

IEL-Sponsored Regional Directors' Seminar Series

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Introduction

Over approximately the period May 2010 to June 2011 a series of seminars have been conducted with directors of education in five regions of Ontario including the Barrie Region, the Southwest Region, the Northeast Region, the Northwest Region and the Eastern Ontario Region. Each seminar series is six days in duration, a total of 30 days, and is coordinated by me working with one or two directors representing their colleagues in each region.¹ At the time of writing this report, 25 of the 30 days had been completed. The remaining five days are to be undertaken as follows:

- Eastern Ontario (3 days, schedule not yet finalized)
- Northeast Ontario (1 day scheduled for July 5)
- Northwest Ontario (1 day scheduled for October 12)

The origin of this year's seminar series in the five regions was the generally very positive assessment by Southwest Region directors of their experiences with a seminar series conducted for and by them over the 2009 -2010 school year, an initiative also funded by IEL. Prompted by the success of the initial Southwest Region seminar series, IEL offered to provide support for a series of six-day seminars for directors in other regions of the province, an invitation eventually accepted by directors in five regions including a second round of seminars for directors in the Southwest Region.

Objectives

Each of the seminar series was guided by objectives or principles recommended in the Southwest directors final report for 2009-10. In brief, the seminars aimed to:

1. Reflect evidence about the characteristics of successful school systems in Ontario-like contexts;
2. Include attention to the leadership practices and dispositions needed by senior system leaders to guide the development of successful school systems;
3. Encourage participants to make explicit the current nature of their leadership, as well as the practices and procedures used by their systems for improving student learning;
4. Foster considerable amounts of practice-sharing among participants, in combination with guidelines, frameworks and criteria for offering constructively critical commentary about the practices of one's fellow directors;

¹ Barrie Region - Susan LaRosa and Larry Hope; Northeast Region - Catherine McCullough; Southwest Region – Linda Fabi and John Malloy; Eastern Ontario Region – Roger Clark; Northwest Region – Jack McMaster.

5. Introduce the results of empirical research into discussions of successful practices and procedures whenever suitable evidence can be found.

In addition to these objectives, the seminar series was intended to make important contributions to the province's efforts to re-conceptualize its expectations for districts, as reflected in the OLF's *System Practices and Procedures*. Most seminar days included time for feedback and discussion by participants of the IEL-sponsored research being carried out about "high performing schools systems" in the province during the same period. As a knowledge mobilization strategy, the seminars resulted in many directors in the province not only having a good understanding of the results of this study but feeling some ownership of the results and considerable commitment to using its results in their own work.

Seminar Processes

While there was considerable overlap in the content focus of the five seminar series, no two series were the exactly the same. This variation was a consequence of encouraging participants to help design each day of the seminar in which they would participate. At the end of each seminar day, a group discussion was held about what had been learned that day and how best to follow up that learning in the next scheduled seminar. The role of the seminar's resident researcher was to participate in those decisions, locate relevant research and propose a suitable design for the next seminar. Evidence of both variation across the seminar series as well as similarities in content focus can be found in Appendix A, the agendas for each day of each series.

Notwithstanding participant-driven variations across the seminar series, the conduct of each seminar reflected a common set of processes including:

- the assignment of prior readings, either original research papers or systematic reviews of research;
- sharing of leadership strategies and district processes and procedures, often stimulated by artifacts of participants' work (e.g., board improvement plans; the structure and expectations of the senior leadership team) tabled at the seminar by several or all participants;
- the use of frameworks and concepts found in the readings for the day as a lenses for participants to use in providing constructive feedback to their colleagues;
- Constructivist- oriented approaches to seminar interactions, including starting from the interests and understandings of participants and helping them make sense of any new evidence or concepts in their own terms.
- guided discussions at the beginning of each seminar about how each participant had used what had been learned at the previous session.

Seminar Evaluations

Each seminar day was evaluated by participants at the end of each day using the form found in Appendix B². Participants submitted their evaluations to one colleague who acted as the main contact for the resident researcher. That person then had the results summarized and a brief report of the results sent to the researcher for use in helping design the next day. Appendix B includes these daily evaluation summaries for each seminar series.

Final Reflections on the Seminar Series

While this has been a fairly demanding initiative to implement, I am left with a few mostly very positive impressions that may be worth sharing by way of concluding remarks:

- Virtually all of the directors who attended the seminars were extremely thoughtful about their work and clearly committed to doing it better whenever they could;
- I was actually quite surprised with how quickly and authentically the “lessons” from a seminar day were acted on through the directors’ work in their districts;
- There is little doubt in my mind that most of the participants are the “lead learners” in their organizations;
- Even though, “lead learners”, the seminars were among the very few opportunities that participants had to seriously reflect on their work and learn from their director-colleagues;
- Discussions during the seminars about the challenges and opportunities faced by directors in the province did provide considerable support for the initiative, taken by the Southwest directors, to begin conversations with Ministry colleagues about shifting the nature of school system – Ministry relations and the locus of decisions about future initiatives aimed at moving student achievement forward in the province might best be made.

My impression, in sum, is that this was IEL money well spent.

² This appendix is still incomplete but the complete version will be provided when remaining seminars have been delivered.