



The Institute for Education Leadership
L'Institut de leadership en éducation

Characteristics of High Performing School Systems in Ontario

Part 2
Technical Report

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References

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1. Introduction

Background

Among the many important influences on the improvement of student learning, neither researchers nor policy makers, historically, have awarded districts or school systems much respect. Current preoccupations with large-scale reform (for example, England's Primary Strategies, the U.S. No Child Left Behind legislation, Saskatchewan's School^{Plus} Initiative, Alberta's province-wide Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), and Ontario's sustained literacy strategy), however, have prompted a rethinking of this neglect. It is now becoming increasingly clear that the absence of school system support and intervention significantly diminishes the chances for success of either large-scale government reform initiatives or school-based improvement efforts. School systems are, of course, also agents of their own strategies for improvement. As Childress et al, (2007) claim, in the preface to their new text, districts "are uniquely positioned to ensure equity and to increase the capacity of all schools – not just some" (p. 1).

Togneri and Anderson (2003) have argued for a distinction between the results of district studies before and after the current era of high stakes accountability. While clearly of some value, pre-accountability studies describe districts working under conditions which are dramatically changed by the introduction of strong external accountability policies. Such policies have significant consequences for educators at all levels of the school system, but they influence districts especially strongly. Districts typically are "closer", legally, to policy-making groups than are schools or classrooms, and they are expected to implement policy with greater fidelity than are schools or classrooms.

If school systems are especially sensitive to (or bound by) the policy contexts in which they find themselves, studies of high performing districts in U.S., Canadian and specifically Ontario contexts might be expected to discover at least partly different characteristics associated with high performance. We cannot assume that Ontario evidence about high performing districts would identify the same characteristics as would American evidence since policy and other contextual variables are significantly different. Unfortunately, almost all evidence about districts has been carried out in the U.S., notable exceptions from the pre- and post - accountability eras being LaRoque and Coleman (1990) and Maguire (2004), respectively. Furthermore, whether conducted in the U.S. or Canada, there is almost no current research describing how high performing districts came to be that way.

Finally, almost all evidence about the characteristics of high performing school systems, whether U.S. or Canadian in origin, comes from case study research - usually case study research using "outlier" designs. Evidence from such research designs, while quite useful, is also quite limited. First, there are no "perfect"

research designs; each type has its own limitations. So even a large corpus of evidence based on the same design cannot be fully trusted. Second, case studies are not well suited to establishing empirical relations between characteristics of a school system and student achievement; establishing such relations requires large-scale quantitative designs.

Finally, while “outlier designs”¹ reveal characteristics of high performing school systems, they are not capable of “subtracting” the characteristics of typical or low performing systems. So they contribute to our understanding of what is necessary for high performance but not what is sufficient. Since improving the performance of a school system is an expensive business, it is especially important to be clear about the least that needs to be done to achieve desired performance.

The dearth of evidence about high performing districts in Ontario and other Canadian contexts, the questionable validity of evidence from U.S. research for understanding Ontario school systems, the use of a single type of research design in almost all existing studies, and lack of information about school system development, justified three goals for this study:

- to describe key features of high performing school districts in Ontario;
- to identify how, and through what trajectory, these districts came to be high performing;
- to clarify those features of districts and their contexts (e.g., size, provincial policies, role of the director or system leaders, role of professional learning) which influence their performance, as well as improvements in their performance.

While these three objective describe the immediate goals for the study, its’ broader purpose was to help in the development of a provincial District Effectiveness Framework (DEF) justified by robust evidence. The DEF is to be part of the Ontario Leadership Framework, replacing the existing System Practices and Procedures. Intended as a complement the province’s School Effectiveness Framework (SEF), the DEF will serve as a guide to school system improvement.

Framework

The starting points for framing this study were three recent syntheses of evidence about school system conditions which influence their success in improving student learning (Leithwood et al, 2004; Leithwood, 2010; Rorrer, Skrla & Scheurich, 2008). Because all three syntheses were based primarily on U.S. data, developing the framework for this study entailed modifications and additions to these data bases specifically aimed at capturing the policy context and wider environments in which Ontario school systems found themselves at the time of the study. These modifications and additions were the outcome of:

- a content analysis of relevant Ontario educational policy;

¹ These are typically case studies of school systems all of which lie at the high performing end of the low to high performing continuum.

- a series of “focus group” interviews² with senior district leaders in one region of the province;
- feedback in response to a draft of the framework received at the annual meeting of the province’s directors of education; and
- responses to initial drafts by Ministry of Education staff.

The detailed outcome of synthesizing the research reviews and adapting them in response to local feedback is described in Appendix A. Four broad dimensions, each of which include from two to four “elements” or sub-dimensions (13 in total) structure the framework – core processes, leadership, supporting conditions and relationships. The remainder of this section summarizes the elements or sub-dimensions associated with these four dimensions and cites examples of relevant original evidence.

Core processes, as the label indicates, are those characteristics of school systems that have the most direct effect on the quality of teaching and learning. Considerable evidence now indicates that such processes include the school system’s beliefs and vision for students; this vision is widely shared and understood (Togneri & Anderson, 2003), as well as being focused on both raising the achievement of all students and closing the gap in achievement from the most and least successful students (Louis et al, 2010). Also included among the core processes is the school system’s curriculum and instruction. High performing school systems work with schools to develop highly engaging instruction for all students, instruction that develops both “tool skills” and deep understanding of big ideas; in such systems, curricula, instruction and assessments are carefully aligned (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2003). Finally, high performing districts have effective information management systems and provide considerable support for their schools in using systematically collected data for instructional planning and school improvement purposes (e.g., Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007).

Leadership, the second dimension of the framework, includes the work of both professional and elected (trustee) leadership. About professional leadership³, the framework draws attention not only to the procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting and appraising both school and district -level leaders but also the quality of their implementation. The framework also defines effective leadership at both levels as instructionally sophisticated including a close, but locally appropriate, reflection of the practices encompassed by the Ontario Leadership Framework. The coordinated distribution of leadership across both formal and informal leadership roles in the system (e.g., Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009) is also endorsed by the framework.

The leadership of elected trustees includes helping to communicate the district vision and goals for students in the wider community, keeping the learning and well being of

² The context for these focus group interviews was a six-day seminar for the region’s directors of education sponsored by the *Institute for Educational Leadership* (IEL) and the *Council of Ontario Directors of Education* (CODE) with the author serving as a resource.

³ In the framework, the term “professional leadership” is used primarily in reference to those in formal school and district administrative leadership roles such as principals, vice principals, superintendents and other central office “line” staff.

students at the core of the board's decision making and aligning policies and financial resources around that core (e.g. Land, 2003).

Supporting conditions, the third broad dimension in the framework that guided this study, encompasses the school system's approach to professional development (PD), organizational improvement processes and the alignment of budget, personnel policies and organizational structures to support the system's vision and goals for students. Successful school systems allocate significant resources to the ongoing learning of their staffs and devote a substantial portion of the time used for meetings to professional learning rather than administrative routines. PD opportunities are often job-embedded, carefully aligned to support the system's priorities and reflect contemporary understandings of how adults learn (Pritchard & Marshall, 2002).

The framework for the study reflects evidence that successful organizational improvement processes are limited to the pursuit of only a small number of goals at the same time, proceed in manageable stages and are guided by explicit and well-tested frameworks, policies and practices, as well as widely shared goals that permit local adaptation (e.g., Louis et al, 2010). All stakeholders have clearly defined roles to play in this approach to organizational improvement. Established structures and procedures are maintained and built on. Care is taken to ensure the continuity and extension of the system's core values and ongoing efforts are made to ensure that budget allocations, personnel policies and district structures enable staff efforts to approximate the its' vision and goals for students.

Relationships is the fourth and final dimension of the framework. These are relationships within the central office and between the central office and its schools, parents, local community groups and the Ministry of Education. Evidence indicates that in successful systems, central office roles are interconnected, work is undertaken collaboratively in the service of a widely shared set of purposes. Communication among staff is frequent and cordial. School staffs often participate in system decisions, are in frequent contact with central office staff for support and assistance (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Communication throughout the system and within schools is nurtured by structures which encourage collaborative work (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). The school system encourages its schools to engage with parents in both the home and school and helps staffs become more skilled in parent engagement; schools are held accountable for developing productive working relationships with parents (Gordon & Louis, in press). Local community groups are routinely consulted and recognized for their contribution and support. The school system is in regular and two-way communication with the Ministry, encourages Ministry collaboration in achieving board goals and directions, and has a multi-year plan that explicitly integrates provincial and board priorities (Louis et al, 2010).

Both the survey instruments and interview protocols used to collect data for this study explicitly asked about those school system characteristics summarized above. Appendices B and C include the surveys used to collect data from principals and system leaders.

Research Methods

The multi-methods design used for this study was intended to:

- test the extent to which the characteristics of high performing systems included in the framework for the study explained variation in two student-related outcomes (Testing System Effects)
- provide an in-depth understanding of high performing school systems and how they got to be that way (Case Study Analysis)

Testing System Effects

The desired sample for this part of the study was all elementary and secondary principals (4625) and system leaders (531)⁴ in the province's 72 school systems. The achieved sample included:

- 1543 principals (approximately 33% of the total province's principal population and about 44% of the principals in districts that chose to participate in the study);
- 235 system leaders (approximately 44 % of all superintendents and directors in the province and about 59% of those in participating school systems) in 52 school systems (72 % response rate).

Data collected for this part of the project were responses to two surveys (principal, system leader). This evidence was about the status of those characteristics of high performing school systems described in the framework for the study. Evidence for this part of the study also included EQAO achievement data (both annual achievement and change in achievement over five years) for each school system at grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 (OSSLT). While evidence about system credit accumulation rates was also examined, results indicated no significant relationship between such rates and the system characteristics framing this study.

The total set of questions to be asked on the surveys were divided between the principal and system leader surveys based on researchers' judgments about which role was most likely to have the best information on which to respond. This strategy also made the length of each survey more palatable to respondents. The principal survey included 57 questions, the system leader survey 51 questions. Each survey could be answered, on average, in about 15 minutes. Both surveys were administered online using *Survey Monkey* with web addresses sent to either the director of each of Ontario's 72 school systems or a designate identified in advance. A letter from the Ministry of Education endorsing the study accompanied the surveys.

Case Studies of High Performing Systems

Three "high-performing" Ontario school systems were selected for more in-depth study based on five-year trends in their EQAO achievement results⁵. "High performance" was defined as taking three different forms on the assumption that the

⁴ This number includes 459 superintendents and 72 directors of education

⁵ Ladd's () evidence indicates that when the focus is on changes in student achievement, as distinct from levels of student achievement, student background variables such as socio-economic status, explain non-significant amounts of variation in achievement.

improvement challenges facing system leaders differed depending on their students' average achievement profiles five years prior to the study, as follows:

- substantially below provincial averages in 2004 - 05 improving to about provincial averages by 2009 - 2010 (the “large gains from a below average starting point“ below profile);
- at provincial averages in 2004 - 05 rising to substantially above provincial averages by 2009 - 10 (the “average to good” profile);
- substantially above provincial averages in 2004 - 05 rising even further by 2009 - 10 (the “good to great” profile).

Table 1 reports changes over five years in the percentage of students achieving Level 3 or above on provincial tests administered by the *Educational Quality and Accountability Office* (EQAO) at grades 3, 6 and 9 in reading, writing and math. These are changes in each tested area at each grade, as well as the total change across all tested areas (bottom row of table): numbers in brackets are the average achievement levels in 2004 - 05. Results are reported for each of the four systems selected for study, as well as the province as a whole.

As the bottom row of Table 1 indicates:

- NP⁶ (large gains from a below average starting point profile) had a total change score of 109 over the five year period beginning from a below average level (52), as compared with the province as a whole (58);
- TL⁷ (average to good profile) had a total change score of 75 over the five year period beginning from an average level (58), as compared with the province as a whole (58).
- CECC⁸ (above average or “good” to higher or “great” profile) had a total change score of 92 over the five year period beginning from an above average level (64), as compared with the province as a whole.

Selection of systems for case study research was not based solely on changes in EQAO scores, however. Ontario has both public and Catholic English speaking school systems and Catholic systems dominate the high end of the achievement distribution. As well, the province has Francophone school systems. Acknowledging these complexities, the sample of systems includes one Catholic English speaking systems (Systems 1), one public, English speaking system (TL) and one Francophone system (System 3). These provincial complexities mean that, while Catholic NPS clearly improved much more than any others in the province, public TL's total improvement was actually exceeded by 8 Catholic school systems (and tied with one public school system).

Several different types of evidence were collected about each system's current characteristics and the evolution of these characteristics over the five-year period (2004-

⁶ Nipissing Parry Sound Catholic District School Board

⁷ Trillium Lakelands District School Board

⁸ Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française (CECC) du Centre-Est

05 to 2008-09) prior to the study. A three-person team conducted site visits to the two English-speaking systems to collect these data while one French-speaking researcher⁹ conducted all interviews in System 3.

Table 1
Total Achievement Change Over Five Years:
Three School Systems and the Province¹⁰

Achievement Area	NP	TL	CECC	Province
Grade 3				
Reading	19 (48)	6 (60)	20 (56)	2 (59)
Writing	33 (46)	12 (55)	13 (75)	7 (61)
Math	11 (63)	7 (67)	15 (61)	4 (66)
Grade 6				
Reading	11 (52)	12 (61)	8 (75)	6 (63)
Writing	24 (42)	9 (53)	6 (80)	8 (59)
Math	4 (50)	3 (57)	7 (80)	3 (60)
Grade 9				
Acad. Math	1 (77)	7 (73)	6 (69)	9 (68)
Applied Math	6 (35)	19 (37)	17 (16)	11 (27)
Total Change	109 (52)	75 (58)	92 (64)	50 (58)

During these site visit interviews were conducted with principals, senior district leaders and trustees. While the total number of interviews varied for each system depending on its size, on average interviews were conducted with approximately:

- three trustees (selected by the director/superintendent as the most knowledgeable about the system’s improvement efforts);
- five senior district administrators (superintendents and director);
- one or more senior leaders with provincially defined responsibilities (e.g., the SEF lead);
- twelve principals, both elementary and secondary, selected randomly from the cohort of school administrators who had been in that role in the district for at least three years.

Each interview was audio-taped, extensive notes taken during the interview process and checked for completeness shortly after each interview by listening to the audio taped record. Audio tapes also were revisited frequently as each case was written. Quantitative

⁹ This was Professor Denis Hache whose first language is French. He is fluently bilingual.

¹⁰ Numbers in brackets represent average achievement in 2005 (percentage of students scoring at Level 3 or above.

survey results collected as part of testing system effects were also available for the three case study school systems.

Case study analysis was guided by the a-prior framework described earlier in the report. Responses of all interviewees to each question were first aggregated by role (principal, system leader, trustee) and these aggregated responses served as the starting point for beginning to write each case. A draft of each case was returned to each case system for review, correction, and other reactions prior to finalizing the case. It was usually the senior system leadership team that read and responded to the draft report.

2. Results of Testing System Effects

Reliability of Scales Measuring System Characteristics

Crucial to both the results of the study and how those results are interpreted is the quality of the measures used, including the internal reliability of the measurement scales. Most of the scales used in the two surveys used in this study were composed of from five to ten individual survey items. A reliable scale is one in which responses to all individual items in a scale are similar, typically estimated using a statistic called Cronbach's Alpha. Internal reliabilities are reported like correlations with .6 widely considered to be a minimum acceptable level of reliability (1.0 would be maximum).

Table 2 reports the reliabilities of all scales used in this study, except for the single item measure of Local Community Groups. When the four broad categories of system characteristics are treated as single scales, measures of only two categories exceed (by a small amount) the minimum acceptable level, Core Processes (.73) and Supporting Conditions (.72). In contrast, all but one of the scales (Internal System and School Relationships) measuring individual system characteristics falls below the minimum acceptable level of reliability and most exceed the minimum acceptable level by a substantial amount.

Reliable measures produce more trustworthy results. So the implication for interpreting the results of the evidence collected using the surveys is to rely more heavily on evidence about individual system characteristics than evidence about the four broad categories, especially the Leadership and Relationships categories.

Table 2
Reliability of Scales Measuring System Characteristics
(Cronbach Alpha)

Core Processes	.73
Curriculum & Instruction	.92
Beliefs & Vision for Students	.81
Uses of Evidence – Sys Leaders	.77
Uses of Evidence – Principals	.85
Supporting Conditions	.72

Organizational Improvement Processes	.82
Professional Development	.88
Alignment	.82
Leadership	.54
Efficacy	.73
Professional Leadership	.85
Elected Leadership	.94
Relationships	.58
Internal System & School	.57
Parents	.82
Local Community Groups	na
Ministry of Education	.68

Current Status of School System Characteristics

This section reports the means and standard deviations of both principal and system leaders' responses to the two surveys. These results, combined in Table 3, indicate the extent to which each of the proposed characteristics of high performing school systems are perceived to be approaching their ideal or most effective state and the amount of variation in these perceptions among principals and system leaders across the province.

For interpretation purposes, characteristics awarded ratings of 3 or more on the four-point scale used in the surveys, are considered to be an indication of moderate to high levels of development. Ratings below 3 are considered to be an indication of relatively weak or low levels of development. This relatively high threshold for interpreting results positively has been set because educators' ratings are typically skewed toward the positive end of most survey response options asking them to rate aspects of their work.¹¹

Across all four categories of school system characteristics, the highest rated categories were Core Processes (m = 3.21) and Leadership (m = 3.04), both of which exceeded the stipulated threshold for being considered well developed. Falling just below this threshold were the categories Supporting Conditions (m = 2.97) and Relationships (2.95). Evidence about the development of characteristics within each of the four categories can be summed up as follows:

- *Core processes.* Ratings of system characteristics included in this category were highest for Beliefs and Vision for Students (m = 3.27), followed by Curriculum and Instruction (m = 3.18) and Uses of Evidence (3.04);

¹¹ For evidence about this claim see, for example, Desimone (2009).

- *Leadership.* In this category, highest ratings were awarded to Professional Leadership (m = 3.14), followed by Leader Efficacy (m = 3.10) and Elected Leadership (m = 2.88);
- *Supporting conditions.* Two of the three system characteristics included in this category fell below the threshold rating of 3 including Organizational Improvement Processes (m = 2.89) and Professional Development (2.83). Alignment easily exceeded the threshold (m = 3.19).
- *Relationships.* Relationships with the Ministry (m = 3.31) and relationships within the central office and between the central office and schools (m = 3.09) were generally rated as quite positive. Relationships with Parents and Local Community groups were rated lower and approximately the same (2.70 and 2.69 respectively).

Across all 13 school system characteristics measured, categories aside, highest ratings were awarded to:

- Beliefs and vision for students (m = 3.27);
- Alignment (m = 3.19);
- Curriculum and instruction (m = 3.18); and
- Uses of evidence (m = 3.17).

Attracting the lowest ratings were:

- Elected leadership (m = 2.88);
- Relationships with parents (m = 2.70); and
- Relationships with local community groups (2.69).

As the standard deviations reported in Table 2 indicate, greatest variation in ratings is evident in responses to:

- Relationships with local community groups (SD = .75);¹²
- Elected Leadership (SD = .65);
- Internal relationships (SD = .60); and
- Relationships with Parents (SD = .64).

Table 3
Individual Principal and System Leader Survey Responses
(Principal N =1543; System leader N = 235)

Characteristics of High Performing School Systems		Principals		System Lead		P&S Agg.
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
A. Core Processes						
1. Curriculum and Instruction		3.18	0.53			3.18
2.	Strongly supports schools' efforts to implement curricula that foster students' higher order thinking skills, as well as to	3.38	0.63			

¹² This characteristic was measured with a single item which likely influenced this standard deviation

	develop basic skills				
3.	Works effectively with schools to help provide all students with engaging forms of instruction.	3.21	0.64		
4.	Works effectively with schools to help establish ambitious but realistic student performance standards.	3.19	0.63		
5.	Has aligned all elements of school programs and resources (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment, staff, budget).	2.96	0.69		
6.	Instructional improvement includes teachers in majority of schools and assists them in developing sophisticated understanding of powerful instruction.	3.24	0.91		
7.	Works extensively with schools to align curriculum, instruction, assessment and teaching resources.	3.12	0.70		
2. System Directions (Mission, Vision, Goals)				3.27	0.39
				3.27	
2.	My school system has developed a widely-shared set of beliefs and vision about student learning and welfare that falls within the parameters set by the province.			3.70	0.50
3.	My school system's beliefs and vision includes a focus on closing achievement gaps.			3.77	0.48
4.	My school system's beliefs and vision includes a focus on "raising the achievement bar".			3.73	0.52
5.	My school system's beliefs and vision include a focus on nurturing student engagement and welfare.			3.51	0.56
6.	My school system's beliefs and vision for students are understood and shared by staff.			3.06	0.61
7.	Elected officials led or participated in assessing community values and interests and incorporating them into the school system's beliefs and vision for students.			3.02	0.62
8.	Elected officials helped to mobilize parents and the wider community in developing and supporting the vision.			2.77	0.66
9.	Elected officials helped to mobilize teachers and administrators in developing and supporting the vision.			2.84	0.73
10.	Elected officials helped to create a climate of excellence that makes achieving the vision possible.			3.06	0.70

		Principals		S ystem Lead.		P&S Agg.
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
3. Uses of Evidence		3.04	0.50	3.31	0.46	3.17
8.	Has efficient information management systems.	2.91	0.67	3.25	0.67	
9.	Provides schools with relevant data about their performance.	3.19	0.66	3.47	0.64	
10.	Assists schools in using data to improve their performance.	3.10	0.67	3.51	0.57	
11.	Creates collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation of data in schools.	2.99	0.69	3.39	0.60	
12.	Calls on expertise from outside the school for help with data interpretation when needed.	2.83	0.70	2.79	0.85	
13.	Uses appropriate data for accounting to stakeholders.	3.06	0.57	3.34	0.63	

14.	Makes effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning?	3.19	0.60	3.43	0.65
B. Supporting Conditions					2.97
4. Organizational Improvement Processes					2.89 0.52 2.89
34.	My board pursues only a small number of improvement goals at the same time.			2.98	0.82
35.	We usually proceed in manageable stages and use the early stages as learning opportunities.			2.99	0.70
36.	My board's approach to improvement is relatively coherent. A small number of key improvement goals are consistently pursued over sustained periods of time.			3.06	0.73
37.	Schools are not overloaded with excessive numbers of initiatives.			2.32	0.74
38.	Considerable effort is made to build the capacities needed by school staffs for successful school improvement.			3.23	0.62
39.	Board improvement efforts typically focus on one portion of the system at a time (e.g., elementary schools then secondary schools; literacy improvement then numeracy improvement) and a schedule is created to ensure improvement in all parts of the school system over the long term.			2.50	0.86
40.	Improvement efforts in schools are guided by explicit and well-tested frameworks, policies and practices, as well as widely shared goals that permit local adaptation. All stakeholders have clearly defined roles to play in this approach to school improvement.			3.03	0.67
41.	The board integrates new initiatives into existing routines and practices. Established structures and procedures are maintained and built on. Care is taken to ensure continuity and extension of core values.			3.06	0.69
5. Professional Development (PD)					2.83 0.54 2.83
15.	Very little time is devoted to routine administrative matters in meetings of teachers and principals. Meeting time formerly used for such matters is now devoted almost entirely to PD.	2.76	0.76		
16.	Most PD is carefully aligned with board and school improvement initiatives.	3.23	0.66		
17.	Differentiated PD opportunities are provided in response to the needs of individual schools, administrators and teachers.	2.58	0.81		
18.	Extensive opportunities are provided for both teachers and administrators to further develop their expertise.	2.82	0.77		
19.	Almost all schools provide time for collaborative work on instructional improvement initiatives. Schools are provided with the resources they need to provide this time and leaders are provided with training in how best to facilitate such work.	2.69	0.79		
20.	All system-sponsored PD is closely aligned with best evidence	2.81	0.69		

	of how people learn.			
21.	Your school system provides you with all of the resources you need to do your job well.	2.77	0.67	
38.	PD provided to me by the system	3.03	0.74	
6. Alignment		3.19	0.56	3.19
34.	Extent of your board's alignment of its financial resources with the support needed to achieve the board's goals for student learning	3.40	0.63	
35.	Extent of your board's alignment of personnel policies and procedures with the instructional expectations for staff	3.26	0.76	
36.	Extent of your board's alignment of structures with the instructional improvement work required of staff	3.32	0.68	
37.	Extent of your system's efforts to align the time and money allocated to professional development with the value of such PD to the district	2.96	0.83	
41.	The school system's alignment of its resources with our goals	3.03	0.73	
C. Leadership				3.04
7. Efficacy		3.10	0.57	3.10
39.	Advice, feedback and knowledge available to me through my network of other principals in this system	3.15	0.76	
40.	Examples I see of other principals succeeding at what I also need to do	2.93	0.80	
42.	The system's assignment of me to a school for which I am well suited	3.30	0.83	
44.	High levels of mutual trust my colleagues and I have in one another	3.46	0.69	
45.	Encouragement I receive from others for the work that I do	3.05	0.87	
46.	Expressions of appreciation/celebration of the value of our work	2.79	0.92	
47.	The guidance the board's improvement plan provides for developing my school improvement plan	3.07	0.79	
48.	The autonomy I have to do what is in the best interests of my school and students	3.08	0.80	
8. Professional Leadership				3.14 0.47 3.14
18.	My board has well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting and appraising school-level leaders.	2.99	0.73	
19.	My board implements procedures for transferring school-level leaders that does no harm and, whenever possible, adds value to improvement efforts underway in schools.	2.88	0.69	
20.	My board ensures that the most skilled leaders in the system are placed where they are most needed.	2.92	0.75	
21.	My board encourages school-level leaders, when useful, to	3.13	0.68	

	supplement their own capacities with system-level expertise.			
22.	My board holds principals directly accountable for the quality of instruction in their schools.	3.28	0.60	
23.	My board has well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting, and appraising system-level leaders.	2.99	0.64	
24.	Most of my system's senior leaders assume responsibility for significantly improving instructional leadership in their schools.	3.35	0.66	
25.	My board expects the behavior of both system-and school-level leaders to reflect the practices and competences identified in the Ontario Leadership Framework, as well as such other practices as might be deemed critical for local board purposes.	3.44	0.56	
26.	My board encourages coordinated forms of leadership distribution throughout the board and its schools.	3.30	0.60	
9. Elected Leadership		2.88	0.65	2.88
27.	Trustees use the board's beliefs and vision for student learning and well-being as the foundation for strategic planning and ongoing board evaluation.	2.93	0.81	
28.	Trustees focus most policy making on the improvement of student learning and well-being consistent with the beliefs and vision.	2.85	0.81	
29.	Trustees identify and fund policies and programs that provide rich curricula and engaging forms of instruction for all students and eliminate those that do not.	2.84	0.82	
30.	Trustees maintain productive relationships with senior staff, school staffs, community stakeholders and provincial education officials.	3.05	0.84	
31.	Trustees provide systematic orientation opportunities for new members and ongoing training for existing members.	2.71	0.81	
32.	Individual trustees support and act in accordance with decisions made by the board of trustees, as a whole.	2.97	0.79	
33.	Almost all trustees avoid becoming involved in school system administration.	2.78	0.88	
D. Relationships				2.95
10. Internal		3.05	0.60	3.09
42.	Effectiveness of Central Office Staff Relations	3.21	0.66	
43.	Support that I can count on from my superintendent whenever I need it	3.38	0.82	
49.	Strength of Relationships Between Teachers and Administrators	2.54	0.78	
50.	Extent of your school system's support for networks or professional learning communities (PLCs) is best described by which one of the following statements.	3.25	0.78	
11. Parents		2.70	0.64	2.70

51.	Extent of your school system’s efforts to help teachers and administrators develop the capacities they need to foster productive parent engagement in the school.	2.96	0.84	
52.	Extent of your board’s efforts to help teachers and administrators develop the capacities they need to assist parents in creating conditions in the home which support the success of their children at school	2.79	0.93	
53.	Extent to which your system holds schools accountable for productively engaging parents	2.43	0.76	
54.	Extent of your school system’s efforts -independent of what schools do -to provide programs and other opportunities aimed at helping parents ensure the success of their children at school	2.59	0.76	
12. Local Community Groups		2.69	0.75	2.69
13. Ministry Of Education				3.31 0.46 3.31
43.	My school system communicates regularly with the Ministry, both formally and informally, about board goals and directions.			3.35 0.56
44.	My school system clarifies with the Ministry how it can be of most help to the board.			3.22 0.63
45.	My school system encourages Ministry collaboration in achieving board goals and directions.			3.30 0.63
46.	My school system provides feedback to the Ministry about the relevance of its initiatives to board goals and directions.			3.32 0.63
47.	My system responds to the province’s initiatives by awarding them priority, analyzing changes and reporting progress.			3.26 0.89
48.	My system supplements Ministry initiatives to increase their local impact.			3.15 0.83
49.	My system attempts to leverage the province’s initiatives in the interest of the board’s priorities.			3.54 0.66

School System Effects on Student Achievement¹³

System effects were assessed using two measures of student performance – achievement on provincial tests and credit accumulation by age 16. Subsequent analyses use only achievement measures, however, since none of the system characteristics measured by the study were significantly related to credit accumulation.

