

Capacity Building K–12

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In this monograph, we introduce you to the big ideas behind the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) and share with you the lessons learned about school improvement by some of Ontario's most challenged schools.

The **Capacity Building Series** is produced by the Student Achievement Division to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools. The series is posted at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/.

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Every Student/ Every School



Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership for Elementary Schools

“Whole system success requires the commitment that comes from intrinsic motivation and improved technical competencies of groups of educators working together purposefully and relentlessly.”

Michael Fullan, 2011

Because there is no “one size fits all” to school improvement, countries and jurisdictions around the world have taken different approaches over time. On the assumption that competition leads to innovation and creativity, England, Sweden and New Zealand have closed down schools and introduced public charter schools and voucher systems, enabling school choice. Alberta and Ontario publicly post standardized achievement test results as a way to trigger greater accountability and improvement. In Massachusetts, test results are tied to replacing school leaders. Singapore and Costa Rica support decentralized decision-making on the assumption that schools freed of bureaucracy will find their own best actions for improvement. Other systems, such as

The Netherlands, Spain, Ireland and many jurisdictions in the U.S. have attempted to redress low performance with financial supports and pay incentives.

All these approaches have had mixed results.

The Ontario Capacity Building Approach

The Ontario approach takes a capacity building route. Rather than closing down schools or replacing school leaders, or sanctioning schools or mandating specific changes, the Ontario approach is designed as a whole-school approach to building the professional capacity of educators to meet student learning needs. It is an asset-based approach based on the

assumption that each school's very own educators are the force for change.

In 2006–07, there were almost 800 elementary schools in Ontario where more than half of the student body was scoring at Level 1 or 2 in reading, writing and mathematics on the provincial assessments designed for Grades 3 and 6 by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). These schools represented about a fifth of the province's elementary schools and tens of thousands of students. Today, only a fraction of Ontario schools – just 63 – have similar proportions of students achieving below the Level 3 provincial standard in reading, writing and mathematics. Clearly, then, the capacity building approach undertaken in Ontario works!

Learn more about Ontario's approach ...

- For an overview of The Ontario Strategy
- *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better.*

What is OFIP?

While EQAO achievement is the sole criterion used to identify low-performing schools in Ontario, like low-performing schools world-wide they tend to have a significantly higher proportion of students living in challenging circumstances. Many also have higher proportions of students whose first language is not the official language of the school and who struggle with academic language proficiency, as well as higher proportions of students with special education needs.

That is why the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP), launched in 2006–07, was designed from the very beginning as an equity strategy. Here in essence are its key purposes:

- Ensure equity of outcomes for all students across the province
- Provide support for low-performing schools
- Strengthen and support instructional leadership and classroom practices for implementing precise interventions

- Build collective responsibility within the schools towards continuous student learning and improvement
- Implement research-proven strategies to improve student learning
- Collaboratively build capacity in boards and schools to ensure long-term sustainability and high levels of student achievement

Over ten years, the OFIP purposes have not changed. However, OFIP has evolved from a more centrally directed initiative with expectations for target-setting, diagnostic assessments, improvement planning and implementation to one that is more locally developed and defined. Early on, OFIP involved all of Ontario's district school boards, and OFIP itself consisted of three categories, with most intensive support and direction provided to the lowest performing schools.

By 2009–10, due to many schools transitioning out to become middle- and higher-performing schools, that number was reduced to 137. Today, as mentioned above, there are 63 OFIP schools and the category is reserved for those where fewer than 50% of Grade 3 and Grade 6 students achieve the provincial standard in reading, writing and mathematics on four of six assessments over two consecutive years. The benefits of participating in OFIP pay off in results, with increasing numbers of schools experiencing success.

Components of the OFIP Strategy

At its simplest, OFIP assists school and board leaders, classroom educators and other key members of the school community, including parents and caregivers, in planning, implementing, monitoring and refining a school improvement plan. Provincial support is provided in the form of advice, shared research into effective practices, opportunities for professional learning and funding for teacher release time for planning, monitoring, reflecting on and integrating what is being learned in classroom practice.

Importantly, although the OFIP partnership requires that district school boards commit to a rigorous whole-school improvement process, the focus of the improvement agenda is wholly the school's own. The support roles that the ministry team plays – coach, challenger and facilitator – are intended to help boards and schools gauge as precisely as possible the particular needs of their student body, and later to implement the plans effectively to respond to identified learning needs. Further, as the

number of OFIP schools has shrunk, the knowledge base for instructional leadership has grown and school teams are involved not only in professional learning communities at their own school but in networking and sharing within and across schools and boards as well.

In the improvement planning process, school teams use the [School Effectiveness Framework](#) to develop and implement their School Improvement Plan.



