

# REPORT 2

## Use of the Leadership Self-Review Tool to Support Leadership Development in Five School Boards

*A Report for the Ontario  
Ministry of Education*

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## BACKGROUND

*“Leadership is the turnkey to system transformation.”*

(Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006)

In December 2005, the Ministry of Education presented a mini-discussion paper, entitled “Leading Education: New Supports for Principals and Vice-Principals in Ontario Publicly Funded Schools”, to the Education Partnership Table. (The Education Partnership Table, a forum made up primarily of representative groups in education, was established in 2004 by the Minister of Education to provide insight into, and contribute to the resolution of, substantive issues in Ontario public education.) The paper reviewed the changes of the past decade in public education in Ontario and outlined a new provincial strategy for reducing the administrative workload of school leaders and supporting them in their important work as instructional leaders.

As part of its strategy, the ministry brought together a think tank of leadership experts from schools, boards, and academia to provide input, based on published

research and effective practice, into the development of a Leadership Self-Review Tool. The tool – a survey to be self-administered by school and board leaders and aspiring leaders – was intended to help school boards examine how they support leadership practices in their schools. The LSRT was meant to be more than a celebration of successful practices already under way; it was intended to be part of a process, with analysis of district findings contributing to informed conversations and action that would lead to improved system, school, and, ultimately, student performance.

Ontario school boards were invited to pilot the tool, and five districts chose to become involved: the Conseil des écoles publiques de l’Est de l’Ontario, the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, the Thames Valley District School Board, the Waterloo Catholic District School Board, and the York Region District School Board.

## ABOUT THE LEADERSHIP SELF-REVIEW TOOL (LSRT)

The piloted LSRT, provided to the boards as an electronic file, consisted of four sections in both English and French:

- suggestions for using the self-review tool
- a brief review of the literature on the importance of district support of school leaders

- the LSRT itself
- a gap-analysis scoring sheet

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

From March through May 2006, a review was conducted of the strategies each piloting board used to implement the LSRT and of the boards' impressions of the tool itself. This report discusses how each board used the LSRT as part of an overall strategy to revise its leadership development practices. (The report is not intended to provide a comprehensive view of the boards' leadership development initiatives.) Information was collected through interviews with a sample of practising principals and vice-principals who were at a wide range of stages in their careers, from newly inducted to very experienced. District personnel with board-wide responsibilities for various aspects of leadership development were also interviewed.

The interview questions were clustered around specific leadership development practices. For example:

- How does your district communicate its vision and mission?
- How do personnel in your system know and understand what is contained in the system improvement plan? What strategies are undertaken to support links between the system and school plans?

- What strategies are in place to nurture, recruit, retain, and develop leaders? How are new school leaders supported in their role as fledgling principals and vice-principals? How do very experienced school leaders continue to contribute their depth of expertise within the district and feel challenged in the role of principal?
- How does the district work with school leaders to create realistic student achievement goals, and to determine whether the goals were attained through the provision of just-in-time data?
- What processes support participative decision making within the district?

The following sections of this report highlight the leadership development practices under way in each piloting school board.

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES IN THE FIVE PILOTING BOARDS

### Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario

At the time of the interviews, the Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario had begun a review of all aspects of leadership development, from recruitment and selection to professional learning for administrators at all stages of their careers. The LSRT provided the conseil with a powerful vehicle for extending its district-wide conversations on all aspects of the role of school leader. It also assisted in the development of a shared language to describe both leadership behaviour and, in particular, the functions associated with being an instructional leader. It was the conseil's intent to use this shared, explicit understanding of leadership within the district to build a common leadership profile, considered necessary to ensure a consistent selection process. The conseil noted that recruitment and selection were challenging, as many francophone district school boards (conseils) are vying for administrators.

The conseil reported that it is shifting to a clearer understanding of the differences between managing and leading, and, in particular, leading in the context of improving student achievement. The conseil said that it will use this new insight to develop a sequential leadership development plan encompassing both principals and vice-principals. The conseil has also included vice-principals at its regular administrator meetings, in part in recognition of the importance of the vice-principal's position as a leader in training, but also to build positive and purposeful connections within the district.

Collaborative decision making and board and school administrators' input are provided through a board committee that includes all superintendents and managers, and representatives of principals and vice-principals. In addition, principal and vice-principal representatives attend executive council meetings to provide school-based input to the council. This experience also gives

school administrators a board-level perspective. Participative decision making appears to be taking root with these structures in place.

Mentoring began in the district with the establishment of a teacher mentoring program. At the time this report was written, the program had expanded, so that each new principal and vice-principal was being supported through an informal mentoring process.