Correlations and Effect Sizes (ES) are used in this section to examine the “effects” on, or relationships between, school system characteristics and EQAO measures of student achievement at grades 3 and 6 in math and language (combined reading and writing scores), grade 9 in academic and applied math and grade 10 in language. These relationships were examined using both achievement change scores, as well as annual mean (2010) achievement scores.

Both achievement change scores and annual achievement scores were examined in two different forms. One of these forms, reported in Table 4, averaged results across grades in

¹³ Although the language of “ impacts” and “effects” is sometimes used in several sections of this report, it is correlations, with their well-known limitations for exploring cause-effect relationships, that are reported.

the same area of achievement. Language scores were averaged across grades 3 and 6 reading and writing, as well as grade 10 (measured by the *Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test*). Math scores were averaged across grade 3, 6 and 9, with the grade 9 score restricted to Academic Math results, since Applied Math results were inconsistent across districts and did not reflect other achievement trends. Some analysts have argued that combining scores, as in Table 4, produces more stable and reliable measures of achievement.¹⁴

The second form in which achievement results were examined was more fine-grained. Scores at each grade level for each area of measured achievement were considered. Correlations between system characteristics and each of these areas of achievement are reported in Appendix D (Table 1 for the five-year change scores and Table 2 for the mean annual 2010 scores).

The description of results in the remainder of this section privileges the results displayed in Table 4 but alludes, as well, to similarities and differences reported in the more fine-grained results. In addition to the correlations reported in Table 4, there are two columns reporting effect sizes (ES) for any correlations that reached statistical significance. One of these columns (fourth from left) reports effect sizes for achievement change scores and one column (far right) for mean achievement scores.

An effect size statistic aims to describe the practical significance of a relationship or effect unlike a correlation which might be very weak, but statistically significant by virtue, for example, of a large sample size. Conventional interpretations of effect sizes suggest that an ES of less than .2 should be considered weak, .2 to .6 moderate and greater than .6 strong (Cohen, 1999; Hattie, 2009). As Hattie (2009) argues, however, even variables with weak effect sizes may be practically consequential depending on costs. And multiple variables with weak effect sizes might add up to strong effects. Methods used to calculate effect sizes for this report are described in Appendix E.

The Four Categories of System Characteristics

Considering just the four broad categories of system characteristics, correlations and effect sizes reported in Table 4 indicate that:

- Core Processes are significantly associated with both language and math achievement change scores as well as 2009-10 annual achievement scores in both math and language (ES = .33 and .35);
- Supporting Conditions are significantly related to five year change scores in language (ES = .28 and .21)
- Neither Leadership (ES = .03 and .05) nor Relationships (ES = .08 and .16) are significantly related to change or annual achievement scores in either math or language, although individual system characteristics within both of these categories do have significant relationships with achievement, as reported below.

Evidence about the four categories reported in Appendix D tables is broadly comparable to the evidence in Table 4. According to these data, the strongest contributions to

¹⁴ Robert Lynn (2006) is one such person.

achievement are made by Core Processes (significant relationships with 4 of 7¹⁵ areas of achievement and changes in achievement) followed by Supporting Conditions (significant relationships with 2 of the 7 areas of annual achievement and 3 areas of change in achievement). As with Table 4 data, neither Leadership nor Relationships are significantly related to any areas of either annual achievement or change in achievement, as these tables indicate.

It is important to recall the evidence reported earlier about the reliability of the scales used to measure the four broad categories of system characteristics and implications for interpreting results. Both Core Processes and Supporting Conditions, treated as scales, met the minimum acceptable level of reliability (by a small margin) while Leadership and Relationships did not. So lack of reliable measures must be considered one possible explanation for the weaker effects on student achievement of the unreliable category scales.

The four broad categories of school system characteristics are used to organize the reporting of more detailed results below but they should not likely be considered empirically meaningful constructs in their own right.

Core Processes

Table 4 indicates that all three individual Core Processes have significant relationships with some measures of achievement and have comparable, moderate effect sizes ranging from .27 to .40;

- Curriculum and Instruction is significantly related to three of the Table 4 measures.
- Beliefs and Vision for Students also is significantly related to three of the four measures.
- Evidence Use (as reported by principals but not system leaders) is significantly related to all four achievement measures.

Evidence reported in the Appendix D tables also indicates that all three Core Processes have significant relationships with more fine-grained measures of annual and change achievement:

- Curriculum and Instruction is significantly related to 5 of the 7 areas of annual achievement and 3 areas of change achievement;
- Beliefs and Vision is significantly related to 6 of 7 areas of achievement, although only 1 area of achievement change;
- Uses of Evidence (as rated by principals but not system leaders) is related to 4 of the 7 areas of annual achievement and 3 areas of achievement change .

These empirical results conform closely to what would be expected conceptually – greatest influence on student achievement from the system characteristics most directly experienced by students.

¹⁵ These seven areas are grade 3 language and math, grade 6 language and math, grade 9 academic and applied math, and grade 10 literacy.

Supporting Conditions

Table 4 indicates significant relationships with achievement in the case of two system characteristics:

- Alignment is significantly related to all measures of achievement except change in math (ES = .32 and .35);
- Professional Development is significantly related to the two language scores but neither of the math scores (ES = .30 and .29).

Evidence reported in the Appendix D tables points to the same two individual system characteristics as making significant contributions to these more fine-grained measures of annual and change achievement:

- Alignment is significantly related to 5 of the 7 areas of annual achievement and 3 areas of change achievement;
- Professional development is significantly related to 3 of the 4 areas of achievement in the elementary grades but none of the areas of achievement in grades 9 or 10. With respect to change achievement, PD is related to 3 measures, one of which is for grade 9 Applied Math.
- Organizational Improvement Processes make almost no contribution to either annual or change achievement. Not only are the correlation coefficients not significant, they are close to 0 and 5 of the 7 concerning annual achievement are actually negative.

Leadership

Evidence in Table 4 reports only non-significant relationships between the three specific leadership variables measured by the survey and any area of student achievement. Indeed, five of the 12 correlations are weakly negative.

Evidence about Leadership reported in Appendix D tables paints a slightly more positive picture. The efficacy of school – level leadership has larger correlations with achievement than does either Professional or Elected leadership and correlations with both annual and change Applied Math achievement, reaches statistical significance. The next section of this report examines Leadership from a different perspective.

Relationships

As Table 4 indicates, the only relationships significantly related to student achievement are relationships between parents and the school – significant in the case of three of the four achievement measures with moderate effect sizes of .26 and .29.

Appendix C, Tables 1, report more significant correlations. First, the aggregate measure of Relationships is significantly related to three secondary level annual achievement measures. Second, there are significant correlations between Internal Relations, Parent Relations and one area of change achievement, in each case. But these two system characteristics have significant relationships with annual achievement at the secondary level:

- Internal relationships is significantly related to both grade 9 academic math achievement and grade 10 literacy;

- Local community relationships is significantly related to the annual measure of grade 9 Academic and Applied Math achievement.

Table 4
System Characteristics and Four Combined Measures of Student Achievement
(N = 49)

System Characteristics	All Language achievement change (5 years)	All math achievement change (5 years)	ES	All language achievement mean (2010)	All math achievement mean (2010)	ES
Leadership	.064	-.010	.03	.028	.067	.05
Professional	.058	.003		-.022	-.001	
Elected	-.017	.020		-.008	.084	
Core Processes	.325*	.321*	.33	.364*	.329*	.35
Cur & Instruction	.382**	.264	.32	.432**	.361*	.40
Beliefs/vision st.	.206	.328*	.27	.376**	.406**	.40
Evidence Use: SL	.055	.065		-.010	-.028	
Evidence Use: Prin	.437**	.356*	.40	.373**	.300*	.34
Support Condition	.402**	.157	.28	.232	.178	.21
Improvement Proc.	.191	.012		-.044	-.073	
Prof. Development	.392**	.210	.30	.334*	.236	.29
Alignment	.433**	.196	.32	.346*	.337*	.35
Relationships	.153	-.006	.08	.126	.184	.16
Internal System	.146	-.030		.206	.195	.21
Parents	.370**	.133	.26	.284*	.296*	.29
Community	-.162	-.168		-.081	-.018	
Ministry	.037	.026		-.064	.020	.05

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

System Leadership Effects On System Characteristics

The status of system characteristics measured in this study is undoubtedly influenced by many “forces”, for example: constraints and opportunities provided by the province, system cultures which may have deep historical roots, and both strong and sometimes contradictory community expectations. System characteristics most certainly interact in complex ways, as well. However, system leaders are among the influences held most directly accountable for the status of consequential system characteristics, not to mention student achievement.

Although results described in the previous section found almost no direct effects of system leadership on student achievement, expecting such effects is neither reasonable nor consistent with relevant leadership theory and evidence. Even the effects on students of school-level leadership is now understood to be mediated by school and classroom conditions.¹⁶ It is, however, quite reasonable to expect system leadership effects on consequential system characteristics. So this section examines the relationship between system leadership (professional and elected) and the status of system characteristics.

Table 5 displays the results of calculating correlations between both professional and elected leadership and each of the four categories and the 11 specific (non leadership) characteristics of high performing districts that appear in the framework for this study. Effect sizes for ¹⁷Professional and Elected leadership combined are also included in the far left column of the table. These data indicate, in sum, that:

- Both sources of system leadership have moderate to strong effects on, or relationships with, all three broad categories of system characteristics and many of the 11 individual characteristics;
- Effect sizes for Professional and Elected leadership combined range from .29 in the case of Curriculum and Instruction to .60 in the case of Organizational Improvement Processes;
- Professional leadership has consistently larger effects than does Elected leadership on all but two system characteristics (Beliefs and Vision for Students, Internal Relationships);
- Professional leadership effects do not reach statistical significance for principals’ ratings of evidence use, internal relationships, and relationships with parents and local community groups.

¹⁶ See, for example, Hallinger & Heck (2010) and Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi (2010)

In sum, while the size of the sample for this study precludes more sophisticated modeling¹⁸, results in this section suggest that system leaders may have quite significant effects on features of their organizations which are known to improve student achievement.

Furthermore, the extent to which Elected Leadership is related to, or influences, important features of the system may come as a surprise to those who remain skeptical about the value that trustees add to school systems' efforts to improve student achievement when they enact their roles as the framework for this study suggests is most effective.

Table 5
Relationships Between Leadership and Other System Characteristics
(Correlation Coefficients, N = 49)

	Professional	Elected	Effect Size
Core Processes	.63**	.46**	.55
Curriculum & Instruction	.34*	.23	.29
Beliefs & Vision for Students	.50**	.63**	.57
Uses of Evidence – Sys Leaders	.67**	.32*	.52
Uses of Evidence – Principals	.27	.09	.18
Supporting Conditions	.63**	.49**	.56
Organizational Improvement	.65**	.54**	.60
Professional Development	.39**	.25	.32
Alignment	.44**	.36*	.40
Relationships	.49**	.39**	.44
Internal System & School	.25	.33*	.29
Parents	.28	.11	.20
Local Community Groups	.13	.10	.12
Ministry of Education	.58**	.28**	.44

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Summary of Quantitative Results

Across the school system characteristic identified in previous research, the most fully developed in Ontario appear to be (a) shared beliefs and goals for students, (b)

¹⁸Since the unit of analysis is the school system, the sample size for this study is only 52. In order to carry out the kind of path modeling techniques which would be useful in answering questions about the indirect effects of system leaders on student learning, a sample of about 100 would be needed.

alignment of system policies, resource and structures in support of school systems' missions, (c) uses of evidence to improve performance and accountability and (d) productive approaches to improving the quality of curriculum and instruction. Evidence also indicates that these same four system characteristics make significant contributions to improving student achievement.

While evidence indicates much room for improving Ontario school systems' approaches to professional development, this evidence also suggests that engaging in such improvement would have considerable potential for improving student achievement; variation in district approaches to PD is significantly related to variation in language achievement, in particular.

The least well developed Ontario school system characteristics are (a) the contributions of elected system leadership, and (b) system efforts to build productive relationships with local community groups. There is little evidence that the second of these variables makes much difference to student achievement.

But elected system leadership, according to evidence in this study, does have the potential to further a system's student improvement agenda.

Evidence summarized in this section has painted a surprisingly influential picture of school system effects on students. This is the only evidence of its kind to provide such a direct test of system characteristics - identified by earlier case study and largely qualitative evidence - on students. It provides considerable support for recent efforts to re-engage policy makers in thinking seriously about the part that district -level organizations might play in furthering large-scale reform efforts.

Although neither professional nor elected sources of system-level leadership make direct contributions to student achievement, both have significant effects on the status of consequential system characteristics. Professional system leadership makes the largest of these contributions, but elected system leadership contributions, while much weaker, are still quite significant.

3. Results of Cross-case Analyses

This section reports both qualitative and quantitative evidence collected from three school systems chosen because their student achievement profiles, over a five-year period, suggested that they were "high performing" relative to other comparable systems¹⁹ in the province. The qualitative evidence includes interviews with trustees, system leaders and principals, along with key documents. Case study results are reported, in the form of a cross-case analysis identifying similarities and differences across the

¹⁹ "Comparable", in this case, refers to their average levels of student achievement on provincial measures of reading, writing and math in 2006.

three systems²⁰. Four sets of implications for system leaders are also included, one set for each of the four categories of system characteristics.

Core Processes

Data were collected from the case study systems about three “core processes” including directions (mission, vision and goals), approaches to curriculum and instruction, and uses of evidence.

System Directions (Mission, Vision and Goals)

All three systems had developed a vision, mission and set of shorter-term goals that had become widely endorsed among trustees, as well as both system- and school-level leaders. Few people interviewed for the study had any doubts about the importance of these directions and just about everyone providing data for the study appeared to have a firm understanding of what their system was attempting to accomplish.

The processes through which such wide-spread knowledge, agreement and commitment were developed typically began in some formal goal setting process associated with “strategic planning”. But the outcomes of such events grew in importance among system members as the systems took steps to embed them in annual improvement plans, monthly principals’ meetings and leadership-initiated interactions in schools. The mission, vision and goals were “brought alive” and sustained through such consistent use as decision-making tools and as beacons for the future.

Curriculum and Instruction

Over the five-year period of interest to the study, approaches by the three system to improving curriculum and instruction had changed quite significantly. These changes included greater collaboration across the system for school improvement purposes, greater consistency in priorities and expectations, and significant increases in support by system leaders for improvement work in schools.

These changes also included much greater use of systematically-collected evidence for decision making and more precise targets for school improvement. TL, for example, used student achievement trends evident in multiple data sources to which the system had access (EQAO, CASI, Iowa, math benchmarks), along with Ministry priorities, to aggressively develop a board improvement plan (which included “SMART” goals). Principals and their staffs were expected to explicitly acknowledge and build on system plans as they created their individual school improvement plans. Increasingly, as well, schools were encouraged to focus their improvement efforts on the needs of individual students, not just groups of students.

The trend toward a more corporate-like approach to school improvement also appeared to be unfolding within schools, as well. There had been considerable effort made to break down the isolation in which teachers often found themselves with more collaboration and

²⁰ Part 3 of the report describes each of the cases separately and in some detail.

collective effort. And this collective effort was more focused on the types of instruction that would be useful to achieve the targets set in the schools' improvement plans.

Expectations for instructional leadership from principals also increased quite substantially across the three systems. Principals were expected to have close knowledge of instruction in their schools' classrooms and considerable influence on its direction. Capacities for such leadership were developed with considerable system support.

A question about the priority devoted to fostering students' "deep understanding of big ideas" was included in the interviews because of several initiatives underway across the province at the time of the study. These initiatives were pressing schools to more explicitly link their instructional improvement efforts to "higher level" or "more complex" goals or "big ideas" included in the provincial curriculum. Originating in the Ministry's *Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat* (LNS) and the work of its student achievement officers, these initiative also had become a priority for the *Leading Student Achievement: Networks for Learning* (LSA) project; efforts by districts to support school staffs in the development of *Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways* were intended to improve the instruction needed by students to master higher order curriculum goals.

This curriculum and instruction priority had become an increasingly important focus for the three systems, drawing significantly on the province's LSA project for both direction and resources. Some system and school leaders attended most provincial conferences held by the LSA project and key project consultants were mentioned as especially helpful sources of professional development.²¹

The systems had also launched their own initiatives in response to this priority. In NP, for example, this was a priority for the system's literacy team and a regular focus of monthly principal meetings and the province's *School Effectiveness Framework* was also being used to help with the development of this focus in the system. TL principals spoke about, the system's attention to critical literacy and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). This system awarded considerable value to developing higher order thinking skills and some staff, as in NP, associated this valuing with involvement in the Ministry's *School Effectiveness Framework*, as well as school walk throughs. Also mentioned was the emphasis given by TL's curriculum department to the development of big ideas.

Uses of Evidence

Principals in the three systems were unanimous in their belief that their systems attached great importance to the use of systematically collected evidence to inform decisions across their systems, as well as within schools and classrooms. This evidence was also used to track improvement progress and assist in making instructional decisions for individual students. Principals spoke about the substantial impact such data use had on student, school and system progress. Dramatic increases in the use of systematically collected data to guide board, school and classroom improvements was viewed by most interviewees as one of the most important explanations for the achievement gains made by their systems. Superintendents explained that conversations with principals and

²¹ Elaine Hein and Denis Maika

teachers were much more precise and specific now. Said one TL superintendent, “It’s a different world now” and an NPS principals said of the difference it made:

Its huge. It’s the biggest difference maker. It takes the ego out of the room. It becomes about how students learn. It gets down to the core of the matter.

The stimulus for greater data use differed across the systems. In the case of NPS, adoption of a policy governance model which demanded transparent data about outcomes at the board table trickled down to schools and classrooms. In TL, the new director considered the development of such data a critical part of her efforts to build a critical chain of accountability and support from the central office to the classroom. The focus on data use in all systems was also prompted significantly by EQAO testing and provincial target setting. The importance of collecting and using high quality data was stressed in professional development initiatives for both principals and teachers and this was believed to have added considerable sophistication to teachers’ understandings of how to use assessment to improve their own practices.

Considerable amounts and varieties of support for data use in schools were provided by the school systems. One form of support was close alignment of the data to be collected with what schools needed for their purposes, not what some other level of the system needed. Multiple types of data were collected and used to help with decisions by the systems and within schools. In addition to EQAO results, the status of student achievement was estimated using such other measures as CASSI, DRI, OWA, report cards and credit accumulation information. Also mentioned, for example, were several “exit surveys” of students and demographic information about students related to their chances of success. Results of these measures did not always concur and staff were encouraged to work at understanding the reasons for differences in results. Moderated marking by teachers was also encouraged in order to build consensus among teachers about standards of achievement to be expected of students.

Respondents claimed that there had been considerable growth over the previous five years in their understanding and uses of data to inform decisions. While five years earlier considerable amounts and types of data were being collected, many school leaders and teachers were not sure how to use it effectively. Descriptions of how data use capacities were developed suggest that it was as much a social as a technical process. Progress was made with principals, for example, not just by providing in-service training. Rather, such progress was also a product of surrounding principals with “experts” so that they could learn the skills of instructional leadership in an authentic way. Over a five-years period staff learned how to interpret data and how best to use it for decisions. Leadership teams and teachers were provided time to think through what their data meant and how best to interpret that data.

Core Processes: Implications for System Leaders

1. Spend whatever time it takes to ensure that the mission, vision and goals (directions) of the system are widely known, understood and shared by all members of your organization.
2. Insist on the use of your system’s directions as fundamental criteria for virtually all decisions: you are the chief “steward” of those directions.
3. Develop and implement board and school improvement plans interactively and collaboratively with your school leaders.
4. Build your system’s capacity and disposition for using systematically-collected data to inform as many decisions as possible. Train principals and staff on the use of data and research literature to sustain decision-making.
5. Make flexible, adaptive use of provincial initiatives and frameworks ensuring that they contribute

Supporting Conditions

Supporting Conditions

Supporting conditions about which data were collected included organizational improvement processes, professional development and alignment of human resources, structures and funding allocations.

Organizational Improvement Processes

Only district leaders were asked questions specifically aimed at describing approaches to system and school improvement processes. Much of what has already been reported by principals and central office leaders captures key features of these processes and how they evolved over the five-year period of interest to the study.

All three systems used some form of strategic planning process as starting point and touchstone for developing and monitoring progress with a *Board Improvement Plan*. School-level improvement plans were expected to build on and be consistent with board improvement plans and priorities. Board and school improvement processes aimed at moving toward the system's mission, vision and goals were highly interdependent and very "organic". Both board and school goals and priorities remained constant over significant periods of time but the actions taken to accomplish those goals and priorities were constantly assessed and refined. In these systems, board improvement planning, school improvement planning and the implementation of those plans were interdependent, data driven and continuous.

The ongoing monitoring and refining of school improvement processes was enabled by monthly meetings of school and system leaders largely devoted to the assessing and refining of these plans, along with related professional development. All schools had created leadership teams intended to act as "professional learning communities" on behalf of their schools. Superintendents were a significant presence in most schools, especially NPS, and their focus was invariably on the schools' improvement plans, the improvement of instruction and evidence that would help illuminate the challenges and progress being made with such improvement. Lack of progress was detected and acted on quickly.

The three systems made the most of well-designed externally-developed procedures for stimulating carefully targeted improvements (e.g., TLCs, SEF, SIM). They had also developed their own improvement procedures or guidelines to supplement those which had been externally developed.

The work of both central office and school-level academic administrators was consistently defined as instructional leadership, one of the most noteworthy changes over the five-year period of time of interest to the study, along with a laser-like focus on improving student achievement as the primary focus of improvement efforts.

Professional Development

Extensive professional development was provided for teachers and school leaders in the three systems. This included a wide variety of opportunities both in and out of school but with the greatest proportion of PD resources devoted to school embedded opportunities, usually provided in some form of “learning community”.

NP evidence from principal and system leader interviews described two shifts that occurred over roughly a half dozen years in the content and delivery of professional development within the system. The content shift was from some combination of centrally-determined and/or preference-based PD content to the very close alignment of PD content with the capacities needed to achieve board and school priorities. Identification of the capacities to be developed typically arose from examinations of evidence about what was working and not working, with PD initiatives aimed at remediating what was not working.

The PD delivery shift was from the provision of PD, particularly for teachers, primarily in locations outside of schools, to a much larger proportion of PD being “job-embedded – undertaken in school or school-like contexts where newly acquired capacities had to be implemented if PD was to make much difference. All formally assigned PD days were school based, for example, and schools controlled most of the agenda for those days. Schools’ professional learning communities were frequently cited as key locations for teacher PD and school coordinators were expected to be important PD resources for each school.

These shifts in the approach to PD in NP approximate the evolution of PD in TL and CECC, as well. For example, in response to a direct question about “if and how” teacher PD had changed over the last five or six years, TL principals were unanimous in describing the changes as extensive. These changes transformed teacher PD from a one-shot, “sit and git” approach, which neither engaged teachers nor produced much improvement in their classrooms, to an approach in which teachers actively participated over extended periods of time in efforts to significantly improve their classroom practices.

Monthly meetings of principals in all systems were significant forms of job-embedded PD for the leaders who attended. These meetings aimed not only to provide PD aligned with system and school priorities but also to further the improvement plans of schools and the system. Authentic engagement by participants in solving the system’s

improvement problems was the mechanism for accomplishing both of these purposes. As well, the close, partnership-like relationship principals enjoyed with their superintendents in their school improvement efforts provided principals with an “at-the-elbow” form of coaching in the exercise of instructional leadership.

