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Results Without Rancor or Ranking

The Ontario Improvement Strategy

Countries across the world are focused on improving educational outcomes for their students. Yet despite these efforts, many students are still leaving school without a high school diploma. This seriously disadvantages our youth and, quite frankly, puts the future of our communities and countries in jeopardy. In the current knowledge-based economy, our greatest resource is our children. As educators, we owe it to students, parents, communities, and future generations to establish effective pathways to graduation.

Our quest for educational excellence with equity must be relentless. Building and developing a robust publicly funded education system is a challenge we must all embrace. This is our best guarantee for realizing the future we owe to the students in our schools today. Working toward the goal of providing every child with a graduation diploma is a vision that must become reality.

It has long been recognized that a high-quality education system has a profound impact on the well-being and prosperity of a country. As early as in 2003, Levin outlined the cost to a nation

when the education system is inadequate. He states that countries will experience

- foregone national income,
- foregone tax revenues for the support of government services,
- increased demand on social services,
- increased crime, and
- poorer levels of health.

From a moral perspective, we must employ strategies that help every student to graduate, but as Levin points out, there are other compelling reasons to improve graduation rates.

Research has clearly shown that early school achievement, especially in reading and writing, is one of the greatest predictors of future success. We need to ensure that we provide our students with the skills necessary to succeed in a knowledge economy. Student success is dependent on a sound foundation in literacy. In one jurisdiction, researchers learned that the local penitentiary predicts, with accuracy, the number of prison cells that will be required by the number of students in the public schools who are reading below grade level in the second grade (Hale, 2004). It is critical that educators recognize that improved graduation rates are dependent on improving teaching and learning throughout our students' journey from kindergarten to graduation. The responsibility to ensure that more students graduate from high school does not begin at the secondary level. It begins when students enter elementary school, where the focus has to be on having students read at grade level. There is ample evidence that well over 90% of children can read by the end of Grade 1 with intentionality, good teaching, and proper supports.

In Ontario, students in Grades 3, 6, and 9 are required to participate in annual provincial assessments. The assessments are administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), an organization that was established to be arm's length from the government and accountable to the public, to assess and report on the quality of education in the province. EQAO has gathered information regarding the achievement of students as measured by the provincial assessments since 1996–1997. In tracking student progress over the past 14 years, it has been shown that students who do well on the provincial assessment in the primary (Grades 1–3) and junior (Grades 4–6) divisions will most likely maintain their high level of achievement in secondary school. EQAO (2011) has found that 92% of students that met the provincial standard in both Grades 3 and 6 again met the standard in the

Grade 9 academic mathematics course, and 77% met it again in the Grade 9 applied mathematics course. It is evident from the research conducted that ensuring that students are successful in the early years of their schooling will give them a greater chance of obtaining a high school diploma.

The greatest resource a country has is its youth. The future well-being, prosperity, and global competitiveness of a country are dependent on high-quality education for its children. If students are to survive and thrive in the 21st century, it is essential for educational systems to implement the high-impact strategies that contribute to student success in school and equip them to be contributing members of society. Educators have a moral imperative to help all students achieve at higher levels and to help them prepare for the wide spectrum of postsecondary destinations that are available to them. This reality has resulted in school systems around the world making improved student learning and dropout prevention key priorities. Improving graduation rates is a goal to which all publicly funded education systems should aspire.

It is essential for all districts to look at their K–12 continuum to ensure that students are not falling through the cracks. One cannot talk about improving graduation rates without first examining the quality of the educational system, from kindergarten right through to Grade 12. As Curran, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) point out, “A high percentage of dropouts send distress signals in the middle grades, long before they actually drop out of school” (p. 28). It is critical that educators recognize that improved graduation rates are dependent on improving teaching and learning in all grades. Too often, we blame secondary schools for the dropout rate instead of recognizing that the foundation in the early years is critical to future success. Waiting until high school to challenge and engage students or to implement intervention strategies is too late. “For many students, lagging achievement evidenced as early as fourth grade appears to be a powerful predictor of rates of high school and college graduation, as well as lifetime earnings” (McKinsey & Company, 2009, p. 5).

