Characteristics of High Performing School Systems in Ontario

Part 3
The District Effectiveness Framework

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The District Effectiveness Framework (DEF)

A Guide to School System Improvement

The DEF is based on a synthesis of empirical research and insights from school system leaders about the characteristics of school systems that are successful in improving the achievement of their students. Four categories of characteristics are included in the framework, Core Processes, Supporting Conditions, Leadership and Relationships. Each category includes from two to five more specific characteristics, 13 in total.

Note that the term "school system" is used throughout the framework, while the term "district" appears in the title and acronym (DEF) only. These terms are intended as synonyms. The term "district" is used in the title only so that the acronym would not be confused with the acronym for the *School Effectiveness Framework* (SEF).

A.
Core Processes

1. System Directions (Mission, Vision, Goals):
- The school system has developed a widely-shared set of beliefs and vision about student learning and well-being that was transparently developed and engaged multiple school and district stakeholders. that falls within the parameters set by the province.
- The school system's beliefs and vision includes a focus on "raising the achievement bar"
- The school system's beliefs and vision includes a focus on closing the achievement gap.
- The school system's beliefs and vision include a focus on nurturing student engagement and well-being.
- The school system's beliefs and vision for students are understood and shared by almost all staff.

2. Curriculum and Instruction
- the school system strongly supports schools' efforts to implement curricula that foster students' deep understandings about "big ideas", as well as to develop the basic skills students need to acquire such understandings.
- system staff and school staff work effectively together to help provide all students with engaging forms of instruction.
- system staff and school staff work effectively together to help establish ambitious but realistic student performance standards.
- the school system has aligned all elements of school programs and resources (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment, staff, budget).
- The school system's instructional improvement work includes teachers in a majority of schools and assists them in developing sophisticated understandings of powerful instruction for students.

- The school system's work with schools to align curriculum, instruction, assessment and teaching resources is extensive, ongoing and involves most stakeholders

3. Uses of Evidence: the school system…
- has an efficient and effective information management system
- provides schools with relevant evidence about their performance
- assists schools in using evidence to improve their performance
- creates collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation of evidence in schools
- calls on expertise from outside the school system for help with data interpretation when needed
- uses appropriate evidence for accounting to stakeholders
- makes effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning

B.
Supporting Conditions

4. Professional Development
- Time spent in meetings of teachers and principals is largely devoted to professional learning. Administrative matters are dealt with primarily through other forums and mechanisms..
- Most professional development is carefully aligned with system – wide and school improvement initiatives.
- Differentiated professional development opportunities are provided in response to the needs of individual schools, administrators and teachers.
- Extensive opportunities are provided for both teachers and administrators to further develop their expertise.
- 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.
- All system-sponsored professional development is closely aligned with the best evidence about how adults learn.

5. Organizational Improvement Processes
- The school system pursues only a small number of improvement goals at the same time.
- The school system proceeds in manageable stages and uses the early stages as learning opportunities.
- The school system's approach to improvement is relatively coherent. A small number of key improvement goals are consistently pursued over sustained periods of time.
- Schools are not overloaded with excessive numbers of initiatives . New initiatives are reviewed to ensure alignment with board priorities. The number of initiatives is managed to ensure that schools are not overloaded
- Considerable effort is made to build the capacities needed by school staffs for successful school improvement.

- 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.
- The school system 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.

6. Alignment

- The school system has a systematic and ongoing process to continuously align its' budget with goals for students.
- The school system has a systematic and ongoing process to continuously align its' personnel policies and procedures with goals for students.
- The school system has a systematic and ongoing process to continuously align its organizational structures with staff's instructional improvement work.
- The school system explicitly acknowledges provincial priorities and aligns its initiatives with them in locally meaningful ways.
- Adequate amounts of both the time and money have been allocated for the professional development of both leaders, teachers and those in support roles.

C.
Approaches to Leadership Development

7. Professional Leadership development

- The school system has well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting and appraising school-level leaders;.
- The school system implements procedures for transferring school-level leaders that does no harm and, whenever possible, adds value to improvement efforts underway in schools.
- The school system ensures that the most skilled leaders in the system are placed where they are most needed.
- The school system encourages school-level leaders, when useful, to supplement their own capacities with system-level expertise.
- System leaders expect principals to be knowledgeable about the quality of their teachers' instruction. This is a central criterion for selecting school leaders and for their performance appraisal.
- The school system has well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting, and appraising system-level leaders;.
- System leaders keep both the community and the central office staff focused on learning and they support principals and teachers in their efforts to improve instruction and ensure high levels of learning for all students. The system assumes responsibility for significantly improving instructional leadership in schools.
- The school system 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 school system purposes.
- The school system encourages coordinated forms of leadership distribution throughout the school system and its schools;

8. Elected Leadership development: the elected board of trustees…
- participates in assessing community values and interests and incorporating them into a the school system's mission and vision for students
- helps create a climate which engages teachers, administrators, parents and the wider community in developing and supporting the vision?
- helps create a climate of excellence that makes achieving the vision possible?
- uses the school system's beliefs and vision for student learning and well being as the foundation for strategic planning and ongoing school system evaluation.
- focuses most policy making on the improvement of student learning and well being consistent with the school system's mission and vision.
- develops policies and supports staff decisions aimed at providing rich curricula and engaging forms of instruction for all students and eliminating those that do not.
- maintains productive relationships, through the director, with senior staff, school staffs, community stakeholders and provincial education officials.
- provides systematic orientation opportunities for new members and ongoing training for existing members.
- avoids becoming involved in school system administration.
- holds the director accountable for improving teaching and learning in the school system.
- individual trustees support decisions by the elected board, as a whole, once those decisions have been made.

D.
Relationships

9. Internal system and school relationships
- 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. Central office staff are in schools frequently and know most school staff members by name.
- Networks and professional learning communities are well established at both school and system levels and have become the established way of solving problems and taking care of other business

10. Parents: the school system…
- provides school staffs with helpful opportunities to acquire the capacities needed to productively engage parents in schools.
- provides school staffs with helpful opportunities to acquire the capacities they need to assist parents in creating conditions for their children's learning in the home and at school.
- has a formal policy on parent engagement and regularly monitors the extent to which that policy is being implemented. School staffs and parents are asked for evidence as part of such monitoring.

11. Local Community Groups
- Community groups are routinely recognized for their contribution and support and consulted on almost all decisions affecting the community. School system staff are regularly members of these groups themselves.

12. Ministry of Education: the school system…
- communicates regularly with the Ministry, both formally and informally, about school system goals and directions;
- clarifies with the Ministry how it can be of most help to the school system;
- encourages Ministry collaboration in achieving school system goals and directions;
- provides feedback to the Ministry about the relevance of its initiatives to school system goals and directions.
- supplements government initiatives, when needed, in order to increase their local impact. Leadership teams in schools (e.g., PLCs) consider how to implement provincial initiatives in order to get the best results for the school and its students.
- has a multi-year plan that explicitly integrates provincial and school system priorities.

13. Teacher Federations: ideal relationships with federations include…
- system and federation leaders sharing the same vision for student learning;
- the provision of time and space for federation leaders to participate in planning system and school improvement efforts;
- system and school leaders working with federations to build trusting relationships;
- federation leaders keeping their members well-informed about their work with school and system leaders;
- contract negotiations between the system and the federations guided by the principles of Interest-based Bargaining (IBB)
- examination of labor contracts for provisions that could significantly impede school improvement and increased student learning.