

## The School District That Did The Right Things Right

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This is a mystery story. It is about a district that apparently did the right things but seemed not to get commensurate results across all classrooms and schools. In this paper we look closely at the details and discover a very important lesson about district-wide reform. The district is York Region District School Board (YRDSB) which is a large multicultural district just north of Toronto, Ontario. YRDSB is a rapidly growing district with a diverse socio-cultural and linguistic population with over 100 different languages spoken in York's schools. The school board has been opening, on average, at least 5 elementary schools a year for the last five years. There are a total of 140 elementary schools and 27 secondary schools with over 108,000 students in total and 8,000 teachers.

District wide reform has become increasingly important over the past decade as educational leaders have sought to achieve larger-scale, sustainable school improvement across the system. Our paper delves deeper into what such reform looks like, and what we must do to obtain substantial success in student learning.

We don't provide here a review of the research on school district reform (for lessons learned from several cases see Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn, 2004). One recent major study, however, puts our paper in perspective. The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2005) contains case studies of reform in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle. All three systems had the attention of political leaders at all levels of the system; all focused on many of the "right things" like literacy and math, used obvious choice strategies such as concentration on 'assessment for learning' data, invested heavily in professional development, developed new leadership, and focused on system-wide change.

And they had money—Seattle 35 million in external funds, Milwaukee with extra resources and flexibility, and Chicago with huge amounts of additional funds. There was great pressure, but success was not expected overnight. Decision makers and the public would have been content to see growing success over a five or even ten-year period. It would seem that the conditions were ideal to accomplish significant reform. Yet there was not corresponding success. The upfront conclusion of the case study evaluators:

The three districts we studied had decentralized resources and authority to the schools in different ways and had undergone significant organizational changes to facilitate their ambitious, instructional improvement plans. The unfortunate reality for the many principals and teachers we interviewed is that the districts were unable to change and improve practice on a large scale (Cross City Campaign, 2005:4).

Pursuing these curious findings, i.e., seemingly doing the right things and not getting results, our paper gets inside district reform in a way that explains why doing the apparent right things is not sufficient. We address this mystery in four sections: the right model; the wrong results (or were they?); Diamonds are in the details; and next steps.

### **The Right Model**

In 1999 when the district began its improvement strategy in earnest, the Director of Education, Bill Hogarth, set out to develop the best possible model for reform drawing heavily on external ideas but developing a capacity from within the district to lead the reform with a critical mass of leaders at all levels of the district: Hogarth focused the system by stating that all students will read by the end of Grade One. At this point, the district with support from School Plans for Continuous Improvement, decided to focus on improving literacy through a model which came to be known as the Literacy Collaborative (LC). Key features of the approach (Sharratt, 2001) included:

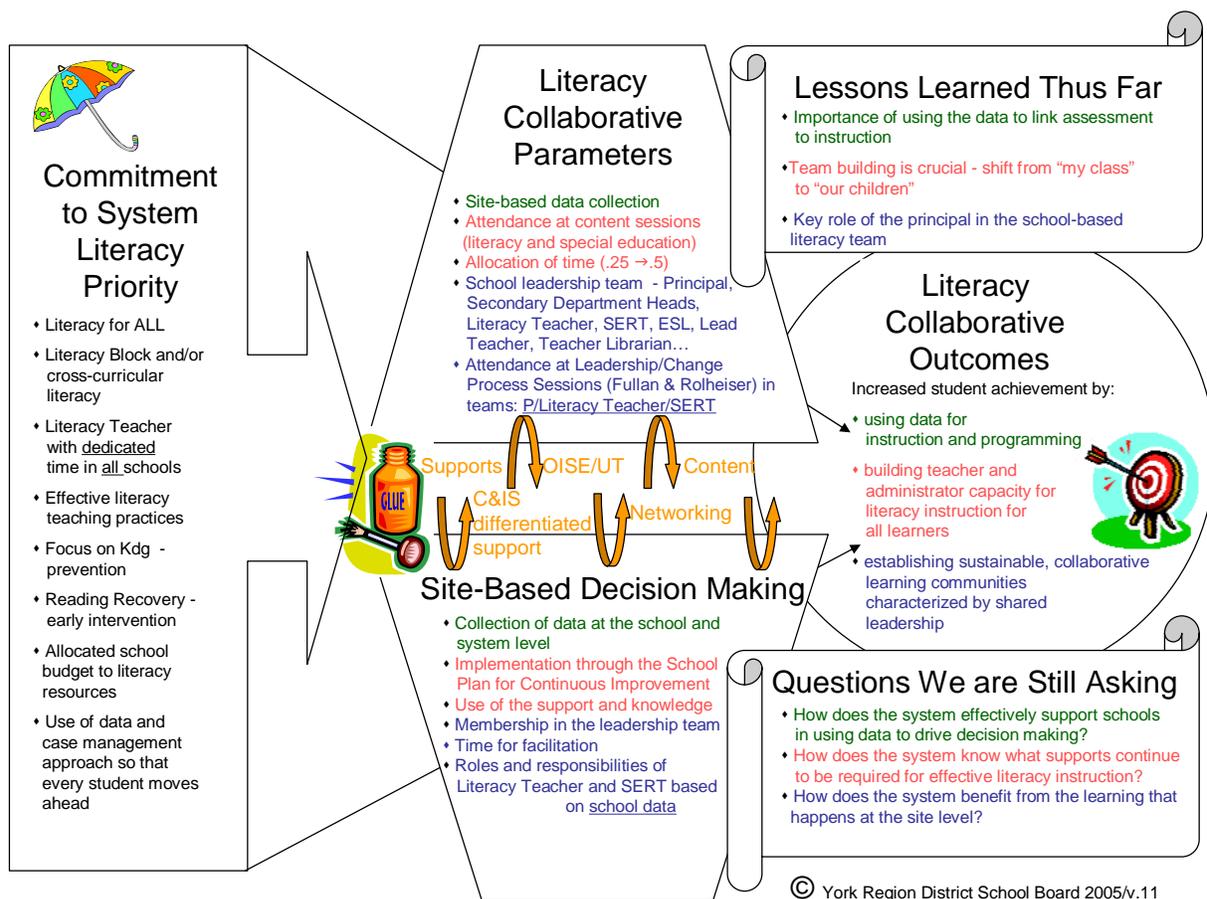
- A clearly articulated vision and commitment to a system literacy priority for all students which is continually communicated to everyone in the system;
- A system-wide comprehensive plan and framework for continuous improvement (SPCI);
- Using data to drive instruction and determine resources;
- Building administrator and teacher capacity to teach literacy for all students; and,
- Establishing professional learning communities at all levels of the system and beyond the district.