As this description makes clear, the systems approached professional development as a key function of their improvement efforts and crafted forms of professional development for both teachers and administrators consistent with the best available evidence about effective professional development. PD was an integral part of both school and system improvement problem - solving processes and the close monitoring of progress toward improvement goals by the system created an indirect but powerful means of holding staff accountable for actually applying the capacities acquired through PD.

Alignment

Allocation of resources was impressively aligned with the boards’ focus on improving instruction and student achievement. Almost all principals in the three systems believed that their systems provided them with as much support as they requested. In almost all cases, principals’ requests for additional were not only approved but facilitated almost immediately. These systems also aligned their personnel resources around their main priorities as, for example, the assignment of itinerant teachers to all schools to build instructional capacities in math and literacy.

Supporting Conditions: Implications for System Leaders

1. Create structures and norms within your system to ensure regular, reciprocal and extended deliberations about improvement progress within and across your schools, as well as across the system as a whole. These structures and norms should result in deeply interconnected networks of school and system leaders working together on achieving the system’s directions.
2. Use the networks you create as the primary mechanism for the professional development of your school leaders.
3. Regularly monitor the alignment of the system’s policies and procedures. Refinements of directions or improvement processes may well prompt the need for some re-alignment by your board.

Leadership

Evidence collected from the case study systems was about both professional and elected (trustee) sources of system leadership.

Professional System Leadership

Much less evidence is available to judge the effects on student learning of professional system leaders, as compared with school-level leaders (although see Marzano, xxx). Recent research has begun to describe, however, the important effects of what system leaders do on the capacities and work of school-level leaders²². Similarly, while evidence about the effects of elected leaders on student performance is mostly

²² Coffin & Leithwood (2006), Leithwood & Anderson (2008); Orr and Orphanus (2011)

inferential in nature (e.g., Land, xxxx), more direct and recent research suggests that it may be a greater influence than typically has been assumed (Saatcioglu, et al, 2011).

Central office leaders in the three systems were asked to describe what the system looked for in their prospective leaders, as well as the systems' approaches to recruiting, selecting, preparing and appraising both system and school-level leaders. These interviewees were also asked how these approaches had changed over the past five years. Significant similarities, as well as differences, were evident among the systems.

Largely similar were those qualities the three systems were seeking in their school-level leaders and prospective leaders (many of these qualities, respondents noted, were included in the *Ontario Leadership Framework*). NPS respondents, similar to those in the other two systems, spoke about the ability to communicate the system's vision for students, the ability to help craft the directions for improvement work and a capacity for, and disposition toward, helping others with this work. Both school and system leaders, respondents indicated, needed to be exemplary teachers able to model good instruction to others.

System leaders, in particular, needed to be adaptable and flexible, maintaining multiple priorities at the same time and able to collaborate productively with others. Interviewees said that these leaders also needed to have broad experience, refined relationship skills, and the ability to add value to the conversations and decisions of the senior leadership team. Commitment to "Catholicity" was a very important quality for all leaders and prospective leaders in the Catholic systems.

Substantial differences among the systems were evident, however, in their approaches to the recruitment, and selection of new leaders. These differences were most obviously a function of leader stability – exceptionally high in NP, but less so in the other two systems. In NPS, there did not appear to be any formal strategies for recruiting and selecting leaders because so few new leaders had been needed over the previous five years. Progress in meeting system and school improvement goals formed the basis for ongoing appraisal of existing leaders.

TL, in contrast, had a relatively longstanding set of procedures in relation to school-level leaders, which had been "fine-tuned" over the five-year period of interest to our study. A retired superintendent on contract with the system and in collaboration with the director took responsibility for encouraging teachers to consider school leadership and for coaching them through the application process. While this was a version of being "tapped on the shoulder", teachers also had the opportunity, with their principals endorsement, to self-select themselves. Either way, these people then entered the aspiring leaders program which began with an informal visit from a superintendent. The program entailed, as well, book study, exchanges, central appointments, and two skill assessments. Applicants were also required to submit a statement of their educational philosophy; said one interviewee, "we are hoping to see 'all students can learn given sufficient time'."

Applicants were required to develop 3 artifacts related to each of these competences and these artifacts were shared during an interview with the selection team. Those judged successful at the interview were then placed in a “pool” and sometimes interviewed a second time before being appointed to a school. The system also had a mentoring program for newly appointed principals and vice principals, as well as those in the pool but not yet assigned a school. Mentors were recently retired principals (usually within one or two years) considered by senior staff to have been very effective in their previous roles.

The major challenge for TL was actually finding enough suitable candidates to fill the positions becoming vacant. While not entirely independent of the recruitment process, this problem was considered much more complex than the existing recruitment process could solve and was a top-of-the-mind dilemma, with no clear solution for the senior staff who were interviewed.

It seemed likely that province-wide efforts to develop a common appraisal process for principals would have some influence on both NPS’s and TL’s future approaches to school leader appraisal but none of our interviewees explicitly spoke about this.

Elected System Leadership

Central office leaders and trustees were asked a series of questions about the focus of trustees, their relationships with staff and parents, and aspects of the system in which they were most engaged. These questions were asked during the same period in which the provincial Ministry of Education was developing new policy about school board governance, a policy aimed at sharpening trustees’ accountability for student achievement and limiting their roles to policy development and evaluation. Our questions and the frame of reference of our respondents were significantly influenced by this provincial context.

In all three systems, trustees focused most of their attention on board policy and concerned themselves with ensuring the board mission and vision drove the system’s improvement efforts, along the lines of the “policy governance” model which was most closely adhered to in NPS; this approach to governance had been introduced over about a 14 month period following the appointment of the director of education in office at the time of the study. The board chair and the new director engaged trustees in extensive deliberations about such an approach and the decision to adopt it triggered extensive training for both senior staff and trustees. A governance consultant recommended by another school system was hired to assist with this training and to provide ongoing advice as the model was being implemented.

Implementing the policy governance model with fidelity, as in NPS, entails the board retaining its focus on goals and policy while senior administrators, the director in particular regularly report to the board progress in meeting goals established by the board. Although TL was not as fully committed as NPS to a policy governance model, evidence suggested that over the previous five years TL trustees had become more focused on board policy and were less distracted by operational issues and political

concerns. They remained responsive to parents, as they always had, and acted as conduits to senior staff on issues raised with them by parents. Trustees still served on board-level committees such as the *Special Education Advisory Council* and stayed fairly engaged in day to day issues but not for purposes of decision making.

Leadership: Implications for System Leaders

1. Competent school leaders should be allowed to remain in their schools for significant periods of time since frequent leadership turnover has significant negative effects on a school's ability to improve its' student's achievement.
2. The *Ontario Leadership Framework* can be trusted as an effective guide for the selection, development and appraisal of school leaders.
3. While professional system leaders should be "team players", they should be able to make significant, independent, contributions to the team's efforts and provide effective instructional leadership to their schools.
4. Help trustees contribute to their system's progress by encouraging them to focus their work on supporting and monitoring progress being made in implementing the system's strategic multi-year plan and by nurturing the wider community's understanding and support for their system's efforts.
5. Systems adopting a policy governance model, should provide ongoing training for all elected board members, system leaders and staff. This approach fosters collaboration and interdependency between professional and elected system leaders.

for including Relationships as a category of district characteristics in the framework, as well as a useful lens for interpreting the qualitative results of the study. As Daly (2010) explains, SNW shifts the unit of change from discrete, formal structures such as classrooms, schools or districts, to "a more sophisticated conception of nested organizational relations" (xi) – the network of people interacting with each other in different ways and in different degrees.

SNW theory and evidence argues that the success of an organization's (or sub-group's) problem solving is a function of the type, density and centralization of relationships within the system because these relationships determine how information and advice flows into and throughout the system. Finnigan and Daly (2010), for example, found that the lack of success experienced by two restructuring districts could be accounted for by (a) the limited, information-based, relationships between central office and school staffs, (b) the rareness of central office staff seeking information and advice from principals (lack of reciprocity) and (c) the isolation, from one another, of a large proportion of school leaders in the two systems.

Dense social ties, both lateral and vertical, it is argued, support the development of coordinated solutions to complex district and school problems like the improvement problems the three school systems in this study were working to solve.

This section summarizes qualitative evidence about relationships in the three systems. These were relationships between and within central offices and schools; they are also

²³ For a recent and very useful overview of such theory applied to schools and districts, see Daly, A. (2010) (Ed.). *Social network theory and educational change*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

relationships with parents, other community stakeholders and the Ministry of Education. SNW concepts capture much of what can be learned about relationships in these districts.

Over the five-year period of interest to the study, these systems had created especially dense and reciprocal relations between central office and school personnel. As well, they had created bridges to external people and groups which enabled flows of information and advice from those people and groups.

Internal System Relationships

All three sets of system leaders described relationships among themselves as “very strong” (or dense) something strikingly evident to us through our informal observations in the course of collecting the interview data. System leaders met weekly, a common practice in most systems. All three sets of system leaders also believed their relationships with principals were open and collaborative (or reciprocal); they aimed to be very accessible to principals and most principals agreed that they were. Principals in the three systems portrayed their relationships with senior system leaders as “phenomenal”, “very close”, “very good”, “excellent”, “great, and “very open”.

NPS principals also cited the lengthy period of time that two of their three superintendents had been in the system in other roles, the small number of administrative leaders in the system and the levels of trust that had developed among them (“everyone knows everyone”); trust “lubricates” the connections among “nodes” (groups or individuals) in a densely connected network of relationships. As several NPS principals said, “there is always someone available to talk to” and access to the senior team was “easy”.

One NPS system leader summed up how she viewed her relationship with school leaders in this way: “Tell us what you need and we will get it for you”. Reflecting this orientation in TL, as well, principals described responses by the central office to their queries as “almost immediate”, “really quick” with many describing relationships with superintendents as frequent and “ongoing”. System leaders in all three systems seemed able to balance a quite demanding focus on high expectations with a “servant leadership”- like orientation to relationships within the system school. Signaling a sense of reciprocal accountability for meeting those shared goals and high expectations, this orientation seems at least partly responsible for the high levels of relational trust evident among schools and with central office leaders in the three systems.

An important explanation for the satisfaction principals expressed about communication in the three systems was the structures that had been established to facilitate such communication. A number of these intentionally created structures encouraged frequent and much valued face-to-face flows of information and advice among principals and between principals and central office staff, especially superintendents. For example, principals pointed to their monthly (and sometimes more frequent) principal meetings with central office leaders as one key structure. TL principals, for example, made reference to the dissemination of curriculum-related information that occurred as part of the *Literacy Learning Team Network* (LLTN) to which every school was invited. A

related structure, brought together all new school leaders with leaders of schools whose students were underperforming district expectations. Other communication opportunities arose, for example, through schools' participation in the Ministry's *Schools in the Middle* project and the uses that systems made of the Ministry's *School Effectiveness Framework* (SEF); SEF applications also prompted considerable professional development for school leaders and staffs, as well as considerable peer communication.

Relationships with Local Community Groups

In response to questions about local community groups, principals in all three systems identified a wide range of such groups with which their schools had some connection and which they valued. Among those groups in NP, for example, was Nipissing University and the provision of access to schools in support of its research program, Children's Aid, the police, the Catholic Women's League, local service clubs, several different health agencies and children's services. TL principals pointed the opening up schools for community use through formal community agreements (forms available on the system website), the work of the board communication officer and the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC).

These community connections are common in many school systems. What seemed less common in the three systems, however, was the sense of importance both system and school leaders attached to their relationship with these local community groups as part of their efforts to accomplish the system's mission and vision. The label "community schools" was used by almost all principals in the three systems in reference to their organizations and access to schools by such community groups as scouts, ladies volleyball, square dancing groups and the like was expected. The responses of interviewees to questions about both parents and local community groups suggested much less social and psychological distance (more reciprocity) between this system's schools and those it served than is the case in many school systems.

While most principals spoke approvingly of these and other system efforts to establish good relationships with external groups and agencies, few believed that this was a new development. These relationships, according to most principals in TL, for example, dated back many years. As with parent engagement, the school rather than the system may be the most productive locus for engaging external groups for most purposes.

Relationships with Parents

All three sets of system leaders, along with all principals who were interviewed, believed strongly in the importance of engaging parents in the education of their children. Leaders in all three systems attempted to encourage such engagement through their schools, as well as through system-wide initiatives directed toward parent engagement. At the system level, for example, TL held parent workshops with a focus on character development in three sites around the system with a speaker at each event and established a parent engagement grant that schools could apply for to use on their own parent engagement efforts. Both NPS and TL convened a system-wide parent council one to three times a year. Among a handful of other initiatives, TL also created a web site for parents which principals considered to be very helpful. One NPS system leader described

the board's efforts to be transparent in their decision-making, to communicate with parents in ways that nurtured their engagement, and to provide extensive opportunities for such engagement (a communication protocol or process had been developed to help leaders work through contentious issues with parents).

Principals were generally impressed by the intention and effort their systems devoted to engaging parents. TL principals did not judge most of these efforts to be very successful because they attracted very few parents. NPS principals judged their system's efforts more positively. Whether system efforts were viewed as successful or not, they did have a strong influence on principals' beliefs about the strong priority awarded to parent engagement by their system leaders and the high expectations system leaders held for the parent engagement initiatives of schools.

The most promising efforts to engage parents in all three systems did take place at the school level. One NPS principal, for example, described parent engagement as "strongly encouraged although not a "mandate" and working productively with parents was included in the professional development the system designed for principals from time to time.

Reflecting the sentiment of others, one TL principal said that to attract parents into the school, initiatives typically had to "involve children and provide food". However, principals described widely varying levels of success with their own efforts to attract parents into their schools. The majority of both elementary and secondary TL principals were disappointed with the turnout of parents at almost any event they held at their schools – although there were notable exceptions. School Councils received relatively high grades from most principals in all three systems for carrying out both traditional functions such as fund raising, as well as informing themselves about larger issues facing the school and the school system.

Relationships with parents, although described by a NPS principal as always having been a priority, had clearly grown in importance over the five year period of interest to this study in all three systems.

Relationships with the Ministry of Education

Relationships with the Ministry of Education varied significantly among the three school systems and in several cases, from the perspectives of trustees, as compared with professional system leaders. Ministry relationships were generally regarded as very positive by NPS system leaders but more problematic by TL system leaders.

NPS trustees describe their relationship with the Ministry as "excellent" although "there is not too much contact". According to one trustee, the Ministry "got its act together" setting, for example, three clear goals for the province and the board was quick to accept its role in helping to "build confidence in public education" (one of the three goals). The general tone of NPS trustee comments was one of support for what the Ministry was trying to accomplish, with some reservations about the number of new initiatives it had been launching. NPS professional leaders agreed with trustees that Ministry relationships

were quite good. Many of the remarks about these relationships concerned the regional Ministry offices in both North Bay and Sudbury. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) was mentioned as an important resource, especially the student achievement officer assigned to NPS and LNS's *School Effectiveness Framework*. No explicit mention was made of other parts of the Ministry, however.

Both challenges and opportunities were embedded in the NPS's relationships with the Ministry. The challenges arose from the number of initiatives, also mentioned by trustees, especially given the small size of the system and the relatively small number of people available to respond to the demands of these initiatives. Aligning Ministry initiatives with board priorities was the primary strategy NPS leaders identified as their solution. Initiatives often came with money attached, money that could be put to good use in the system. So the tension, according to NPS leaders, was typically around getting access to those targeted dollars in ways that acknowledged the goals they were intended to accomplish but also helped the system pursue its own priorities; central system goals for math and literacy were an intentionally direct reflection of LNS goals in this area. Most of NPS leaders seemed satisfied with the tradeoffs they had to make, since involvement in many of the Ministry initiatives were significant learning opportunities. *Schools in the Middle* was one example given of such a learning opportunity.

Among the most useful Ministry contributions to system development, according to several of the NPS leaders, occurred around the board's improvement plan (BIP). Visits by Ministry personnel to review those plans and inquire about how they will be implemented provided the system with "an external set of eyes." The responses of central office staff and trustees in TL indicated that "the Ministry" was not a unitary and coherent entity to deal with from a their perspective. Noted at least several central office leaders, relationships with - and support from - regional office staff, special education services, and LNS student achievement officers were very positive.

TL relationships with the Ministry were generally considered to have improved over the least 5 years; the Ministry was described as more responsive, for example. But one central office leader believed that the Ministry needed to "plan ahead and not work in such silos". Small school systems such as TL, respondents noted, had limited numbers of staff available to respond to the demands and requests that accompanied Ministry initiatives. However, one central office leader expressed "shock" at many of his own colleagues overly compliant responses to Ministry initiatives and their tendency to ask the Ministry for permission to do what they knew needed to be done. In fact, another interviewer noted that the downside to quick compliance to others' initiatives is that sometimes these initiatives change in response to experiences during early implementation and efforts are wasted.

The one trustee who spoke about TL's relations with the Ministry was substantially more positive than most of the central office leaders, although would have preferred more coherence and longer lead times from the Ministry in rolling out new initiatives.

Implications for System Leaders

1. The terms "reciprocal", "collaborative" and highly "interactive" begin to capture the most productive type of relationship to be developed between system and school-level leaders.
2. Ensuring high levels of interaction among school leaders is important for system improvement. These interactions should include all school leaders and be driven by a shared sense of responsibility among school leaders for system improvement.
3. Supporting schools in their parent engagement initiatives will have greater effects on student

Differences Among the Three Systems

Similarities across high performing school systems, similarities that might be emulated by others, would seem to be the “holy grail” of school system research with practical purposes in mind. And while evidence summarized discussed above, identifies a number of such similarities, it also points to a significant number of differences. Furthermore, detailed evidence about the three systems included in the Technical Report made it clear that each system had good reasons for being different. This suggests that identifying the reasons for differences among high performing systems might be as important, in the long run, as identifying similarities: it would certainly deepen our understanding of school system performance.

While this study was not designed for such a purpose, the evidence allows us to at least engage in some disciplined speculation on the reasons for differences across the three high performing school systems. Using only the quantitative evidence collected for the study using surveys, Table 6 serves as a reference point for this speculation. This table compares the quantitative ratings provided by survey respondents to each of the four categories and 13 specific characteristics of high – performing school systems identified in the framework for the study. The ratings for each system are reported, as well as the average ratings by all survey respondents in the province who participated in the study. These data allow for two types of relevant comparisons.

First, a comparison of individual system and provincial averages helps to clarify the extent to which these systems or districts are justified as being identified and studied as high performing on some basis other than their student achievement profiles. Individual system’s achievement profiles may or may not be a consequence of what central office leaders did or the characteristics of the system, as a whole. The actions of individual staff members and schools might account for exceptional student performance, in spite of system characteristics and actions of the central office, for example.

Table 6
A Quantitative Comparison of the Province and

Three High Performing School Systems

Characteristics of High Performing School Systems	Province	NP	TL	CECC
Core Processes	3.21	3.65	3.36	3.37
<i>Curriculum and Instruction</i>	3.18	3.56	3.37	3.23
<i>Beliefs Vision & Goals for Students</i>	3.27	3.89	3.28	3.55
<i>Uses of Evidence</i>	3.04	3.17	3.08	3.28
Supporting Conditions	2.97	3.34	3.20	2.95
<i>Organizational Improvement Processes</i>	2.89	3.13	3.25	2.63
<i>Professional Development</i>	2.83	3.11	2.96	3.10
<i>Alignment</i>	3.19	3.77	3.38	3.39
Leadership	3.04	3.71	3.25	3.35
<i>Professional System-level Leadership</i>	3.14	3.61	3.22	3.10
<i>Elected (trustee) Leadership</i>	2.88	4.00	3.50	3.71
Relationships	2.95	3.23	2.94	2.85
<i>Internal</i>	3.09	3.34	3.24	3.23
<i>Parents</i>	2.70	3.15	2.83	2.85
<i>Local Community Groups</i>	2.69	2.43	2.55	2.32
<i>Ministry of Education</i>	3.31	4.00	3.14	3.00

Second, comparison among the three systems indicates, as did the qualitative data, that high performance can assume quite different patterns. Cross-system comparisons evident in Table 6 paint a picture of variability not uniformity in the status of many of the measured system characteristics. For example:

- NP exceeds average provincial ratings on 11 of the 12 individual characteristics and is rated highest among the three systems on 9;
- TL exceeds the provincial average on 10 of the 12 ratings of individual characteristics and is highest rated among the systems on one (Organizational Improvement Processes);
- CECC exceeds the provincial average on 8 of the 12 ratings and is rated highest among the three districts on one (Uses of Evidence).

Six possible explanations for these differences are suggested and of the six, three are at least indirectly related to system size.

1. Intensity of Interventions

NPS is the smallest of the three systems (13 schools) by a substantial margin and the impact of deliberate interventions by central office leaders is likely to be felt more directly and perhaps implemented with greater intensity (e.g., monitoring) across its 13 schools as compared with greater number of schools in TL and CECC. This explanation in no way diminishes what central office leaders have accomplished in NPS, since there

are many examples of small school systems that remain underperforming over long periods of time. Small size presents unique possibilities but the possibilities have to be seized. Larger systems with more resources, some might argue, should be able to approximate the level of intensity exercised by smaller systems with fewer resources. But this argument does not take into account dis-economies of scale.

2. Dis-economies of Scale

A diseconomies-of-scale explanation for poorer performance in larger organizations has emerged in research on school size (Leithwood, 2010), as well as in research demonstrating declining contributions to student learning as districts increase in size above about 10,000 students (www). Dis-economies of scale arise because, as organizations increase in size, a larger proportion of their resources have to be devoted to coordination and control rather than the provision of direct services.

3. Contagion or “halo” effects

The use of the term contagion here reflects the measures used in this study to estimate the status of district characteristics, in combination with system size. These were measures of principal and central office leaders’ perceptions of district characteristics. A contagion explanation assumes that in smaller organizations, widely appreciated improvements in even a small number of system characteristics may “go viral” – spread a positive disposition toward other features of the organization, at least some of which actually improve if people think they are improved (e.g., beliefs and vision for students, some aspects of alignment, internal relationships).

4. Transfer or Side Effects

It would be extremely challenging for a group of system leaders to intentionally work on the improvement of all district characteristics measured in the study within the relatively short timeframe examined in this study. Perhaps, however, some characteristics have more potential than others to influence or generate “real” changes in other characteristics as side effects – that is, without intentional action by system leaders. CECC’s and NPS’s decisions to implement a policy governance model for trustees might be an example of such a characteristic.

5. Strategic Leverage

It also seems plausible to argue that, depending on the most important challenges facing a district, improving just one or a few key district characteristics might be what is needed to move the system forward. For example, qualitative evidence about TL indicates that *Organizational Improvement Processes* were a priority for the work of system leaders in the first several years of the reform effort launched by the new director of education. While quantitative evidence from the study did not find significant effects of such processes on student achievement across the province as a whole, those processes might well have been especially powerful instruments for change in the unique circumstances faced by TL. Much the same argument could be made for CECC’s emphasis on the extensive *Uses of evidence for Decision Making*, a characteristic that does have significant effects on student achievement across the province, as a whole.

Indeed, a “strategic leverage” explanation surfaces a distinction between what is necessary vs. what is sufficient for a system to do in order to improve its students’ achievement. Focusing on the improvement of one – or a small number – of system characteristics may be sufficient to realize significant gains in student achievement. The choice of that system characteristic, or small handful of characteristics, seems likely to depend partly on “pre-conditions” or contextual features unique to the system at the time. One such feature might be the existing level of student achievement.

6. Different Starting Points

Progress from a low beginning on measures of student learning may demand a more comprehensive set of interventions than progress from average or above average starting points. Most of a system’s consequential characteristics may need to be raised to a minimum acceptable level before the more strategic focus on improving just one or a few such characteristics can have much effect. Put differently, below some as-yet-unspecified status of most system characteristics that influence its’ performance, more strategic choices for intervention may not be productive.

This explanation is consistent with the strategy used for selecting systems for study to begin with. The five-year performance of CECC, however, is not consistent with common-sense assumptions about “ceiling effects”. Even though average student performance in this system began at a high level (64 as compared with 58 for the province), CECC still produced a total student achievement change of score (92) significantly greater than the average change for both the province (50) and TL (75).

These six possible explanations for differences among the three high performing systems are not mutually exclusive and no claim is made that they are exhaustive.

Nipissing Parry Sound Catholic District School Board

“Large gains from a below average starting point”

The School System

Student Achievement

The purpose for including *Nipissing Parry Sound Catholic District School Board* (NPSCDSB) among the four systems in which case studies were conducted was to learn more about how districts beginning with below average levels achievement (as compared with provincial averages) can become at least average over a fairly brief period of time. We reasoned that the challenges facing leaders moving their districts from “poor to average” might be significantly different from the challenges associated with moving from “average to good” or from “good to great”. While one example certainly cannot represent a category of such challenges, it has the potential to enlighten a purely quantitative picture of district improvement and to generate plausible hunches for further exploration.

Table 1 reports the percentage of students in English-speaking school systems achieving Level 3 or 4 on provincial tests. For each subject, the table reports 2005 results for both the province and NPSCDSB, along with changes in those results by 2010. Based on average total gains from 2005 to 2010 across all test subjects, as in Table 1, NPSCDSB ranked first in the province. As the two far right columns of data indicate, in 2005 the system was achieving six percent below the provincial average (52 vs. 58). Between 2005 and 2010, the total average achievement gain across all test areas for the province was 50, whereas the total gain for NPSCDSB was 109. More specifically, NPSCDSB grade 3 gains in all areas were almost five times those of the province (63 vs. 13) and its’ grade 6 gains were more than twice the gains of the province (39 vs. 17). NPSCDSB grade 9 math gains, however, did not keep up with average provincial gains (7% gain vs. 20% gain) over the 2005-10 period. The most obvious reason for this is the extremely high performance of NPSCDSB in academic math (77 vs. 68) in 2005. Indeed, NPSCDSB’s level of 2005 performance was matched or exceeded by only eight other English-speaking school systems in the province.

This overall pattern of change in NPSCDSB performance lends some support to one of the key assumptions on which our selection of case study systems was based, an assumption about “ceiling effects”. Larger gains in student performance are more readily achieved when initial performance is poor; the improvement challenges facing system leaders may well be significantly different depending on their system’s initial performance of their students. NPSCDSB’s 2005 performance in academic math also serves as a reminder that within - system performance can vary across areas of the curriculum, much of this variation likely accounted for by pockets of talent and opportunity that may be underutilized, perhaps even unrecognized, by much of the rest of the system.