There is a worldwide trend and a multitude of voices demanding accountability in education. Many countries are currently engaged in education reform and system improvement. Political leaders around the world have made improved student learning and dropout prevention a priority. To achieve the goal of lowering dropout rates and improving achievement results for all students, educators will need support and resources that will provide them with proven processes and strategies.

It is within this context that we share the Ontario experience in improving student achievement in elementary schools and high

school graduation rates without the ranking of schools or the rancour that often accompanies educational reform. Ontario is considered across the world as one of the fastest-improving systems. What is most noteworthy is that this has been achieved in the context of Ontario's diversity. Ontario is one of the largest and most diverse provinces in Canada, attracting the majority of immigrants that come to this country each year from more than 200 countries.

The Canadian Context

Canada is one of the few countries in the industrialized world without a national department of education; there are, rather, 13 different education systems for each of our 10 provinces and three territories. Some aspects of education governance are, however, determined centrally. For example, the Indian Act gives the federal government responsibility for Aboriginal education on reserves, while the Constitution protects the rights of minoritized groups. Catholics are considered a minority under the Constitution with the right to operate their own publicly funded education system. The Constitution also protects the right of minorities of the two official languages, English and French, to operate English- and French-language district school boards.

The Extent of Ontario's Diversity

In Ontario, children from immigrant backgrounds, low-income homes, and those with special education needs or with other challenges are improving their achievement consistently. This proves that the strategies are working. Low-performing schools have been reduced to an all-time low and "static" schools, where results had flatlined, are doing better than they have ever done. Excellence and equity have become hallmarks of this school system.

When examining Ontario's results in PISA in 2009, it was evident not only that Ontario is one of the highest performing jurisdictions, but, while achieving excellence, the province is also reducing gaps in achievement. PISA confirmed this improvement, stating that Ontario is among the few jurisdictions in the world that demonstrate both higher achievement in reading and a smaller performance gap between high- and low-income students when compared to the OECD average (EQAO, 2010).

Ontario has been able to achieve continuous improvement in closing achievement gaps when working with students from a wide range

of backgrounds. Ontario is the home of 40% of Canada's 34 million people. It is Canada's most diverse province and continues to be the province of choice for newcomers to Canada: 60% of the 225,000 immigrants who come to Canada annually settle in Ontario. This province has 2.1 million students in four provincially operated education governance systems: English public, English Catholic, French public, and French Catholic. Data from the Ministry of Education website (www.edu.gov.on.ca), show that approximately 1.4 million students attend Ontario's 4,000 elementary schools, and approximately 700,000 attend more than 850 secondary schools. The 2006 Statistics Canada census indicates that 28.3% of Ontario's population are immigrants, with 4.8% arriving in the last five years. As well, 22.8% of Ontario's population are visible minorities. When compared to U.S. jurisdictions, it has the population equivalent to Illinois, Pennsylvania, or Ohio, the fifth, sixth, and seventh most populous states.

Between 2001 and 2006, Ontario's Aboriginal population grew nearly five times faster than the non-Aboriginal population. Ontarians reported more than 200 languages as their mother tongue. By 2017, about one fifth of our population will be members of diverse faith communities, including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, in addition to a growing number of individuals without a religious affiliation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

Ontario is also diverse geographically. There are more than 1 million square kilometers of land with large urban centers (e.g., Greater Toronto Area) and remote rural and northern areas. Ontario has not only improved achievement as measured by provincial assessments and graduation rates, but has also been among the top performers in international assessments. The Ontario strategies that have worked in such a diverse context are applicable and replicable in other jurisdictions. Ensuring international comparability was a key reform strategy in Ontario. We have long recognized the importance of looking beyond our borders to learn with and from others. We have benefited from the experiences, successes, and failures of other jurisdictions. As well, we have used international research extensively to broaden our approach and deepen our understanding of how children learn and what it takes to help all children become successful.

