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*Ontario Leaders Collaborating for Student Achievement, Equity and Well-being
La collaboration des leaders en Ontario assure la réussite, l’équité et le bien-être des élèves.*

The Little School that Could – Even Against the Odds! Joanna Crapsi-Cascioli

The author of this story was principal of a small elementary school serving a large proportion of students from economically disadvantaged families. Her story demonstrates the many forms that “providing instructional support” as described in the practices of the [Ontario Leadership Framework \(OLF\)](#) can take. It also illustrates the potential leverage for student learning that exists in a school’s strong relationships with families and the wider community.

Roxborough Park School, in Hamilton, is a high needs K - 5 school in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board. Seventy-five percent of its 225 students live below the poverty line. It is comprised largely of generational poverty with English Language Learners (ELL) comprising 37 percent of its population.

When I began as the principal, the school was not without its challenges. However, among the challenges was a very clear commitment by the staff, students, parents and community so I turned to them to inform our vision-building to move forward together.

1.1 Building a shared vision

As a high needs and former Ontario Focus Intervention Partnership (OFIP) school, one might expect our little school to be grasping for solutions to student achievement challenges, yet this was not the case. EQAO results over a five-year period indicated continuous improvement among students achieving at levels 3 and 4 in both reading and writing.

How Did this School Overcome the Odds?

The leadership practices as outlined in the *Ontario Leadership Framework* and supported through the initiatives of the LSA Project provide a clear map of the practices that came together leading to the school’s success. LSA’s *Theory of Action* identifies four paths (Rational, Emotional, Organizational and Family)¹ through which leadership practices contribute to student learning. The following discussion illustrates the Emotional Path and shows how teacher efficacy, student efficacy and trust have a significant impact on this important lens. It was trust that led to launching innovative initiatives focused on support interventions that would enhance elements along the Rational Path such as academic emphasis and disciplinary climate.

Psychological Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – resilience,

Through the creation of networks and learning teams, the Organizational Path was enhanced in a highly responsive and strategic way to meet the school’s specific needs, allowing for a refined approach to meeting the complex needs of our students.

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

Finally, woven throughout those practices are the connections made to the Family Path. These are connections that draw our hardest-to-reach families into our educational culture through reciprocal

¹ Leithwood, K., Patten, S., Jantzi, D. (2010). Testing a conception of how leadership influences student learning, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46, 5, 671-706

relationships. They allow for the co-creation of learning by students, schools and families in a very powerful way that enhances the social capital of parents while connecting them to educational culture.

Student and Teacher Efficacy

My entry plan included an interview with each staff member.

- When asked what they thought needed to be celebrated, the overwhelming response was “the kids.” Teachers described student hardships, how their lives are impacted by poverty, mental health, addiction, and other challenges. As one teacher described it, “yet they get here every day and work their little buns off! Yes, the kids should be celebrated because they don’t give up.”
- The more I came to know the staff, the more I learned that it was not just the kids that weren’t giving up in this school, neither were the staff. Despite facing a period of internal challenge related to school culture, individual teachers kept their eye on the goal and continued to deliver exceptional instructional practice to their students. Walk-through’s revealed solid comprehensive literacy programs – their work supported by previous administrators, and the board’s literacy improvement project teacher was solidly in place in most classrooms. The teachers knew their students, knew what they needed and provided a solid program within their classes.
- Despite the challenges, teachers and students believe that the students are capable of learning and achieving at high levels.
- Starting in a new school mid-year that needed new structures mid-year was a busy and challenging time. With behavioural and cultural elements requiring my full attention, and the strong teacher efficacy I observed, my message to teachers was “I trust you. You are all professionals and qualified. I trust you to know your kids, to know what they need and to do it ... and if there is anything you need from me you let me know and it will be done.”

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): problem-solving expertise, knowledge of effective school and classroom practices that directly affect student learning, & systems thinking

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

And that’s exactly what they did when they identified the need for behaviour/well-being interventions to support our at-risk students – so, tiered interventions became our next step.

3.6 Allocating resources to support the school’s vision and goals

Tiered Interventions – A Focus Beyond Tier 1

- A contributor to the strong literacy scores was the solid academic interventions already in place. The school’s Learning Resource Teacher was diligent about ensuring that Empower Reading Groups ran without distraction. The school’s Literacy Improvement Project Teacher delivered Leveled Literacy Interventions to support struggling readers. Classroom teachers implemented Class Act where needed.
- Assistive technology was not yet widely used but classroom teachers in grade 3 added it as an additional intervention strategy for struggling readers and it made a difference, as students who struggled with decoding were now able to focus on expressing their thinking.
- My teacher interviews, along with a review of exactly which students were not meeting with success, revealed an intervention gap in the area of behaviour/mental well-being.
- Teachers identified a small percentage of students who required an intervention for behaviours that were leading to escalation and putting the school into Non-Violent Crisis Intervention (NVCi) frenzy and resulting in students either missing valuable instructional time due to escalating challenges with self-regulation, or suspensions and students unable to attend school at all.