Table 1
Changes in Achievement from 2005 to 2009
(Percentages of students achieving Level 3 or higher on EQAO tests)

Province		NPS	
2005	Change	2005	Change

Grade 3				
Reading	59	2	48	19
Writing	61	7	46	33
Math	66	4	63	11
Grade 6				
Reading	63	6	52	11
Writing	59	8	42	24
Math	60	3	50	4
Grade 9				
Academic Math	68	9	77	1
Applied Math	27	11	35	6
Mean	58	50	52	109

Demographic Characteristics

NPSCDSB was spread over 11,653 square kilometers, including only one medium- sized urban area, the remainder being primarily rural. It's one secondary and 12 elementary schools enrolled a total of just over 3000 students. The system also had one alternative and continuing education campus and a total 2010 budget of just over \$43 million. Professional staff included 166 elementary and 78 secondary teachers, 13 principals and just over 82 educational assistants. The senior system leadership team was composed of the director of education, two superintendents, a board Chaplain and two senior managers (human resources and plant services and health and safety). By Ontario standards this was a small school system.

The Evidence

Evidence for this case was based on interviews with six principals (5 elementary and 1 secondary), four school system administrators (the director and 3 superintendents) and 2 trustees. All of the interviewees exceeded the minimum threshold of experience in NPSCDSB (at least three years) that we believed was necessary to help build a portrait of how the system had accomplished the increases in student achievement which had led to its selection for the study.

Principals who were interviewed had an average of 26 years experience in the system, 10 as principals, and of that 10, an average of 7 years in their current schools. The three superintendents had 11, 22 and 8 years tenure in the system, with 4, 4 and 0 years as school- level leaders and 3, 4 and 10 years as senior leaders. In her eighth year as director of education when we interviewed her, the director had also served as an NPSCDSB teacher, vice-principal, principal and superintendent over since 1989. While the lengthy tenure and low levels of staff mobility found in NPSCDSB are sometimes associated with inertia and resistance to change in other organizations, the exceptionally stable profile of this system's leaders must be considered a potentially important part of the explanation for its rapid progress over the five-year period of interest to this study; ensuring such stable leadership was an intentional policy of the board. A highly motivated group of stable school and system leaders potentially possesses remarkably deep levels of understanding about the cultures and capacities of their organizations, well-developed relational trust, and uncontestable commitments to

their organizations. These invaluable pre-conditions for significant improvement, pre-conditions that our evidence suggests prevailed in NPSCDSB, would require large investments of time and energy to develop for senior leaders new to a system. In addition to interviews, some documentary evidence was provided to us by interviewees when they thought it would help us understand the nature of the school system's work. We also read relevant documents (e.g., strategic plans) posted on the system's website.

The next four sections (Core Processes, Supporting Conditions, Leadership, and Relationships) report the results of our analysis of the interviews and documents. These sections and subsections correspond to the framework for the study described in the introduction to the study, as a whole. Each section provides a synthesis of evidence from principals, central office administrators and trustees about selected characteristics of NPSCDSB and key features of the system's evolution from the 2004-05 school year through to the early fall of 2010 when data for the study were collected.

Core Processes

Mission and Vision

The system's website prominently displayed the system's mission and vision which was arrived at through a strategic planning process initiated by the new director during the first two years of her tenure. The system's mission was described as follows:

As a faith community, we provide learning opportunities that inspire, nurture and celebrate each learner's journey to:

- *Reach their full potential*
- *Be a contributing member of society*
- *Live the richness of their faith*
- *Embrace lifelong learning*

Its vision, *Rooted in Faith, Alive in Spirit*, is explained in more detail as follows:

Rooted - indicates that the Catholic faith is the basis around which the Board exists and operates. That is, the faith dimension is its foundation. Like a tree, the Catholic faith represents the roots, anchoring and giving stability to the Board. The roots also represent the point where nourishment enters and gives life. The Catholic faith gives life to our learners and the organization.

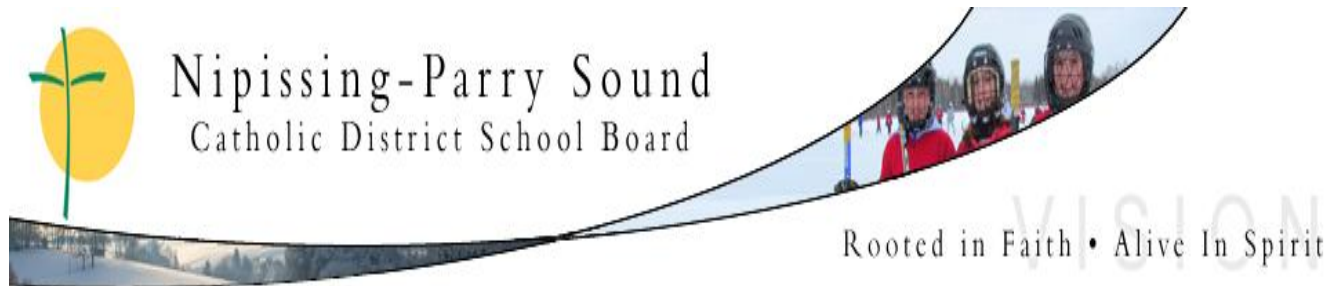
Faith - represents the Catholic faith. The Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board is a Catholic School Board, built on the teachings, practices and values of the Roman Catholic Church, which need to be present in everything the Board undertakes and provides.

Alive - reflects excitement, energy, life, challenge and hope. This word gives a sense of vitality and purpose to the organization, that is, to bring to life the potentials of each learner, the richness of the Catholic faith and the realization of the aspirations of all the individuals who are stakeholders to the Board

Spirit - outlines the importance of and a focus on both the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity and human spirit, that is, a spirit for both faith and life. It is through one's spirit as an individual and as a member of the community, that each learner, staff member, parent and stakeholder is energized, moves forward, learns and is

motivated to achieve their potential and be a contributing member of their community.

As part of the strategic planning process and the communication plan developed in support of the plan, a board logo symbolizing this vision was also developed.



/w EPDw UENTM4

When asked about the system’s vision and mission, all principals claimed that it “drives our actions”. For most, the vision and mission included a belief that all students can learn as well as a commitment to “excellence” in such learning.

Curriculum and Instruction

Approaches to improving curriculum and instruction. Over the five-year period of interest to the study, principals indicated that approaches by the system to improving curriculum and instruction had changed quite significantly. These changes included greater collaboration across the system for school improvement purposes, greater consistency in priorities and expectations, and significant increases in support by system leaders for improvement work in schools. As described more fully below, these changes also included much greater use of systematically-collected evidence for decision making and more precise targets for school improvement. As one principal said:

The board supports us, aligns resources, establishes targets that are achievable and celebrates the little successes. As we do this, the conversation shifts to kids and their learning. We dig down deep looking at the story (of a student) not a number. There’s a shift.

Expectations for instructional leadership from principals also increased quite substantially. Principals were expected to have close knowledge of instruction in their schools’ classrooms and considerable influence on its direction. Capacities for such leadership were developed with considerable system support. One principal also described the capacities he accrued through his school’s participation in the provinces *Turnaround School* program: an infusion of new resources, access to high quality professional development, more time spent observing classroom instruction, clear procedures for working on instructional improvement with staff. This participation shifted the principal’s focus to the school, as a whole.

Fostering Students’ Deep Understandings about “Big Ideas”. This had become an increasingly important focus for the system and it drew heavily on the province’s *Leading Student Achievement* (LSA) project for both direction and resources. At least

one superintendent and several principals attended most provincial conferences held by the LSA project and key project consultants were mentioned as especially helpful sources of professional development.²⁴

Within the system, principals pointed to a number of related initiatives aimed at fostering students' deep understanding about big ideas. This was a priority for the system's literacy team. It was also a regular focus of monthly principal meetings. One principal described her school's involvement with two other schools in moving this priority into their schools, a partnership encouraged and supported by the system ("the board always grants requests of this nature.."). The province's *School Effectiveness Framework* was also being used to help with the development of this focus in the system.

All of the system's elementary schools considered themselves participants in the LSA project which, until the year of the study, had limited its attention to elementary schools. NPSCDSB's one secondary school had joined the first wave of project expansion into secondary schools and was just "warming up" to its participation at the time of our data collection. The secondary school principal explained that her school was already engaged in monthly professional learning community meetings, and even though staff members were not yet familiar with much of what that participation would entail, they would not be surprised by the focus on big ideas and the development of *Teaching-learning Critical Pathways* (TLCPs) as a central part of that participation. She believed that the annual long range planning each department had undertaken would be helpful as they began their TLCP work together.

Uses of Evidence

Principals were unanimous in their belief that the system attached great importance to the use of systematically collected evidence to inform decisions across the system, as well as within schools and classrooms. This evidence was also used to track improvement progress and assist in making instructional decisions for individual students. All principals interviewed spoke about the substantial impact such data use had on student, school and system progress. As one principal said:

Its huge. It's the biggest difference maker. It takes the ego out of the room. It becomes about how students learn. It gets down to the core of the matter.

Superintendents expressed much the same view. Noted one, the conversations with principals and teachers "is much more precise and specific – miles ahead of where we were" and "much more research based". This conversation had "dramatically changed". The importance of collecting and using high quality data was stressed in most professional development initiatives for both principals and teachers and this was believed to have added considerable sophistication to teachers' understandings of how to use assessment to improve their own practices.

Considerable amounts and varieties of support for data use in schools were provided by the school system. One form of support was close alignment of the data to be collected with what schools needed for their purposes, not what some other level of the system needed. As the director explained, "we never ask schools for data they don't need". The system also had developed a computerized data compilation system that provided all school staffs with relatively easy access to all of the data sets collected within the system.

²⁴ Elaine Hein and Denis Maika

The board's MISA²⁵ representative was mentioned by some principals as very helpful in generating data for use by individual schools on request.

Multiple types of data were collected and used to help with decisions by the system and within schools. In addition to EQAO results, the status of student achievement was estimated using such other measures as CASSI, DRI, OWA, report cards and credit accumulation information. Also mentioned, for example, were several "exit surveys" of students and demographic information about students related to their chances of success. Results of these measures did not always concur and staff were encouraged to work at understanding the reasons for differences in results. Moderated marking by teachers was also encouraged in order to build consensus among teachers about standards of achievement to be expected of students. In addition to data about student learning, the system and its' schools also had access to several different demographic measures associated with variation in student achievement.

Respondents claimed that there had been considerable growth over the previous five years in their understanding and uses of data to inform decisions. While five years earlier considerable amounts and types of data were being collected, many school leaders and teachers were not sure how to use it effectively. At that time, according to one superintendent, the system "pressured principals without adequate knowledge of what a good DRA or a bad DRA should look like".

Descriptions of how data use capacities were developed suggest that it was as much a social as a technical process. Progress was made with principals, for example, not just by providing in-service training. Rather, such progress was also a product of surrounding principals with "experts" so that they could learn the skills of instructional leadership in an authentic way. Over a five years period staff learned how to interpret data and how best to use it for decisions. Leadership teams and teachers were provided time to think through what their data meant and how best to use it.

One principal also described the interactions that occurred between system and school leaders about numerical data describing student achievement. As this principal explained,

There's a difference, they [central office leaders] look at the numbers, we look at the story, Dialogue changes the discourse

As the description of Organizational improvement processes (below) makes clear, relevant data was the pivot around which meetings of school and system leaders revolved. How systematically- collected data came to assume such central importance in this system had a great deal to do with the adoption (about 7 years prior to the study) by trustees of a "policy- governance" model to guide their work (described more fully in the section on trustees below). In brief, this governance model focused trustees' attention and

²⁵ MISA is "a large-scale provincial initiative to increase provincial, district and school capacities to work with data and information to support improved student achievement". The MISA website describes its purpose as "supporting evidence-informed decision making, effective teaching and improved learning through a collaborative approach to sharing, developing and sustaining the capacity of people, processes and systems".

effort almost exclusively on the evidence about the system's progress in achieving its key priorities and policy responses to this evidence.

The evidence demanded by this form of governance must be systematically-collected, trustworthy and transparent. Demand at the board table for such evidence quickly "trickled down" to schools and classrooms since they were the sources of such data. While such a trickle-down effect had the potential of requiring data from schools that the schools themselves did not need (see the director's comments above), this potential appears not to have materialized. A superintendent explained that the policy governance model required much more precision in the collection of data and so more precision from central office leaders in working with principals to provide that data.

Supporting Conditions

Organizational Improvement Processes

While the strategic planning process initiated by the director when she was appointed was a distinct "event", one that set the direction of the board for much of the next decade, board and school improvement processes aimed at moving toward the system's mission, vision and goals were highly interdependent and very "organic". As one principal said, "planning within the board is a two-way street" with plans constantly being monitored and revised as experience with their implementation unfolds.

The *Board Improvement Plan* provided the template for school improvement plans. Each school was expected to move the small number of board's goals forward and to include locally critical goals as well. One superintendent, explaining that school improvement plans were now limited to no more than about six priorities, pointed to recent experiences of the system and its schools attending to an excessive number of Ministry initiatives which seriously eroded schools' abilities to make progress with key board and school priorities. This year, she explained, the system has returned to "the basics" – the focus on a small number of critical priorities. Both board and school goals and priorities remained constant over significant periods of time but the actions taken to accomplish those goals and priorities were constantly assessed and refined. In this system, board improvement planning, school improvement planning and the implementation of those plans were interdependent, data driven and continuous.

The ongoing monitoring and refining of school improvement processes was enabled by monthly meetings of school and system leaders largely devoted to the assessing and refining of these plans. Mornings of these full-day meetings were entirely devoted to the monitoring of progress and related professional development, while afternoons were devoted to managerial issues. One superintendent explained that some principals occasionally suggested switching the order of topics (management issues first, improvement issues second). But senior leaders insisted that the most educationally important business be addressed during the mornings when participants were still "at their best".

All schools had created leadership teams. Three times a year all principals and members of their leadership teams met together with system leaders. The first of these meetings,

held in early fall, was to review and fine tune board and school improvement plans for the year. The second meeting, typically held in early February, was aimed at monitoring progress and making mid-course corrections (e.g., using report card data). The third and final meeting, held at the end of the school year, assessed progress in accomplishing the year's goals and began planning for the next annual cycle: EQAO data are an important consideration at each of these meetings. As with the monthly principals' meetings, the three meetings with all school leadership teams were very interactive, centered on evidence of progress and aimed at sustaining a sense of collective responsibility and accountability for both school and system-wide progress.

Within schools, leadership teams were intended to act as professional learning communities on behalf of their schools, and included at least the principal, literacy coach, coordinators, numeracy teachers and a regular teacher. School superintendents had remarkably close working relationships with their schools, as well, and principals spoke about these relationships in only the most positive terms. Superintendents were at least a weekly presence in most schools and their focus was invariably on the schools' improvement plans, the improvement of instruction and the evidence that would help illuminate the challenges and progress being made with such improvement. Lack of progress is acted on quickly. Explained one system leader:

We are fairly direct with a principal/school that is not improving. We send in support and resources and expect improved results. We articulate expectations and monitor and evaluate to make sure improvement has occurred. We want to know early in the process if things are not working.

Every principal, explained one superintendent, had to have a "portfolio" about their school including evidence of achievement in reading, writing and math (including some direct evidence of student work in these areas). When superintendents visited principals' schools, these portfolios were a major focus of attention.

Professional Development

Evidence from principal and system leader interviews captured two shifts that occurred over roughly a half dozen years in the nature or content and delivery of professional development within the system. The content shift was from some combination of centrally-determined and/or preference-based PD content to the very close alignment of PD content with the capacities needed to achieve board and school priorities. Identification of the capacities to be developed typically arose from examinations of evidence about what was working and not working, with PD initiatives aimed at remediating what was not working. One principal described PD content a half dozen years earlier as "more sugary, less meat and potatoes".

The PD delivery shift was from the provision of PD, particularly for teachers, primarily in locations outside of schools, to a much larger proportion of PD being "job-embedded" – undertaken in school or school-like contexts where newly acquired capacities had to be implemented if PD was to make much difference. All formally assigned PD days were school based, for example, and schools controlled most of the agenda for those days but with an expectation that their focus would be connected to common expectation for school improvement within the school and across the system. Schools' professional learning communities were frequently cited as key locations for teacher PD and school

coordinators were expected to be important PD resources for each school. Several principals also described partnering with other schools and districts for professional development purposes. This shift in PD delivery included, as well, movement from short-term, “one shot” initiatives to sustained attention to a small number of capacities needed to achieve the school’s and system’s goals. In the words of one principals, “It takes 20 ‘hits’ for behavior to become practice, not one-shot wonders”.

While job-embedded PD was the dominant delivery model, both teachers and administrators in the system also had access to many PD opportunities that took them outside their buildings or their system and introduced knowledge not available only through sharing good practices (principals had their own conference budgets). These were opportunities related to Ministry of Education initiatives including, for example, ongoing participation in the LSA project-sponsored conferences, web-based interactions and visits to the system of external experts. Principals also mentioned their schools’ participation in the province’s *Turnaround Schools*, *Schools-In-the Middle* and *Safe Schools* initiatives as important opportunities for additional learning. Professional development for both math and literacy priorities in the system had been provided by highly regarded experts from outside the system.

The monthly meetings of principals and the tri-annual meeting of school leadership teams with system leaders were significant forms of job-embedded PD for the leaders who attended. These meetings aimed not only to provide PD aligned with system and school priorities but also to further the improvement plans of schools and the system. Authentic engagement by participants in solving the system’s improvement problems was the mechanism for accomplishing both of these purposes. As well, the close, partnership-like relationship principals enjoyed with their superintendent in their school improvement efforts provided principals with an “at-the-elbow” form of coaching in the exercise of instructional leadership.

As this description makes clear, the system approached professional development as a key function of its improvement efforts and crafted forms of professional development for both teachers and administrators consistent with the best available evidence about effective professional development. PD was an integral part of both school and system improvement problem - solving processes (“everything is connected”, noted one principal) and the close monitoring of progress toward improvement goals by the system created an indirect but powerful means of holding staff accountable for actually applying the capacities acquired through PD.

Alignment

Budget allocations. All principals who were interviewed believed the system’s budget was carefully aligned with its improvement priorities, especially for elementary school priorities. By way of example, principals pointed to the allocation of money in support of the system’s math improvement goals (“dollars are put where the priorities are”), money in support of substantial commitments for professional development, including paying for supply teachers to free up both administrators and teachers. Principals had considerable

discretion over the use of their budgets and almost all principals claimed that they had the money they needed to do their jobs well.

Personnel policies and procedures. The most noteworthy information about personnel policies from the principal interviews was about the discretion they had in selecting their own teachers. Principals interviewed all applicants for teaching positions in their schools and while their choice was made as a “recommendation” to their superintendent, there were no reports of a superintendent ever rejecting a principal’s recommendation. Principals’ school improvement work often brought them into areas of considerable interest to teacher unions. Arguably, the most frequent problem across the province, at the time of the study, was disputes about the use of staff meeting time, unions often objecting to any portion of that time being used for professional development purposes. NPSCDSB principals did not identify union issues frustrating their improvement efforts. Relationships with the unions were reported to be collaborative and quite good. Said one principal, “We respect the union environment and know the boundaries”. One reason for the unproblematic nature of union relationships in this system may have been the quality of support available to principals, from the Human Resources Department, to interpret union contracts (“The HR department will help walk you through the contract”).

Organizational structures. Like all school systems, NPSCDSB was formally structured along relatively typical and hierarchical lines. This formal structure by itself does not seem particularly well aligned with the goals and priorities of the system. We might argue that alignment around mission was not even its purpose. Among other things, the formal structure served as a form of communication to stakeholders that the school system is a legitimate entity managed in predictable ways and that someone or group is both in charge and can be held accountable. The same can be said about the formal structure of most school systems.

What appears to be most remarkable about the system’s overall structure, however, was the addition of three highly visible and overlapping network structures to the formal and hierarchical structure of the system. These three networks were intentionally created to help accomplish the system’s key priorities. Borrowing concepts from social network theory²⁶, all principals were members of, or “nodes” in, one of these networks, with the central office leadership team acting as a “hub” for this network most visibly during the monthly principal meetings and the three-a-year leadership team meetings. The highly interactive relationships encouraged by the way in which these meetings were conducted, evidence indicated, aimed to maximize the development of participants’ social and intellectual capital relevant to school improvement. It also seems likely to have influenced members toward a common perspective on their purposes and procedures. A second set of networks was formed by each of the two superintendents of schools acting as hubs with each of the schools they worked with behaving as nodes. Relationships in these networks seemed mostly to entail superintendent/school reciprocal flows of information rather than school/school reciprocal flows of information; these relationships were intended to push forward individual school improvement efforts and enrich individual principal’s instructional leadership capacities.

The third set of networks consisted of members of the leadership teams in each school. These networks were intended to carry out the day-to-day problem solving required for

²⁶ For an overview see Borgatti, S., Foster, P. (2003). The network paradigm in organizational research: A review and typology, *Journal of Management*, 29, 991- 1013.

sustained improvement progress. The formal existence of these carefully structured teams represented a coordinated form of distributed leadership, one that aimed to infuse schools with high levels of instructional leadership without depending on principals to be the only sources of such leadership.

Leadership

Professional Leadership

Central office leaders were asked to describe what the system looked for in their prospective leaders, as well as the system's approach to recruiting, selecting, preparing and appraising both system and school-level leaders. These interviewees were also asked how these approaches had changed over the past five years.

Answers to these questions indicated that both leadership stability (e.g., no new principal appointments in the past five years) and small district size had substantially reduced the amount of formal attention devoted to this set of issues. Nonetheless, interviewees were able to identify qualities they believed were critical for leaders to possess including: ability to communicate the system's vision for students, commitment to Catholicity, ability to help craft the directions for improvement work and a capacity for, and disposition toward, helping others with this work. Both school and system leaders needed to be exemplary teachers, according to the interviewees, and to be able to model good instruction to others; one superintendent said simply "you can't monitor what you don't know". System leaders, in particular, needed to be adaptable and flexible, maintaining multiple priorities at the same time and able to collaborate productively with others. There did not appear to be any formal strategies for recruiting and selecting leaders because so few new leaders had been needed over the previous five years. This circumstance was changing, however, and the system was actively considering how to proceed in the future. Progress in meeting system and school improvement goals formed the basis for ongoing appraisal of existing leaders.

Elected Trustees

The "policy governance" model used by trustees in this system had been introduced over about a 14 month period following the appointment of the director of education in office at the time of the study. Having read the book by Carver, an often-cited source of this approach, the board chair played a key role in convincing his trustee colleagues to consider moving to a governance model. The chair, along with the new director, was convinced such a governance model was superior to "business as usual" and extensive deliberations among trustees eventually resulted in agreement to move to this model²⁷, but not without periodic expressions of doubt by some. This decision triggered extensive training for both senior staff and trustees. A governance consultant recommended by another school system was hired to assist with this training and to provide ongoing advice as the model was being implemented.

²⁷ Uptake by the full board was not immediate and during the second year in which the model was being considered, the director presented each trustee with a book about the governing approach, entitled "Boards That Make A Difference", by John Carver, as requested by the Board of Trustees themselves. .

At the core of a policy governance model is a commitment by trustees to focus their efforts on establishing goals for which the organization would be responsible, developing policies designed to accomplish those goals and monitoring progress in the achievement of goals. The director of education and her staff are then fully responsible for implementing the board's policies and making progress toward the board's goals. Trustees are not involved in system operations. For example, when asked about how engaged the trustees are in the system's day-to-day operations, one trustee said "...we would never contact [teaching] staff – same for schools and central office – it's not my role now". Another trustee describing her response to a direct parent contact explained:

...the process flows from the teacher to the principal to the superintendent. The parent can call back if they need me. At the end of the day, there is the director, then the board itself. Once I speak to the parent then I call the superintendent and let her know the situation – give them a heads up and let them handle it.

Implementing the policy governance model with fidelity, as in NPSCDSB, entails the board retaining its focus on goals and policy while senior administrators, the director in particular, regularly report to the board progress in meeting goals established by the board. In NPSCDSB the board had established four main goals or "ends statements" and twice a year, the director presented a report to the board about progress toward each of these ends statements. The board determined next policy directions to be taken, in response. These policy directions become the next mandate of the director.

As an indication of just how fully committed the NPSCDSB trustees were to a policy governance model, the final item on each of the board's meeting agenda was reflection on how well they had conducted the meeting according to policy governance principles. Meeting notes were then sent for feedback, to the consultant, who had originally helped introduce the model. The consultant's feedback was then reviewed at the subsequent meeting.

Relationships and Communication

Internal Relationships

System leaders described their own relationships as "very strong", something strikingly evident to us through our informal observations in the course of collecting the interview data. Both an Executive Council and an Administrative Council met frequently, the Executive Council every week. System leaders' offices were close together to promote regular communication.

System leaders also believed their relationships with principals were open and collaborative; one spoke about always being accessible, another about her open door policy. Principals concurred. They described their relationships with senior system leaders as "phenomenal" and "very close", for example, citing the lengthy period of time that two of the three superintendents had been in the system in other roles, the small number of administrative leaders in the system and the levels of trust that had developed among them ("everyone knows everyone"). As several principals said, "there is always someone available to talk to" and access to the senior team was "easy".

One system leader summed up how she viewed her relationship with school leaders in this way: “Tell us what you need and we will get it for you”. Evidence about the work of system leaders described in earlier sections of this report indicates considerable intentionality about achieving shared purposes, as well as high expectations for the work of school leaders. But the superintendent’s quoted comments, versions of which we heard from others, balanced that quite demanding focus on high expectations with a “servant leadership”- like orientation to relationships within the system school. Signaling a sense of reciprocal accountability for meeting those shared goals and high expectations, this orientation seems at least partly responsible for the high levels of relational trust evident among schools and with central office leaders.

Parents

Relationships with parents, although described by one principal as always having been a priority, had clearly grown in importance, over the five year period of interest to this study. A system-wide parent council, with membership made up of two representatives from each school council, met once each year to share best practices. These parents were viewed as highly supportive of the system’s directions and sponsored occasional events with parents across the system, as well. The board had also established parent-community chairs who meet with principals occasionally in relation to their school improvement initiatives. Parent engagement was described by one principal as “strongly encouraged although not a “mandate” and working productively with parents was included in the professional development the system designed for principals from time to time. One system leader described the board’s efforts to be transparent in their decision-making, to communicate with parents in ways that nurtured their engagement, and to provide extensive opportunities for such engagement (a communication protocol or process had been developed to help leaders work through contentious issues with parents).