Three key beliefs drove educational reform in Ontario:

- It takes clear vision and persistent resolve to transform the educational system.
- Public education is the foundation of democracy.
- Excellence and equity go hand in hand.

A Clear Vision and Persistent Resolve

In Ontario, there has been clarity of direction, persistent resolve, and an enduring sense of mission to transform the educational system. The government of the day placed education at the center of its mandate with a firm commitment to improvement. The underlying foundation for reform rested with a commitment to build capacity among educators at all levels to improve teaching and learning. The vision for the Ontario educational system was one of excellence with equity, ensuring that all students, regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic status, or other human rights factors achieve at higher levels. The strategy focused on three key strategic goals adopted by the Ministry of Education for all schools:

- Increased student achievement
- Reduced gaps in performance
- Increased public confidence in public education

These goals were the catalyst for the reform of K–12 education in Ontario. A critical aspect of the Ontario strategy was that change efforts would respect of the professional knowledge of educators. Alliances were developed between the Ministry of Education, district school boards, and professional organizations (e.g., teachers unions,

principal and superintendent organizations, and parent, student, and trustee associations). The Ontario strategy built good will, affirmed the professionalism of teachers, and enhanced the motivation of all who work in education to improve our schools.

A sense of urgency was ignited within all those charged with improving the school system with the notion that the students cannot wait. It was recognized that educating all children to the highest level possible was our moral imperative. This resolve to improve the outcomes for all

The strategies outlined in this book resulted in continuous improvement in Ontario's Graduation rates:

Year	Graduation Rates
2003–2004	68%
2004–2005	71%
2005–2006	73%
2006–2007	75%
2007–2008	77%
2008–2009	79%
2009–2010	81%
2010–2011	82%

Source: www.edu.gov.on.ca

students was sustained through positive pressure and intensive support. Ambitious targets for student achievement were established while, at the same time, educators received a variety of supports to strengthen their professional practice. Administrators and teachers were provided with ongoing professional learning opportunities, resources were developed to support classroom instruction, class sizes were reduced to provide more individualized instruction, and ministry staff supported improvement efforts at the school level. The Ontario strategy recognized that to improve our schools, we must invest in people, support them, and develop their professional expertise.

Excellence and Equity Go Hand in Hand

We recognize that educators can enhance the life chances of our diverse population and prepare our young people to participate fully in Canadian society as well as in the global economy. In Ontario, with our belief that factors such as poverty should not truncate the life chances of students, we have used focused intervention strategies to ensure that all children learn regardless of personal and socio-economic factors. As a province, we have demonstrated that results can be achieved without alienating our teachers and principals or without imposing punitive approaches and negative sanctions. In fact, our strategy engaged educators fully and reaffirmed their sense of education as a moral imperative.

Turning the Ontario System Around

In the early years of 2000, the times in Ontario were described as turbulent at best. Labor unrest and tension-filled relationships between government and educators led to eroding confidence in the public system and low morale among teachers. Many educators felt that there was a climate of fear and resentment, with teachers experiencing a range of emotions from anger to despair. The teaching profession itself seemed to be suffering from a damaged self-concept. Many chose to retire as soon as they possibly could. Fewer individuals wanted to enter the teaching profession or to assume leadership positions. The system had become focused on operations and fiscal management rather than on instructional leadership and student achievement. Not surprisingly, student achievement had flatlined, and enrollment in private schools was on the rise. From all accounts, the system was in a state of crisis.

Then the new Liberal government took office and made a strong commitment to improving the Ontario education system. The first step in realizing excellence would require that every student in Ontario develop reading, writing, mathematical, and comprehension skills at a higher level by the age of 12. Progress would be measured by ensuring that 75% of students reached the provincial standard of a “B,” or 70%, within a specified time frame. At the secondary level, a provincial target was also set—namely, that 85% of students would graduate from high school by 2010–2011.

