

SUPPORTING THE ONTARIO LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

What We Heard from the Experts

BACKGROUND

Ontario is recognized internationally as a leader in educational improvement. In its 2010 report *Capturing the Leadership Premium*, McKinsey and Company identified Ontario as one of eight high-performing educational systems in the world, on the basis of its strong performance on international tests and evidence of good school leadership practices.

In 2008, prior to the launch of the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS), the ministry consulted with an expert panel to ensure that the strategy would be grounded in reliable evidence. Since then, research on educational leadership in Ontario has been extensive.

As we move forward with the OLS, it is important that we continue to consult with experts for advice on how to proceed in our journey to excellence. In winter 2012, the ministry convened an expert panel of academic researchers and education practitioners to tap into their wisdom and learn more about their findings.

WHAT WE HEARD

The panel was invited to explore six big questions. What follows is a synopsis of what we heard.

QUESTION 1

Since the release of the 2010 McKinsey report, the focus on leadership in Ontario and around the world has intensified. There has been increased research activity, and school districts have been working hard to try to select and develop strong leaders on a consistent basis. What evidence have you seen that we are getting better at doing this?

Responses

- In Ontario, we have effectively communicated the importance of encouraging and supporting principals to become instructional leaders.

“Ontario has a strong cadre of formal school leaders who are very curriculum-savvy.”

Steven Katz

- We often select leaders based on their ability to get tasks done, but once in the job, principals find that their role is to influence others to get tasks done. We need to be cognizant of this.
- We know what works. The trick for principals is to create the conditions to influence others to want to know, learn, and engage in what works.
- We need to provide more support for school and system leaders to learn the politics involved in school and board leadership, to help them succeed in creating a positive climate, a shared vision, and effective outreach initiatives.

“The decision to pursue a leadership position is easier for aspiring leaders when they see that those in the role receive high levels of support from colleagues and the board.”

François Massé

QUESTION 2

What high-impact interventions should be applied (and adapted to the particular context of each school district) to move individual districts and the province as a whole closer to consistent excellence in leadership? How can we facilitate implementation of those interventions?

Responses

- What we really need is “dissonance in the tent” – that is, vigorous discussion and debate – to get the diversity of thinking that makes ideas better.

“Succession planning requires interventions and focused programs that actively identify and target prospective leaders, including those who may not self-identify.”

Julian Hanlon

- Supervisory officers and the senior leadership team need “thinking time” and not just “operational-processing time”. They need time, for example, to learn and think about the world beyond education and the proven leadership styles and strategies that are being used in other contexts today.
- Supervisory officers need to help their districts become “assessment for learning systems”, but this has not been a traditional part of the work they have done.
- Learning networks are powerful tools for developing collective wisdom at both the school and system level.

QUESTION 3

The 2010 McKinsey report *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* indicates that there is a correlation between “a system’s performance stage and the tightness of central guidance to schools”. It goes on to say that “one of the biggest choices facing school systems ... is to what degree an intervention should be mandated and to what extent persuasion should be used” with districts that are at different performance stages (p. 26). As the ministry continues to support districts in strengthening their Board Leadership Development Strategy, what are your thoughts about the degree to which we should mandate the implementation of specific practices and interventions as opposed to attempting to persuade districts to adopt them?

Responses

- To initiate system change of any sort you have to have a mandate to begin with, but the mandate should be developed through consultation and collaborative decision making.

“Develop high-level strategies based on evidence, then hold districts accountable to contextualize and implement them and make them work at the local level by engaging our communities in appropriate ways.”

John Malloy

- We need to use mandates to create a climate in which people can’t avoid thinking about the most important things.
- We won’t “unleash greatness” if we mandate everything, because people who have a passion to make things better will spend time fighting the system rather than embracing it.
- Mandate broad goals that provide a strong focus for district leaders. Then, every time a decision is made, leaders at the system, school, and classroom levels can ask themselves “How does this relate to the goals”?
- Rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach, consider different intervention approaches – more flexibility and discretion for those who are successful in achieving results, and more direction for those who are not.

QUESTION 4

As the ministry works with districts, how can we best facilitate collective capacity building across the province to capture the “leadership premium” at the district level and to ensure that district leadership supports and drives improvement in schools and learning?