Local Community Groups

In response to questions about local community groups, principals identified a wide range of such groups with which their schools had some connection and which they valued. Among those groups, for example, was Nipissing University and the provision of access to schools in support of its research program, Children’s Aid, the police, the Catholic Women’s League, local service clubs, several different health agencies and children’s services.

These connections are common in many school systems. What seemed less common, however, was the sense of importance both system and school leaders attached to their relationship with these local community groups as part of their efforts to accomplish the system’s mission and vision. The label “community schools” was used by almost all principals in reference to their organizations and access to schools by such community groups as scouts, ladies volleyball, square dancing groups and the like was expected. The responses of interviewees to questions about both parents and local community groups suggested much less social and psychological distance between this system’s schools and those it served than is the case in many school systems.

Ministry of Education

Trustees describe their relationship with the Ministry as “excellent” although “there is not too much contact”. According to one trustee, the Ministry “got its act together” setting, for example, three clear goals for the province and the board was quick to accept its role in helping to “build confidence in public education” (one of the three goals). The general tone of trustee comments about Ministry relations was one of support for what it was trying to accomplish with some reservations about the number of new initiatives it had been launching. Indeed, one trustee expressed some worry about the demands this was placing on staff and mused that “Maybe we don’t say enough thank yous”.

System leaders agreed that Ministry relationships were quite good. Many of the remarks about these relationships concerned the regional Ministry offices in both North Bay and Sudbury. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) was mentioned as an important resource, especially the student achievement officer assigned to NPSCDSB and LNS’s *School Effectiveness Framework*. No explicit mention was made of other parts of the Ministry, however.

Both challenges and opportunities were embedded in the board’s relationships with the Ministry. The challenges arose from the number of initiatives, also mentioned by trustees, especially given the small size of the system and the relatively few number of people available to respond to the demands of these initiatives. Aligning Ministry initiatives with board priorities was the primary strategy system leaders identified as their response.

But initiatives often came with money attached, money that could be put to good use in the system. So the tension, according to these system leaders, was typically around getting access to those targeted dollars in ways that acknowledged the goals they were intended to accomplish but also helped the system pursue its own priorities; central system goals for math and literacy were an intentionally direct reflection of LNS goals in this area. Most system leaders seemed satisfied with the tradeoffs they had to make, since involvement in many of the Ministry initiatives were significant learning opportunities. *Schools in the Middle* was one example given of such a learning opportunity.

Among the most useful Ministry contributions to system development, according to several of the system leaders, occurred around the boards improvement plan (BIP). Visits by Ministry personnel to review those plans and inquire about how they will be implemented provided the system with “an external set of eyes. Board A is doing this, have you thought of it?”. This interviewee believed such feedback was very useful to them because the system was open minded and willing to seriously consider such feedback, “a strength of this board”.

Conclusion

This is one of four system-level case studies included as part of a larger study which aimed to describe the characteristics and development of “high performing” school systems. The larger study also included a quantitative test of the same conception of high performing school systems that shaped the questions asked of interviewers in this case.

Evidence generated by cases such as this one are relatively rich, nuanced and allow for the development of deeper understandings than are typically possible with quantitative evidence alone. But this richness is also a source of “noise” when the goal is to separate

everything the district did on the road to improvement from those things that actually contributed significantly to its progress. This is the problem of distinguishing what was “necessary” for that progress from what was “sufficient”. There is no algorithmic method for getting to sufficient, only logical deduction from the premise that the greatest contributions to the system’s improvement are likely to be found in those features of the system that changed most over the five year period of interest to the study. So what did change the most?

Evidence outlined in this report points to five features of the system’s work that seemed especially central to its progress:

A Policy Governance Model implemented with a High Degree of Fidelity

Both trustees and system leaders considered this approach to governance by trustees to be a “game changer”. It helped create the demand for evidence-informed decision making at all levels, clarified relationships throughout the system, and helped sustain the system’s commitment to improving learning for all students.

At-the-elbow Instructional Leadership by System Leaders.

The superintendents who worked directly with schools as their main task were exceptionally knowledgeable about good instruction, exercised a refined set of relational skills with their principals and managed to avoid getting overwhelmed by with managerial matters. As a consequence, principals had trusted and knowledgeable “just-in-time” advice about their instructional leadership, as well as a direct line of communication to the central office.

Interdependent Board and School Improvement Processes

The Board Improvement Plan and school improvement plans were created synergistically. This means that the BIP was as much a product of what schools thought the board should do as school plans were a product of what the board thought schools should do. Furthermore, these plans had no special status unless evidence suggested they were helping accomplish the shared goals. Monitoring occurred frequently enough to make adjustments almost continuously to the actions that were part of the plans with care taken to ensure that the same goals were pursued long enough to be accomplished.

Data-informed Decision Making at all “Levels”

A very significant commitment of the board, systematically collected data was used for decisions in all segments of the system. The requirement for such data began with the policy governance model but was reinforced by a set of cultural norms that demanded transparent justification of decisions .

Stable System and School Leaders

Not always a strength, the longstanding leadership evident in this system came with exceptionally strong commitments to achieving the system’s mission, vision and goals. It also came with a disposition toward openness to feedback, whether from within or without. Many of these system and school leaders had developed deep levels of trust in one another over many years. They knew and often had worked with one another for

many years. So relationships were exceptionally well developed, a significant precondition for change enjoyed by the system.

5.

Trillium Lakelands District School Board (TLDSB)

“From Average to Good”

The School System

Student Achievement

The purpose for including TLDSB among the four systems in which case studies were conducted was to learn more about how districts beginning with “average” achievement levels can become significantly better than average over a fairly brief period of time - five years in all of our cases. We reasoned that the challenges facing leaders moving their districts from “average to good” might be significantly different from the challenges associated with moving from “poor to average” or from “good to great”. While one example certainly cannot represent a category of challenges, it has the potential to enlighten a purely quantitative picture of district improvement and to generate plausible hunches for further exploration.

Table 1 reports the percentage of students achieving Level 3 or 4 on the province’s annual EQAO tests in Grades 3 and 6 reading, writing and math, as well as Grade 9 academic and applied math. For each subject, the table reports 2005 results for both the province and TLDSB, along with changes in those results by 2009. As the two far right columns of data indicate, in 2005 the system was achieving exactly at the provincial average. Between 2005 and 2009, the total average achievement gain across all test areas for the province was 50, whereas the total gain for TLDSB was 75. More specifically:

- TLDSB grade 3 gains almost doubled those of the province (25 vs. 13);
- TLDSB grade 6 gains exceeded average provincial gains by about 40% (24 vs. 17), and
- TLDSB grade 9 math gains exceeded average provincial gains by about 30% (26 vs. 20).

By 2009 (not shown explicitly in Table 1), TLDSB scores exceeded provincial averages by about 3 % at the grade 3 level and about 11% at the grade 9 level, applied math performance having increased dramatically. Grade 6 provincial and TLDSB scores still remained very similar.

Based on average total gains from 2005 to 2009 across all test subjects, as in Table 1, TLDSB ranked 10th in the province. Among *public* school boards, however, TLDSB was essentially tied for first place with one other school system. Only two percentage points in overall 2005 mean scores and one percentage point in mean gain scores by 2009 separated these two systems. The school systems ranking first to eighth, based on total gain scores from 2005 to 2009, were all catholic school systems (the first ranked system is also part of this study). Among the four school systems selected for our case studies, TLDSB is the only public school system. Among the eight higher ranked systems in the province, average 2005 results were essentially the same as TLDSB’s in

four systems (not more than 2 percentage points difference) and lower in the case of four (m = 48 to 56).

Table 1
Changes in Achievement from 2005 to 2009
(Percentages of students achieving Level 3 or higher on EQAO tests)

	Province		TLDSB	
	2005	Change	2005	Change
Grade 3				
Reading	59	2	60	6
Writing	61	7	55	12
Math	66	4	67	7
Grade 6				
Reading	63	6	61	12
Writing	59	8	53	9
Math	60	3	57	3
Grade 9				
Academic	68	9	73	7
Math				
Applied Math	27	11	37	19
Mean	58	50	58	75

Demographic Characteristics

TLDSB was formed through the amalgamation of three smaller school systems during the last round of government-initiated school board consolidation in Ontario in 1999. At the time of the study, the school system educated approximately 18,000 students in 41 elementary schools, 7 secondary schools and 6 adult education centres spread over 11,500 square kilometers of some of the most attractive and popular tourist destinations in southern Ontario. The system had offices located in three communities, the “corporate head office” being in Lindsay, the largest town in the area with a population of about 20,000 residents. In 2006-07 the system had total revenues of just under \$190 million, increasing to more than \$235 million by 2009-10.

The Evidence

As Table 2 indicates, evidence for this case was based on interviews with 14 principals (12 elementary and 2 secondary), five school system administrators (both the current and former directors, as well as 3 supervisory officers) and 3 trustees. Almost all of the interviewees achieved the minimum threshold of experience in TLDSB (at least three years) that we believed was necessary to help us build a portrait of how the system had accomplished the increases in student achievement which had led to its selection for the study.

Most principals had long experience in some position in TLDSB (m = 15) and had been in principal positions during the full five year period of primary interest for the study. Among senior district leaders, the director of education at the time of the study had the least tenure; he was in the early months of his first year and was new to the system. Other central office leaders had worked for TLDSB for almost 10 years, on average, at least three of those years as central office leaders. The person who had been director of education during the 2004-05 to 2008-09 period of interest in the study had worked her way up through the system as teacher, school administrator, supervisory officer and finally director. In addition to interviews, some documentary evidence was provided to us by interviewees when they thought it would help us understand the nature of the school system's work. We also read relevant documents (e.g., strategic plans) posted on the system's website.

The next four sections (Core Processes, Supporting Conditions, Leadership, and Relationships) report the results of our analysis of the interviews and documents. These sections and subsections correspond to the framework for the study described in the introduction to the study, as a whole.

Table 2
Interviewees Length of Experience

Role	Total Years In System	Total Years in Admin Role	Total Years Current Position
Principals (14)	4 to 38 (m = 15)	2 to 17 (m = 6.2)	2 to 17 (m = 3.9)
System Ad. (5)	1 to 23 (m = 15)	8 to 10 (m = 9.6)	3 to 7 (m = 5)
Trustees (2)	.5 to 10		

Each section provides a synthesis of evidence from principals, central office administrators and trustees about selected characteristics of TLDSB and key features of the system's evolution from the 2004-05 school year through to the early fall of 2010 when data for the study were collected.

Core Processes

Mission and Vision

Asked about TLDSB's mission and vision, principals, superintendents and trustees all referred to a document entitled "Better Together: In a safe and caring community", the original version of which had been developed by trustees shortly after the system was amalgamated more than 12 years earlier. The choice of "Better Together", as one trustee explained, was to help build a sense of community across what had been three separate school systems. Still considered the official public expression of the system's mission, current versions of the mission statement also included the following set of belief statements:

- Students are the focus of our system
- Our school system will be open and accessible
- People are our strength

- Effective communication is the key to success
- Schools are a reflection of the community
- Education is a shared community responsibility
- Learning is a lifelong process
- Mutual respect is the basis of our school system

The consistency of TLDSB’s mission over a significant number of years helped to ensure not only that it was widely known by trustees, staff and many members of the community, but that its meaning to many of the staff interviewed for the study had deepened considerably as they worked to implement the mission. The growing meaningfulness of the mission was also a product of substantially increasing the involvement of staff and community members in the strategic planning process. Whereas the original mission statement was the product of trustees alone, subsequent efforts to plan for the implementation of the mission included a wide cross section of TLDSB staff and community members.

While the mission had remained consistent for a long time, beginning in the 2005-06 school year the specific priorities of the system had been continuously clarified, made much more specific, and aligned with provincial priorities. “Student learning, Staff learning and Safe and Caring communities” appeared as three pillars of the board’s strategic plan beginning in 2006-07 and these pillars remained central to subsequent iterations of the system’s strategic plans. A superintendent explained how the three pillars were developed as follows:

Three areas were developed with the last director, 5 years ago. The senior administration team decided that these were three areas to focus on (student learning, staff learning, safe and caring learning environments). The challenges were that the board improvement plan mandated by the ministry had K-8, special education and 9-12 separate. They did not align. The challenge was to bring them together and make them cohesive for the system. All of the superintendents at that time were involved (but none of the current ones were in the role). Each group had their own plan, but for reporting to the trustees each plan was divided into the three areas. We simplified the plans for reporting. We monitored the plans and reported fairly regularly. Through that process the focus became more on student achievement.

Each of these pillars served as a focus for setting quite specific annual targets which were changed over time in response to the progress made each year. For example, the 2008-09 Strategic Plan concerning “Student learning” included three targets for the Kindergarten level, the first of which was to:

Increase the percentage of senior kindergarten students who score at a PM Benchmarks Level 5 in reading from a baseline of 37% to a preferred target of 49%

In that same Strategic Plan, one of the nine targets for “Staff Learning” was that:

Every staff member will have the opportunity to engage in professional development provided by the board.

And one of the 21 targets to be achieved as part of “Safe and Caring Communities” (included in a subcategory called “Environmental Stewardship”) was that:

Five more schools will reach accreditation status within the EcoSchools Program

The concrete guidance for staff provided by targets (especially student achievement targets) set out in the systems more recent strategic plans was unavailable until system leaders and principals began to look carefully at EQAO scores. As the Director at the time explained, when she assumed her job these scores were considered just adequate and not much attention was being devoted within the system to provincial test score (EQAO) results. Both parents and trustees were generally happy with the services being provided by schools. But provincial test score results the year following the new director's appointment noticeably declined. This served as a call to action on her part and provided her with a hard-to-resist reason for making some very difficult decisions about system structures, senior personnel and the allocation of resources.

Curriculum and Instruction

Approach to improving curriculum and instruction. Until about five years prior to the study, schools worked relatively autonomously to identify goals and the other components of their school improvement plans. But this autonomous approach to school and curriculum improvement changed dramatically over the five year period of interest to the study. Using student achievement trends evident in multiple data sources to which the system had access. EQAO, CASI, Iowa, math benchmarks), along with Ministry priorities, the system moved to aggressively develop a board improvement plan (which included "SMART" goals) that principals and their staffs were expected to explicitly acknowledge and build on as they created their individual school improvement plans. Increasingly, as well, schools were encouraged to focus their improvement efforts on the needs of individual students, not just groups of students.

Principals were informed of district-wide trends in the achievement and other data used by the system. At principal meetings, superintendents worked with principals to ensure that their school plans reflected priorities in the board's plan, but in a locally meaningful way. The result of this approach to improvement was that "everyone's speaking the same language". "Having a clear plan", according to one of the principals interviewed, "is very symbolic".

With a relatively common set of priorities across schools, the system became better able to support useful professional development for staff, according to several principals. Said one such principal, "PD has evolved from the school base, where principal identified what staff needed, to board - directed [professional] development.

In addition to the board improvement plan, school improvement initiatives were influenced by, for example, the system's adoption, three years prior to the study, of *Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCPs)*²⁸ and board visits to schools using the Ministry's *School Effectiveness Framework*, at the elementary level, as well as a comparable resource, locally developed, at the secondary level (the *Secondary School Inventory* or SSI). Work related to both sets of initiatives was considered an integral part of each school's improvement activities, including the monitoring of these initiatives by board staff, feedback provided to the school and periodic follow up to ensure continuing

²⁸ TLCP is a process for instructional improvement by school teams that begins with the identification of a major curriculum goal or "big idea", examining student work related to that goal or idea, working out common understandings about judging that work ("moderated marking"), providing feedback to students, refining instruction and tracking student progress.

progress. Once school improvement plans were established, the system supported their implementation with information, time and funds.

The trend toward this more corporate-like approach to organizational improvement also appeared to be unfolding within schools, as well. As one principal noted in reference to teachers, “You used to be able to close your door and hide, but not anymore”. There had been considerable effort made to break down the isolation in which teachers often found themselves with more collaboration and collective effort. And this collective effort was more focused on the types of instruction that would be useful to achieve the targets set in the schools’ improvement plans.

The system also had shifted the focus of those in lead coaching roles so that their efforts were almost entirely embedded in schools and aimed at “helping teachers one-on-one, unlike the external leadership previously provided by the board”.

One principal added, to the general approach toward improvement described above, that the system awarded greater priority to special education teachers and literacy coaches than it had in the past, likely a reflection of its efforts to close achievement gaps. This principal also noted, with approval, encouragement provided by the system for schools to keep all students integrated in whole classrooms and provide differentiated instruction in those classrooms, rather than engage in some form of tracking or streaming.

One of the superintendent interviewees traced the origin of some features of TLDSB’s approach to improving literacy to a visit by two school staffs and a central office leader to the York Region District School Board (YRDSB). This school system had become well known in the province for its efforts to improve literacy. Following this visit, TLDSB began to incorporate some of the strategies evident in YRDSB into its own approaches to improving literacy (e.g., end of year Literacy Fair). These improvement initiatives remained hard work, however. It was, for example, comparatively straightforward to create Literacy Coach positions, but much more difficult to figure out what skill set a person would need to be effective in the role.²⁹

Fostering Students’ Deep Understandings about “Big Ideas”. A question about the priority devoted to fostering students’ “deep understanding of big ideas” was included in the interviews because of several initiatives underway across the province at the time of the study. These initiatives were pressing schools to more explicitly link their instructional improvement efforts to “higher level” or “more complex” goals or “big ideas” included in the provincial curriculum. Originating in the Ministry’s *Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat* (LNS) and the work of its student achievement officers, these initiatives also had become a priority for the *Leading Student Achievement: Networks for Learning* (LSA) project; efforts by districts to support school staffs in the development of *Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways* were intended to improve the instruction needed by students to master higher order curriculum goals.

²⁹ While almost all of the principals interviewed were supportive, if not enthusiastic, about the system’s emerging approach to improving curriculum and instruction, one reservation was expressed by the principal of a small school. This principal noted that using EQAO results to develop targets for the current cohort of students was especially problematic since the results available in the fall of each year are about the cohort of students from the previous year and small schools, in particular often experience huge cohort differences.

The general view of principals who were interviewed was that “big ideas” had become a substantial priority for the school system, especially over the past year. The origins of this priority were several and principals did not speak much about linkages among them. It seems more likely that initially independent sources had begun to nudge the system toward an interest in some version of “big ideas” as an organizing concept for instructional improvement.

One source was the work undertaken by the system to develop *Teaching – Learning Critical Pathways*, work that was widely endorsed by the system and associated at least partly with those schools participating in the LSA project³⁰. A second source of encouragement for big ideas, indeed a particular interpretation of what “big ideas” meant within the system, was “a lot of talk about critical literacy and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). According to several principals, the board awarded considerable value to developing higher order thinking skills and some of these principals associated this valuing with involvement in the Ministry’s *School Effectiveness Framework* and school walk throughs. As an example, one principal cited grade 4 students who were studying “medieval times- the Middle Ages - making a castle. It’s important but what is the purpose and what are the students going to gain from it is more important- HOT”.

Another principal explained that “through the literacy coach meetings and principal meetings or any workshop, the board focuses a component of the meeting on higher order thinking”. All schools involved in TLCs were also engaged in some elements of HOT development, according to another. One principal associated the origin of interest in big ideas with the Ministry’s guide to effective instruction in math and literacy, in particular the research underlying such instruction.

The school system’s *Literacy Learning Team Network* (LLTM) was credited, by one principal, for building members understanding of big ideas and how to develop them. Because each school’s literacy coach and principal were part of the LLTM, they were then able to work with individual school staffs to build comparable understandings. The LLTM developed job-embedded activities that members tried out in their schools and their experiences in using those activities were then shared during subsequent LLTM meetings. The school system, in sum, “has been really good as far as orchestrating or changing the knowledge base”, claimed one principal. Another said “the director and SO’s are all on page 1 together with big ideas”.

Noting that “big ideas” have become a focus especially during the past year, another principal explained that curriculum planning in the school engaged teachers more directly with the concept. Literacy teams at this school (made up of the literacy coach, principal, vice principal, librarian and resource teachers) “are mindful of big ideas, and want to be more engaging to students”. This principal cited as an example of a big idea “social justice” and explained how this idea represented an authentic interest of many students. School leaders, explained another principal, not only work on how to teach “big ideas” with their literacy teams but also pursue this work at regular principals’ meetings to further enable principals to provide leadership around the development of big ideas in their own schools.

³⁰ *Leading Student Achievement: Networks for Learning* was a province-wide project sponsored by the *Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat* and led by the three provincial principal associations. The main goal of this project was to increase student achievement by improving the quality of school leadership.

Several principals also mentioned how the work of the system's curriculum department fosters a priority around the development of big ideas. For example, the department encourages staffs to plan instruction aimed at four levels of cognitive complexity – communication, understanding, thinking and application. These principals claimed that the curriculum department had significantly increased its emphasis on critical thinking and the “application” level of cognitive complexity; it was encouraging schools to do the same. This emphasis by the department, according to several principals, had helped promote staff understanding about how critical thinking is possible at any age. Prior to this emphasis, claimed one principal, “some primary teachers did not believe their students capable of critical thinking. It was only something older kids could do”. Big ideas were becoming a key component of school improvement plans.

Uses of Evidence

Results of interviews with central office leaders and principals indicated considerable change over the past five years in the system's collection and use of data and the expectations for data use in both elementary and secondary schools. According to one superintendent, the advent of the *Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT)* and the need to pass it for graduation, significantly advanced the use of systematically collected evidence for decision making in secondary schools. This superintendent also said that the system had close connections to educators in the United Kingdom UK through an exchange and that experience had impressed on those TLDSB staff involved in the exchange of the value of using systematic collected data. EQAO measures, credit counts and credit quality indicators also provided more meaningful measures than had previously been available to secondary schools.

While skepticism about the relevance of provincial test scores lingered among some staff, the attitude adopted by central office leaders was, in the words of one superintendent, “until we get good at this, no one will listen to us about the rest”.

The director of education during this period strongly advocated for the use of systematic evidence of the types mentioned above. Implementation of the Ministry's *School Effectiveness Framework (SEF)*, led by a superintendent, reinforced this as a key lever for advancing the system's achievement goals. Paraphrasing one superintendent's description, SEF involved:

...every principal, vice principal, coordinator and consultant on a district review team, 30 people in total on each district review team. Two or three people form a mini-team and visit classrooms to observe: what teachers do; what students do; what is on the walls and; what resources are in the classroom. The team is looking for the indicators included in SEF. They meet at the end of observation for a 30 minute conversation and to request more information. Then the team debriefs strengths and areas for growth. In the same year, a smaller team with the principal walks through, as a follow up, to see what is going well, what needs work. The second year, a mini team goes back to ask how everything is going, makes a report on what went well and what needs more focus. The third year there is another visit to monitor progress and to ask about supports still needed by the school.

Reflecting the value most interviewees associated with use of the *SEF*, one superintendent said, “ We could easily write the board improvement plan based on the *SEF* process...”.

The Ministry’s *SEF* was designed for use in elementary schools. Because of its value in pursuing the system’s achievement goals at that level, one superintendent undertook the development of a comparable tool and procedure for use in secondary schools, with a focus on grade 9. Called the *Secondary School Inventory (SSI)*, this tool was implemented by teams of staff, each team consisting of a superintendent, district principal, curriculum coordinator, literacy coaches and several principals (both elementary and secondary). These teams spent up to a week in a school collecting data about features of the school identified in the *SSI* and helping staff identify promising directions for their subsequent improvement work.

At the time of our study, then, the system had a sophisticated set of tools for collecting data, reporting data to schools, providing schools independent access to their own data, and expecting principals and teachers to make extensive use of data for both school-level improvement planning and classroom-level instructional decision making. Teachers were expected to examine individual student-level data in making their instructional decisions. As one indication of how the system had become data driven, principals described the *Board Improvement Plan* as a “living document” which changed from year to year in response to the most recent evidence of progress. School improvement plans were expected to be similarly responsive to evidence.

The use of data throughout the system was ubiquitous and considerable support was provided by central office staff to principals and teachers as part of this dramatically increased emphasis on data use. District consultants visited schools to better understand what kind of assistance they needed and to arrange for that assistance. Principals were expected to bring the “binder” containing their schools’ data to every principals meeting to work with in collaboration with other principals and central office staff. *TLCP* work was expected to be data driven and lead coach meetings also engaged in data interpretation.

Literacy Learning Team Network meetings were typically organized in response to data provided by the system and/or by individual schools. At the school level, *Professional Learning Community (PLC)* meetings were expected to be guided by evidence of student progress. And the walk – throughs associated with implementation of the *School Effectiveness Framework* were focused on student achievement evidence, as well as evidence reflecting the indicators associated with each of the *SEF* characteristics. Six full days per year were devoted to school improvement meetings for those participating in the Ministry’s *Schools in the Middle (SIM)* project and these schools were expected to bring their binders of data to work with during these days. The system collected most of the data it expected schools to use and provided the data to schools in a readily accessible form.

Clearly, these uses of data very directly served accountability purposes. Each schools’ data was available, on line, to other schools thereby increasing the opportunities for collaboration, but also for peer pressure. When superintendents visited schools and classrooms, evidence about progress with student achievement was typically the starting point for conversations, walk-throughs and (eventually) plans about what needed to be done next. Follow up was monitored through subsequent visits to the school. Elementary

school staffs, our interviews suggested, did not find these data-driven visits to their schools especially challenging. But secondary principals reported considerable stress on the part of their teachers, likely because of their lack of previous experience with district staff in their classrooms. This was particularly evident in relation to *SSI*-related activities.

The system posted a climate survey on its website designed to collect information about issues of current concern (“hot topics”) such as bullying, cyber bullying and aboriginal education. However, almost all other evidence that the system and schools worked with was about student achievement. Multiple sources of such evidence were used. In addition to the province’s EQAO data, the system and schools also collected and factored into their decisions results of CASSI tests, the OWA test, benchmark data, “moderated marking” information and report card data. Secondary schools were able to link their EQAO results to course accumulation information. This achievement evidence was used to identify common priorities for attention across the system; at the time of data collection, one priority was to help students move from “description” and “understanding” levels of cognitive complexity to “thinking”. An action plan had been developed to achieve this priority using graphic organizers to help students organize and become more explicit about their ideas.

