the recommendations from the CLLRN (2009) evaluation was for the LNS to balance its focus on high-yield and "high-comprehension" strategies with a similar focus on foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Other relevant overall systemic aspects of the LNS have been the weighted focus on literacy and its shift from the primary grades (K–3) to the junior grades (grades 4–6). The original TSP focused on the primary grades. Interestingly, the CLLRN evaluation noted that primary teachers in the OFIP schools felt less connected to the OFIP strategy, a finding that illustrates the challenges with sustaining long-term, systemic change efforts.

School Leadership

School leadership structures in Ontario have not changed as a result of the LNS initiatives. Rather, there have been increased attempts to build the instructional leadership capacity of teachers, principals, superintendents, and directors of school boards. School leaders in the OFIP schools have also exploited the opportunities made available through the LNS for all educators. As part of the overall LNS strategy, in 2005–06, more than 12,000 principals and teachers attended workshops on shared reading, and more than 16,000 principals and teachers participated in training on differentiated instruction. This provided a shared knowledge base that could be elaborated upon in school-based Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in all schools, not just in OFIP schools. PLCs are intended to foster the leadership skills of both teachers and principals, allowing them to build professional knowledge in partnerships. A similar model exists for directors of low-achieving school districts and boards and for directors of high-achieving school districts and boards, to network, share solutions, and learn from each other. In addition, the Leading Student Achievement (LSA) initiative, a joint effort of the principals' councils and the LNS, helped nearly 1,800 principals to hone their knowledge and skills around instructional leadership of effective learning teams within and across schools.

The LNS has provided direction to superintendents to assist them in working with principals to bring schools in line with expectations, including articulating high expectations for all students, implementing the uninterrupted literacy block, helping identify and encourage the use of a common literacy assessment instrument across schools in a board, and assembling a School Improvement Team to write a school improvement plan aligned with the board improvement plan. Principals shared the responsibility with the School Improvement Team to effectively use student data to inform teaching decisions, and to ensure that the instructional strategies advocated by the SAOs were implemented. If it was not already part of their practice, principals were encouraged to make regular visits to classrooms to provide support to teachers, monitor progress, and schedule professional development. Principals in partnership with the school leadership team would direct school resources

and put in place instructional strategies to meet the needs of particular groups of students in order to close the achievement gap. These strategies were largely based on hypotheses put forward by education researchers and experienced educators (e.g., use of nonfiction materials, boys' reading clubs, graphic novels). One of the ongoing challenges for these types of initiatives is that they often lack a strong evidence base.

School Climate

In considering the effect of LNS programs on school climate, this section focuses on two aspects: the perceptions by teachers and principals of the direction and actions taken by the LNS, and the impact of LNS programs on elements of the education environment not specifically linked to achievement outcomes. While the overall impact of the LNS has been perceived positively, the response from educators has not been entirely uncritical. Some teachers report that the renewed focus on literacy and numeracy has been an important and vital stimulus. Others are concerned that the focus on literacy has reduced the time for teaching other important curricula. There are ongoing concerns about large-scale testing in elementary schools. While this is not the responsibility of the LNS, there is some concern that the EQAO scores alone are the impetus for the massive change in expectations and the extremely quick pace at which LNS initiatives are being rolled out. In its evaluation of the LNS (2009), the CLLRN reported that 55 percent of teachers and 65 percent of principals surveyed agreed with the statement, "The pace at which new resources are provided is too fast." Another teacher commented, "The resources and initiatives have been extremely valuable and improved my teaching, but the pace has been very stressful and if it continues, I can see myself burning out quickly." There is also an increased expectation for OFIP schools to increase parent involvement and community engagement through implementing programs like family math night. Presently, there are no public data about the extent to which parents of children in OFIP schools report feeling engaged in the education system.