4.4 Buffering staff from distractions to their work

4.2 Providing instructional support

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement progress

- In response, we agreed to create a Student Success Room as a tier 2 intervention strategy. In this room students not only receive academic support, they also receive support in the area of mental health and well-being, which supports their self-regulation – resulting in increased instructional time. If you were to walk into this room you might see a student reading to the Learning Resource Teacher, another student completing a Problem Solving Sheet, using a stress ball or reviewing a social story in the “Cool Down Zone” while another is building with some blocks or playing in a sensory bin on the carpet supervised by an EA during a scheduled stress reduction break. It is a highly timely and responsive intervention, which has resulted in increasing the attendance and time on task of our most challenged students. The greatest impact of this intervention is that it not only allows students to stay in school, but it also allows them, in a short time, to return to class and apply their learning and skills back in the regular classroom with their peers.
- Our district offers an intervention called the After-School Scholars Community Program which provides after school literacy instruction from qualified teachers from within the school, providing a seamless transition from classroom tier instruction to afterschool intervention as well as the learning in the intervention back to the classroom. Instructors in the program receive training and can integrate that professional learning back into their regular classroom for all students.
- The program includes a parental engagement component. At Roxborough Park almost 50 students and 10 parents participated in this intervention and students demonstrated improved literacy and numeracy scores.
- Finally, for a very select few students, exploring tier 3 strategies such as system classes, or in some cases a temporary reduced day timetable, has resulted in the implementation of medical interventions and collaboration with community services which have, over a short period of time for some, resulted in an increased focus on academics.

4.2 Providing instructional support

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

3.3 Building productive relationships with families and communities

3.4 Connecting the school to its wider environment

CASE STUDY OF A SUCCESSFUL TIER 3 IN-SCHOOL INTERVENTION

B is a student whose behaviour began to escalate in the spring of 2013. Aggression and emotional outbursts were a daily occurrence and impacting his ability to focus, complete task, and get along with peers in all school settings. Not only was his behaviour impacting his learning but also the learning of his classmates. All of the school’s resources had been unsuccessful in making an impact. Regular meetings with his mother, involvement of the social worker, support of an EA and the student success room, and communication with the family doctor had all failed to make an impact.

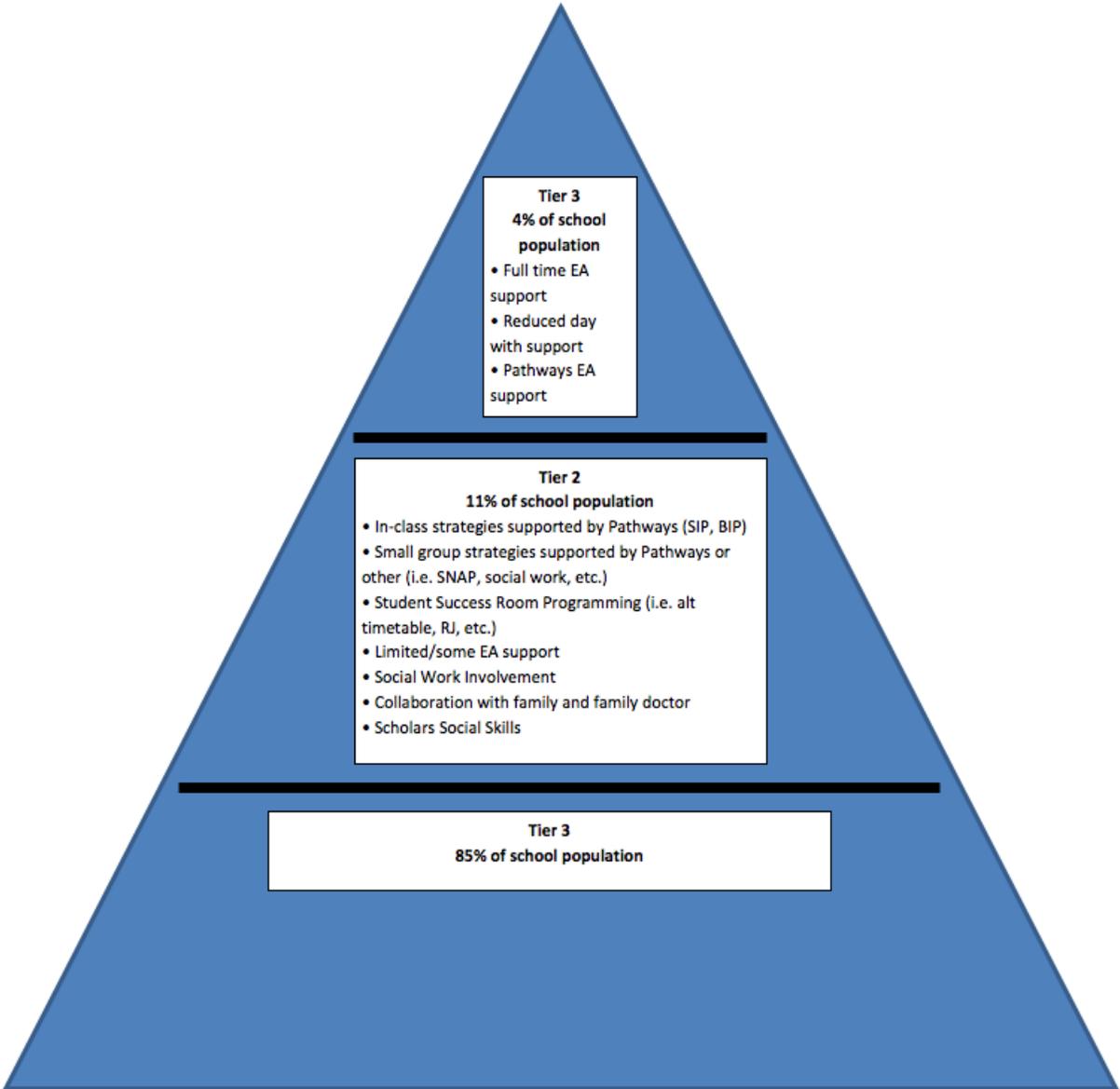
In September with the start of a new school year, the student had three significant violent incidents toward others within the first month of school. While on suspension he wielded a knife at a family member and set his closet on fire. He returned to school and trashed his classroom two days in a row and was suspended again. Our tier 3 intervention went into motion, reducing his schedule to a half day and supporting his mother in accessing community supports to address his mental health issues.

