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A Comprehensive Approach to Leadership Development

York Region District School Board

The York Region District School Board is committed to progressing from “good to great” and from “great to sustainable excellence.” In doing so, our Board recognizes that leadership has and will continue to play a pivotal role. We recently documented “the York Region Story,” outlining this journey of continuous and sustainable improvement in student achievement and well-being over the past 15 years. Leadership has been a key dimension of our story and will continue to be in the next stage of our journey.

The district has focused on leadership and leadership development for over a decade. Our commitment to, and investment in, leadership has been a conscious priority and we have reaped the benefits in both the quality and supply of capable leaders for formal leadership positions. In focusing on leadership, we are intentional about using the broadest understanding of the concept of leadership.

While emphasizing the pivotal role of leadership, we increasingly realize the intersectionality of the various dimensions of our work. The importance of aligning and connecting the various elements that make up the Characteristics of Strong Districts and Their Leadership in Ontario has become as important as any one of the characteristics on its own. Given that we see leadership as pivotal to the various characteristics and responsible for this interconnectivity, we have chosen to focus on our leadership journey for this case study. Our case study includes a comprehensive approach to leadership development as well as the professional and political leadership that underlie our story.

In the process of looking at leadership, we will connect in particular to the following other characteristics of high performing districts:

1. Creating a widely shared system mission, vision and values.
2. Building curriculum and instruction capable of achieving system direction.
3. Alignment of system policies and procedures in support of system direction.

Additionally, with our commitment to intentionally building capacity at all levels of the organization, we have worked to cultivate a culture of collaboration and continuous learning for all staff focusing on, and positively affecting, improved

student learning. As such, we feel that our case study must reference a fourth dimension – productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders.

Looking through our leadership lens, it is evident that efforts to address these elements are foundational to our district’s evolving journey. Chapters one and two of “the York Region Story” reflect our evolution from a relatively narrow focus on literacy achievement accompanied by high levels of accountability and technical adjustments to a broadening of focus increased individual and collective responsibility as well as more attention to adaptive change. In shifting from the high level of accountability to increased individual and collective responsibility, the importance of building a culture of staff professionalism has been a much higher priority. We realized that we must be more intentional, precise and strategic in our efforts to make this sustainable, which can only occur when staff members are fully engaged and take ownership in the work. This is where we are now, at the onset of “Chapter Three,” a stage in our journey in which everyone sees themselves as having responsibility for leading the way into a period of continuous improvement, innovation and sustainable excellence.

The following are responses taken from the outline above that address the case study questions:

1. Which one or two characteristics does this case study address?

- Creating a widely shared system mission, vision and values.
- Building curriculum and instruction capable of achieving system direction.
- Alignment of system policies and procedures in support of system direction
- Continuing to build internal and external relationships

2. How did you decide this characteristic needed more attention in your district?

The district has focused on leadership and leadership development for over a decade. Our commitment to, and investment in, leadership has been a conscious priority and we have reaped the benefits in both the quality and supply of capable leaders for formal leadership positions.

3. What was the state of this characteristic when you began to work on it?

At the outset, there was no aligned mission, vision and values; there was not a focus on learning and teaching in support of that vision and system policies and

procedures were not in alignment with the proposed direction.

4. What did you do to improve the condition of this characteristic (who was involved, what actions were taken, how did you respond to unexpected events along the way)?

In effect, the answer to this question is the story that we are in the process of describing above. Chapters one and two are outlined in the work to date; chapter three will describe the work ahead.

5. Were there significant turning points in your efforts to improve these characteristics? What were they?

I would say it was not so much a significant turning point that we addressed as much as a desire to become focused and clearly aligned in our work with the express purpose of better supporting our schools and school leaders. We wanted to address the necessity of streamlining the work and workload for our administrators so that they could better articulate the why, what and how of the work that needed to be done. In doing so, they would see alignment with their School Improvement Plans for Student Achievement, allocation of necessary resources, deployment of staff needed to deliver the work and then assess impact as the work proceeded.

6. How would you describe the condition of this characteristic in your district now and what evidence do you have to justify this description?

There is no question that the York Region District School Board school and system leaders understand our district focus on what is required to improve student learning and well being. School Improvement Plans for Student Achievement are aligned with the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and these are strategically focused on the key work that is required in the process. The system is moving away from Smart Goals to Theories of Action at this point with the specific purpose of focusing on the leadership practices that will be used to achieve the expected outcome.

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innovation and sustainable excellence.

7. What advice would you provide others, given your experience with improving the condition of this characteristic?

Change takes time so staying the course in a focused way has been key. Nevertheless, we have allowed an iterative approach to govern the work as we have monitored progress and assessed impact.

The 'story' described in our case study depicts a journey over the past decade. Along the way, we have been open to new learning, sharing ideas, deliberating on practices that are making an impact and finding new ways to move the work forward. This latter point is one that has been critical in the process. We don't necessarily have all the answers we need – either as individuals or even as a collective. We need to be willing to test approaches and strategies out to determine what works and what should be discarded.

Most significantly, we have learned that this is not easy work. That said, knowing the impact a team is having to impact learning, leading and teaching in each school – and specifically the outcomes for all students – helps to build teacher and leader efficacy that further supports the next steps in the process.