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Catholic Principals' Council of  
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Officials

Council of Ontario Directors of  
Education

Ministry of Education

Ontario Catholic Supervisory  
Officers' Association

Ontario Principals' Council

Ontario Public Supervisory  
Officials Association

## **Module Five: Strong Districts and Their Leadership Characteristic**

### *Deliberate and Consistent Use of Multiple Sources of Evidence To Inform Decisions*

#### **Content**

Module Description \*

Agenda

Samples of relevant research

Appendix A: Rainbow District School Board

Appendix B: District School Board of Niagara \*

Appendix C: Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est

Appendix D: Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board

Focus Group Interviews \*

Final Comments \*

Self-assessment

Evaluation

## Module Description \*

Encouraging the use of systematically collected evidence in district and school-level decision making has been at the center of all accountability-oriented policies introduced in Ontario and elsewhere over the past 15 years.

In this module through the use of case studies, exposure to the most recent research and collaborative discussion participants explored what strong districts do to encourage effective data use in schools

In sum, they:

- Provide schools with relevant and accessible evidence about their performance in a timely manner
- Make effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning; insist on a careful reading of relevant research evidence as the starting point for decisions about what to do to improve student performance
- Assist schools in using evidence to improve their performance, including frequent, job-embedded opportunities to learn about productive evidence use and the provision of time to interpret and act on what is learned through those opportunities
- Create collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation and use of evidence in schools
- Call on expertise from outside the school system for help with data interpretation when needed
- Implement computerized information management systems that are easily used by school and district staffs and that allow for the integration of all or most of the information available within the district
- Use appropriate evidence for accounting to stakeholders

## Agenda

### 1. Objective

As a result of participating in this module, district leaders will gain a better understand of the types of evidence needed and the ways that evidence can best be used, at district and school levels, to improve decisions influencing student learning.

### 2. Overview of relevant research

- [Power Point Presentation](#)

### 3. Full Group Discussion

Participants identify other promising approaches to district and school uses of evidence to better inform decisions (similarities and differences with case approach).

### 4. Appendix A: Case Study: Rainbow District School Board

*What can be learned from this case study about how to use evidence to better inform decisions?*

- Discussion of the written case study (in teams of four or five people)
- Debriefing of what was learned from the written case study by each team
- Synthesis of key findings

### 5. Appendix B: Case Study: District School Board of Niagara \*

*What can be learned from this case study about how to use evidence to better inform decisions?*

- Discussion of the written case study (in teams of four or five people)
- Debriefing of what was learned from the written case study by each team
- Synthesis of key findings

### 6. Appendix C: Case Study: Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est

*What can be learned from this case study about how to use evidence to better inform decisions?*

- Discussion of the written case study (in teams of four or five people)
- Debriefing of what was learned from the written case study by each team
- Synthesis of key findings

### 7. Appendix D: Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board

*What can be learned from this case study about how to use evidence to better inform decisions?*

- Discussion of the written case study (in teams of four or five people)
- Debriefing of what was learned from the written case study by each team
- Synthesis of key findings

## Samples of Relevant Research

- Anderson, S., Leithwood, K., Strauss, T. (2010). Leading data use in schools: organizational conditions and practices at the school and district levels, *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 9, 292-327.
- Daly, A. (2012). Data, dyads, and dynamics: exploring data use and social networks in educational improvement, *Teachers College Record*, 114.
- Datnow, A., Park, V., Wohlstetter, P. (2007). *Achieving with data: how high performing school systems use data to improve instruction for elementary students*. Los Angeles, CA: Center on Educational Governance, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California.
- Earl, L., Katz, S. (2002). Leading schools in a data-rich world, In K. Leithwood & P. Hallinger (Eds.). *Second International Handbook of Leadership and Administration*, Volume 8, pages 1003-1024. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.
- Finnegan, K., Daly, A., Che, J. (2013). System wide reform in districts under pressure: the role of social networks in defining, acquiring, using and diffusing research evidence, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51, 4, 476-497.
- Honig, M., Venkateswaran, N. (2012). School–central office relationships in evidence use: understanding evidence use as a systems problem, *American Journal of Education*, 118.
- Leithwood, K. (2011). *Characteristics of high performing districts in Ontario (Part 1)*. Toronto: Final report of research for the Institute for Educational Leadership.

## Appendix A: Rainbow District School Board

### Guiding Questions

1. This district used “learning cycles” as a vehicle for school improvement. What is a “learning cycle” and how does it compare with your district’s approach to school improvement?
2. As part of the work taking place in learning cycles, staff in this district have access to, and make use of a wide range of data. What is this data and how does it compare with the data used in your schools?
3. How did this district align its’ efforts at data use with its professional development initiatives?

### Case Study

## Appendix B: District School Board of Niagara \*

### Case Study

## Appendix C: Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est

### Guiding Questions

1. This case study traces the emergence of data-informed decision making through a series of stages beginning in 1989. What have been the main sources of motivation for increased reliance of systematically collected data in your district?
2. As compared with this district’s efforts, how have you attempted to increase data use at the school level?
3. What challenges to effective data-informed decision-making by schools remain and how are you planning to address those challenges?

### Case Study

## Appendix D: Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board

### Case Study

## Focus Group Interviews \*

This module identifies and illustrates, with one or two case stories, one of nine characteristics of high performing or “strong” districts. These characteristics have been identified through empirical research conducted in Ontario school systems, as well as research carried out in other contexts.

To help you recall what was outlined and illustrated during the module, a summary of what is included in this key feature of district work appears in the box below.