In summary, the Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario has several leadership development initiatives in place to strengthen and support the principal in his or her role as leader and manager of curriculum processes within the school. The time and focus given to building a shared board-wide focus and a deep understanding of leadership are giving rise to a shared sense of collective responsibility for all students within the system.

### Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board

For some time before piloting the LSRT, the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DSB) had a leadership development process in place that has supported the maintenance of a deep pool of incoming leaders during the recent years of student population growth and school expansion. The board wanted to become involved with the LSRT to examine new thinking about leadership capacity building.

The board sets out its Board Goals in its "Annual Statement of Direction" and school improvement goals in its "Board Plan to Improve Student Achievement". Some of the key questions asked in developing these goals are "What are our system priorities?" and "How will we know we have successfully addressed them?" The improvement plan provides direction to multi-tiered board committees charged with its implementation. "The alignment and coherence resulting from this planning strategy has been terrific, and provided me with a strong

sense of direction for school planning,” remarked one school principal who participated in this process.

The board has created family-of-schools capacity-building committees, which, as they are linked to the board’s improvement planning committee, provide for a continuity of deepening direction over time. The family-of-schools committees contain teams of teachers and school administrators who participate in joint in-service and dialogue to develop an understanding of instruction strategies and to learn change-management strategies. These committees are designed to launch curriculum initiatives within their family of schools, and every school administrator belongs to one of these groups. The committees are also intended to provide purposeful and positive connections to board initiatives and to contribute to the building of a collective capacity.

Part of the board’s selection process for administrators is a day-long problem-solving session, where prospective administrators demonstrate their group-process skills and their technical and adaptive problem-solving skills in response to case studies and simulations. Participants’ responses are assessed by a group of board-level administrators. “I found this process extremely helpful, as I learned from and participated in other’s learning,” said an elementary school principal.

The board offers a series of seminars that provides educators who are considering leadership positions with information about the dimensions of Catholic leadership and leadership as it pertains to a wide variety of curriculum issues. These opportunities to learn about board policies and procedures related to finance, special education, school discipline, and equity help to nurture distributed leadership.

In summary, the Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB supports the development of administrators’ leadership competencies through a series of intentional learning experiences,

which begin with the aspiring leader and which continue to be available to school administrators through broad-based committee structures and many opportunities for professional learning.

### **Thames Valley District School Board**

The Thames Valley DSB implemented the LSRT as a way to obtain feedback on the model of leadership development that has been in place in the board for the past few years.

The board had instituted a broad communications strategy to ensure that all school and system administrators had a clear sense of the board’s vision, mission, values, goals, and direction for the coming academic year. To help all staff understand and internalize the board’s defined purposes, the board posts support materials as well as all system plans on its website, and updates them regularly. In addition, the board’s goals are frequently articulated by the director and central administrators. This process of building “A Caring, Learning Community” was corroborated by an external reviewer, who, in a recent report, deemed the Thames Valley DSB’s planning process a “neural highway” that provides common ground for administrators in the board.

The board has a staff development plan. Sessions are well attended by aspiring administrators and classroom teachers, so that a critical mass of educators in the board has learned and practised the skills associated with instructional coaching, developing staff, and conducting and engaging in focused conversations. A selection of necessary operational and administrative topics is also covered. Specific sessions provide support to school-based leaders as well as board managers; other sessions focus on the aspiring leader. Since its leadership development plan focuses on *process* as well as *content*, it is clear that the Thames Valley DSB recognizes the centrality of the professional learning community to school improvement.

Multi-year professional development related to “instructional intelligence” is also under way in this board. Principals and/or vice-principals and school teams practise tactics and strategies related to instructional intelligence that have frequent application in their own school contexts. “I find many ways to use the understandings and knowledge learned through our system initiative of instructional intelligence in my daily role, and I feel confident modelling these instructional practices for my staff,” remarked one experienced principal.

A program is also in place that provides support and guidance to newly inducted elementary and secondary administrators on a wide variety of topics – some self-selected and others board-determined. The program begins in June of the year that the candidates are appointed. It is designed to build capacity and to offer just-in-time delivery of professional learning. The program is composed of regular sessions throughout the school year and the summer months. Among the results has been the creation of peer networks and support.

“Our system has made great strides in participative decision making,” said a principal. The board welcomes a mix of school and board administrator participation on committees, and gives administrators regular opportunities to provide input into the deliberations of the superintendents’ council and other structures. In these ways, two-way communication and collaboration have become a benchmark for this board.

In summary, the Thames Valley DSB encourages collaboration and solicits input from school-based administrators through a variety of vehicles for shared decision making. These structures serve to connect the board improvement plan to school improvement plans by providing communication mechanisms that facilitate the internalization of these plans.