To ensure system reform, the government consulted with leading researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to develop a strategy with tight timelines and with the following key components:

1. A small number of ambitious goals
2. A “guiding coalition,” including the premier and the minister of education, to monitor and support change
3. A respected educator with experience at all levels of the system appointed as chief student achievement officer to “champion” the initiative
4. High standards and expectations, with a focus on both excellence and equity
5. Investment in capacity building at all levels, with an emphasis on instructional effectiveness
6. Investment in leadership development
7. The use of research-informed, high-impact strategies to improve achievement
8. The use of data and authentic assessment to improve practice
9. The implementation of nonpunitive intervention strategies to improve low performing schools
10. Paying attention to the distracters, such as collective agreements and unnecessary bureaucracy, to protect the focus on the core priorities

The approach taken for this massive reform effort involved engagement and alignment at all levels, which included the provincial (state), district, school, and classroom levels.

At the provincial level, policies were established and resources allocated to provide much needed support to schools and districts. Provincial leaders sought input from school board administrators, teachers' unions, trustees, student and parent groups, and other stakeholders as they shaped the provincial strategy. District school boards were expected to establish local improvement teams and to develop, implement, and monitor improvement plans. The province provided student achievement officers (SAOs) to support improvement at the elementary school level and funds for student success leaders (SSLs) to facilitate change in high schools. Finally, at the school level, supports were provided to ensure capacity building that would strengthen instructional practice. Small amounts of funds were provided to purchase necessary resources and free teachers up so they could share their expertise and plan collaboratively for improved student learning. This comprehensive provincial reform strategy is explained in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

The result of this effort can be seen in improved provincial achievement scores and higher graduation rates. Other obvious signs of progress included

- a clear focus on improving student achievement,
- improved morale and confidence in the government's improvement agenda,
- a pervasive focus on capacity building and job-embedded professional learning,
- consistent improvement among schools in socioeconomically challenging circumstances,
- previously underachieving groups increasing their performance significantly, and
- a surge in confidence among educators in their ability to improve their schools.

The strategies used to achieve these results are well documented in current research and have proven to be effective in improving achievement for students throughout the province.

As a result of the reform strategy, Ontario has also seen a cultural shift where educators are more actively involved in the improvement process, resulting in improved morale and stronger professional learning communities. Table 1.1 is a comparison of the provincial climate before the reform strategy was implemented to the current climate.

Table 1.1 The Change in Provincial Climate

Before	Now
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disparate goals and priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and strategic goals aligned • Specific student achievement targets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple disjointed initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selected high-impact strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolated, ad hoc professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team focused and job-embedded professional learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited reliance on research and data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research based and data driven
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on horizontal accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor morale and lack of involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High motivation and commitment to sustain gains and achieve continuous improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flatlined achievement levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous improvement in student achievement and graduation rates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inequity in achievement results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The narrowing of achievement gaps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on basic skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on 21st century, higher order critical and thinking skills, and character development

Starting With Literacy

In recognizing the importance of literacy as a foundation for learning, success in school, and future career choices, the Ontario government created the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (the Secretariat) with a mandate to drive change and create a new way of working with the school districts to bring about improvement in the schools. It was the responsibility of the Secretariat to provide strategic leadership in building strong linkages and alliances with system partners to support learning. Dr. Avis Glaze, a veteran educator, was chosen to be Ontario's first chief student achievement officer and CEO of the Secretariat with Ruth Mattingley as the senior executive officer. Rob Andrews, our third author, later became the director of the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategic Implementation, Innovation and Support in the Student Achievement Division of the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The Secretariat moved quickly to forge consensus around the philosophy, modus operandi, resources, strategies, and tools that would be needed to ensure success for all students.