In sum, then, the dramatic increase in the use of systematically collected data to guide board, school and classroom improvements was viewed by most interviewees as one of the most important explanations for the achievement gains made by the system. Said one superintendent, “It’s a different world now”.

Supporting Conditions

Organizational Improvement Processes

Only district leaders were asked the series of interview questions specifically aimed at describing approaches to board and school improvement processes. Much of what has already been reported by principals and central office leaders captures the most important features of these processes and how they evolved over the five-year period of interest to the study. In a nutshell, this evidence paints a picture of a system:

- guided by a longstanding, widely understood and shared mission, along with very specific targets to be accomplished from year-to-year as a means of helping to realize that mission;
- relying heavily on systematically collected evidence for determining its directions and monitoring its progress
- implementing well-designed externally-developed procedures for stimulating carefully targeted improvements (e.g., TLCs, SEF, SIM);
- developing its own well-designed, internally developed, improvement procedures to supplement those which had been externally developed (e.g., SSI, LLTN, new instructionally-oriented positions such as math coaches) ;
- using the implementation of these improvement procedures also as rich, situated, opportunities for staff learning;
- consistently and persistently defining the work of central office and school-level academic administrators as “instructional leadership”.

These organizational improvement processes were, according to almost all interviewees, a dramatic departure from the past, one that required a very significant shift

in the system's culture toward greater transparency, a laser-like focus on student performance, and a renewed and strengthened commitment to staff learning, along with acceptance of responsibility and accountability for ensuring student success.

Professional Development

Principals. Principal interviewees generally described the professional development opportunities available to them as significantly increased, extensive and in many cases, very effective. Among the most effective, in the judgment of the interviewees, were the experiences associated with the communication structures and procedures for board and school improvement described in earlier sections of this report. In the context of TLDSB's improvement efforts, these experiences would be considered "job-embedded including, for example, regular principal meetings, the *Literacy Learning Team Network*, literacy coach meetings, the system improvement team, the *Schools in the Middle* project, the *Leading Learner Principal Network* (bringing together successful and struggling principals) and work with the *School Effectiveness Framework*. One principal cited the discussions he had with his superintendent about his career path as a stimulating source of PD. These PD opportunities were also the work of the system and its school leaders. Approached as it was in TLDSB, "the work was the learning".

Principals also pointed to more conventional and less job embedded PD opportunities available to them. Among those cited were the Ontario Principals' Council's *Principal Certification Program* offered within the system (although without enough participants to support a Part 2), funds (\$750 per year) to attend conferences of one's choosing, an aspiring leaders program including a summer institute for aspiring leaders. The system itself provided PD centrally in support of some of its own priorities.

Teachers. "There is a workshop on almost any topic you can name". This comment from one principal is symptomatic of the TLDSB's efforts to support the ongoing learning of its teachers. TLDSB provided considerable variety and flexibility for teachers to chose PD close to their own interests and professional learning needs. Examples of workshop topics mentioned by interviewees were autism, smart boards, assistive technology, IEP writing, and parents helping students with homework. Interviewees also noted teacher participation in book tags, book groups and the reading of professional literature. The system also provided teachers with PD targeted to its own priorities (e.g., in service about a new nutrition policy). Superintendents and board consultants identified the themes for centrally-offered PD by "marrying" school and district priorities.

More job-embedded types of PD opportunities mentioned for teachers included visits to other schools and classrooms, the 6 days of meetings each year for Math leads, job shadowing of other teachers, monthly PD for math coaches and lead coaches, and the provision of coaching for individual teachers in their own classrooms. Some principals cited their teachers participation in professional learning communities as an important source of PD, as well as regular staff meetings in some schools.

One of the secondary principals explained that the PD money allocated for the school's use was given to 3 departments each year. This money was used for PD outside the school or for a department retreat. This principal also acknowledged the considerable amounts of PD for teachers from the central office and through the consultants. Indeed, as

this principal observed, “it is almost too much at times, teachers are called out of their classes too many times for PD”.

In response to a direct question about “if and how” teacher PD had changed over the last five or six years, principals were unanimous in describing the changes as extensive. These changes transformed teacher PD from a one-shot, “sit and git” approach, which neither engaged teachers nor produced much improvement in their classrooms, to an approach in which teachers actively participated over extended periods of time in efforts to significantly improve their classroom practices.

Alignment

Principals were asked about the extent to which the budget, personnel policies and procedures and organizational structures were aligned with its goals, vision and mission. Most principals considered the system to be very well aligned in all three areas, as far as they were able to judge with the information they had. As an elementary principals said, the system is “very aligned. Everything is filtered through student success”.

Budget allocations. Overall indications of budget alignment were evident in how the system spent money on initiatives to improve student achievement in the areas of numeracy and literacy. Another elementary principal explained that:

The budget is aligned with PD and the dollar cost for literacy coaches and training. The alignment is dependent on determining the data and what needs to be done- that’s where the board is spending it’s money.

For example, literacy coaches were provided to schools in proportion to a school’s student population. Based on the available evidence, schools identified as underachieving in math were given numeracy coaches, allowing for a larger numbers of days to be made available to engage with teachers in improving the teaching of math. As another example of alignment, one principal explained that at the beginning of the school year, part of the board improvement plan required the special education department to provide each school with two laptops and also to incorporate assistive technology in the classroom. This was to improve the quality of differentiated instruction in classrooms. Board assessment results showed a weakness in thinking and writing with boys and the purchase of resources that boys are interested in (such as the laptops) had helped. The system funded this initiative.

While the TLDSB budget was considered to be well aligned with its priorities, several principals qualified their approval with the caveat, “as well as could be expected with the current ministry funding formula”. The overall demand for money, these principals explained, was much greater than the money that was available for the many different initiatives it might be spent on. Both the system and the province, pursuing improvements to student achievement in literacy and math, were allocating considerable sums to these priorities (“The focus is on curriculum, money is allocated to improve resources and PD, I’m pleased to see that”). However, new initiatives also costing money continued to surface. “There’s only so many dollars and so much has to be spent in so many different ways”. For example, one principal cited mental health issues as a growing concern in his school, as well as across the system, yet one she believed to be largely ignored in the current allocations of money.

Allocating the budget to improve curriculum and instruction priorities meant something at least a bit different in most schools because individual school budgets were based on their school improvement plans. Beyond a common allotment to every school, a school might receive more or less than others (up to \$15,000) depending on the fiscal requirements of their plans. Principals had a reasonable amount of discretion over how their budgets were spent.

Personnel policies and procedures. Citing, in the words of one principal, a “level headed, common sense approach to policy”, almost all principals believed the system’s personnel policies and procedures were highly aligned with its priorities. For example, explained a principal, one of the reasons why there are still literacy coaches throughout the system was because trustees still supported the money needed to maintain them. This principal believed that trustees supported the training and the work the literacy coaches did because they saw the need based on the data. During board meetings, it was explained, superintendents showed trustees the raw data needed to justify decision. There was an entire website, noted one principal, devoted to the system’s procedures and policies. These policies and procedures were monitored and reviewed by groups of principals and senior administrators about every four years as a means of ensuring their alignment with the system’s changing priorities.

The system’s personnel policies and procedures, claimed several interviewees, help principals avoid spending excessive time on the management of their schools and allowed them to devote much more of their time to instructional leadership. Central office staff members were available to support principals’ work and encourage them to move out of the office and walk the hallways and be in classrooms. For example, if a principal had to write the first letter of expectation for a staff member and needed some clarification about relevant policies, staff in the Human Resources department would help the principal write this first letter. As another example, in a case where a principal is trying to suspend a student and is not aware of the right procedures and procedures, the principal’s superintendent will help the principal walk through the process and policies in order to solve the problem faster and move on to instructional leadership activities. Principals also noted the “huge network of principals that would also help each other”.

Teacher unions often have much to say about board policies and procedures effecting labor relations and their members’ working conditions. So we asked principals about union relationships in TLDSB. This system, as principals quickly acknowledged, has access to a unique resource not available to other systems in the province, a senior HR official, a superintendent, who had been the longstanding and widely respected president and chief negotiator for the province’s secondary school teacher’s union (OSSTF). As one principal explained,

(Name) sees both sides based on his experiences with the OSSTF (he was the president) and asks lots of probing questions. He asks questions about what has been tried and makes suggestions on alternative ways of resolving issues- this is his general attitude. He doesn’t just jump to the worst thing that could happen.

Principals also received help and advice from their superintendents in dealing with union issues in their schools. Most principals who spoke about union relationships stressed their efforts to work collaboratively with union members, believed the system

had nurtured relatively positive relations with the union, which was helpful at the school level.

Principals who spoke about relations with the unions nonetheless believed that they had been deteriorating over the past five years. This was not strictly an alignment issue although the unions were seen as a bulwark against misalignment of policies and procedures. Union relationships were more directly related to the system's and the schools' efforts to improve curriculum and instruction. The system typically attempted to work out a solution before agreeing to an arbitration process, according to one principal, and the consultation process was very good. Nonetheless, one principal said simply that the hardest part of a principal's job is working with the unions. Another principal, explaining her efforts to transform school-level staff meetings into learning opportunities in the context of a restrictive union climate, said that she no longer called them meetings

...because the union says they can only have one meeting a month. There is no agenda and attendance is optional. 95% of people show up on time and the others come in later. The focus is to ensure that everyone is on the same page but it is pretty informal.

Organizational structures. Some of the principals interviewed claimed to have incomplete knowledge about the alignment of the system's organizational structures and some responses were not so much about the system's "structural" alignment as about its "functional" alignment; that is, the extent to which the actions of people were aligned with school and system priorities, no matter the structures within which they found themselves. But the overwhelming sentiment expressed by principals was that the system was highly aligned for their purposes. Noted a secondary principal, for example:

Any facet of my work I might want information about - from hiring, procurement, curriculum issues, personnel are in place for an answer the same day. I feel safe in assuming, in my job as principal, that the organizational structure is there to help me.

Principals cited specific examples of system-level organizational alignment including:

- the tight coupling of board and school improvement plans and the planning process;
- the introduction of "district principal" positions, two years prior to our study, with responsibilities carefully matched to the board's improvement plan;
- the assignment of superintendent responsibilities aimed at providing as much support to schools as possible for achieving their improvement targets and;
- transformation of the focus of principal meetings from system and school operations to board and school improvement initiatives and the learning required by principals to be successful.

Several principals spoke about efforts in the current year to better align the broader curriculum improvement efforts with special education, one of the few specific example of unsatisfactory alignment identified:

I see this as technical support, special education and transportation. They pay more attention to alignment, but special education and technical support need more collaboration. For example when rolling out curriculum ideas to improve student learning, having the technical piece in place would help. But I need to get the resources myself, for example when developing critical literacy and media literacy it is important that they should be rolled out together rather than having individual session on software programs, also special education should be included in our year plans.

A second example of less-than-adequate alignment, one that was likely to be especially challenging for the system to address, concerned the allocation of vice principals to many of the smaller schools in the system. According to the interviewee raising this issue, experience as a vice principal is a critical part of one's preparation for, and inclination to consider, the principalship. Yet vice principal positions in a substantial proportion of the system's elementary schools were restricted to a small fraction of a position and almost always entailed a very significant teaching load. According to the principal who raised this concern, vice principals were often unprepared for moving on to principalships and less inclined to consider such a move, as well. Succession planning was made much more difficult as a result.

Leadership

Professional Leadership

Central office interviewees were asked questions about the system's approach to both school and system-level leadership. These were questions about processes for identifying, recruiting, selecting, and appraising people in formal leadership role at both levels.

School-level leaders. The system had a relatively longstanding set of procedures in relation to school-level leaders, which had only been fine-tuned over the five year period of interest to our study. A retired superintendent on contract with the system and in collaboration with the director took responsibility for encouraging teachers to consider school leadership and for coaching them through the application process. While this was a version of being "tapped on the shoulder", teachers also had the opportunity, with their principals endorsement, to self-select themselves. Either way, these people then entered the aspiring leaders program which began with an informal visit from a superintendent. The program entailed, as well, book study, exchanges, central appointments, and two skill assessments (EQ360 and EQ1). Applicants were also required to submit a statement of their educational philosophy; said one interviewee, "we are hoping to see 'all students can learn given sufficient time'."

The selection process was framed by five key sets of competences described in the *Ontario Leadership Framework*. Applicants were required to develop 3 artifacts related to each of these competences and these artifacts were shared during an interview with the selection team. Those judged successful at the interview were then placed in a "pool" and sometimes interviewed a second time before being appointed to a school. The system also had a mentoring program for newly appointed principals and vice principals, as well as those in the pool but not yet assigned a school. Mentors were recently retired

principals (usually within one or two years) considered by senior staff to have been very effective in their previous roles.

While seemingly well developed, several interviewees had reservations about at least parts of this process³¹. The major challenge for the system was actually finding enough suitable candidates to fill the positions becoming vacant. While not entirely independent of the recruitment process, this problem was considered much more complex than the existing recruitment process could solve and was a top-of-the-mind dilemma, with no clear solution for the senior staff who were interviewed.

Procedures for appraising existing school leaders were not nearly as elaborate or consistent as the system's recruitment process. Principal appraisal had been part of a school audit but this was no longer the case. Success in meeting student growth targets was at least one of the bases on which superintendents appraised principals in those schools for which they were responsible. It seemed likely that recent province-wide efforts to develop a common appraisal process for principals would have some influence on TLDSB's future approaches to school leader appraisal but none of our interviewees explicitly spoke about this.

System-level leaders. The process for recruiting and selecting central office leaders (primarily superintendents) was less explicit than was the process for school leaders. Partly this was a function of not being faced with much turnover. Nonetheless, interviewees seemed to be clear that the process involved:

- Considerable individual cultivation;
- Identification of promising people “early on” in their careers;
- Provision of opportunities to understand what the job entails and to develop the necessary capacities

Qualities considered important to be selected for system leadership included breadth of experience, refined “HR” skills, and the ability to add value to the conversations and decisions of the senior leadership team. The board of trustees, noted one interviewee, was involved in selection of both principals and senior leaders, along with the director. One superintendent noted that

The director wants a divergent team with different perspectives, so we create a different tomorrow...[he also expects such qualities in members of the senior team as] conscientiousness, high EQ, good work ethic, to be change agents, make change at the system level and how to use data to move the system forward, work well as a team.

Elected Trustees

Central office leaders and trustees were asked a series of questions about the focus of trustees, their relationships with staff and parents, and aspects of the system in which they were most engaged. These questions were asked during the same period in which the provincial Ministry of Education was developing new policy about school board governance, a policy aimed at sharpening trustees' accountability for student achievement and limiting their roles to policy development and evaluation. Our questions

³¹ The current director was one of them, expressing serious reservations about the quantity of material to be developed and shared at the interview, preferring more time to go deeper with a smaller number of artifacts. The process was likely to be changed in the not-to-distant future.

and the frame of reference of our respondents were significantly influenced by this provincial context.

Of the three pillars making up the system's strategic directions (student learning, staff learning, and a safe and caring environment), superintendents thought trustees were particularly interested in the third. Noted one superintendent, "Their focus is on culture and caring". Said another, Their focus is more on nutrition, character education, special education, and eco schools. One of the trustees noted that Character Education "is part of everything that we do".

Several interviewees did note, however, that specific aspects of the student learning pillar did attract considerable trustee attention including the achievement of special education students and the performance of boys. On these issues and others mentioned above, senior staff believed the trustees were quite knowledgeable relying on staff for input but also attending relevant conferences to educate themselves. In the words of one superintendent, however:

I don't think trustees are interested in EQAO. Maybe if the scores were not positive they would be more in tune, but because the board is on an upward movement, it hasn't been discussed.

Other interview responses, both central office leaders and trustees, suggested that over the previous five years trustees had become more focused on board policy and were less distracted by operational issues and political concerns. They remained responsive to parents, as they always had, and acted as conduits to senior staff on issues raised with them by parents. Trustees served on board-level committees such as the *Special Education Advisory Council* and stayed fairly engaged in day to day issues but not for purposes of decision making. Overall, in the words of one interviewee, "they take their positions seriously".

Relationships and Communication

Central Office Relationships With Schools

Almost all principals were very satisfied with the quality of communication and the relationships of which they were a part in TLDSB. Their level of satisfaction was captured in such frequently mentioned terms as "very good", "excellent", "great, and "very open". Many principals described responses by the central office to their queries as "almost immediate", "really quick" with many describing relationships with superintendents as frequent and "ongoing". Central office leaders held similar views about the positive nature of their relationships with school staffs, as did trustees. Central office leaders adoption of a service ethic with schools was explicit and one that the schools appreciated; one superintendent said, for example, that his/her goal was to return calls from schools within an hour or at least within the same day.

An important explanation for the satisfaction principals expressed about communication in the system was the structures that had been established to facilitate such communication. One principal pointed to the relatively small size of the system (although quite large geographically) as a factor and another described email as the basic communication infrastructure. But most principals focused on structures that had been

more intentionally created by the system either acting on its own or responding to Ministry initiatives. A number of these intentionally created structures encouraged frequent and much valued face-to-face communication among principals and between principals and central office staff, especially superintendents.

Most principals pointed to their monthly (and sometimes more frequent) principal meetings with central office leaders as one key structure. Others made reference to the dissemination of curriculum-related information that occurred as part of the *Literacy Learning Team Network* (LLTN) to which every school was invited. A related structure, the *LLPN* brought together all new school leaders with leaders of schools whose students were underperforming district expectations.

As with the LLTN, additional communication structures were project-related. For example:

- TLDSB's 14 schools participating in the Ministry's *Schools in the Middle* project (schools in which 50 to 75% of students were achieving at Level 3 or above in 4 of 6 curriculum areas measured by EQAO) were intended to work as a network for improvement.
- TLDSB's work with the Ministry's *School Effectiveness Framework* (SEF) prompted considerable professional development for school leaders and staffs, as well as considerable peer communication.
- TLDSB's literacy coach project entailed monthly meetings of staff with central office staff in which data were examined and moderated marking was undertaken.
- TLDSB's curriculum advisory council, a group of elementary principals and VP's who met about three times a year to set strategic directions with the system; rather than communication being a top down, principals described it as reciprocal – back and forth between the schools and the system. There was, however, one-way guidance from the district on some matters including, for example, some curriculum priorities & Ministry initiatives
- Networks within families of schools
- Classroom walk – throughs with a superintendent in which the conversation helped the principal to see the classroom through different eyes and refocus her attention
- PLC meetings attended by a district consultant.

While communication with the system was viewed as overwhelmingly open and effective, several principals also pointed to the downside of such extensive communication. As one said:

The negative is that sometimes [district staff] turn too many stones, there's too many people giving input. Every part of the central staff feel that their message is important, but as a principal what is important is what is happening with students, they can't have an instant response.

Occasionally, as well, said another principal “the left arm doesn't know what the right arm is doing and they need to work on it. Instead of 5 e-mails that need action, only send 3.” While the extensive communication enabled by email was clearly valued, one respondent was concerned that telephone and personal contact was being lost.

Parents

Principals identified a wide array of initiatives undertaken by the school system, as distinct from schools, to more fully engage parents in the education of their children. Among the initiatives mentioned were, for example:

- Parental workshops with a focus on character development in three sites around the system with a speaker at each event.
- A parent engagement grant that schools can apply for to use on their own parent engagement efforts
- The climate survey used to collect information from parents and then to provide workshops for parents based on the results
- A district council that meets 2 to 3 times a year to plan and supported by a video conference linking participants in different locations
- System-run parent workshops organized on Saturday evenings with guest speakers about engaging boys in literacy and how to run a successful school council, for example;
- The “Be There” campaign which encourages parents to share their your stories about playing with the kids, engage them in a conversation and celebrating the conversation.
- District parent night each year
- A web site for parents – very helpful
- The “Eric Walters workshop” attended by 58 parents brought by their children (with an IPOD given to each child)

Principals were generally impressed by the intention and effort the system devoted to engaging parents, but did not judge most of these efforts to be very successful. Most attracted very few parents. The most promising effort to engage parents took place at the school level with substantial encouragement by the school system. Reflecting the sentiment of others, one principal said that to attract parents into the school, initiatives typically have to involve children and provide food. School Councils received relatively high grades from most principals for carrying out both traditional functions such as fund raising, as well as informing themselves about larger issues facing the school and the school system.

Principals described widely varying levels of success with their own efforts to attract parents into their schools. The majority of principals were disappointed with the turnout of parents at almost any event they held at their schools. Said one principal:

Schools have tried everything - movie nights for kids, curriculum nights for parents, laptops set up for parents, education sessions for parents on how they could assist kids with homework. But the turnout is often discouraging. It's probably not the school system but generally that people are very busy.

But there were some exceptions. One principal claimed that in her school, for example, parents were helping out in book fares, and volunteering on field trips. This school was attempting to removing barriers to having parents come to the school “Last night”, explained the principal, “the school offered free child care”. This school also engages responsible high school students to come in as part of their community service hours.

Another principal explained, “I have 125 volunteers per week in a 310 student school which is very involved with the community. They are in the school, classes and library at all times”. She noted that in her school, for example, there are coaches in the halls (6) and volunteers reading with students. Her school’s success has made it a site for visits from other schools wishing to expand this component of their work. This principal believed it was the culture of the school that supported such involvement and teachers in the school were in support of such involvement.

Secondary principals, like some of their elementary counterparts, reported considerable challenge in attracting parents into their schools. A better approach, noted one secondary principal was to engage students out in the community in helping the community in some manner. This principal believed that the system had become more encouraging of this approach of late. But difficulties with parent engagement aside, one of the secondary principals said bluntly that “if there is a parent here that thinks their voice isn’t being heard, they’re full of s--t”.

Principals were asked if they had seen much change over the past half dozen years in the system’s efforts to encourage school-parent relationships. Responses varied from almost no change to significant change. But one principal captured the central tendency in these responses with these words:

The change is that they (system) keep trying new things, being proactive in offering workshops and guest speakers. They brought district school councils back... They work hard, but it’s a tough sell because of the rural area...School councils must hand in year end reports....Government is really pushing this and it is embraced by central office.

Nevertheless, fostering closer home-school connections is part of the board’s improvement plan and, as one principal noted:

The system definitely is reaching out. However, it is the other side that has to do something. The system has the good intention to improve on parental involvement but has not succeeded in impacting on the parent population

Local Community Groups

Principals readily identified a large number of community groups with which their schools and sometimes the school system had developed a relationship. Three examples of system-specific initiatives include opening up schools for community use through formal community agreements (forms available on the system website), the work of the board communication officer and the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC).

All media communications were funneled through the communication officer who also provided training in media relations for principals and other staff. Said one principal about the value of such training, “I used to be afraid to have the media in (to my school). Now they are in every week”.

Several principals claimed that SEAC efforts

probably have the most effect on student learning. These individuals are knowledgeable. The district has made great gains with special needs students as

far as EQAO scores. So the knowledge the board has gained from [SEAC members] probably has been worthwhile”.

SEAC, one principal explained, had been around for about 12 years. But more recently, schools had been receiving notes of SEAC meetings, unlike in the past. SEAC also sends out surveys (using survey monkey) to schools when they need answers to specific questions. “There is better collection and dissemination of information than ever before”.

While most principals spoke approvingly of these and other system efforts to establish good relationships with external groups and agencies, few believed that this was a new development. These relationships, according to most principals, date back many years. As with parent engagement, the school rather than the system may be the most productive locus for engaging external groups for most purposes.

Ministry of Education

Responses to the series of questions we asked central office staff and trustees about the system’s relationships with the Ministry of Education indicated quite clearly that “the Ministry” is not a unitary and coherent entity to deal with from a school system perspective. Said one superintendent, “the Ministry is like a nine-headed monster. It depends on who you are dealing with”.

Noted at least several central office leaders, relationships with - and support from - regional office staff, special education services, and LNS student achievement officers were very positive and two examples of positive relations were cited by one interviewee:

We asked the ministry officer to facilitate the writing of the K-12 board improvement plan with the principal and SO’s. The ministry person dealt with the people who came with an agenda and facilitated the planning process. That allowed the SO’s to participate in the courageous conversations.

We met with the same ministry representative again to look at the Schools In the Middle initiative and the quality tasks they’ve built, with data from walk throughs. The School Improvement Team is meeting to prepare for the presentation to the Ministry, how to build descriptive feedback, walk throughs, sharing and meeting to look at what we did.

Relationships with the Ministry were generally considered to have improved over the least 5 years; the Ministry was described as more responsive, for example. But one central office leader believed that the Ministry needed to “plan ahead and not work in such silos”. Small school systems such as the TLDSB, according to one interviewee, also face unique challenges with Ministry initiatives. Limited numbers of staff were available to respond to the demands and requests that accompanied these initiatives.

Another central office leader expressed “shock” at many of his own colleagues overly compliant responses to Ministry initiatives and to their tendency to ask the Ministry for permission to do what they knew needed to be done. As he pointed out, a secondary principal leading a school of 1400 students is responsible for an organization exceeding the size of all but about 50 companies in Canada; a director’s responsibilities are clearly much greater. And yet, the Ministry still feels it should stipulate much of what these

leaders do and too many system leaders acquiesce. The solution, from his perspective, was to be much more proactive about what needs to be done, “to get ahead of it and take control.” In fact, another interviewer noted that the downside to quick compliance to others’ initiatives is that sometimes these initiatives change in response to experiences during early implementation and efforts are wasted.

The one trustee who spoke about TLDSB’s relations with the Ministry was substantially more positive than most of the central office leaders, although would have preferred more coherence and longer lead times from the Ministry in rolling out new initiatives.

Conclusion

This is one of four system-level case studies included as part of a larger study aiming to describe the characteristics and development of “high performing” school systems. The larger study also includes a quantitative test of the same conception of high performing school systems that shaped the questions asked of interviewers in this case.