Such climate-related issues as teacher-student relations, school cleanliness and orderliness, and parents' relationships with the school have not been a focus of LNS or MOE evaluations. One program with the potential to affect these factors is the Character Education initiative implemented by the LNS in collaboration with other branches of the MOE. Under this initiative, there is a deliberate attempt to foster the character attributes that are valued by schools and communities and that are thought to form the basis for respectful, safe, caring, and inclusive places to learn. As part of this initiative, the LNS held 15 regional forums in early 2007, engaging parents, community groups, local businesses, and the education sector to initiate consensus-building around the qualities to be incorporated into a character development framework. Responsibility for implementation of the Character Education initiative rests with school boards. Key features of the initiative are the requirement that each board go through a consultation process that engages students, staff, trustees, parents, and the community; the prominence of students in leadership roles; and the establishment of partnerships with community organizations to provide students with opportunities to engage with the community. The school board must also collect data to monitor the impact of a character development curriculum on achievement, attendance, behavior, and students' community involvement. Since the project is still in its early stages at the time of this writing, such data are not yet available to the public and, therefore, it is not possible to estimate its effect on school climate.

Instructional Practices

A cornerstone of the LNS mandate has been identification of a strategic theme called "developing precision in knowledge, skills, and daily practices for improving learning." This involves three components that have formed the focus of the LNS's instruction-related activity. The first component is capacity building to increase school staff's professional knowledge and confidence in literacy and numeracy instruction, "assessment for learning," classroom management, and instructional leadership. The second component includes use of data to inform instruction and track student progress, at both the school and system levels. The third component is meticulous attention paid to curriculum development, instruction, and interventions (the high-yield strategies). This promotion of instructional strategies and organizational features is believed to be a key to increasing students' literacy and numeracy achievement.

In many cases, teaching staff have received needed professional development to bring skills and understanding to par. The CLLRN (2009) evaluation found that approximately 80 percent of teachers and principals surveyed believed that their knowledge and understanding of effective literacy practices had changed moderately to dramatically over the three-year existence of the LNS. Consistent with the intensive support given to OFIP schools, the CLLRN review found that teachers from OFIP schools were significantly more likely than those from non-OFIP schools to express agreement with statements that they had adequate support and professional development to implement new strategies. The suite of professional development materials (e.g., podcasts, DVDs, print materials, film clips) developed by the LNS not only supports the OFIP schools but makes these strategies available to all schools in the province. Determining the best method for the use of these materials is an ongoing challenge for the LNS. They are used by the SAOs in the OFIP schools; thus, it is not surprising that teachers in the OFIP 1 schools reported a higher rate of use of these resources than did teachers in the other schools.

External Support

The LNS was created by the Ontario MOE, and other education stakeholders (e.g., principals' councils, teachers' federations) were not involved in its creation. Nevertheless, the funds, materials, and professional development opportunities provided by the LNS to schools and teachers have resulted in "cautious" working relationships between this branch of the MOE and educators throughout the province. These relationships have resulted in LNS support for specific forms of professional development. Councils and federations have allowed their members to be seconded to the LNS and the MOE. Funding provided by the LNS has been the major impetus for the working relationships that exist. Schools throughout the province receive a fixed amount of funding from the provincial MOE to provide education services and support professional development. Council and federation dues provide some funding to support members' ongoing professional learning. The LNS has become one of the few alternative sources of funding available to further support school improvement efforts or to provide release time for teachers to participate in professional learning opportunities. As an example, the funds provided for OFIP 1 and OFIP 2 schools have provided access to materials and resources that would not have been available previously. Since 2006, Ontario has invested $25 million annually in the OFIP strategy, with an additional $8 million given for before- and after-school tutoring programs, another MOE strategy intended to support struggling learners.