The district developed a strong team of Curriculum Coordinators and Consultants, all focused on literacy, and also linked into external expertise, particularly with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). Assessment of the effectiveness of the implementation was evaluated annually (Mascall, B., Rolheiser, C.,

Wallace, D., Anderson, C., and Fullan, M., 2005). Capacity-building focused on assessment, literacy, instructional strategies, and on change management. Capacity-building means any strategy that develops the collective efficacy of a group to raise the bar and close the gap of student achievement through 1) new knowledge competencies and skills, 2) enhanced resources, and 3) greater motivation. The operative word is *collective* – what the group can do whether it be a given school or indeed the whole district to raise the bar and close the gap of student achievement.

The district has invested in on-going, systematic professional development in literacy, assessment literacy, knowledge of the learner, and instructional intelligence, as well as professional learning focusing on change knowledge (understanding the change process, dealing with resistance, building professional learning communities, leadership and facilitation skills, and the like). The full blown model is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Literacy Collaborative Vision



The model may appear overwhelming and we do not intend to explain it in detail here. In fact, the model was developed over time and is presented and discussed on an ongoing basis within the system to clarify the overall vision and approach. Our point here is that the model is explicit and comprehensive. It reflects and guides the work of the district and is used by instructional leaders at all levels of the system.

More specifically, the strategy involved developing and supporting school literacy teams, starting with an initial cohort in 2001-2002 and adding schools over a four year period until all schools in the district were involved, elementary and secondary. Each school team consisted of three people - the principal, the Literacy Teacher (a leadership role typically released for .50 to 1.0 time to work along-side the principal and teachers during the school day) and the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT). The teams committed to participating in regional literacy professional development once a month and in change knowledge sessions, led by Carol Rolheiser and Michael Fullan, about 5-6 times a year.

The cohorts joined LC, starting with the most disadvantaged elementary schools. In 2001-2002, 17 elementary schools formed the first cohort; 21 schools were added in 2002-2003; 45 in 2003-2004, and the remaining 57 schools joined in 2004-2005. Thus, by 2005 all schools were involved, including all 27 secondary schools. There is a longstanding saying in the change literature that “change is a process not an event”. Such a process was actualized in York Region District School Board, not just because the professional development sessions were continuous over multiple years, but also because the strategy required school teams, working with their staffs, to apply ideas in between sessions and to continually build them into everyday practice. It was what happened in the schools in between sessions that counted. Ideas were constantly applied and discussed as the district emphasized “learning in context” i.e. learning by applying new ideas and building on them.

In short, the model was based on best knowledge. Comprehensive in coverage, the model was constantly shared and refined with all stakeholders---the school teams, the curriculum consultant/coordinator staff, the community, school board trustees, and the system as a whole. Moreover there was a multi-year commitment funded at the Board table and outlined in a comprehensive System Plan for Continuous Improvement (SPCI) so that the district stayed on course with the strategy. There was no mistaking that LC was clearly the system priority.

Each June the district organizes a Literacy Learning Fair in which the literacy leadership teams from all LC schools, present what they have accomplished and learned. Schools must report on the three goals of LC: increasing students' achievement by:

- using data to drive instruction and the selection of resources;
- building administrators' and teachers' capacity for successful classroom instruction; and,
- establishing professional learning communities across the district.