Common OFIP Themes/Unique OFIP Journeys

The OFIP process fosters ownership for change at both the school and board levels. The process starts with conversation – respectful, ongoing and focused on each school’s particular experience – and implementation of the improvement plan and its refinement is locally driven by a school’s own review and self-assessment. Therefore, as much as OFIP school journeys share commonalities, each OFIP story is unique.

Based on school and board reports, a number of themes have emerged over a decade as common areas of inquiry and action for school teams.

Theme # 1

Building leadership for learning

John Hattie states that “learning has to be visible if we want it to occur and improve – among the students, among the teachers, among the school leaders and within the system” (Hattie, 2015, pp. 26-27). In this aspect, school and system leaders play an important role in improvement – they not only ensure that the structures are in place for professional learning, but they also participate in the journey as co-learners. Importantly, they support and model the risk-taking required to question past practices in pursuit of new knowledge and more effective applications.

System and school leaders play a particularly important role in nurturing a shared belief in the importance of ongoing professional learning linked to student learning – they explicitly, frequently and widely communicate that staff members are leaders and learners, too. They structure time to meet and they act as provocateur or critical friend to catalyze

thinking, making sure that strong “teacher voice” is integral to the learning table.

Administrators who are co-learners have a heightened awareness of the professional learning needs of staff and they take ownership for the challenges and the solutions across the system. In recent years, school teams have expressed interest in creating learning networks or forums in which “evidence of what maximizes impact can then be shared meaningfully between schools” (Hattie, p. 27).

Theme # 2

Holding the belief that all students can learn and acquiring a deep understanding of student learning needs

Jim Cummins has suggested (2006) that holding high expectations is not about making the work of learning “more difficult,” but rather about making it more engaging through relevance and person-

alization. This is an asset-based stance that resonates with the efforts of school teams to identify both the interests and learning needs of all students and, in turn, to use differentiated instruction and support to enable students to meet

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their learning goals. In orienting to students on the basis of their strengths, not limits and gaps, school teams have found what students can do and achieve is often surprising and exhilarating. This “expectation dissonance” – dissonance between what teachers thought their students could do and what they actually do – leads to providing richer learning opportunities that invite higher-order thinking, leading to improved learning and achievement results.

OFIP teams reflect on assessment data, both from traditional measures, such as EQAO and diagnostic assessments, and from classroom-based approaches,

such as pedagogical documentation. Their purpose is not simply to assign a grade or level but also to achieve a nuanced understanding of student thinking and learning and on these bases to scaffold instruction. Getting a wide range of examples of student learning is important because it enables refinement of educators' responses to student learning needs.

Theme # 3

Building inclusive, collaborative relationships and committing to a collective goal

Drawing on a large body of research, John Ippolito (2011) writes that education is "an inescapably shared task," and that "student success rests on the quality of adult and adult-child relationships at school and at home." Educators in OFIP schools work hard to build bridges for this collaboration both inside and outside the school.

The importance of making a collective commitment to student well-being and achievement is evident in all OFIP reports. In fact, all schools report that a primary focus of their improvement journey has been the engagement of the members of the school community – staff, students and parents – in working together to meet student learning and achievement goals. Staff members demonstrate this commitment through their involvement in professional learning experiences designed to build capacity and expertise focused on providing effective literacy and mathematics programs and ensuring that their classrooms are inviting learning environments for all students.

There is growing recognition that when educators build relationships with a student's family, they foster that student's sense of belonging in school and increase academic support at home. As educators deepen their understanding of a student's background and context, they are able to teach through *culturally responsive pedagogies* and in so doing create a learning environment that affirms student identity and voice and increases student engagement in learning.

Theme # 4

Focusing on effective literacy and mathematics programs, including the teaching of higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills

School teams acknowledge that when learning is anchored in assets and interests, learners, whether teachers or students, are more likely to be engaged and successful. However, the transfer of professional learning into teaching practice (sometimes referred to as "fidelity of implementation") is a challenge, particularly in complex school settings. David K. Cohen (2011) explains that teaching requires "the mindful negotiation" of three terrains:

Knowledge of content and pedagogy –

Domain knowledge is important; the knowledge of how to bring it to students is critical.

Discourse – Classroom talk is also critical – the exchange of ideas through talk, work and inquiry builds understanding.

Knowledge of students – Teachers should actively seek out to understand their students and what their learning needs are in a manner that increases students' comprehension and engagement.

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Earlier in the OFIP journey, many school teams focused on their students' learning to read, write and communicate – establishing learning goals and success criteria, providing descriptive feedback and using differentiated instruction to personalize learning. Over the past five years, mathematics has also become a focus of OFIP schools, with the acquisition and development of content knowledge for teaching increasing as a priority.