Other Factors

Another potentially important factor in raising student and school performance in Ontario has been the use of School Improvement Plans. These plans have been a requirement for schools and boards for several years, but some recent changes have been intended to better focus and align the plans, subsequent practices, and measures of improvement. Once again, the LNS has been instrumental in this regard, creating the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF). The SEF is a document that provides guidelines and the structures to help boards and schools more effectively plan for improvement, set achievement targets, and use formative assessment practices to measure success. In 2007, boards also received resources to fund a new internal position, the School Effectiveness Lead. This individual was responsible for implementing the SEF, supporting superintendents and principals around board and school improvement planning.

Another initiative, the Statistical Neighbours Tool, was also created and promoted for potentially helping principals to collaborate and share strategies and issues. The tool enables principals to identify other schools in the province that share similar contextual characteristics (e.g., demographics, student income, regional similarities, ESL and special needs populations). A principal can then contact the principals in similar schools to discuss shared problems or, if there are substantial differences in assessment results, learn about strategies that may be responsible for the differences in outcomes. The tool has been piloted in a small number of school boards, with minor success to date. The current plan is to continue revising the tool to make it easier to access and use.

Results and Outlook

Student achievement in Ontario has been rising slowly over time. The lowest-achieving schools have seen the greatest improvements, most

likely due to the intensive support that the LNS and the MOE have provided. The provincial goal has not yet been reached, but results from the large-scale provincial testing indicate that the province's education system is moving forward. The number of OFIP 1 schools continues to decline, and greater proportions of students are meeting the provincial standards each year. Educators throughout the province have acknowledged an increased awareness of the needs and pressure to focus more intently on literacy and, to a lesser extent, numeracy instruction. This has raised some concerns, but it is generally acknowledged that this will benefit Ontario's students. Partnerships with other stakeholders continue to develop. In particular, the federations have benefited from the funds and increased professional development available through the LNS and the MOE.

The provincial premier's initial promise certainly created a sense of urgency and helped focus the attention of educators on literacy and, to a lesser extent, numeracy. It also provided the LNS with the mandate to direct resources and develop initiatives intended to meet the achievement targets. While the premier set a very optimistic timeline for the attainment of the targets, the MOE has acknowledged that the work of the LNS and, within it, that of the OFIP are long-term strategies. The ongoing improvements in student achievement have yielded more optimism that greater progress can be made, but the experience has also underscored the reality that real changes in students' learning and achievement take time. Changes in achievement can only occur after system capacity has been developed and teachers and educators have the in-depth understanding, knowledge, and skills to enact the necessary teaching practices. The combination of pressure and support that has been provided is generally viewed positively.

Sustainability of the gains made under these initiatives is an area of concern. Funding for the position of School Effectiveness Lead is available for one year only; funding for OFIP 1 and OFIP 2 schools is available for two years only. The expectation is that the intensive capacity-building efforts during those two years should substantially raise the expertise and attitudes of classroom teachers. It remains to be seen whether the gains made under this intense short-term support model, in which the intensive provision of resources abates after a defined period, will be sustainable once the resources are no longer available. Meanwhile, achievement gaps remain throughout the province for targeted populations, most specifically male students. There are ongoing issues as new initiatives and ideas begin to take center stage in the education sector. For example, "assessment for learning" (AFL) is becoming a popular topic in Ontario, despite the general lack of empirical evidence on how it can be effectively implemented or on its effectiveness. Still, provincial funds are now being directed to support separate initiatives linked to this assessment philosophy. There are attempts to integrate AFL with the current LNS and MOE initiatives, but until there is a broader understanding of AFL among educators, these integrative attempts will likely be less effective. Capacity building within the LNS itself is also a crucial area of further work. Due to recent changes in government hiring policies, there has been great turnover within SAO ranks, with the consequence that there are now many less-experienced SAOs who require ongoing professional development. The LNS has recognized this as an area needing further effort.

Implications for Other Nations

Other countries wishing to increase achievement in low-performing schools may learn from the case of Ontario and the OFIP strategy. Major highlights of the OFIP strategy include targeted resource support for literacy initiatives, differentiation of support based on level of need, reducing class sizes in the primary grades, system-level change processes, adopting a collaboration and networking model across levels of school personnel, and, where possible, local autonomy.