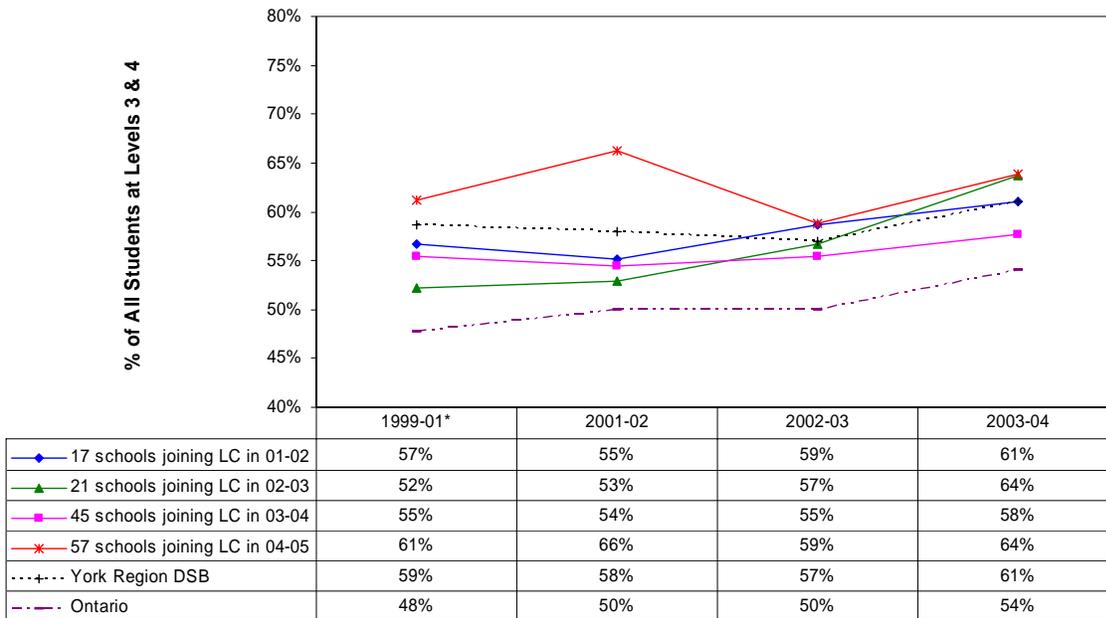
The Literacy Learning Fair is part celebration and part pressure and support to keep reaching new levels of achievement. If there was ever a district that got it right and was engaged in continuous reflection and development, York Region would be it. So, what results are they getting?

### **The Wrong Results (or were they?)**

York Region, as we have said, is strongly committed to the moral purpose of raising the bar and closing the gap of student achievement so it is a major interest to find out how they are doing relative to literacy achievement of its students. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) is an arms-length government agency charged with assessing and communicating on the achievement of all students in Ontario including for example, the literacy performance of Grade 3 and Grade 6 students. We do not hold EQAO results as the only measure of achievement—in fact, YRDSB's assessment for learning strategy relies heavily on a range of daily diagnostic, and formative, assessment strategies. Nonetheless, as a standardized assessment, EQAO scores are a significant barometer of progress over time.

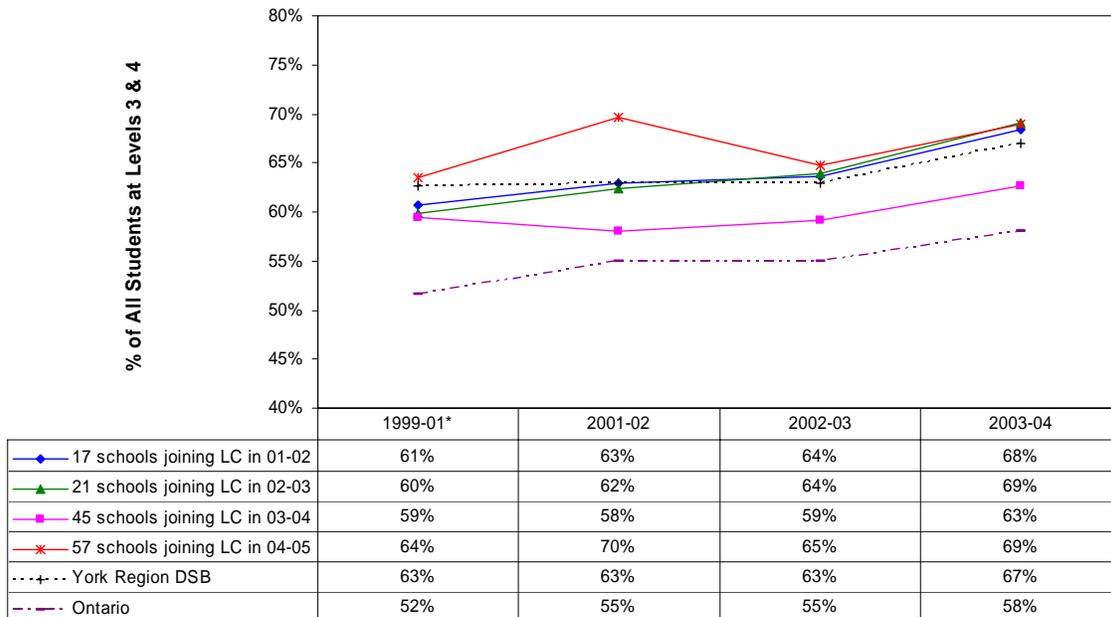
First let's examine the EQAO results for Grade 3 (reported as the percentage of students who achieved levels 3 and 4, which is the province's standard of proficiency). Figures 2 and 3 provide the results, by LC cohort group, district average, and provincial average.

**Figure 2. Grade 3 EQAO Reading Results of LC Schools**



\*: Weighted results of 1998-99, 1999-00 and 2000-01 school years.

**Figure 3. Grade 3 EQAO Writing Results of LC Schools**



\*: Weighted results of 1998-99, 1999-00 and 2000-01 school years.