Evidence generated by cases such as this one are relatively rich, nuanced and allow for the development of deeper understandings than are typically possible with quantitative evidence alone. But this richness is also a source of “noise” when the goal is to separate everything the district did on the road to improvement from those things that actually contributed significantly to its progress. This is the problem of distinguishing what was “necessary” for that progress from what was “sufficient”. There is no algorithmic method for getting to sufficient, only logical deduction from the premise that the greatest contributions to the system’s improvement are likely to be found in those features of the system that changed most over the five year period of interest to the study. So what did change the most? Evidence outlined in this report points to seven necessary features of the systems improvement success:

Unambiguous and Unwavering Call for Change In Direction from the Top

While our evidence does not reveal much about the work of the director who preceded the one in place during the five years of improvement, his priorities and the focus of his attention were at least partly and significantly different than the priorities adopted by the new director. While the most dramatic changes launched by the new director did not begin until about 8 months into her first year, it is likely significant that she had been a long-time and widely respected member of the system before her appointment. This meant that she did not have to spend much time building the kind of trust among her colleagues so important to gaining the commitment and cooperation needed for the changes she launched.

Use of Robust, Publicly Available Measures of Student Learning As the Basis for Judging Progress

One of the most significant explanations for growth in student achievement over the five year period of the study was a shift from largely ignoring or dismissing provincial test score results to using them as the standards by which everyone in the system was asked to judge their progress; the system supplemented its student achievement information with other data from other instruments, as well. The pressure for this shift did not come from the trustees. Nor did many school staff members initially welcome the

shift. But at the point of our study, there was very little debate about the value of this shift. Accomplishing that level of acceptance took several years of persistence, the development of significant new capacities among school leaders, system leaders and staffs, along with the introduction of new data management systems to help make EQAO and other data increasingly accessible and meaningful to all in a position to use it.

Increased Precision and Transparency of School Improvement Goals

The emergence of provincial test score data as the gold standard for judging progress allowed school improvement goals to be much more measurable, precise and transparent than had been the case earlier; schools began to set concrete targets to be achieved in each year. These qualities conform quite closely to the types of goals considered to have high motivational impact in most contemporary theories of human motivation³². These qualities are also reflected in the popular concept of SMART goals which became widely used in the system. This substantial shift in the nature of school improvement goals seems likely to have produced greater motivation among school staffs to actually accomplish the improvement goals they establish

More Powerful Procedures for Improvement Planning and Implementation

When the new director took office, school improvement planning was a common process but one that was undertaken in a relatively autonomous way by individual schools. Over the five year period of interest to the study, the system developed its annual “board improvement plan” which became a template for schools to work with in the development of their own improvement plans. This meant that individual schools, while still responsible for addressing the needs of their own communities, were also expected to do so in a way that contribute to system improvement goals. Furthermore, there was considerable interaction across schools and with system leaders focused on school improvement plans, not just their development but monitoring their implementation as well. Externally developed frameworks, such as the provinces SEF and the systems own SSI, provided schools much more systematic tools for diagnosing needs and tracking progress in meeting those needs than was likely with exclusively school-developed procedures.

De-privatized Practice

Because the use of these new frameworks invariably brought fresh eyes into schools and classrooms thereby deprivatizing practice, there was a much greater chance of identifying productive strategies for moving the system forward than when schools were left to their own devices.

System’s Challenges as a Source of Situated, Authentic Professional Learning

Most school leaders belonged to at least several “problem solving” groups or teams in the system. And the work of those groups or teams was to build strategies for helping the system and its schools address their improvement goals. The shared, collaborative nature of the work which was undertaken by these groups and teams was widely cited as the most powerful form of professional learning available to members of those groups. While

³² See, for example, Locke, E., Latham, G. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35 year odyssey, *American Psychologist*, 57, 9, 705-717.

the system supported many other approaches to professional learning, it would be hard to find more powerful opportunities for significant learning than were available to members of the working teams.

All Academic Administrators as Instructional Leaders

Although changing the responsibilities and accountabilities of academic administrators from “management” or “operations” to include instructional leadership is a widely endorsed for school and district improvement in the wider reform literature, TLDSB’s efforts help illustrate how this can actually be done. Insisting on the use of student test scores for judging progress is likely step one. Other steps taken in TLDSB which appeared to be necessary included creating a culture in which the shared norms and values focused on publically transparent growth in student achievement, creating structures for collaborative work and learning among leaders, shifting the focus of leadership selection, preparation and ongoing PD to include a heavy emphasis on instructional leadership capacities.

6.

Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française (CECC) du Centre-Est³³

1. Introduction

La présente étude de cas, axée sur le Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est, situé à Ottawa, fait partie d'un échantillon de quatre conseils scolaires choisis à travers la province pour leur réalisation marquée en amélioration du rendement scolaire. Les objectifs de l'étude consistaient à:

- décrire les éléments clés qui contribuent aux succès des conseils en question;
- identifier comment ces conseils en sont arrivés à un tel rendement scolaire;
- élucider les caractéristiques des conseils et les contextes qui influencent le rendement scolaire ainsi que le processus d'amélioration continue.

2. Description

Le Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est a été créé en 1998 et s'étend sur un vaste territoire qui comprend les régions d'Ottawa, Brockville, Kingston, Carleton Place, Merrickville, Marionville, Pembroke et Trenton. Dès ces débuts, le Conseil a été confronté à des défis importants de restructuration des frontières géographiques et par la mise en place d'une toute nouvelle structure organisationnelle. Après un assez long cheminement, le nouveau conseil en est arrivé, avec l'aide d'experts de l'extérieur, à la mise en place d'une institution axée sur la poursuite de la réussite scolaire et de l'amélioration continue. Lors du processus de planification, les intervenants se sont beaucoup inspirés du modèle du développement des compétences du Conference Board du Canada et des ouvrages de John Carver (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008).

Dès l'an 2000, le Conseil a pris plusieurs initiatives pour assurer la mise en place d'un mode de gouvernance et de gestion propre à assurer une imputabilité et une amélioration constante du système. Dans un document intitulé «Cadre d'imputabilité et d'amélioration», le Conseil jette les bases de son fonctionnement future et affirme que : « Dans la recherche d'une plus grande qualité de service et d'une plus grande imputabilité, le CECCE propose donc une démarche systématique et systémique d'examen et d'amélioration de son rendement. Différentes sources d'information permettent de faire le point sur la situation actuelle, sur les résultats obtenus ainsi que sur les stratégies que l'administration et les écoles du CECCE adoptent pour améliorer le système actuel. » (p.2)

Depuis lors, le Conseil n'a cessé d'évoluer pour en arriver à occuper le premier rang au sein des conseils scolaires de langue française en Ontario et sa croissance continue toujours, tant sur le plan du rendement scolaire que des effectifs. À l'automne 2010, les

³³ Denis Haché collected and analyzed the data for this case study, as well as writing the case.

inscriptions de la maternelle à la 12^e année, s'élevaient à 19 293 élèves, ce qui représentait une augmentation de 3,7 % sur l'année précédente.

Tableau 1: Inscriptions de la maternelle à la 12^e année (2006-2010)

Année	Inscriptions	Augmentations	Pourcentage d'augmentation
2010	19 293	692	+3,7 %
2009	18 601	412	+2,3 %
2008	18 189	479	+2,7 %
2007	17 710	504	+2,9 %
2006	17 206	313	+1,9 %
2005	16 893	118	+0,7 %
2004	16 775	185	+1,1 %

Cette progression vers une amélioration continue du rendement scolaire est très visible lorsque l'on analyse les résultats des tests de l'OQRE de 2004 à 2010 pour les élèves de 3^e et de 6^e années en écriture, lecture et mathématique (Tableaux 2 et 3). L'étude des taux de réussite démontre une progression constante et uniforme qui surpasse la moyenne provinciale dans tous les domaines pour la période de 2004 à 2010.

Tableau 1
Variation de la performance de 2005 à 2009

(Pourcentage des élèves ayant atteint ou dépassé le niveau 3 aux tests de l'OQRE)

	Province		CECCE	
	2005	Variation	2005	Variation
<u>3^e année</u>				
Lecture	59	2	56	20
Écriture	61	7	75	13
Mathématiques	66	4	61	15
<u>6^e année</u>				
Lecture	63	6	75	8
Écriture	59	8	80	6
Mathématiques	60	3	80	7
<u>9^e année</u>				
Mathématiques				
Cours théorique	68	9	69	6
Cours appliqué	27	11	16	17
Écart/Total	58	50	64	

La vision actuelle, dont s'est doté le Conseil vise à être un chef de file en éducation reconnu pour l'excellence de ses écoles, son accueil, ses innovations et son implication dans la communauté. Cette vision se traduit en une mission qui vise à outiller chaque élève pour sa réussite scolaire, son épanouissement personnel, sa citoyenneté et son engagement dans la catholicité et la francophonie. Cette mission est la base d'un profil de sortie de l'élève qui est façonné par des cheminements précis, de la maternelle à la fin du secondaire, visant le développement scolaire, professionnel, catholique, francophone et personnel de chaque élève. De là, un crédo qui proclame que chaque élève peut réussir si l'on y consacre le temps et l'appui nécessaire. Le Conseil s'engage donc à fournir à chaque élève un encadrement et un accompagnement qui puissent assurer sa réussite. Depuis sa création, le Conseil a travaillé sans relâche pour façonner un milieu d'apprentissage propre au développement de chaque élève dans un cadre organisationnel qui procure un alignement parfait de toutes les composantes du Conseil jusqu'au niveau de la salle de classe. Pour en arriver là, le Conseil s'est d'abord doté d'un ensemble de politiques et de paramètres à base du concept de gouvernance par politiques.

3. Méthodologie

Cette étude de cas se base sur une série de dix-huit entrevues d'une durée d'environ soixante minutes avec trois membres élus du Conseil, cinq cadres supérieurs et dix directions d'école. Les questions de l'entrevue portaient surtout sur des éléments caractéristiques du rendement et de l'amélioration scolaires, quoique certains aspects de ces questions varient en fonction des différents groupes de participants. Les questions se regroupaient autour des thèmes suivants : la vision et la mission, l'utilisation des données probantes, l'amélioration organisationnelle, le leadership, les relations internes et les relations avec le ministère de l'Éducation. Une étude des documents importants du Conseil a complété l'analyse des données issues des entrevues.

L'auteur se propose de procéder à l'analyse des données en provenance des entrevues en se guidant sur les différentes catégories de questions posées aux trois différents groupes de participants.

4. Élaboration de la vision et de la mission.

Les membres élues du Conseil, qui étaient tous des vétérans de longue date, ont démontré lors de l'entrevue, une connaissance approfondie et un intérêt particulier dans la vision et la mission du Conseil. Elles reconnaissent l'importance et la contribution de la vision et de la mission au succès actuel des élèves. Pour elles, c'est ici que tout commence. Lors des exercices de planification, les conseillères scolaires ont travaillé à l'élaboration de la vision et de la mission du Conseil avec l'aide de consultants externes. Cela a été un exercice ardu et long qui a demandé plusieurs rencontres échelonnées sur un échéancier étendu. Suite à un remue-méninge et plusieurs ébauches, le Conseil en est arrivé à une vision et une mission succinctes et courtes, de sorte que tous les intervenants puissent s'en rappeler facilement. Ces dires des conseillères scolaires qui ont participé à l'entrevue sont corroborés par la direction de l'éducation lorsqu'il ajoute : « Dès sa création en 1998, le réaménagement des communautés scolaire et, comme conséquence, le dossier de la fermeture de certaines écoles, a posé un défi de taille pour le nouveau Conseil. Ce

dossier de fermeture était très émotif et personne ne voulait accepter la fermeture de leur école. Pour circonscrire le problème, le Conseil a tout simplement mis toutes les écoles de son territoire sur une liste potentielle de fermeture et a confié à une agence externe la tâche d'examiner les écoles qui devaient être fermées selon des critères préalablement établis par le Conseil. C'était une question de survie pour le Conseil et une action qui permettait de faire un pas en avant et de consolider la mise sur pied du nouveau Conseil. »

Les débuts furent assez difficiles, mais après avoir pris la décision ferme de fonctionner par politiques, le Conseil s'est approprié une vision et d'une mission claires qui puissent être comprises et interprétées de la même manière par tous. Le succès d'une telle entreprise est attribué à la confiance qui existait entre le Conseil et la direction de l'éducation, le seul employé du Conseil, ainsi que la volonté d'éviter toute friction entre ces deux entités qui sont essentielles au succès.

L'objectif premier des membres élus était la réussite scolaire des élèves, ce qui se reflétait au sein de la vision et la mission. Au dire d'une conseillère scolaire : « Le Conseil s'en préoccupe toujours et est toujours attentif lorsque l'administration porte à son attention des situations nouvelles qui pourraient affecter sa vision et sa mission, tels les changements démographiques de la francophonie, la situation des mariages exogames, l'assimilation, etc. Ce sont là des situations changeantes qui forcent le Conseil à envisager des modifications ou des éclaircissements de la vision et de la mission. »

Donc, dès 1999, lors de l'adoption du modèle de gouvernance, le Conseil décide d'un fonctionnement par politiques et procède à la mise en place d'une structure organisationnelle appropriée. La vision et la mission actuelles datent d'une dizaine d'années, mais il y a quatre ans, le Conseil en a fait une révision complète dans le cadre de l'élaboration de son plan pluriannuel. Cet exercice était considéré comme nécessaire avec l'arrivée de nouveaux membres au sein du Conseil et on considérait que le temps était venu de faire le point. Cet exercice de révision et de validation impliquait non seulement les membres du Conseil et le personnel, mais aussi les parents et les membres de la communauté. Il n'y avait pas de gros défis outre la mission sur laquelle il a fallu faire un peu de polissage puisque l'on considérait que cette dernière n'était pas formulée assez clairement. Cet exercice était surtout bénéfique pour les nouveaux arrivés et a permis une appropriation de la vision et de la mission par ces derniers.

La vision a été établie avec un accent sur la réussite de chaque élève à base de cinq cheminements soit scolaire, catholique francophone, professionnel et personnel. Mais, avec une gouvernance par politique, les choses ont grandement changé puisque les écoles se devaient de coopérer et d'échanger entre elles. Dans un tel contexte, toutes les décisions du Conseil rejoignaient les échelons inférieurs jusqu'à l'élève en salle de classe. Le directeur de l'éducation décrit fort bien cette situation : « Étant reconnu comme chef de file en éducation et par l'excellence de ses écoles, le Conseil veut aussi encourager une recherche continue de l'amélioration du rendement des élèves et de l'innovation. On cherche à instaurer une façon de fonctionner qui va de la table politique à la salle de classe dans un parfait alignement. Dans un tel cadre, on finit par véhiculer le même message et partager la même vision. Tous les intervenants connaissaient ce que

l'on attendait d'eux. Une culture de collaboration et de communication s'était installée au sein du Conseil et le personnel, ainsi que les écoles ont commencé à échanger de l'information et à dialoguer sur la signification de la réussite scolaire. La table politique (le Conseil) ne fait plus de microgestion et ne s'occupe que de l'élaboration des politiques et non plus du contrôle de leur mise en oeuvre. C'est une approche très constructive qui permet à l'administration de faire son travail sans l'intrusion des membres du Conseil. Le Conseil fixe des résultats à atteindre et laisse à l'administration la tâche de trouver et de choisir les moyens pour en arriver aux résultats désirés. Cette approche décourage et empêche l'intrusion des conseillers scolaires dans la gestion quotidienne du système scolaire.

Les attentes et décisions du Conseil sont transmises à son employé, le directeur de l'éducation, qui doit s'assurer que tous en connaissent la teneur, jusqu'au niveau de la salle de classe et que le message est bien compris de tous. Aussi, les rôles sont bien déterminés et tous connaissent leurs responsabilités. Le Conseil s'en tient à fixer les attentes à la direction de l'éducation du Conseil, et n'a pas à décider des moyens à prendre pour atteindre les résultats fixés. Chaque année, la direction de l'éducation est évaluée en fonction des attentes fixées par le Conseil et des résultats obtenus. Le Conseil reconnaît la direction de l'éducation comme le seul et unique interlocuteur officiel entre eux et le personnel.

Le Conseil a mis beaucoup d'emphase lors de l'exercice d'élaboration de la vision et de la mission sur l'élaboration d'un profil de sortie de l'élève. À quoi les parents s'attendent-ils comme profil final? Il y a eu beaucoup de consultations auprès de la communauté, mais ce n'est plus le cas maintenant, car nous avons de la difficulté de les rejoindre. Est-ce parce qu'ils sont satisfaits? Selon les conseillères interrogées, il faut croire que oui.

Selon la direction de l'éducation, l'un des grands défis a été de développer une vision et une mission communes et de s'entendre sur une compréhension et la signification des jargons utilisés. L'autre grand défi est de faire en sorte que ces énoncés de vision et de mission sont compris de tous sur le terrain, à la table politique, chez les enseignants et jusqu'aux parents en passant par le personnel de soutien. Dans le cadre de cette préoccupation, on remet, au début de chaque année un carnet de la rentrée à tout le personnel du Conseil dans lequel on fait état de la vision, de la mission, de la planification stratégique, du profil de l'employé, des valeurs véhiculées, des cheminements des élèves et à tous les autres cadres de références importants pour le Conseil. Ce type de message est souvent repris et à chaque occasion.

Tel que nous l'avons préalablement mentionné, dès les débuts du Conseil, il y avait une volonté politique de se donner une gouvernance axée sur les résultats. C'était une étape importante dans son évolution. Aux dires d'une surintendante, le Conseil pouvait donc communiquer à la direction de l'éducation ses attentes sous forme de résultats à atteindre. On commence alors à parler de travail en équipe, d'équipe de collaboration, de leadership pédagogique des directions d'école. C'était une période d'ébullition et aussi de recherche

de moyens et d'outils pour assurer l'amélioration du rendement des élèves. La vision axée sur la réussite des élèves était claire et nous servait de guide, car nous y allions un peu par tâtonnement. C'était aussi un moment crucial pour le Conseil puisque cette action changeait vraiment les pratiques traditionnelles et la manière dont on travaillait dans les écoles. Les premières initiatives de changement avaient comme objectif d'atteindre chaque enseignant dans sa salle de classe et d'obtenir une adhésion minimale de prime abord et, ensuite, de développer une compréhension commune de cette nouvelle mission.

La culture organisationnelle du Conseil et des écoles était donc fondamentalement transformée pour en arriver à la mise en place d'équipes de collaboration au niveau des écoles durant la période allant de 2003 à 2005. Le défi consistait à s'assurer que les directions d'école adhèrent toutes à ce changement de cap axé sur la réussite des élèves. Cette transformation profonde affecta aussi les relations professionnelles entre les écoles et avec les autres partenaires. En plus, il fallait s'assurer que la haute direction et les directions d'école adhèrent et croient à cette approche de collaboration et aussi de voir à ce qu'il y ait une compréhension commune de la vision et de la mission ainsi que des nouvelles orientations qui en découlaient.

Quant aux directions d'écoles, leurs témoignages confirment un alignement dans la compréhension et l'interprétation de la vision et de la mission du Conseil. Il faut dire que, dans le contexte des directions d'école, les relations les plus fréquentes et les plus intenses se font avec les surintendantes et les surintendants et les animateurs pédagogiques. On y observe très facilement un haut degré de collaboration entre le groupe des surintendants et les directions d'école. Ces derniers ont une opinion très positive de leurs supérieurs en ce qui a trait aux relations actuelles qu'ils qualifient comme étant professionnelles, ouvertes, d'égaux à égaux et très cordiales. Selon les directions d'école, les surintendants sont respectueux des opinions des autres et toujours à la recherche de stratégies aptes à soutenir l'amélioration du rendement des élèves. Les contacts entre ces deux groupes sont fréquents et axés sur le développement de la pédagogie, le curriculum et le perfectionnement professionnel, mais aussi lors de l'élaboration du plan d'amélioration continue au niveau de l'école qui se traduit par l'énoncé d'objectifs SMART, c'est-à-dire des objectifs qui sont spécifiques, mesurables, atteignable, et réalisable dans un temps donné. Il y a donc un esprit d'équipe très développé au sein de ces deux entités ainsi qu'au niveau des directions d'école. Les messages venant de la haute direction sont donc véhiculés jusqu'au niveau de l'école par un fil conducteur bien en place.

5. L'utilisation des données probantes

Dans le cadre d'une telle vision et mission, l'utilisation des données probantes devient la pierre angulaire du Conseil. Pour se faire, ce dernier a mis beaucoup d'énergie pour recruter des spécialistes dans ce domaine afin de pouvoir faire la cueillette de données et d'en faire une analyse efficace. Les données en provenance du Ministère ont toujours été très primées par le Conseil et on tente d'en faire une analyse poussée et détaillée. Même si les données sont, de prime abord, très révélatrices, on tente de creuser un peu plus pour faire ressortir le plus d'information possible afin de pousser l'analyse un peu plus loin dans le contexte d'amélioration continue. À savoir, qu'est-ce qui explique certaines

failles ou écarts? On essaie ensuite de trouver des pistes de solutions pour corriger les failles.

Selon une conseillère, l'utilisation des données probantes est l'outil de choix qui guide toute décision prise par le Conseil : « Dès la création du Conseil, on a exigé de l'administration qu'elle appuie la présentation de ses dossiers au Conseil par des données probantes. Au cours des années, cette façon de faire est devenue une pratique courante et fait maintenant partie de la culture organisationnelle. Cette pratique fut institutionnalisée et tous l'ont appropriée avec le temps »

La table politique s'attend à avoir des données pour tous les résultats fixés et la direction de l'éducation demeure à l'affût afin d'identifier, à partir de ces données, des pistes d'amélioration en fonction des cinq cheminements mentionnés au préalable. Ces données probantes servent aussi à la table politique pour la supervision et l'évaluation du travail de la direction de l'éducation. Le bilan et l'évaluation de la direction de l'éducation, qui a lieu en novembre de chaque année, se font à partir des données accumulées au cours de l'année et aussi en comparaison avec les données soumises au cours des années précédentes. Le Conseil peut donc constater s'il y a eu des progrès et de l'amélioration. C'est aussi à partir de données probantes que le Conseil élabore ses attentes envers la direction de l'éducation et élabore les pistes d'amélioration et les résultats attendus pour l'année à venir. La direction de l'éducation doit ensuite voir à la mise en œuvre et s'assurer que le message se rende aux écoles. Ce processus annuel suit donc un cycle complet au sein de l'organisation..

Les données ont toujours été très présentes au niveau du Conseil et étaient à la base de son fonctionnement. Cette culture d'analyse des données pour soutenir la prise de décision a, depuis quelques années, atteint le seuil de chaque école et fait maintenant partie de la culture organisationnelle globale du Conseil. Les témoignages des directions d'école le confirment très clairement et affirment que cette culture a maintenant atteint le niveau de la salle de classe. Ce qui n'était pas le cas au tout début. Le tournant a été pris lorsque le Conseil a mis en place le profil des résultats des écoles en 2005-2006. Cette initiative est devenue le levier par excellence pour encourager les directions d'école à travailler ensemble et aussi permettre au directeur d'école de travailler avec le personnel enseignant de son école. Aux dires d'un cadre: « Nous en sommes arrivés au point de raffinement de l'utilisation et de l'analyse des données et de pouvoir fournir des données en temps réel relatif à l'école et à chaque élève de l'élémentaire au secondaire. Il y a donc accès facile et rapide aux données. »

Chaque école reçoit un profil basé sur des données probantes et ces dernières sont utilisées pour situer l'école par rapport aux normes établies. Ce profil fait état de discussions régulières au sein du système et permet de situer l'école en fonction des normes établies et des autres écoles. Ces normes sont publiques et chacun connaît où se situe l'école au sein du système. Par exemple, en ce qui concerne la sécurité des élèves à l'heure du dîner, le Conseil s'est fixé une norme qui spécifie que 90 % des élèves dise se sentir en sécurité à l'école à l'heure du dîner. Suite à un sondage, l'école qui se situe en deçà de cette norme aura un travail d'amélioration à accomplir pour rejoindre cette

norme. Il en va de même pour tous les autres domaines de la vie scolaire. Ce système permet d'identifier les écoles performantes et de profiter de leurs expertises et celles qui nécessitent une amélioration pour rejoindre la norme. Les écoles performantes partagent les initiatives à succès avec celles qui sont en voie d'amélioration. Ce qui permet de fixer une priorité d'action pour garantir une amélioration constante et aussi de modifier les normes en question pour pousser plus loin l'amélioration.

Avec l'utilisation de données probantes, les membres du Conseil peuvent miser sur des résultats attendus et, par la suite, voir l'amélioration du rendement. Il est très encourageant pour les membres du Conseil de voir de tels progrès concrets et mesurables. Il en est de même pour les sondages de satisfaction des parents. Il est réconfortant de voir par exemple que 85 % des parents sont satisfaits des services et de la performance du système. Il faut s'en réjouir, mais que fait-on des 15 % qui ne le sont pas? Il faut s'occuper de ce 15 % de mécontent et aller voir ce qui ne va pas puisqu'une telle démarche fait aussi partie de cette poursuite de l'amélioration du rendement scolaire.

Le Conseil met beaucoup d'importance sur les résultats et les attentes du Conseil qui se traduisent souvent à partir des résultats. Le Conseil considère les résultats comme de bons indicateurs qui fournissent des balises pour une amélioration du système. L'utilisation des résultats de l'OQRE en est un exemple évident et le Conseil en fait un usage fréquent pour fixer ses attentes.. Elles permettent aussi de décider des stratégies pour l'amélioration du rendement scolaire des élèves.

Outre les données en provenance du Ministère, le Conseil fait usage d'une multitude d'autres outils, tels des sondages, notes et bulletins des élèves, groupes de discussions, etc. En plus de données factuelles, on tente de comprendre le pourquoi des moyens utilisés qui expliquent les raisons du succès et aussi de les partager au sein du Conseil. Du point de vue du Conseil, il faut comprendre les raisons qui expliquent le succès du Conseil afin de pouvoir répondre au public qui veut savoir pourquoi un tel succès.

Les membres du Conseil s'intéressent à tous les types de données qui permettent d'évaluer et de mesurer le progrès accompli au sein du système. Par exemple, suite à une initiative personnelle d'un membre du Conseil qui se préoccupait de l'écart de réussite entre les garçons et les filles, on a initié une cueillette de données probantes à ce sujet. Un dossier qui est devenu très important pour le Conseil depuis plusieurs années et qui fait présentement partie des préoccupations du Conseil. Aussi, les données qui ont trait au décrochage des élèves occupent une place importante et sont à la base de tout le processus décisionnel du Conseil. Les données de l'OQRE ont aussi beaucoup servi.

Le Conseil se fie aussi aux statistiques fournies par l'administration du Conseil. Par exemple, le Conseil a réagi aux statistiques sur le taux de décrocheurs et a mis de l'emphase sur des actions précises qui devaient remédier à cette situation. Ces dernières se traduisent ensuite sous forme d'attentes que le Conseil transmet à l'administration. Encore une fois, on attribue beaucoup d'importance aux données de l'OQRE.