A number of factors appear to have played a role in the ongoing turnaround of low-achieving schools in Ontario. The differences between OFIP and non-OFIP schools are largely quantitative ones. The same instructional strategies are encouraged, regardless of OFIP status. The same collaborative model of sharing professional learning in PLCs is being promoted. OFIP and non-OFIP schools both focus on the alignment of literacy-related priorities, from instructional practices in the classroom to school and board improvement planning and budgeting for literacy-oriented materials,

resources, and professional development. Thus, the primary factors contributing to the successful turnaround of low-performing or average-performing OFIP schools seem to have been the intensity of support and the balance between central authority and local autonomy. This balance is still evolving, but school principals and board leaders have largely overseen their own improvement efforts, with support from the LNS as needed and requested. There have been challenges as the LNS and school staffs have negotiated their working relationships, but positive gains in achievement have been made when educators and the LNS were able to work together. This local autonomy may be hindered by contractual obligations and hiring policies that limit the power of a principal to determine school staffing. Thus, leaders have had to develop their skills in promoting and developing the education and leadership skills of teachers present in those schools. This may point to the important role of school administrators and the ongoing efforts to promote PLCs.

All teachers in the province can access professional development through the LNS, either through materials or through formal in-service training; intensive professional development for OFIP principals and teachers is provided using a variety of delivery models. The collaborative learning and "at the elbow" support provided by the SAOs communicate a sense of urgency and yield increased knowledge and confidence around literacy instruction that is likely effective in raising literacy scores. Another important factor is

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Don Klinger

Don Klinger is an associate professor in Assessment and Evaluation at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. He completed his PhD at the Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation at the University of Alberta in 2000. Dr. Klinger's research interests include quantitative research methods, the examination of psychometric and policy issues of large-scale assessments, program evaluation, and measures of school effectiveness. He is particularly interested in the methods used to evaluate students and the subsequent decisions, practices, and policies that arise from these evaluations. His research largely focuses on the uses and misuses of large-scale assessments and data sets to monitor and measure student achievement and program effectiveness. These interests have allowed him to publish research in both national and international journals considering the uses of data for supporting education decisions, specifically school and teacher practices and policies. Research grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Education Quality and Accountability Office, and professional teaching organizations in Ontario have enabled Dr. Klinger to examine the changing assessment culture surrounding large-scale testing and the impact of such testing programs. Much of the work published by Dr. Klinger uses hierarchical linear modeling to explore the student- and school-level factors associated with differing educational outcomes for students.

An ongoing interest for Dr. Klinger is to build connections among the research and professional communities in education. His professional experience as a teacher and district coordinator of assessment and evaluation in British Columbia provides him with an understanding of both education research and practice. He shares his expertise with professional organizations in order to better promote and facilitate the use of research in education. Dr. Klinger is a founding member of the Assessment and Evaluation Group at Queen's University and was part of the external evaluation team for the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. Currently, he is a member of the Psychometric Expert Panel for the Education Quality and Accountability Office; a member of the Ontario Education Research Panel; and the co-chair of the task force revising the Student Evaluation Standards.

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district-level emphasis on both the importance of data for instructional decision-making and the fact that data should come from an instrument common to primary and junior schools within a school board. Finally, the ample provision of materials and resources targeting specific aspects of literacy needs has been a primary focus in improved schools and appears to be related to their increased student achievement.

Ontario is still very much engaged in reaching its specified targets. Aiming to fulfill its mandate, the LNS has already identified a greater need for attention to numeracy, including capacity building and developing guidelines and resources in this area. Continuing development includes a focus on better delivery models for professional development materials to enhance take-up and application of information therein. The CLLRN (2009) evaluation also recommended an expansion of the current definition of evidence-based practice to include a greater focus on empirical studies of literacy and numeracy development outside the bounds of the province

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