The primary goal of the Secretariat was to work collaboratively with the school districts to

- create a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy,
- share promising practices among schools and districts,

- extend the knowledge base of the profession,
- increase capacity to support learning, and
- engage parents, school councils, business, community members, and trustees to further support the student achievement goals.

Early on, the Secretariat recognized that a “one-size-fits-all” approach would not work. A range of strategies were implemented to address the diverse needs of district school boards and schools across the province. For change to happen and be sustained, it is critical to have ownership at all levels. Relying solely on top-down approaches has not proved to be effective in the long term. The Secretariat’s approach was to work alongside districts and schools, providing a range of supports and capacity building for them to take ownership for their own improvement efforts.

The work of the Secretariat was soon being lauded across the world. The Canadian Language and Literacy Network (CLLRNet), an independent consultancy asked by the government to evaluate the Secretariat’s effectiveness, said that the Secretariat’s efforts, in partnership with school boards, had resulted in a significant shift in the culture of Ontario schools that is focused on enabling the success of all students. The evaluation concluded that the model used by the Secretariat was effective and should continue. They stated that “over its brief history, Ontario’s Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat has had a major, and primarily highly positive, impact on Ontario’s education system” (CLLRNet, 2009, p. 11).

The Secretariat successfully engaged teachers, principals, and supervisory officers in sharing ownership and responsibility for the achievement of the goals. As well, the Secretariat successfully entrenched the notion that “business as usual” would not bring about the results needed to improve student learning and close gaps in achievement.

A strong commitment to research, evidence-based inquiry, and data-informed decision making was critical to the success of the strategy. The Secretariat launched an innovative series of monographs, titled “What Works: Research Into Practice,” as well as highly popular webcasts and web conferences. Using research-informed, high-impact instructional strategies has resulted in improved student achievement at all levels.

Improving Graduation Rates

Ontario, much like other jurisdictions, was deeply concerned about the number of students leaving high school prior to graduation. Roughly 25% of Ontario’s students were not graduating from high

school (King, 2004). In Ontario, we looked for innovative ways to evolve traditional practices to improve support for students while they are at school and to create the conditions for their successful graduation and transition to postsecondary destinations.

Determined to improve the graduation rates in Ontario, the government established an ambitious target. They set a goal that specified that 85% of those who had entered Grade 9 in a given year (cohort group) would graduate. To accomplish this goal, the Ministry established the Student Success/Learning to 18 strategy and supported it with resources, including policy, legislation, and human, media, and monetary resources. The Ministry created internal divisions to support the strategy and the various components and pillars. Assistance was also needed in the schools. Every school board and authority received funding for a dedicated SSL and was provided with an annual budget with which to support the initiatives related to each pillar. In 2005, the Ministry also introduced the SST, a secondary school teaching role that was funded above the grants that school boards normally received based on the number of students enrolled. These teachers were expected to serve as advocates for students deemed to be “at risk,” to track, counsel, and work on behalf of these students to optimize their chances of success.

Three themes shape the secondary (high school) reform effort in Ontario:

1. The importance of building foundational skills in literacy and numeracy
2. The need to provide a more explicit and richer menu of programs
3. The need to attending to the individual well-being of students as a precursor to achievement

The Ontario Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy introduced four “pillars” of student success based on these themes:

- **Literacy:** The primary intent of the literacy strategy was to ensure that students graduate with the essential literacy skills for life. The literacy strategy consisted of professional development and training and the development of literacy support materials. The Ontario Literacy Course was also introduced as a support for students who had been unsuccessful in passing the provincial literacy test, which is a prerequisite for graduation.

- **Numeracy:** The focus in this pillar was to ensure that students develop the mathematics skills and understanding they need to reach their full potential in the 21st century. A variety of projects were introduced to help improve mathematics instruction in secondary schools. The numeracy strategy focused on teacher training, structured lesson design, and resource development for a variety of learning styles.