Responses

- Encourage districts to think about the structures that need to be put in place, such as leadership learning networks and opportunities for co-learning. Focus on clarity of direction and goals, and encourage everyone to see themselves as leaders.
- There is no magic in collaboration – together can be worse than alone – but it does offer the potential to move beyond what can be done when learning alone. When districts are setting up learning networks, they must think about setting up collaboration that encourages dissonance and diversity of thinking.
- Supervisory officers need to think deeply about what it means to build capacity in themselves as “lead learners”. But as human beings who tend to protect what we already know and believe, we try to avoid the hard thinking that would allow us to answer that question. We need an injection from the outside of opportunities for the kind of “dissonance” that will tap into our natural curiosity and help us delve deeper.
- Continue to encourage cross-district sharing of effective practices.

“Boards demonstrate what is important by what they pay attention to – What gets you a call from the central office? Is it related to the key board goals? ... Boards need to organize themselves to focus on the things that matter. They need to minimize the number of rules you have to break to be an effective leader.”

Ben Levin

QUESTION 5

Capturing the Leadership Premium states that “the identification of potential middle-tier leaders does not ... appear to have reached the ... level of consistency and sophistication as the identification of potential school leaders” (p. 25). What should we be doing to support succession planning for “middle-tier” leaders?

Responses

- We need more people moving across districts. Make it easier for this to happen.

“Establish a robust approach for districts to create short-term secondment opportunities for principals and supervisory officers within and beyond their district.”

Karen Edge

- Cultivate leadership for everyone. Don’t train leaders for just one school or even one district but for the whole system.
- We are not particularly good at asking “who is missing” from our talent pools and what are the barriers standing in the way of under-represented groups.
- Define career paths and use the capacity in the system to build leadership development, engaging senior individuals to mentor juniors.

QUESTION 6

What advice do you have for us in terms of the goals, priorities, and tactics that we set as we venture into this next phase of the work?

Responses

- We have done an excellent job of putting leadership at the forefront of our work in education. We need to capitalize more on the capacity and motivation of district leaders.
- Support innovation and focus on coherence – they are the “enablers”.
- Pay attention to the Personal Leadership Resources in the Ontario Leadership Framework – these attributes explain why some practices are enacted well while some are not enacted at all.

“If you could put all three of the psychological resources in one person -- resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy -- you would have an unbeatable combination. People with these qualities can provide energy and focus on work that needs to be done in a way that becomes highly contagious for others. These people will persist in the face of challenges until they are successful.”

Ken Leithwood

“Sometimes people refer to the cognitive resources as the ‘hard skills’ and to the social resources as the ‘soft skills’, but maybe we should be referring to them as the ‘hard skills’ and the ‘harder-to-develop’ skills.”

Michael Fullan

- Differentiate learning opportunities depending on the career-cycle stages of leaders – their needs are different at each stage.
- Further explore opportunities to work with trustees and teacher federations. These groups can help us in meeting our shared goals and priorities.

• • •

We are grateful to our participants for their passion, expertise, and good advice. We will be reflecting on this advice as we embark on next steps in moving the OLS forward.

CO-CHAIRS

Barry Pervin

Assistant Deputy Minister,
Instruction and Leadership
Development Division

Mary Jean Gallagher

Assistant Deputy Minister,
Student Achievement Division

PARTICIPANTS*

Anne-Marie Bitoni, Director, Nipissing–Parry Sound Catholic District School Board

Grant Clarke, Ministry of Education, Assistant Deputy Minister, Learning and Curriculum Division

Bruce Drewett, Ministry of Education, Director, Leadership Development Branch

Karen Edge, Professor, University of London

Michael Fullan, Special Advisor to the Premier of Ontario and the Ministry of Education

Jim Grieve, Ministry of Education, Assistant Deputy Minister, Early Learning Division

Julian Hanlon, Director, Ottawa Catholic District School Board

Bill Hogarth, Former Director, York Region District School Board

Gyslaine Hunter-Perreault, Director of Education, Conseil scolaire Viamonde

Steven Katz, Professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Veronica Lacey, President and CEO, The Learning Partnership

Ken Leithwood, Professor Emeritus, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Ben Levin, Professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Bob Macmillan, Dean of Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba

John Malloy, Director, Hamilton–Wentworth District School Board

François Massé, Supervisory Officer, Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est

Doris McWhorter, Ministry of Education, Director, Education Research and Evaluation Strategy Branch

Raymond Théberge, Ministry of Education, Assistant Deputy Minister, French-Language, Aboriginal Learning and Research Division

*Positions and affiliations listed were current at the date of the ministry’s Leadership Expert Think Tank: “Getting to Excellent”, which took place in Toronto on February 21, 2012.