School leaders who want success for all students know that it doesn’t come easily. Getting to what activates student improvement often requires a major unearthing of beliefs about instruction and leadership practices. Such inquiry can help schools realize that their current ways of working are not meeting student learning needs and that practices need to change. Over three years, the Johnsview Village School experienced such a change and, as a result, managed a steady, incremental rise in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Johnsview Village Public School is a small community school nestled in a “village” of some 400 condominiums just north of metro Toronto, Ontario, in the town of Thornhill. The school name comes from the Johnsview Village condominium development in which it is located. Students come from three major areas: a high-rise condominium, a residential area of detached homes, and the village townhouses. The school is accessible by public transportation and within walking distance of the local community center and daycare. Johnsview families comprise a diversity of ethnicities typical of the growing multicultural landscape of the greater Toronto area. The greatest number are families from Persia — about 60% of the school population. About 20% are students of Asian origin — Chinese, Korean, and Japanese — with the remainder representing Russian, South American, South African, Caribbean, and middle-European backgrounds. Many of these families have lived in Canada for only three to five years. They present a variety of settlement issues, such as community familiarity, access to social services, employment, and knowledge of the education system. However, many of the professional families who join the Johnsview community do so with ease, navigating the system of services and successfully integrating their children into the school setting.

Since Johnsview has only 300 students and 12 staff, the school has long had a strong sense of congeniality, warmth, caring for the students’ educational success, and collaboration among the teachers. The staff includes one communications class (autism) teacher, special education resource staffing, a part-time librarian, a teacher for English language learners, and a Reading Recovery teacher.

MOVING FROM CASUAL TALK TO DATA

Over the years, teachers meeting in the staff lounge freely acknowledged that a portion of students were underperforming. Teachers knew the challenged students by name but didn’t know what to do to alter the persistent failure rate. A transient student population made the task even more elusive. Children who enrolled in kindergarten were not likely to be the same ones who crossed the stage for their 8th-grade diploma. Kids often enrolled midway through their elementary career, say grade 3 or 4, and

DONNA FORD was principal of Johnsview Village Public Schools from 2004 to 2008. She is now course director with the faculty of education at York University, Ontario, Canada. © 2008, Donna Ford.
then left the school by grade 7. Teachers needed a way to identify at-risk learners and a clearly defined approach to dealing with their learning deficits.

Without a clear process, identifying where to begin with a given at-risk student and, more important, the next steps to help that student read and write on their own cannot be overstated. Johnsvi's route to achieving this included a deep focus on data that, in turn, helped shift teachers' thinking from a deficit model — what's wrong with this child — to a model that built on student strengths.

Dan Lortie says teachers tend to evaluate students individually but reflect less frequently on how to improve class performance. In Lortie's study, less than 30% of the teachers had a whole-class improvement perspective versus “my few needy students’ improvement” perspective. Part of what contributes to that viewpoint is not having data that would reveal a trend of strengths and weaknesses in student performance.

Marie Clay talks about high-efficiency, high-impact activities that begin with what the student can do. By strengthening those abilities, Clay believes teachers will be more successful in expanding students' learning.

Without a doubt, the strength of the professional relationships at Johnsvi made it possible for teachers to ask more questions and probe student results for the answers. Teachers worked together to create a simple format for looking at the at-risk performers and transformed what had been an incidental, even superficial commentary about failing kids into more focused, data-based, and student-centered discussions.

**DATA MEETINGS**

Beginning in 2004, Johnsvi introduced schoolwide meetings three times a year in which teachers by class and then by grade shared their student learning data. What had been a private examination of data by the principal became a public sharing of data about student learning. This public discussion revealed the number of at-risk students in each class and opened the door to a more collective approach to thinking about how to teach struggling students. Once the data were displayed on chart paper that everyone could see, and they knew exactly which students were most needy, teachers had something concrete to work with. Every teacher could now view the school data, remark on the performance trends, and then begin to figure out each student’s strengths and weaknesses and establish some realistic goals.

The data showed that reading and writing were the areas of greatest need — not surprising, because 50% of the students did not have English as their first language — and teachers believed that literacy should be the area of focus. The bigger challenge for teachers was identifying how to differentiate instruction in order to improve achievement.

Johnsvi also created a literacy team comprising the principal, resource teacher, and literacy teacher. This team served as a liaison between the York Region District School Board’s literacy collaborative and the teachers in Johnsvi. The team was crucial to spreading the pedagogic gospel that all students can achieve
high standards, given the right time and support, and that all teachers can teach to high standards given the right assistance. Through their association with the board’s literacy collaborative, Johnsview’s literacy team learned a variety of strategies that they could introduce to teachers. One of the first activities used was classroom visits. Classroom teachers scheduled visits by the literacy teacher, who modeled instruction of a reading strategy. The classroom teacher observed and later debriefed with the literacy teacher. On the next visit, the classroom teacher would try the demonstrated approach while coached by the literacy teacher.

**INTRODUCING CASE MANAGEMENT**

As Johnsview teachers were learning more by probing student data, the school devised an approach to case management that helped teachers understand how to respond to student assessment data. Meanwhile, other schools in the York region were figuring out how case management could yield results for students. Case management is a method for monitoring the progress of individual students.

Monthly team meetings essentially became case management meetings. These meetings, which occurred during the school day, included K-3 teachers, 4-6 teachers, or 7-8 teachers. At these meetings with the principal, teachers review data from diagnostic and formative assessments. The assessments demonstrate how the student has been doing. The team meetings are a process of thinking and sharing on the at-risk student’s behalf.