It can be seen that cohorts 1 (17 schools) and 2 (21 schools) did only moderately better than the third and fourth cohorts. In Grade 3 Reading, for example, the first two LC cohorts moved from some 57/52 % to 61/64%, compared to the second two cohorts which advanced

from 55/61% to 58/61%. Very modest gains. Compared to the provincial average, York Schools as a whole moved from 59 to 61% compared to the provincial averages of 48 to 54%. Not very impressive. So what was happening and what are some of the possible explanations. Four possible explanations occur to us.

First, perhaps the model was not the right one, or the most powerful. We leave open this debate.

Second, it might be that the model has not yet had enough time to take effect. Cohorts 1 and 2 have been engaged only three years, and the largest cohorts have had little time –the 2003-2004 cohort of 45 schools has been involved for only one year, and for the largest group, 57 schools has not yet had a chance to see first year results as they began only in 2004-2005. Thus, 102 of the 140 elementary schools have been implementing the changes for a very short time.

Third, the results may indeed be impressive, given that the district is supporting an increasing number of students who are learning English as an additional language. The percentage of ESL/ELD learners that have reached the provincial standard on the EQAO assessments has improved over the past five years in reading, writing and mathematics (i.e., Grade 3 reading – 34% to 47%, Grade 3 writing – 47% to 63%, Grade 3 mathematics – 62% to 70%,). To hold one's own, and to move forward albeit in small steps, may be a significant accomplishment under these challenging conditions.

Fourth, perhaps there is more than meets the eye. We decided to examine more closely these seemingly rather average results given the effort of the district. And this is where we found “Diamonds in the details”.

### **Diamonds are in the Details**

There are 13 specific components of the LC model which are embedded in figure 1. We wanted to know to what extent each of the 17 schools in Cohort 1 had implemented the core components of the model. The components are briefly described as follows:

#### **1. Shared Beliefs and Understandings**

Leaders in LC schools must not only believe and understand but “walk the talk” – and take action to demonstrate that they believe:

- a) all students can achieve high standards given the right time and support
- b) all teachers can teach to high standards given the right assistance
- c) high expectations and early intervention are essential
- d) teachers need to be able to articulate what they do and why they teach the way they do (Hill & Crevola, 1999).

## 2. Embedded Literacy Teachers

This role was initially .5 Reading Recovery Teacher/.5 Literacy Teacher-allocated from within school staffing...now given to all schools, elementary and secondary, so that schools can be in LC without saying “impossible to find the staffing”. The Literacy Teacher works along-side classroom teachers modelling/demonstrating successful literacy practice – it is not about withdrawing needy students from the classroom learning environment! Literacy Teachers model assessment literacy that drives Instructional Intelligence (Bennett, Sharratt, Sangster, 2003)...this is “putting the individual faces on the data” and taking action in the classroom.

In the selection of Literacy Teachers the following characteristics are key:

- a) strong interpersonal/facilitation skills to be classroom coaches;
- b) strong assessment and instructional knowledge in balanced literacy programming in classrooms;
- c) co-transformational leadership with administrators; and,
- d) being on-going lead literacy learners (Sharratt, 2004).

## 3. Timetabled Literacy Block preferably at least 100 uninterrupted minutes per day must be allocated in the morning to emphasize:

- a) focused time on task on balanced literacy assessment and instruction;
- b) no distractions, nor interruptions, such as announcements, field trips, assemblies during this dedicated literacy time; and
- c) Literacy Teachers daily timetable aligns with the Literacy Block.

## 4. Principal Leadership

Principal’s deep structural understanding of successful literacy practices in classrooms is key. Therefore, principals in LC committed to:

- a) attending **all** regional literacy professional development sessions with their literacy leadership team;

- b) focusing on school data to improve student achievement; and,
- c) staying the course/maintaining the literacy plan, outlined in the school plan, until improvement is achieved.

#### 5. Full Implementation of Reading Recovery (RR)

This program is essential to our literacy success not only in identifying the lowest children in every grade one class, but also in moving these lowest achievers to read and write at the average level so that they are able to benefit from good classroom instruction.

Principals must:

- a) select competent and experienced primary teachers to be trained
- b) support daily lessons supporting the lowest individual students; and
- c) commit to ensuring all children who need it have access to this individualized daily RR instruction.

#### 6. Case Management Approach

In order to use data to drive instruction and select resources, we use a case management approach to:

- a) put individual faces on data so that teachers know which students need more support (daily guided reading within the classroom, booster group support, reading buddies etc.) constantly reviewing the data and updating students' progress;
- b) ensure that **all** teachers in the school have collective responsibility for **all** students;
- c) develop tracking boards that are used to monitor student progress throughout the year (kept in a location that is a constant reminder to staff);
- d) use diagnostic and assessment tools such as PM Benchmark and DRA assessments (three times a year at school level – results sent to district research department once a year, in June to be analysed), effectively for in-school and district determination of “next steps”. This helps to identify needs of each student but also to determine the needs of the system regarding professional development.

7. Literacy Professional Development (PD) at School Staff Meetings

Principals committed to literacy PD at staff meetings by reducing operational items to memo format. They focused on weaving together Assessment Literacy and Instructional Intelligence as experienced in classrooms through the literacy lens. This in-school PD was always based on the school's own data that the teachers brought and worked from together.