### Strong districts:

- Provide schools with relevant and accessible evidence about their performance in a timely manner
- Make effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning; insist on a careful reading of relevant research evidence as the starting point for decisions about what to do to improve student performance
- Assist schools in using evidence to improve their performance, including frequent, job-embedded opportunities to learn about productive evidence use and the provision of time to interpret and act on what is learned through those opportunities
- Create collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation and use of evidence in schools
- Call on expertise from outside the school system for help with data interpretation when needed
- Implement computerized information management systems that are easily used by school and district staffs and that allow for the integration of all or most of the information available within the district
- Use appropriate evidence for accounting to stakeholders

## Questions

1. Your district may or may not do what you consider a good job in this area of its work. When it does (or if it did), however, how do you build on or take advantage of your district's efforts in this area?
2. Are there *particular things* your district does (or could do) in this area of its work that are (or could be) especially helpful to you? If so, what are they and why do they matter?
3. Are there *particular things* your district does (or could do) in this area of its work that have negative consequences for your school leadership efforts? If so, what are they and how do they matter?

## District Leadership Practices

Available evidence suggests that district leaders increase their success in the area of deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions in their districts by enacting the seven leadership practices in the box below.

- Uses data from all available sources to assist decision-making in the central office
- Insists on the use of the best available research and other systematically collected evidence to inform decisions wherever possible
- Encourages collaboration in the interpretation and uses of data
- Builds system's capacity and disposition for using systematically-collected data to inform as many decisions as possible.
- Provides training for principals and staff on the use of data and research literature to sustain decision-making;
- Models evidence-informed decision making to school staffs
- Grounds interactions with, and advice to, trustees in sound evidence

## Questions

1. Does this list overlook any district leadership practices that you consider particularly helpful in the area of deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions for the district? If yes, what are they? What makes them important?
2. Are any of these seven district leadership practices especially crucial in your experience? If so, why? What makes them especially important?

## Final Comments by Dr. Kenneth Leithwood \*

It is clear from conversations among members of the District teams that many types and sources of evidence needed to inform district improvement efforts are not the quantitative and systematically collected types favored by the policy community and by evaluation specialists. In fact, the dominance of such evidence, especially in the form of student achievement results, serves to narrow the scope of attention to the disadvantage of many district efforts. Such evidence is unquestionably necessary but by no means sufficient. You can stare at your achievement results endlessly and they still won't tell you what to do.

The reliance on evidence, we need to remind ourselves, is part of choosing to move forward with an "evidence-based" rather than an "expertise based" approach to improvement. The two are by no means mutually exclusive. But naming them begins to acknowledge that our staffs don't always need some form of external evidence to figure out what needs fixing and how to fix it. To the extent those staffs have been well trained to begin with, the expertise and experience they bring to their classrooms and schools provides substantial guidance about what to do. This is particularly the case among those staff members who are continually striving to do a better job for their students. Armed with a sense of where things are not working well - developed through the day to day, or even moment to moment, responses of students to their effort - many staff members will find a way forward that is at least as robust as the insights that might be provided in more formal ways. There are, in other words, trade-offs to be made in the use of more or less formally collected evidence, trade-offs, for example, between reliability and sensitivity.

On the province-wide angst about declining math scores, we should remind ourselves that underperformance in schools has many potential causes. This is especially well explained in the literature on school turnaround. School underperformance can be the result of changing student populations, excessive principal turnover, family transience, lack of district support for interpreting student achievement evidence, poor instruction, low expectations for student learning, etc. My point is that the dominant explanation assumed by most districts is that the problem is poor instruction, or at least instruction not up to the task at hand. But surely that cannot be the same source of the problem in every district as we seem to be assuming at the moment. One cause of the same problem across the entire province just does not pass the 'smell test'. But I heard almost nothing during our discussions today about actually diagnosing the causes of the problem in one's own districts.

The need for careful diagnosis aside, improvements in the quality of math instruction and student math achievement reported by one district following a district-wide effort to have most teachers of math complete AQ courses in math reminds us that the most potent source of improvement in math instruction is greater pedagogical content knowledge on the part of teachers of math.



We know that schools are influenced to use the best available evidence for their decisions by the example provided by district leaders. Modeling good data use- or an 'evaluation habit of mind' was nicely illustrated in the story told by one NDSB superintendent about what transpires in their weekly senior leadership team meetings. In response to otherwise persuasive explanations of things that seem to be working well in their schools, the director is often heard to say 'That's a nice story but where is the evidence?'

## Self-assessment

*In order to assist you with your learning, use a rating scale in response to the following: (1 = not at all, 2 = a modest amount, 3 = significantly, 4 = a great deal)*

Please indicate the extent to which you feel that participation in this module has extended your ability, or increased your awareness of the need, to address the following challenges associated with the deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions in your school district:

1. Provide schools with relevant evidence about their performance;
2. Assist schools in using evidence to improve their performance
3. Create collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation of evidence in schools
4. Use appropriate evidence for accounting to stakeholders
5. Make effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning.

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## Evaluation

1. If your participation in this module has caused you to consider doing something different in your own system, please describe what that is.
2. Please identify any changes or refinements that could be made to this module that would improve participants' learning.
3. How can this work best be used with others in the future?
- 4.

**The Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) invites you to share your responses to the above questions with the coordinator of the IEL at [communication@education-leadership-ontario.ca](mailto:communication@education-leadership-ontario.ca).**