Within a month of implementing this plan, B received medical and family supports and began demonstrating a significant improvement in his mood and behaviour. He was calm, focused, generally happier and meeting with success with both his schoolwork, his peers, and at home. His day was expanded and he was re-directed to tier 2 interventions.

The complexity of tier 3 cannot be stressed enough. Recently B has returned to tier 3 and the causes are being explored. The good news is that a clear course of action now exists, expediting a timely

response. Furthermore, it should be noted that any student on a reduced day is supported by regular monitoring and communication between the staff, family and community supporting agencies.

Roxborough Park Student Wellbeing/Behaviour Tiered Interventions



Low Transiency

EQAO data reports that 56 percent of grade 3 students who wrote the tests had been at the school for two years or more. It would seem that this low transiency rate reduces the transitions for our students, allows our teachers to know their students better and supports the building of relationships between school and family.

Community and Positive School Culture – Integrated Learning and We All Own Our Kids!

After building on the strong teacher efficacy of the school, listening to staff, student and parent input to determine the most appropriate interventions to put in place, it did not take long to nurture a positive school culture to contribute to student learning.

3.3 Building productive relationship with families and communities

In October the school launched its Breakfast Program, which produced an immediate impact as students who were formerly consistently late began to arrive on time. We also observed fewer behavioural issues as students were showing up to class more focused and ready to learn. Partnering with the Hamilton Bulldogs Hockey Club and “Tastebuds” has made this possible.

3.4 Connecting the school to its wider environment

We have also partnered with the Ontario Early Years who are now offering an Early Years Program at the school which we hope will assist our future students with school readiness.

3.4 Connecting the school to its wider environment

On any given day as you walk down the halls at Roxborough Park you might:

- hear a caretaker speaking to a student about respect;
- catch our school secretary showing primary students how to make chalk modeling and guiding students through the measurement of ingredients;
- see parent volunteers support a variety of students in the ripping of bread or baking of cookies for a school- wide Christmas luncheon;
- catch parents delivering a read aloud or a community partner delivering a yoga class.

3.5 Maintaining a safe and healthy school environment

Challenges Going Forward

As a new principal to Roxborough Park wishing to support the school’s upward trend in achievement, my challenge becomes continuing to support the good strategies already in place and being wise enough to value and learn from the good work that the school is already doing; all the while continuing to challenge the boundaries of instruction in an effort to continue to move staff toward 21st century teaching and learning practices. Additionally, I certainly feel the weight of the challenge of framing EQAO results within the context of school improvement with such a small cohort where numbers do not always give the full picture.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is to continue to advocate for support for the 4 percent of our population who are students in the tier 3 program, almost exclusively in kindergarten. These are students truly in need of tier 3 supports, not simply kindergarten children who are a little restless on the carpet. While these students are almost all connected with medical agencies in the field of mental health and well-being, as an education system we are not yet equipped with the resources or expertise to support these students in a traditional educational setting. The next frontier of intervention for Roxborough Park does not yet exist. It is complex and will require problem solving and innovation; indeed, it will require the very 21st century skills we aspire to for our students. Yet, if we are truly committed to “closing the gap” our data would seem to suggest that this is where our focus must be.

So, while we celebrate the success of our ongoing growth and beating the odds, our work does not end here. Reflecting and learning from what we are doing right, continuing it within the culture of continued growth in our instructional practice to modernize our system overall, while not losing sight of our highest risk students in tier 3 is a complex juggling act. What is certain is that at Roxborough Park we will be doing it together. As we continue to refine our engagement with the practices outlined in Leithwood’s Rational, Emotional, Organizational and Family Paths, we can make deeper connections to our individual school contexts to become even more strategic in targeting the school-side experiences and classroom experiences of our students impacting their learning and well-being. I wish to express my deepest regards to the staff at Roxborough Park who serve our students daily.