8. In-School Grade Meetings

These weekly meetings focused on literacy achievement of individual students by using common assessment tools or exemplars so that same-grade teachers could come to common understandings of the expected standards across a grade level.

9. Book Rooms of Leveled Books

Principals and literacy teams established book rooms at primary and junior levels where Literacy Teachers have leveled books for classroom teachers' use in order to bring all students to the next reading level, Kindergarten to Grade 6.

10. Allocation of School Budget for Literacy Resources

Administrators and the literacy leadership team agreed to allocate budget for resources. These are recommended by district curriculum consultants at literacy content sessions for use with students and also with teachers on staff for book study, for example.

11. Action Research Focused on Literacy

School literacy teams posed questions concerning literacy and increased student achievement that related to their school data. They explored the answers together throughout the year. District staff provided four PD sessions during the year for Action Research teams as well as provided one thousand dollar grants per school for on-site work. As they had to write a report at year end that documented their journey, the school teams were highly accountable through this process. These reports were compiled into a Board report for use by other schools and at the district level.

12. Parental Involvement

School literacy teams worked towards establishing community-home-school relationships. Many teams reached out to establish pre-school literacy programs in

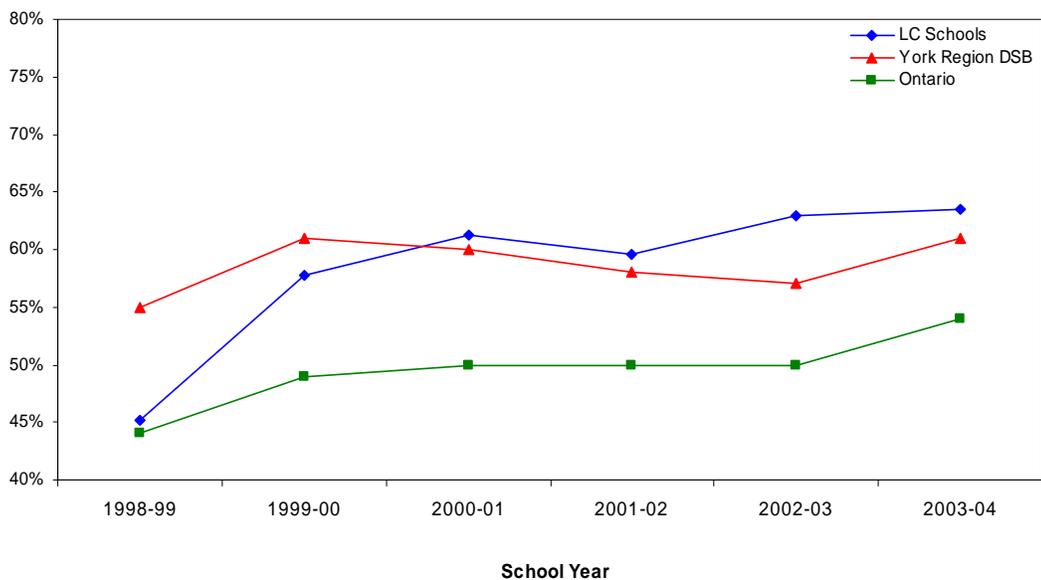
community places, with teachers going out to community centres as part of school readiness programs (Sharratt, 2004).

### 13. Cross-Curricular Literacy Connections

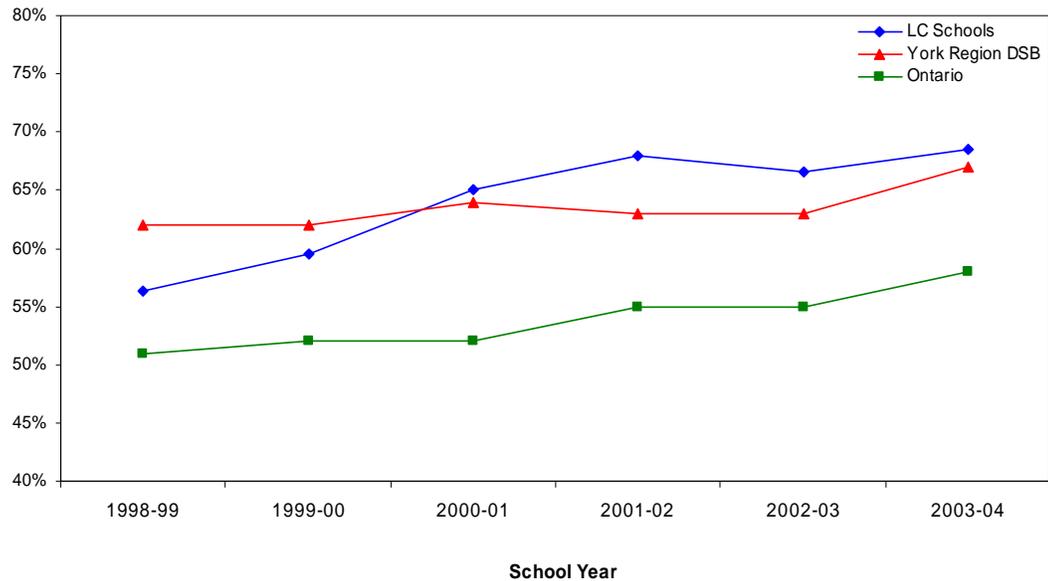
Although the Literacy Collaborative began with a primary focus, all teachers, JK-8 in these schools began to discuss and then implement teaching literacy in the content areas across the grades.