Recent OFIP reports suggest that schools are intentionally building on previous years' learnings, and are monitoring their own practices from one year's school journey to the next. They are asking, as Steven Katz (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) asks, "Are we focusing on the right inch? Are we doing the right work?" They are drawing on conversations, observations and student work to determine if changes in practice are having an impact on student learning. Further, numerous schools are identifying a narrower focus for exploration such as making more explicit mathematics connections in children's everyday lives, and adopting whole-school use of technology.

Theme # 5

Connecting professional learning needs to student learning needs at the classroom level

School teams are overwhelmingly consistent in stating the importance of 1) engaging in reflective practice, 2) basing professional learning on student learning needs and 3) working together as "we." Throughout the ten-year provincial OFIP journey, it is evident that reflective practice is leading educators to take individual and collective ownership for their professional learning by assuming a "we are all learners together" approach. This stance

has led to numerous innovations in professional knowledge-building, like collaborative inquiry about students' learning challenges, which has become a prevalent part of the Ontario improvement journey.

All OFIP schools undergo a collective journey of transformation ...

- Listen to this school principal as he anticipates the work ahead for his school and his school team.
- Explore the school improvement journey of a former OFIP school.
- Watch how one school principal walks the talk of, "We're all leaders, we're all learners."



School teams make numerous references to several conditions that support reflective practice in their professional learning communities and emphasize the following:

- clarity of group norms/protocols and time spent learning the norms/protocols (e. g., how to question colleagues effectively and respectfully)
- ability of educators to view themselves as researchers, self-assess their own beliefs and practices and work collaboratively to study student learning and adapt practices accordingly
 - commitment to co-learning practices such as co-assessing, co-planning and co-monitoring.

... reflective practice is leading educators to take individual and collective ownership for their professional learning.

Some school teams track the progress of particular students to assess the impact of their work and to improve teaching practice. Many acknowledge the determination of their educator teams to delve deeply into the strengths, behaviours and responses of the marker student as

contributing to refinements in instruction leading in turn to improved student results.

Challenges Persist

Research from Canada and around the world has established a strong link between socio-economic status and academic performance (Ferguson, Bovaird & Mueller, 2007; Phipps & Lethbridge, 2006; Willms, 2006). Research has also shown that schools can mitigate the effects of poverty and disadvantage on a student's experience of schooling and can considerably reduce the inequality of outcomes (Bryk, 2010; Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013).

Researchers agree that the challenges of poverty are complex and multidimensional (e.g., Laderchi, Saith &

Stewart, 2003; Loewen, 2009). The chart below simplifies this research in order to highlight what OFIP schools have done – and are continuing to do – to mitigate the impact.

School teams have reported applying all these school-based strategies as key components of their success.

Listen to Dr. Asa Hilliard speak on how all educators can support all students to succeed.



Challenging circumstances can mean ...	Examples of school strategies
Lack of resources Lack of resources to meet an adequate standard of living	Providing breakfast programs, snack programs, clothes depot in the school; improving the physical environment of the school
Issues of Social Exclusion Experience of marginalization related to lack of resources and stigma of poverty	Promoting an inclusive school culture (e.g., restorative justice practices); capacity building for inclusion (e.g., professional learning about culturally responsive pedagogy); inclusive offerings of extra-curricular activities
Lack of social capital Lack of assets, resources, choices, security and power to enjoy both an adequate standard of living and citizen rights to education, health, etc.	Taking focused, systematic school action to help students and families access a range of resources to develop each student's capabilities (e.g., offer after-school tutoring and extra-curricular activities such as sports, music and drama to provide equity of opportunity programs; connect students with interdisciplinary support teams)

Lessons for All Schools

Ensure Equity as the Foundation for Excellence

All students, regardless of background or personal circumstances, can reach their full potential with access to rich learning experiences and with appropriate time and support.

Connect Professional Learning Needs to Student Learning Needs

A variety of conditions – from establishing group norms to using conversation protocols – support reflective practice within a professional learning community.

Monitor Impact

Using a wide range of assessments, from more traditional measures like EQAO results to more innovative ones like pedagogical documentation, enables educators to evaluate their impact and design more effective instruction.

Focus on Effective Literacy and Mathematics Programs

Deepening educator content knowledge and pedagogy for teaching (including differentiated instructional approaches) are important keys to the Ontario improvement journey.

Build Relationships and Work Towards a Collective Goal

Building relationships with families and communities deepens educator knowledge and understanding of students and facilitates teaching through culturally relevant pedagogies which improve student success.

Build Leadership for Learning

System and school leaders play a unique role as they ensure the necessary conditions that deepen learning and engagement and enhance collective responsibility.

Understand Student Learning Needs

Understanding student learning needs is important because it enables refinement of educator response.

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- To learn about the Ministry of Education's intervention strategy for secondary schools ... Student Success Initiative [Click here](#)