Teachers have conversations that focus on asking three questions about each child:

- What is the student’s reading level?
- What are the student’s strengths?
- What does the student need to be able to do?

Learning skills — the more behavioral facets of the learner represented, for instance, by regular homework completion, working cooperatively with other students, taking initiative, and goal setting — played an obvious role in student achievement at Johnsview and in teacher perception of student performance. By keeping the inquiry focused on these three questions, teachers obtained a new and different view of the learning potential of and then instructional possibilities for each at-risk student.

The value added for the student is what teachers glean from the data they’ve generated and then how teachers use this information in their classrooms between case management meetings. This often makes a critical difference for the student, encouraging teachers to shift to strategies that can improve student learning, rather than continuing to rely on the same strategies.

Case management also presents teachers with more opportunities to do what Judith Warren Little calls “joint work,” that is, teachers sharing responsibility for the work of teaching, motivating them to participate because they need each other’s contributions in order to succeed, and developing confidence in each other’s competence and commitment. Collaboration can be a powerful mechanism for changing ideas and practice, particularly when joint work includes personal support plus critical inquiry about present practice and future direction.

More joint work and less casual commentary has benefited Johnsview students and focused instruction. Teachers see that they can accomplish more together than in isolation. In fact, they understand that regular, collective dialogue about an agreed-on focus sustains commitment and feeds purpose; effort thrives on concrete evidence of progress; and teachers learn best from teachers. “When we are all working on the same approach using the same reading strategy, I can better see how the students are doing and where we can intervene,” one teacher explained. Another teacher remarked that talking about the data with a colleague helped him get a clearer picture of the achievement standards used to rate his students.

Finally, Johnsview’s efforts were also aided by changes at the provincial level. In 2005, Ontario’s Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat set a goal that 75% of all 6th-grade students would be reading at the level of provincial standard by the end of a three-year period. Beyond just setting goals, Ontario’s benchmark assessments at grades 3 and 6 also provided significant feedback that teachers could use to guide their instruction. Annual test scores, also known as EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office) data also confirmed performance trends for the school. Despite the transient nature of Johnsview, teachers with the principal tracked improvement from early entry to graduation in 8th grade. By monitoring the EQAO data, term reports, and reading assessments, teachers were often able to anticipate student learning concerns.

**TIPPING TOWARD MORE INQUIRY**

Teachers want to talk with colleagues about their work with students and student achievement. Be it with a grade partner, in a team meeting, with a re-
source teacher, or with another teacher in the same grade in a neighboring school, teachers want to talk about their work even more when the work is goal-oriented or, better yet, results-oriented. When the school improvement trend began moving in a positive direction, teachers saw that “they really had something here at this school.” That ‘something,’ momentum, occurred for a number of reasons.

In order to create literate schools, Booth and Rowsell write, principals and administrative teams must ensure that teachers not only have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to choose effective teaching strategies or assessment strands, but also have the wherewithal to use them. At Johnsview, the literacy team ensured that teachers had a steady stream of learning related to literacy and linked to the overall efforts of the district and the province.

In hindsight, it seems that the diversity of ideas regarding student achievement were not well coordinated. In fact, at times, they clashed. So, to help shift what was understood about the data and then what teachers believed their students were able to do, the teachers first had to investigate the links between data analysis, assessment, and instruction and, next, reach agreement about the assessment. The whole process and the connections between each component of these planning and instruction cycles needed to be much clearer and, indeed, intentional.

The case management approach brought teachers together to identify what given students needed to improve. In order for systematic improvement to occur, the teachers needed to understand the instructional and assessment process and how it would apply differently to each learner. Teachers needed to speak the same language. Once changes began in one place, they moved from class to class and created consistency throughout the school.

In a professional community where teachers overlap strong pedagogy with assessment, teachers need the ability and desire to assess their students and to ensure that the results of those assessments inform their practice. Teachers identified research that addressed the school focus and satisfied their growing desire to reflect on, make sense of, and adjust what they were doing. Research brought legitimacy to their work, confirming that the teachers were on the right track. In one book study meeting, for instance, a chapter on front-loading meaning directly addressed the issue of activating background knowledge so that a student population that was up to 60% English language learners could engage in the modeled and shared lessons about making inferences. Conversations in data-team meetings began to become more focused on how to teach based on student responses.

The opportunities for gathering evidence occurs on many fronts. Teachers can examine responses as students participate in lessons. Teachers can work with other teachers to decide how to use those responses to impel instruction. Throughout the school, administrators led teams to understand that the effect of rethinking teaching practices begins with deeper knowledge of each student. Customizing a program to fit the learner is about identifying, even reinforcing individual strengths, goals, and interests so that by 8th grade, the student realizes how to do this with a degree of independence. The Student Success Initiative, for example, is a provincial effort for Ontario middle to high school students that provides a multipathed approach so that students may navigate by interest, academic strengths, and goals to accumulate credit for their secondary diploma. Customizing a program also means making sure that language, ethnicity, and socioeconomic condition are not stumbling blocks to learning.

The learning journey continues. For Johnsview Village Public School, there is ongoing work to create school practices that respond to the current student needs, without delay. By moving away from a surface sense of student achievement and toward a greater grasp of student needs through data analysis and changing classroom instruction within a team, results for some 300 students will continue to be positive.

7. David W. Booth and Jennifer Rowsell, The Literacy Principal: Leading, Supporting, and Assessing Reading and Writing Initiatives (Markham, Ont.: Pembroke, 2002).