With a view to determining the extent of implementation of the 13 components, we analyzed the annual reports from the 17 schools, and interviewed the two initial leaders of the initiative about which schools had incorporated the strategies more fully. We found that there were 9 schools which had consistently followed the above 13 specific components of the model. When we then compared their performance compared to other groups, the results were dramatic. Figures 4 and 5 show the outcome of this comparison.

**Figure 4. Grade 3 EQAO Reading: % of All Students at Levels 3 & 4**



**Figure 5. Grade 3 EQAO Writing: % of All Students at Levels 3 & 4**



The 9 schools that implemented the above parameters consistently, despite being well below other York Region schools at the beginning of the strategy in 1998-1999, and despite being at the lowest end of the provincial average, outperformed both these groups within four years. For example, in Grade 3 Reading (Figure 4) the 9 LC schools were at 45% in 1998-99, and progressed above both comparison groups within two years and have remained above the other groups since then.

The explanation for better performance seems to lie in more careful attention to the previously discussed details of the LC model. These 9 schools that did especially well were initially among the lowest performing schools in the district yet they moved beyond the district average in a relatively short time. The explanation in our view is that these schools were led by principals and literacy teacher leaders who understood and committed with will and perseverance to the specifics. For example,

- a. the 9 school leaders clearly understood the model and most importantly lived the Beliefs and Understandings in the design;
- b. the 9 school leaders clearly understood that they needed to do **all** the above parameters – all 13;
- c. the 9 school teams did constant self-evaluation, striving for alignment of the beliefs and understanding among the Principal, Literacy Teacher, Reading Recovery teacher and Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT). This involved

“accountable talk” and corresponding action in an on-going way during the school day; and

- d. competing priorities in the school and from some district leaders made choices difficult to “stay the course”, but again these leaders did not let the “distracters” divert their energies and focus.

We have, then, an explanation to the mystery of lower than expected overall results, but what can we make of it? First, we are learning that effective change involves far more precise and detailed work than we thought (for elaboration of what it takes to achieve breakthrough results i.e. results for all see Fullan, Hill and Crevola, in press). Second, 9 of 17 is not a bad percentage for starters. And we expect that the schools in the other cohorts will sort on how well the components of the model are being pursued with diligence and perseverance. Thus we have the makings of a critical mass of leaders. We may not be far off a tipping point to achieve system change, although we think that the current state of affairs is fragile, albeit potentially strong.

We then pushed further to see how widespread the support for the model and for associated change was. In April 2005 we conducted a survey of all school teams (principals, literacy teachers, and SERT’s) from all schools in the district—a total sample of the response rate was an impressive 76%. or 387 respondents. We asked these school leaders questions pertaining to the effectiveness of the LC strategy. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. The percentages below refer to those who reported “somewhat” or “great impact” with respect to the question asked:

1. The Literacy Collaborative has **provided teachers with a wider range of teaching strategies (89.5%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*This is the initial exposure many teachers have had to strategic teaching of reading sheets – so the learning curve is great. But we’ve made pretty good progress – have established a book study, guided discussion of teaching practices – teachers are experimenting with variety of strategies in reading. We still have a lot to learn.*

*It has given me personally a huge boost in literacy instructions practices. I feel our school is still in the beginning process with some individuals well into the process*

*This initiative has had a profound effect on classroom teaching and student achievement. Thank you!*

*Has focused conversations on student improvement and use of effective strategies*

*Provided a greater opportunity for the staff to have a greater understanding of literacy strategies*

*There has certainly been an impact on instruction and professional learning in terms of scheduling a mandatory reading block (class graded reading) and allowing teachers to voice opinions and collaborate but teaching practices and beliefs must be refined.*

2. The Literacy Collaborative has **helped teachers and administrators ensure that adequate resources are available to support students' learning. (78.3%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*Providing ongoing great information about appropriate resources  
It has provided a clear focus and resources.*

*It has fostered discussion using common language – focused on providing adequate resources*

3. The Literacy Collaborative has **raised the expertise of the teachers within their schools. (87.7%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*I believe that it has a huge impact on literacy instruction and wish that this role and mentorship was available when I began teaching.*

*Made teachers more reflective about their own teaching experiences.*

*Provided many opportunities for professional development for all staff*

*The Literacy Collaborative has helped to create more consistent teaching practices in our classrooms. Now that teachers must use specific evaluation methods at the beginning and end of each school year we are better able to track students learning and take ownership of all the students in our school. We speak the “same language”. We have more time to be reflective about our teaching practices.*

4. The Literacy Collaborative has **increased the school-wide focus on literacy. (94.6%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*It's created an opportunity to teach teachers our new learning's by creating the time for a literacy coach. Drives the school plan towards literacy therefore aligning practices and having a narrower focus so you can accomplish your goals.*

*The collaborative has allowed for PD at staff meetings and sharing of resources with all teachers. All teachers involved in PD are getting the same message and may feel more competent and up to date with literacy language.*

*It has sparked energy and enthusiasm from participants which has in turn brought better focus to the school. Leadership has been developed at many levels.*