- **Program Pathways:** This part of the strategy focused on the creation of program options that reflect quality choices for students bound for different postsecondary destinations. The specific strategies include grouping course selections, designing the specialization of course content to reflect areas of focus, increases in experiential learning opportunities that connect curriculum to relevant experiences outside of the school environment, certification, and the recording and tracking of these to further support students. The creation of the Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) included a special designation on a students' graduation diploma, as well as the furthering of strong partnerships with employers, apprenticeship organizations, and colleges.

- **Community Culture and Caring:** This pillar evolved to address the variety of nonacademic or program challenges that create barriers for many students as they move through the education system. The strategy has focused on the engagement of students in their school communities and addresses students in transition as well as targeted groups that demonstrate low engagement.

With each of the pillars in place, Ontario's secondary schools have been undergoing a remarkable transformation. An investigation in Chapter 5 of the development of the initiative and of each pillar serves to illustrate how the Ontario government has been able to work collaboratively with school districts across Ontario to improve student success rates so that 93,000 more students have graduated from high school over the past eight years. These dramatic improvements are being recognized across the world. They are significant because many people see the improvement of secondary schools as a near intractable proposition. Because of the Student Success strategy, the life chances of students are being enhanced.

Where Are We Now?

There is a sense of urgency in the province that is founded on our belief that children cannot wait for slow-moving improvement. Educators have recommitted themselves to their moral responsibility to ensure

that all children succeed. They are working together to ensure school improvement and are setting ambitious achievement targets for their students. Schools are implementing research-informed, high-impact strategies to meet the unique needs of their students. Educators are tracking progress and revising their practice when necessary.

Through a combination of positive pressure and support, achievement results have improved. More students are graduating from high school than ever before. Ontario is achieving results that are comparable to or surpassing many high-achieving countries across the globe.

And by Ontario's own standards, progress has been sustained, the results are transparent and, the gains are validated by external bodies such as the OECD.

In sum, the following represents the essence of the Ontario strategy:

- Ensuring dialogue and engagement with all stakeholders
 - ✓ Forging consensus
 - ✓ Developing a common sense of purpose
 - ✓ Building commitment and motivation
- Providing positive pressure and support
- Supporting and guiding school improvement planning
- Implementing high-impact strategies
- Requiring deep implementation and monitoring of progress
- Providing targeted resources
- Facilitating capacity building at all levels of the system
- Promoting teacher collaboration
- Conducting assessments of district and school effectiveness
- Focusing on professional accountability
- Insisting on excellence and equity
- Supporting community outreach and engagement
- Ensuring international comparability

The challenges that Ontario faced when seeking to improve student achievement and graduation rates are not unique. Across the globe, there has been a growing demand for accountability in education and improved results. Meeting the needs of a diverse population is prevalent not only in Ontario, but in most jurisdictions as well. We have similar concerns, such as improving outcomes for students living in poverty and minoritized groups that have historically underperformed. By examining current research, policies, and practices from around the world, Ontario developed a comprehensive reform strategy that continues to meet the needs of a diverse population.

The authors of this book have all been instrumental in implementing the government's agenda while serving in the Ministry of Education in different capacities. One of us had the distinct honor of being appointed by the government as Ontario's first chief student achievement officer and CEO of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. The mandate was to establish the Secretariat to drive change and achieve results with a sense of urgency. Another of us played an important role in the Secretariat as associate to this role, and the third served as director in the Ministry of Education, continuing the development and implementation of the strategy for the reform of secondary schools.

We take pride in the fact that Ontario has been able to achieve excellent results without punitive measures or the ranking of schools. We have created conditions to ensure that educational leaders and teachers develop the capacity and the motivation required to deliver on the education agenda. In Ontario, teachers and principals now feel that they have the skill, the will, and the necessary determination to take a system to the zenith of its possibilities.

We are confident that educators around the globe will discover a range of strategies in this book that are applicable to their circumstances. Ontario's success was based on the premise that one size does not fit all. It is therefore important that policy makers and educators critically examine the strategies in light of their district's needs and context.

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