### **Waterloo Catholic District School Board**

The Waterloo Catholic DSB reported that a thorough review of board goals and activities related to leadership development was under way when the opportunity arose to confirm or revise the directions chosen. The board also reported that the six domains in the LSRT echo its own dimensions or domains of leadership, still in partial use within the board as part of the principal and vice-principal selection process.

Before piloting the LSRT, the board had launched a new preparation and support program, called Excellence in Leadership, for principals and vice-principals. The program was designed to provide participants with consistently articulated messages about expectations related to Catholic leadership within the board, as well as a continuity of experiences for new vice-principals. All vice-principals attended modules that were facilitated by both board and school-based administrators. Each module theme was wide-ranging, encompassing direct learning experiences, case studies, problem-solving exercises, and self-reflection. The frequency of the sessions created a network of support between the participants and the experienced leaders who led the program. Newly appointed vice-principals joined the group in spring 2006. Release for all classroom-based participants was funded centrally. “The experiences over last winter and spring in this program have equipped me with the tools and knowledge necessary to be successful in the years ahead,” remarked one newly appointed principal about her participation in Excellence in Leadership.

Excellence in Leadership is based on current research about leading in a Catholic school community. Drawing from theorists and practitioners from a broad range of public and private sector organizations, the program clearly demonstrates the board’s intentions to build leadership capacity at all stages of principal development –

emerging and newly assigned principals and vice-principals, and those involved in mentorships.

Under the mentorship part of the program, principals have been given the clear directions and support they need to mentor and give feedback to their vice-principals as the vice-principals perform a wide range of tasks, and to ensure that the vice-principals receive a consistent range of experiences in their schools. Vice-principals' participation in this formal mentorship program will be a consideration in the board's selection process for principals.

In addition, the board provides seasoned administrators with experiences designed to continually reinvigorate them in the challenging role of principal. Several principals are assigned to board tasks, usually related to the implementation of board projects. The lateral transfer of administrators across panels helps give them a board-wide view of education. In addition, administrators are called upon to mentor new colleagues and to present in-service modules in the Excellence in Leadership program. The board has recognized this emerging need, and intends to develop other responses to it.

In summary, the Waterloo Catholic DSB's Excellence in Leadership program, in this early stage of its implementation, is intended to provide the kind of consistent and deliberate experiences necessary to ensure that leaders maintain a strong focus on the improvement of student learning. The development of cadres of new leaders, working together on similar learning modules, is intended to build shared commitment, networks, and a sense of collective responsibility for learning.

### **York Region District School Board**

Prior to piloting the LSRT, the York Region DSB undertook a review of its leadership practices in conjunction with board stakeholders and a university partner, the

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. The goal of the review was to modify overall district leadership development processes and supports.

One outcome of the review has been the creation of a Leadership Competencies Practices-Based Model. The model is based on current research, with a focus on the identification of effective school leadership behaviours that are linked to raising student achievement. It was created by a team of school and board administrators, and is intended to be used by administrators as a tool for self-reflection and performance assessment and by the school superintendent as a basis for discussion with school leaders. Desired school leadership behaviours have been identified within the following four leadership practices: Creating and Sustaining the Vision, Building Relationships, Managing Instruction and Leading Instructional Processes, and Further Developing the Organization. In addition to describing specific behaviours, the model sets out, for each leadership practice, under the heading "Evidence and Focus for Growth", specific examples that can serve as a template for individual users.

The board employs an interesting process for the production of its System Plan for Continuous Improvement (SPCI). The distinctive aspect of the plan is the way it serves as a key communication vehicle for the entire district. The SPCI is introduced to the system several months prior to the academic year, so that all other system planning processes can be linked to it. The plan is considered a living document, one that is intended to create a sense of coherence for the district. It is used to provide consistent and clear messages of expectation and celebration, and it is monitored consistently and reviewed at least quarterly by board-level administrators. Leadership development is woven into the plan's three broad goals. One veteran administrator remarked, "I have

worked in other systems in my 30 years, but in the last several years as principal in York Region DSB, I have experienced the kind of alignment and clarity of focus that simplifies my job.”

Professional learning takes many forms in this board. A new coaching model provides additional support to new principals. Under this model, recently retired principals are hired to provide a non-judgemental “reflective mirror” of support for newly inducted principals. Each coach works a predetermined amount of time, offering counsel and collaborating in the solving of problems, either in person, by phone, or by e-mail.

In addition, the notion of vice-principal as intern is clearly articulated, in order that all school principals provide their vice-principals with the job-embedded training essential for a smooth transition to the role of principal.