*Shift away from primary focus to junior focus – need to bring divisions together for assessment, tracking, etc.*

*Focused and aligned school plan.*

5. The Literacy collaborative has **clarified the role of all teaches in support of literacy instruction. (78.2%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*As a new school, we have implemented from day 1 (and before – in hiring of staff) our school-wide focus in literacy and our intended participation in LCP. (We were previously involved at former school.) This has allowed us to create a professional learning community “attitude” from the ground up. The LCP allows us as leaders to continue to grown professionally and in turn impact our colleagues in this area. In turn, our students will be impacted.*

*It has provided a wealth of knowledge and resources that have been shared with staff. This in turn, has elevated the awareness of how important literacy is and that the teaching of literacy is a shared effort that everyone is responsible for.*

*Atmosphere of collaboration has been fostered.*

*Staff are more focused on literacy. They are beginning (in the junior division) to use data to support instruction. The primary division is very supportive. Focus on literacy PD in staff meetings is moving us forward.*

*It has impacted us greatly because it provided purposeful and meaningful strategies with which to influence our schools and provided springboard for discussion and change.*

*More teachers are talking about literacy as the cornerstone of their programs.*

6. The Literacy Collaborative has **provided more attention and assistance to students at risk. (82.9%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*The literacy collaborative has impacted literacy instruction by not allowing “at risk” students to slip through the cracks.*

7. The Literacy Collaborative has **helped students at risk become identified earlier. (79%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*It has provided an opportunity for us to look at the needs of students at risk and develop a plan to address issues.*

*This has helped us identify the “at risk” students at our school and provide needed support to help them meet with success.*

8. The Literacy Collaborative has **helped the school raise literacy expectations for all students (90%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*It has focused attention to assessment driving program and reinforced the importance of a wide emphasis on literacy in all areas.*

*The literacy collaborative has impacted literacy instruction in my school by making teachers aware of the importance of literacy in all curriculum areas. As well, teachers are learning that it is their responsibility to become professional learners who understand that all children can learn.*

9. The Literacy Collaborative has **produced more consistency and continuity in literacy instruction across different subject areas. (74.5%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*Introduced and re-introduced many strategies that support literacy across all subject areas.*

*It has forced literacy to become a priority, which was necessary. We now have a focus to work from.*

*Given us a common focus, tools/strategies to accomplish goals and we are moving forward as a team. Having staffing for literacy teachers has allowed us to support teachers and mover forward.*

*I think it has greatly impacted literacy instruction. We share our learning with our staff. The time for professional learning communities/greater collaboration has to be supported in our schedules at times.*

*Given many processes to use with staff to deliver the constant message that “all students can learn”.*

*It has provided us with a common ground and a common direction for our whole school to follow.*

10. The Literacy Collaborative has **ensured that the school is organized around the learning needs of students. (80.1%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*I believe that our participation has positively impacted literacy instruction. As a new school, it is helping to build a framework (ground work by which we can approach our literacy work in coming years).*

*The LCP has greatly influenced literacy instruction – guided reading, modeled reading/shared reading to teach comprehension strategies is happening in all classrooms. We are going to focus on writing next year. For most of the last 3 years we have had collaborative grade meetings for grade partners to share/work together in planning strategies for at-risk students, issues around guided reading, etc.*

*Very positively, provided framework/common language/more focused action plan to meet needs of students.*

11. The Literacy Collaborative has **fostered a more positive attitude among staff regarding the teaching of literacy. (85%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*It has had a great affect, especially in the creation of and staff participation in a literacy learning team. We have focused our concerns used assessment to drive our instruction (i.e. Listening Comprehension), and establish a real sense of collaboration community. We have produced strategy packages for all staff to use, and have fostered a positive attitude, re: teaching of literacy.*

*It has had an incredible impact because it has underlined our focus on literacy especially when it's district, admin, teachers together.*

*We are more aware of Board expectations, good teaching practices, the need to use data to drive instruction, the need to view all students as learners, to fine tune our skills as literacy teachers.*

*Helped established a learning community – increased level of trust and collegiality of staff.*

*The literacy collaborative has brought the staff at the school together as a more cohesive team with similar academic goals.*

12. The Literacy Collaborative has **involved individual teachers in sharing expertise and effective practices with teachers from other schools. (68.7%)**

**Survey respondents commented.....**

*It has brought our school together with another school in our community. We planned a writing lesson and brought examples together to discuss strategies to help students with some weaknesses.*

*I enjoy the networking opportunities with other schools to hear how their school is handling/setting up and gathering more options for our school.*

*It gives us opportunities to interact with other schools and devise plans and ideas we might not have thought of otherwise. We always come energized with great new strategies and ideas to try.*

*It has people talking about their teaching practices.*

*It has had a positive approach/impact because it has provided common professional development that can then be shared back at the school and in the family of schools.*

*Sense of belonging to a system that was moving in the same direction*

Our conclusion is several fold. First, there is widespread support throughout the system for the model and the strategy being pursued which could represent a tipping point for breakthrough change. On virtually every item, 8 or 9 out of 10 respondents report widespread and beneficial presence and press for literacy across the school and district. Even on the demanding matter of lateral capacity building across schools (sharing effective practices between schools), 69% indicate that this is occurring.