Selon les membres du Conseil, l'utilisation des données probantes a un peu changé au cours des cinq ou six dernières années, car il a fallu trouver les moyens pour conserver l'état de succès actuel. Cette dernière préoccupation fait aussi l'objet de discussions et de réflexions au sein des directions d'école. Selon une conseillère, l'utilisation des données probantes est devenue plus pointue, car ayant atteint un niveau de succès marqué, il faut maintenant utiliser les données pour, non seulement les conserver, mais pour poursuivre l'amélioration du rendement scolaire. C'est une tâche qui devient de plus en plus difficile pour le Conseil. La seule façon d'augmenter les résultats est de continuer à faire ce que l'on a bien fait jusqu'à maintenant, mais aussi de trouver les moyens d'aider ceux qui ne partagent pas le succès de l'ensemble. Il serait facile de s'asseoir sur nos lauriers, mais il faut pousser plus loin. La seule façon d'augmenter, c'est d'essayer de faire mieux avec ceux qui ne réussissent pas. Il nous faut donc être très innovateur. Dans ce même contexte, la question du rendement des garçons et des filles est devenue une préoccupation majeure du Conseil depuis plusieurs années, bien avant que ce dossier devienne une préoccupation du ministère de l'Éducation. Ce qui rend la tâche difficile pour un Conseil qui réussit bien est d'assurer la poursuite du processus d'amélioration.

Et dans la même foulée, elle ajoute que les données probantes ont toujours été utilisées par le Conseil, car on réalise que les chiffres parlent. Cette année, nous avons eu 3,7 % d'augmentation au niveau de nos inscriptions alors que c'est le contraire pour plusieurs autres conseils scolaires en Ontario. Par exemple, il y a actuellement près de 14 000 ayants droit qui ne sont pas inscrits dans les écoles francophones, qu'est-ce que l'on doit faire pour les attirer dans nos écoles?

Les sources de données sont diverses, allant de données en provenance de l'OQRE aux taux de diplomation du niveau secondaire en passant par des sondages de satisfaction, etc.

Les données en provenance de l'OQRE sont utilisées comme un premier point de départ. Le Conseil en est rendu à un point de raffinement dans son utilisation des données où le rendement et le niveau d'apprentissage de chaque élève sont disponibles en données en temps réelles en fonction des objectifs SMART. Cette pratique est devenue très pointue au cours des dernières années. Ce n'est qu'un indicateur parmi d'autres puisqu'après l'OQRE il faut creuser dans d'autres sources pour obtenir une analyse plus détaillée et pointue. Le degré de précision s'améliore de plus en plus avec le temps et l'usage.

Dans sa poursuite de l'amélioration continue, le Conseil s'attend à ce que chaque école identifie et adopte annuellement trois des vingt-sept objectifs prioritaires d'amélioration que le Conseil s'est fixés. Ces objectifs sont fixés à partir de sondages faits tous les deux ans. Il y a des écoles qui, individuellement, font des sondages sur leurs priorités afin de raffiner les données et de se doter d'outils adéquats pour mieux atteindre ses objectifs.

Le Conseil travaille actuellement sur un projet pilote à base de seize composantes de l'école efficace et cueille présentement des données perceptuelles auprès du personnel. Une fois validées, ces composantes pourraient servir de guide dans l'identification des écoles efficaces et l'identification de champs d'action par l'utilisateur. Aussi, ça

permettrait de développer au sein du personnel un langage commun en ce qui a trait à l'école efficace. Cet exercice a provoqué beaucoup de réflexions et de questionnement au sein du personnel des écoles impliquées dans le projet, plus particulièrement en ce qui a trait à la protection du temps d'enseignement.

Nous faisons avec les directions d'écoles l'analyse de données probantes afin de modeler l'exercice selon un certain standard et un processus commun. La même approche est utilisée au sein des familles d'écoles qui regroupent les écoles de même niveau ou de régions particulières. Ce même processus est suivi lors de la supervision individuelle, la supervision en équipe, des rencontres de cadres et aussi lors des réunions de la direction d'école avec son personnel. Les données sont toujours le point de départ de toutes les réunions et les rencontres individuelles. Ces interactions permettent d'avoir une idée du niveau de compréhension des directions d'école et aussi de leur capacité à utiliser les données.

Il y a aussi une personne qui appuie les directions d'écoles dans ce cheminement et les outille pour mieux accomplir leurs tâches. Lorsque cette personne identifie des lacunes, des activités de formation sont organisées pour combler ce vide. Il y a un alignement qui se fait de plus en plus au niveau des écoles et de la direction de l'éducation quant à la compréhension, l'analyse et l'utilisation des données probantes.

Les données probantes sont à la base du fonctionnement de la table politique et le Conseil les utilise constamment dans le cadre de ses interactions avec la direction de l'éducation. Cette utilisation des données probantes se fait à l'échelle du Conseil en entier, ce qui permet à l'administration et au personnel enseignant d'avoir des profils en temps réel du rendement des élèves et identifier ceux qui ont besoin d'une attention particulière. On tente de creuser l'analyse des données afin de pouvoir comprendre de manière plus pointue la signification de ces données et de découvrir le pourquoi. Par exemple, lorsque les données nous indiquent que les élèves ne se sentent pas en sécurité à l'école, on va tenter de savoir pourquoi en organisant un groupe de discussion (groupe focus) et en utilisant d'autres outils pour en identifier les causes.

L'époque où la direction d'école faisait la planification seule dans son bureau est définitivement révolue. Cette planification se fait maintenant entre la direction d'école et son personnel avec l'aide de données probantes à partir desquelles on établit des priorités qui sont ensuite traduites par l'élaboration d'objectifs qui sont spécifiques, mesurables, atteignables, réalisables dans un temps donné (SMART) et qui deviennent la base du profil de l'école et du plan annuel d'amélioration du rendement. L'analyse des données n'est plus une tâche accomplie dans un bureau, mais plutôt une tâche qui se fait à tous les niveaux de l'école.

L'utilisation des données a donc évolué au cours des dernières années et continue de changer. On ne fait que devenir plus pointu et raffiné dans l'analyse.

Il a cinq ou six ans, les directions d'école s'approprièrent les outils tels le profil de l'école et le plan d'amélioration du rendement scolaire. Après quelques semaines seulement, ces outils étaient mis sur les étagères et oubliés pour le reste de l'année. Depuis, les choses ont grandement changé grâce au modèle dont le Conseil s'était donné. Maintenant, l'analyse des données n'est plus l'apanage de la direction d'école, mais de tout le personnel de l'école. Ces données sont maintenant plus pointues puisque l'analyse s'intéresse et s'interroge maintenant sur le pourquoi et les causes de telles ou telles données.

La problématique qui se pose maintenant, après plusieurs années d'amélioration, est de trouver les moyens d'élever les normes et aussi de trouver des normes mobilisantes pour ceux qui en sont déjà là, sans toutefois abandonner ceux qui n'y sont pas encore. Il faut s'assurer de ne pas retenir les écoles qui performent, tout en s'abstenant de fixer des attentes trop élevées à celles qui ne performent pas adéquatement.

6. Processus d'amélioration organisationnelle

L'approche primée par les membres élus du Conseil consiste surtout à fixer des résultats à la direction de l'éducation et à établir un cadre d'imputabilité.

La préoccupation axée sur l'amélioration du rendement scolaire des élèves fait partie de la culture organisationnelle du Conseil. Le tout se traduit par la mise en place de balises qui ont pour objet de promouvoir l'amélioration et qui prennent aussi en considération la situation particulière de chaque école. Dans ce cadre, les écoles doivent miser sur trois objectifs d'amélioration au cours de l'année scolaire.

Le Conseil est aussi conscient de son double mandat axé sur la francophonie et la catholicité, et du défi qu'il doit relever. Sous l'égide de ce mandat, le Conseil a institué un programme de garderie à demi-temps pour les enfants de trois ans en provenance de familles exogames et s'affaire aussi à garder un contact étroit avec les parents de ces enfants. Le Conseil est aussi conscient de l'importance de recruter les enfants le plus tôt possible afin qu'ils n'aboutissent pas dans d'autres systèmes scolaires. C'est pourquoi il considère primordial d'avoir des garderies dans les écoles.

Afin d'assurer l'amélioration constante et continue dans chaque école, le Conseil a instauré une politique de mobilisation du personnel au niveau de l'école et aussi le développement d'un climat de collaboration et du travail d'équipe au niveau des écoles qui, auparavant, travaillaient comme des entités séparées.

Selon la haute direction, le processus est plutôt synergique car plusieurs entités sont impliquées. Les cadres supérieurs n'ont pas toujours la solution, car cette dernière se trouve au niveau de la salle de classe et des enseignants. La direction verra à aider les écoles qui n'atteignent pas les normes fixées afin qu'elles puissent s'améliorer et rejoindre le groupe. Quant aux écoles performantes, nous continuons à soutenir leur effort d'amélioration pour s'assurer de la continuité de leur succès.

Cette approche à deux niveaux permet premièrement d'assurer la communication efficace de la vision et de voir à ce qu'elle soit comprise jusqu'en salle de classe. Deuxièmement, les outils que l'on s'est donné pour en arriver à notre fin, par exemple, la Pyramide d'interventions, publiée en 2007 pour l'apprentissage et la réussite de chaque élève, permet une évaluation continue de l'apprentissage de l'élève et aussi l'ajustement des interventions en cours de route. Cet outil s'inspire de la recherche et de la prémisse que, dans le cadre d'un enseignement efficace, 80 % des élèves vont réussir. Ce qui signifie que 20 % des élèves ne réussiront pas. De ce pourcentage, 15 % auront besoin d'interventions ciblées sur des besoins individuels pour réussir tandis que le dernier 5 % aura besoin d'interventions particulières. Ces deux derniers groupes seront la cible d'interventions et d'appuis additionnels afin de réduire l'écart entre le rendement attendu et le rendement réel.

Un autre outil primé par le Conseil est le processus des cinq « pourquoi » qui est surtout utilisé par les équipes de collaboration qui font l'analyse de données et qui consiste en une interrogation séquentielle en quête d'une d'information explicite afin d'expliquer les causes fondamentales du phénomène ou des données à l'étude. L'analyse des données n'est plus une tâche uniquement réservée à la direction d'école, mais plutôt à l'ensemble du personnel qui en fait usage selon les besoins et le niveau.

Afin de pouvoir influencer les approches en matière d'amélioration dans chaque école, le Conseil a mis en place un processus logique, clair et bien compris de tous qui représente un portrait de la situation, tout en responsabilisant chaque école pour améliorer son fonctionnement dans un cadre de communautés d'apprenants.

L'accompagnement des écoles par les surintendantes et les surintendants, l'harmonisation des outils d'interventions et des données utilisées, et aussi l'identification des stratégies se font autour des trois priorités annuelles de l'école. Aussi, l'établissement du parcours fondamental de l'élève consiste en un ensemble d'activités d'apprentissages s'étendant sur une période de 4 à 6 semaines et regroupe une équipe de 3 à 4 enseignants qui s'entendent sur le contenu d'apprentissage des élèves.

Le Conseil offre un menu aux directions d'école pour leur perfectionnement professionnel. Afin de mieux répondre aux besoins des directions et aussi du système, ce menu comprend des formations obligatoires et optionnelles. Les rencontres des familles d'écoles ou des différentes tables de concertation contiennent aussi des activités de perfectionnement sur des sujets de l'heure ou des domaines d'intérêts particuliers. Par exemple, dans le cadre de ces rencontres, on fait l'étude et l'analyse des plans individuels des écoles participantes afin d'apprendre comment rédiger un plan d'amélioration ou améliorer ces derniers. Nous faisons beaucoup usage des pratiques exemplaires et des résultats de recherche.

Dans sa quête pour trouver de nouvelles approches à l'amélioration, le Conseil crée des programmes innovateurs et avant-gardistes. Par exemple, on a tout récemment instauré un programme de soutien du comportement positif (SCP) au niveau de l'école. Au lieu de punir l'élève pour des comportements inacceptables dans le cadre d'un programme de discipline, on utilise un renforcement positif pour mettre en évidence les comportements

acceptables. On y fait aussi un enseignement des comportements positifs auprès des élèves. Lorsqu'il y a un écart de conduite, on refait cet enseignement. Afin d'être proactif, on utilise beaucoup les données dans un effort pour identifier les causes fondamentales des comportements inacceptables et des écarts de conduite. Une surintendante de l'éducation confirme fort bien ce genre de situation lorsqu'elle affirme que: « Dans le cadre de ce cheminement, il y a eu d'immenses progrès, car nous sommes devenus plus spécifiques et beaucoup plus pointus. Ce qui explique pourquoi nous continuons à nous améliorer après avoir atteint un niveau de succès enviable. Le processus d'amélioration devient de plus en plus difficile, car il faut raffiner nos approches. »

7. Le leadership

Les membres élus du Conseil ne participent pas au processus de recrutement des leaders dans les écoles. Chaque école doit établir son profil de direction et c'est l'école qui doit identifier, recruter, choisir préparer et évaluer les leaders potentiels. Du point de vue du Conseil, on cherche avant tout un leadership au niveau de l'école et de la communauté ainsi qu'un leadership axée sur la pédagogie. La décision revient à l'administration et à la direction de l'école concernée. Depuis sa création en 1998, rien de particulier n'a changé quant aux processus et aux critères de base.

Donc, lorsqu'il s'agit d'identifier, recruter, choisir, préparer et évaluer les leaders principaux du système scolaire, ce genre de responsabilité relève des gestionnaires du Conseil et non de la table politique. Toutefois, la direction de l'éducation en informe la table politique et fourni les motifs sous-jacents à ce choix. Il en est de même pour l'affectation annuelle des directions d'école. Le Conseil fait confiance aux gestionnaires et met rarement en doute le choix et les décisions ayant trait à l'affectation des directions d'écoles. Le Conseil ne choisit que la direction de l'éducation, mais compte sur des personnes d'expérience qui ont le sens du leadership administratif et pédagogique et aussi une préoccupation de la réussite des élèves pour le choix des directions d'école.

Le Conseil se dit toujours fidèle à sa vision et à sa mission et ne s'ingère pas dans un domaine qu'il considère la responsabilité des gestionnaires. Là où c'est nécessaire, il ne fait que ratifier le choix de ces derniers.

Le Conseil est, en ce moment, en pleine révision de ses politiques pour tenir compte de la nouvelle réglementation sur le cadre de planification pluriannuelle ainsi que sur l'équité et l'éducation inclusive. Cet exercice permettra la mise à jour de plusieurs politiques et de préparer le Conseil à relever les nouveaux défis provoqués par l'immigration, la politique du Ministère sur l'inclusion, l'implication des parents, etc.

Dans la pratique, au niveau de la haute direction, le Conseil a mis en place un programme pour identifier les leaders potentiels au sein des écoles. Les candidats sont soumis à des tests psychométriques afin d'évaluer leurs compétences générales et doivent participer à une étude de cas et mise en situation ainsi qu'un test écrit. Ils doivent s'engager dans l'obtention de qualifications additionnelles. Dans cette foulée, il y aussi une entrevue avec les candidats et une prise de référence avant de pouvoir accéder à liste

d'admissibilité à un poste. Les critères de sélection varient entre les différentes catégories de postes de gestion.

L'ensemble des intervenants reconnaissent que le leadership exercé au sein du système est de nature démocratique et décentralisée à tous les niveaux et est aussi exercé dans un environnement positif et proactif.

7. Relations internes

Dans le cadre de sa politique de gouvernance, les seules communications entre le Conseil et le personnel administratif sont limitées à la direction de l'éducation. Dans la pratique, le membre élu du Conseil ne communique jamais avec le personnel scolaire directement. Les membres du Conseil visitent les écoles sur invitation ou à leur demande. Ils ne s'ingèrent jamais dans la gestion quotidienne des écoles. Dans le passé, certains membres élus ont tenté de s'ingérer l'administration quotidienne de l'école, mais le Conseil a vite pris des dispositions pour régler le problème. Le Conseil considère cette pratique comme non productive, même si dans certaines circonstances, cette action se fait de bonne foi. Une des conseillères met ce genre de relations bien en perspective lorsqu'elle ajoute que : « Ce genre d'intervention de la part des membres élus n'est pas toléré par le Conseil, car elle peut avoir des conséquences néfastes au sein de l'école, surtout dans le cas où le membre du Conseil se voit comme le superviseur de la direction d'école. Certains ne se rendent pas compte de l'impact que cette action peut avoir sur le personnel puisque c'est assez intimidant pour certains. On s'attend ce que les membres du Conseil axent leur travail sur des politiques du Conseil. Le conseiller n'a aucun pouvoir sur les membres de l'administration ou sur une école.

Au sein du Conseil, dans le cadre de ces réunions, les relations sont très formelles et protocolaires. Ceci encourage le respect des participants et assure un déroulement bien ordonné des réunions. Il n'y a pas de confrontation majeure entre le personnel administratif et les membres du conseil scolaire, car on essaie toujours de trouver une solution au problème par l'intermédiaire de la direction de l'éducation. Donc, il n'y a jamais eu de confrontation entre ces deux éléments, car depuis l'adoption de ce mode de fonctionnement par politiques, les conflits se règlent de manière constructive. On essaie d'éviter des situations de conflit au sein du Conseil par une communication ouverte et franche. Lors de situations délicates, la pratique veut que l'on s'arme de documentation et de données probantes qui puissent éclairer et rendre objective la décision. Ce genre de fonctionnement favorise la collégialité dans le cadre d'une structure formelle qui est bien établie et rodée. Le respect des rôles et responsabilités de chacun fait partie de ce climat organisationnel. Les nouveaux membres élus y sont informés dès leur arrivée au Conseil.

La seule relation du Conseil est avec la direction de l'éducation. Ce rapport est bien respecté par les intervenants, contrairement à d'autres conseils. Certains contacts vont se faire au niveau de la haute direction du Conseil seulement. Le Conseil s'attend à ce que la direction de l'éducation l'informe s'il y avait une ingérence induite d'un membre du Conseil dans la gestion administrative.

Lors de problèmes entre un conseiller et un cadre, ce dernier peut en parler à la présidente ou à la direction de l'éducation. Ce genre de situation est bien encadré par les politiques et procédures du Conseil. Il peut sembler pour un nouvel élu que cette pratique est restrictive, surtout pour celui qui possède un agenda politique personnel. Les résultats d'une telle pratique sont là pour démontrer l'efficacité du système. Pour les élus, il est primordial que ce mode de gouvernance par politiques ainsi qu'une définition claire des rôles de chacun demeurent afin de garantir un fonctionnement souple et ordonné du système.

Un effort particulier est mis sur la décentralisation de la prise de décision afin de minimiser les décisions arbitraires en provenance de la haute direction. Le système fonctionne souvent à partir de comités et de processus de validation auprès de personnes concernées par des décisions prises à un échelon supérieur. Il y a aussi une grande volonté de maintenir des relations cordiales au niveau des deux groupes d'intervenants.

Par exemple, au niveau des cadres, ces derniers se réunissent tous les lundis en avant-midi afin de discuter des dossiers politiques, des sujets d'ordre corporatif et du fonctionnement général des écoles. Il y a aussi des rencontres mensuelles sur des dossiers qui sont plus stratégiques et primordiaux pour le système, tel que le positionnement stratégique des écoles et le développement de priorités stratégiques dans le cadre de la planification pluriannuelle. Il y a aussi des rencontres hebdomadaires des personnes à la surintendance, auxquelles des cadres supérieurs peuvent être invités selon les dossiers discutés. La direction de l'éducation n'y participe qu'au besoin.

10. Conclusion

La présente étude de cas nous a permis d'analyser la mise en œuvre d'un projet d'envergure et la gestion d'un changement majeur au sein d'un système scolaire. Le projet est d'autant plus remarquable par le fait qu'il s'approprie des principes et des pratiques propres au monde des affaires. L'usage d'un modèle commercial dans un contexte scolaire provoque souvent l'opposition des professionnels de l'éducation. Les failles que l'on y attribue sont nombreuses et les pratiques utilisées, dans le cadre de ce modèle, sont considérées comme inaptes pour le système d'éducation publique. C'était donc une expérience forte de risques qui requérait un engagement inébranlable et constant de la part des participants.

Les intervenants interrogés en arrivent tous à la reconnaissance du succès obtenu et partagent le même souci quant au futur. Il est aussi évident, selon les dires de ces derniers, que le même état d'esprit existe aussi au niveau de l'enseignant et de sa salle de classe. Bref, il nous est permis de faire les constatations suivantes :

1. On observe une excellente compréhension et une interprétation commune de la vision et de la mission de la part de tous les intervenants et l'usage d'un vocabulaire commun. Cet état de partage a même rejoint la salle de classe depuis quelques années. Tous en reconnaissent l'importance et l'utilité comme garant du succès actuel.
2. Les membres élus du Conseil sont les promoteurs ardents et convaincus, non seulement de la vision et de la mission, mais aussi du mode de gouvernance par

- politique et refusent de s'ingérer dans les affaires quotidiennes du Conseil et des écoles.
3. L'utilisation des données probantes est devenue une pratique essentielle à la prise de décision et est primée par l'ensemble des intervenants. Cette pratique, tout comme la vision et la mission, a maintenant rejoint le niveau de l'enseignant et fait partie de la pratique quotidienne de ce dernier. Ils reconnaissent les effets bénéfiques de cette pratique et y attribuent une grande part de leur succès.
 4. Une reconnaissance de l'importance des données probantes dans la prise de décision, la solution de problèmes et de la mise en œuvre de nouveaux programmes et activités.
 5. Les programmes et activités de perfectionnement professionnel sont axés sur les besoins collectifs et individuels et sont soutenus par des ressources financières adéquates. Leur sélection fait partie d'un processus qui mise sur des activités propres à améliorer le rendement des enseignants et des élèves.
 6. Les relations entre les différentes composantes du système apparaissent cordiales et excellentes et évoluent dans le cadre d'un leadership démocratique et d'une gestion proactive du changement.
 7. | Bref, il y a un alignement souple et efficace à tous les niveaux de l'organisation et tous les membres semblent fonctionnés dans un encadrement bien compris et accepté.

Ayant atteint un succès très enviable, depuis nombre d'années consécutives, les dirigeants du Conseil, les gestionnaires et les enseignants se posent tous la même question fondamentale...que fait-on maintenant? Ils réalisent que le taux de rendement pour chaque unité d'effort ne rapportera plus les mêmes résultats que par le passé. À ce niveau, les écarts deviennent beaucoup plus difficiles à combler et les domaines à améliorer sont plus pointus et de moins en moins nombreux. Dans un tel contexte, des questions se posent, à savoir :

- Comment assurer la préservation et l'amélioration du taux de rendement actuel d'année en année?
- Comment cibler les domaines en besoin d'amélioration et en assurer le succès?

La préoccupation principale de l'ensemble des intervenants était d'assurer la réussite individuelle de chaque élève en utilisant des outils bien appropriés à la situation. Les cas problème ou ceux à rendement faible ne sont pas laissés à l'abandon, mais font preuve d'une attention particulière. L'utilisation des données probantes a évolué au cours des années vers une approche analytique très pointue et raffinée qui mise sur toutes les différentes perspectives d'un problème ou d'une cible de réussite. Cette pratique efficace est utilisée de façon courante et quotidienne à tous les niveaux du système et peu de situations semblent y échapper, exception faite du rendement des garçons qui est souvent inférieur à celui des filles. Le Conseil et ses gestionnaires en sont préoccupés, mais pas assez pour en faire un objectif majeur dans l'amélioration du rendement des élèves. Il semble que l'on accepte la véracité de cette constatation et que l'on accepte aussi la situation comme normale, ne nécessitant pas d'intervention spéciale et ciblée. Il est de l'avis du chercheur, suite à l'étude des documents fournis et l'analyse des entrevues, que

c'est là un domaine de préoccupation majeur sur lequel le Conseil pourrait se concentrer afin d'assurer l'équité au niveau du rendement des garçons et des filles. C'est un domaine d'amélioration bien visible et l'un des grands défis des années à venir. Le Conseil pourrait devenir le premier des conseils scolaires à combler l'écart de rendement entre les sexes et devenir le chef de file en éducation au niveau provincial.

Les dirigeants réalisent que le succès a un prix, que personne ne peut s'asseoir sur ces lauriers et qu'il faut maintenant faire preuve d'imagination et de créativité. Le défi des prochaines années apparaît aussi imposant, sinon plus important, que celui relevé par les fondateurs du Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est.

7. Conclusions

Three purposes were to be accomplished by this study:

- to describe key features of high performing school districts in Ontario;
- to identify how, and through what trajectory, these districts came to be high performing;
- to clarify those features of districts and their contexts (e.g., size, provincial policies, role of the director or system leaders, role of professional learning) which influence their performance, as well as improvements in their performance.

While these three objectives capture the immediate goals for the study, its broader purpose was to help in the development of a provincial *District Effectiveness Framework* (DEF) justified by robust evidence. The DEF is to be part of the Ontario Leadership Framework (replacing the existing System Practices and Procedures) and a complement to the province's *School Effectiveness Framework* (SEF).

There were two main parts to the study. One part was a quantitative test of the effects of a set of system characteristics on important student outcomes (achievement and credit accumulation). These system characteristics, serving as a framework for the study as a whole, were identified through a review of previous research along with feedback, collected in several different ways, from a large proportion of the province's directors of education.

Results provide considerable support for most of the system characteristics included in the study's framework and illustrate how a small sample of high performing Ontario districts both developed and enacted these system features. In combination with the prior research and director feedback used to help identify them initially, this evidence provides strong justification for using the system characteristics examined in this study as the basis for the province's *District Effectiveness Framework*.

School system leaders intending to use the study's results to help guide their own work, perhaps as they are described in the DEF, should carefully consider the section of this report that speculates about the reasons for differences across the three high performing

systems. While most of the system characteristics included in the framework for the study are significantly related to important student-related outcomes, it is not likely necessary to “do everything”. The study does point to the importance of creating widespread support for the system’s directions early in the improvement process, but it does not have much to say about what to do next, or what to emphasize most in the face of those unique circumstances and histories found in every system in the province. It will come as no surprise to any system leader that considerable judgment still needs to be exercised if the results of this study are to add value to the effectiveness of their leadership.

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