The board’s leadership development centre (Centre for Leadership and Learning) offers a wide array of courses aimed at bolstering the skill sets of its elementary and secondary principals and vice-principals, as well as its aspiring leaders. The programs are valued by both new and experienced administrators. They build capacity by providing new tools, skills, and understanding in both facets of the principal/vice-principal roles: administration and leadership.

A Literacy Collaborative provides administrators with new knowledge about and expertise in balanced literacy programs, coupled with a keener understanding of change management and change processes focusing on literacy instruction and literacy leadership. Since schools send teams to Literacy Collaborative sessions, the new knowledge and skills acquired by team members allows leadership in this area to be distributed across the team, thereby supporting the growth of a pool of school leaders for the coming years.

All of the initiatives described above are integrated into the SPCI.

In summary, the York Region DSB provides all staff with a clearly defined set of expectations about leadership practices, as well as multiple entry points from which to learn the skills and strategies related to these expectations, all of which are linked to a strong and focused SPCI. This approach is likely to give leaders the confidence to focus on the mission of improving student achievement.

### **Summary of the Piloting Boards’ Leadership Development Practices**

In conclusion, all of the piloting boards have embarked on reviews of their leadership development processes to strengthen and support the roles of school leaders. Each believes that developing school leadership skills should be a multi-layered capacity-building process that provides school leaders and aspiring leaders with skills, experiences, and responsibilities within a school-team context, and that offers them a continuum of leadership-development experiences throughout their careers.

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The renewed commitment of the district school boards in this pilot project to leadership development indicates their recognition of the central importance of school leadership to student achievement. That these boards consider leadership development to be a necessary *system* reform reveals a new understanding of system thinking – a recognition that it is no longer sufficient for strong leadership to be experienced by only a few schools in a few places. There is too much urgency for change; the stakes are too high. Each piloting board is to be congratulated for this renewed focus on leadership development, recruitment, and selection.

Nonetheless, this review of the piloting boards' leadership development programs reveals that some aspects of leadership development that are emphasized in the research require further attention, at both the provincial and board levels.

1. Leadership development initiatives must be integrated into board improvement plans. All the piloting boards have a great many initiatives under way to support school administrators, many of them in the portfolios of various system administrators. Where these initiatives flow out of a board improvement plan, school leaders are better able to understand how all the pieces fit together, and leadership development is related in a coherent way to curriculum implementation and to all of the board's activities for the year. Another way in which having leadership development flow from the board improvement plan makes a huge difference is that school leaders then know and can articulate the board's priorities readily and easily. In this way, distractions, work overload, and fragmentation are reduced. The linkage also allows the board's priorities to be expressed regularly and clearly by board-level administrators, so that school leaders are able to internalize the priorities. (See also Domain 1 in the LSRT, *School and District Improvement*.)
2. A clear identification by the board of the leadership behaviours and values it expects was not readily apparent in all of the piloting boards. A clearly articulated framework of expectations makes school leadership capacity building transparent and assists with district recruitment initiatives. (See also Domain 3 in the LSRT, *Leadership Development*.)
3. The piloting boards' concentration on data literacy is nominal. Collegial review of and reflection on data at both the school and board levels would help to sharpen all participants' ability to work with data. Principals said that they need data given to them in a way that is easy for them to manage, understand, and work with. (See also Domain 4 in the LSRT, *Administrative Structures*.)
4. Boards may want to consider revisiting their policies related to the transfer of school superintendents. Several principals commented that they had had many school supervisory officers over the course of a few years. It is challenging to focus on instructional leadership when supervisory officer personnel changes are so frequent. System administrators who have high visibility and who are accessible can help determine school-based high-leverage strategies for improvement. They can also build "lateral" capacity among the principals and vice-principals of families of schools, thereby creating a group of resilient administrators who are better able to withstand changes. (See also Domain 6 in the LSRT, *Succession Planning, Including Recruitment, to Build Capacity and to Retain and Sustain Effective Leaders*.)
5. Boards may want to give more consideration to supporting the role of secondary school vice-principals. Specialized in-service to assist and support them is essential. Many hold their positions for longer than their elementary counterparts, and vice-principalships

can be career positions. Special attention to supporting secondary vice-principals is not widespread. (See also Domain 6 in the LSRT, Succession Planning, Including Recruitment, to Build Capacity and to Retain and Sustain Effective Leaders.)

6. Boards may want to strengthen the role of school improvement teams by ensuring that they receive consistent opportunities at board events for joint in-service on and dialogue about improvement planning. (See also Domain 1 in the LSRT, School and District Improvement.)

## REFERENCES

Fullan, M., Hill, P., & Crévola, C. (2006). *Breakthrough*. Toronto: Ontario Principals' Council.

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