

SUPPORTING THE ONTARIO LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

Ontario Leadership Congress

What Is the Ontario Leadership Congress?

The Ontario Leadership Congress (OLC) is an Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS) commitment to strengthen the ministry's relationship with school and system leaders and to advance the overarching goal of sustaining school improvement, enhancing student learning, and moving the system to new heights of success.

The Ontario Leadership Congress is an annual event that brings together a team of school and system leaders from each district in Ontario for a facilitated one-day conference focused on enhancing student achievement and well-being. Participants are invited to engage in three interconnected components: (1) in advance of the congress, participants reflect on their leadership practice by responding to questions that ask them to consider and write about their leadership practice; (2) on the day of the congress, they participate in discussions and activities; and (3) after the congress, they engage in follow-up conversations. Congress is a knowledge mobilization strategy intended to make explicit expert leaders' knowledge and capture the collective insights embedded in their expertise.

Overarching Focus: Closing Achievement Gaps

In a truly equitable system, factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status do not prevent students from achieving ambitious outcomes. The congress draws on our collective knowledge and experience to:

- identify leadership challenges in raising the bar and closing the achievement gaps;
- gain insight about existing leadership practices to overcome these challenges;
- provide concrete advice about how to spread these successful practices and how to improve and build on them as we move forward.

In 2012, the congress focused on building knowledge about leadership practices and personal leadership resources that contribute to a positive school climate and improved student achievement and well-being. In 2013, the focus was on leadership as the exercise of influence, specifically with regard to leadership practices that bring about improvements in mathematics outcomes for students.

Why the Leadership Congress?

The congress provides an opportunity to bring expert leaders together to share knowledge about an important problem – closing achievement gaps – and to gather and mobilize this knowledge so that many others can benefit. A unique combination of pre-work, face-to-face discussions, inspirational and informative leading-edge keynote speakers, and facilitated discussions has helped to accomplish congress goals.

Key Elements of the Ontario Leadership Congress

- **district teams, including school and system leaders with a focus on leadership development.** In 2013, teacher leaders were invited for the first time.
- a **collaborative approach to program development and delivery** led by a planning team whose members include ministry staff and representatives of principal associations and the Institute for Education Leadership
- **advance participant preparation**, including submission of individual written responses to a question relevant to the congress theme, which is then used to inform the design of session content and ensure that participant expertise is documented
- an **accomplished keynote speaker** whose presentation connects with the theme
- **facilitation of small-group discussions** structured to maximize participant dialogue and exchange of successful leadership practices (facilitators are trained and provided with resources and detailed instructions)
- providing resources such as video clips, a networking site, and artefacts that participants can use to **follow up in their districts** after the congress

Goals

The congress is intended to:

- develop leadership practices of school and system leaders and coherence of leadership activities in organizations to accomplish the government's core priorities;
- mobilize knowledge that supports collective leadership capacity in districts;
- increase policymakers' and other stakeholders' understanding of the individual and collective challenges encountered by school and system leaders and the strategies they use in overcoming them.

History of the Congress

Congress was launched in 2009 as the Ontario Principal Congress and for three years the participants were mainly principals who were nominated by their districts as highly successful school leaders with an interest in furthering their work in closing achievement gaps. A summary of their responses to the advanced question protocols is found in the publication, *Closing the Achievement Gap: Advice from Expert Ontario Principals (2012)*, available on the ministry website. In 2012, the Ontario Principal Congress was renamed the Ontario Leadership Congress to signal a shift in focus from school-level to system-wide leadership. In 2013, the congress included teachers as part of the district leadership team.

What Has Been Accomplished?

- Each year participant feedback confirms the success of the congress in meeting its goals. Of particular note in 2013, 89% of district respondents indicated that congress will have an impact on their practice, and 97.6% of BLDS lead and supervisory officers with the leadership portfolio indicated that congress will have an impact on how their organization develops leaders.
- Each year, the congress provides salient, on-the-ground information on the experiences of school and system leaders in achieving provincial education priorities. For example, Congress 2013 provided new and important insights into the role of teacher leaders generally, and department heads specifically, in improving student outcomes.
- Materials used at the congress and video highlights of the keynote speaker are posted on the ministry website each year so that participants and others can follow up with activities in their districts.

“It was a privilege to be in the room as a facilitator, learning with and through the delegates’ thoughtful, generous, candid, deep and authentic sharing and reflections. The program design is a standout model for us all.”

Ministry facilitator

“We will use many of the activities to engage leadership in our district. What was most meaningful for me in my personal learning was the chance to listen to principals and teachers. A powerful activity that has me reflecting so much about my leadership.”

District participants

What’s Next?

- The Safe and Accepting School Resource Series was developed to share promising practices that support safe and accepting schools drawn from advance-question (AQ) responses provided by participants in the OLC 2012. It provides examples of real-life scenarios that illustrate how leaders draw on the leadership practices and the personal leadership resources from the Ontario Leadership Framework to establish and maintain a positive school climate (fall 2013).
- The ministry will utilize Board Leadership Development Strategy (BLDS) forums (regional teleconferences and sharing sessions, board site visits, etc.) to ensure that knowledge generated through the AQs and discussions at congress is mobilized to support collective leadership capacity in districts.
- Plans for the OLC 2014 are underway.

What Participants Said

- “The biggest impact of congress was our district’s decision as a result of the congress to ensure that the planning and delivery of many of our new required learning for principals and vice-principals will be co-developed and co-delivered with our Leadership Development department and Equity and Inclusive Education representative.”
- “The discussion on leadership resources will help shape my future growth planning for myself and the school.”
- “Thank you for an energizing and enlightening day! We have many ideas and next steps to take back to support our work in our various roles.”

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www.ontario.ca/eduleadership