Second, we endorse one of our basic change findings namely, that shared vision or ownership is more an *outcome* of a quality process than it is a pre-condition. You have to develop shared vision. Related, we also know from our change work, that to a certain extent, behavior change often precedes change in beliefs. We think that survey participants have had new experiences and it is this that has made them more positive.

Third, the work requires much more precision and focus than we or others thought. For example, in the 9 vs. 8 school comparison involving the first cohort, there was not much difference in the attitude of the school leaders. In the 8 less than effective examples, the “hearts” of the school leaders were in the right place. It is not surface beliefs that matter but rather commitment, staying the course, and detailed know-how that comes from learning by doing and reflecting on practice.

In short, when we get to a more fine-grained analysis, we see that it is the details that count. In turn, this means we must develop strategies that help school leaders experience and learn more about how precisely to engage in continuous improvement in classroom practice. Such leaders conceptualize and carry out their roles with ever increasing precision and commitment. They can walk the talk as well as talk the walk.

### **Next Steps**

There are essentially three broad themes that we believe are necessary to go beyond where we are—staying the course, becoming more specific, and widening the sphere of involvement.

Staying the course means holding the focus and the existing model. We saw that the intensive involvement of most schools is only recent, yet there is widespread support for the direction undertaken. LC is an approach which means that the model is a learning one, participants continuously learn by doing. Staying the course, for example, means more intensive learning about focused balanced literacy practices, early intervention, and parental and community involvement and ownership. Above all, staying the course means that leaders across the district—school and district levels—understand that they are at the early stages of an improvement strategy that requires ever increasing attention on the ground.

Second and related, precision and detail are key. Therefore, new strategies are needed which increase the specificity and the opportunity to learn in context – more precise and intensive literacy support for selected schools will be needed. For example, during the 2005/2006 school year, 27 elementary schools and 6 secondary schools will receive intensive school-based support focusing on improved student achievement in literacy. The schools to receive this additional support have been selected according to needs indicated by patterns in EQAO results, using a sophisticated analysis of socio-economic factors by the YRDSB Research Team (Zheng, 2005) and analyses from supervisory officers using contextual knowledge about the schools. Each of the 33 schools identified for intensive support will receive assistance from two curriculum consultants and leadership from one curriculum coordinator, who will work directly with the school administrator and Literacy Teacher in each school to extend school-wide capacity for improved student achievement in literacy as defined by each school's plan for continuous improvement.

In preparation for this intensive support, curriculum coordinators met with the principal and Literacy Teacher of each school selected to clarify the focus for literacy support, using a carefully developed diagnostic tool to assess not only needs but status of school results and perceptions of administrators, Literacy Teachers and community.

Guided by a curriculum coordinator, each consultant team will meet weekly with the principal and Literacy Teacher to facilitate ways of going deeper in literacy teaching and learning...always guided by the school's data. The teams will put "faces on the data" and drill down to make the assessment and instructional strategies become more public and precise for the teachers (always working with the principals and Literacy Teachers). Monthly meetings will be held with the field superintendent and curriculum coordinators to track and monitor school progress as well as consolidate learning and next steps.

Additional strategies that will lend themselves to greater precision include targeted "Literacy Walks" in which school teams observe the work of others and explain their own detailed work to participating groups, external to the school groups. Similarly, action research will be another strategy fostering teachers' inquiry at a deeper level. Thirty-nine schools have applied for the Action Research grants from the curriculum department for 2005-2006. This is a marked increase from other years. This work is essential for embedding improvement in schools. Self-reflection at the school and classroom level on "What works, what doesn't work and what can we do differently" feeds into greater precision about literacy implementation

and improvement. Annual reports, presented to teams across schools and to district staff, will be part of the process. All Intensive Support Schools will be expected to have an inquiry/Action Research question by 2006-2007.

Third and finally, extending the net of learning outside the district is a new strategy for accessing ideas and contributing to the development of others. For the 2005/2006 school year, the York Region District School Board has received a special funding allocation from the Provincial Secretariat to support the expansion of the Literacy Collaborative program to include the involvement of leadership teams from 10 other regional school boards. The districts involved in this journey will join York Region administrators and teachers to take part in change leadership training sessions in order to address knowledge, skills, structures and strategies that promote region-wide literacy capacity-building. These will be led by curriculum and OISE/UT research staff. The general notion is that districts develop best in the long run if they take the intellectual (knowledge based) and moral (commitment to the system as a whole) stance that it is their responsibility to learn from other districts and to contribute to the learning of other districts.

In sum, there is more to getting it right than meets the eye. The experience of York Region is instructive in that it shows that you can accomplish a great deal in a short period of time, but that this really just represents the beginning of a much deeper journey which has only just begun.

The goal of district-wide reform is to transform the culture of the district at the school and district levels—vertically and horizontally in terms of how schools relate to the district (and vice versa) and to each other. We see in this work that the movement is from a we-they orientation to a we-we commitment. Classroom teachers begin to identify with “my school” not just “my classroom”; school staff develop commitments to “my district”, not just to the narrower “my school”.

Once the new culture reaches a critical mass, we believe that sustained district-wide reform will be within our grasp. In other words, as system capacity increases, given efforts yield greater return because the whole system gets better at what it does. The extraordinary becomes possible without superhuman effort. And when this happens, continuous improvement on a large scale becomes a reality.

## **About the Authors**

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