Results Without Rancor or Ranking
ONTARIO'S SUCCESS STORY

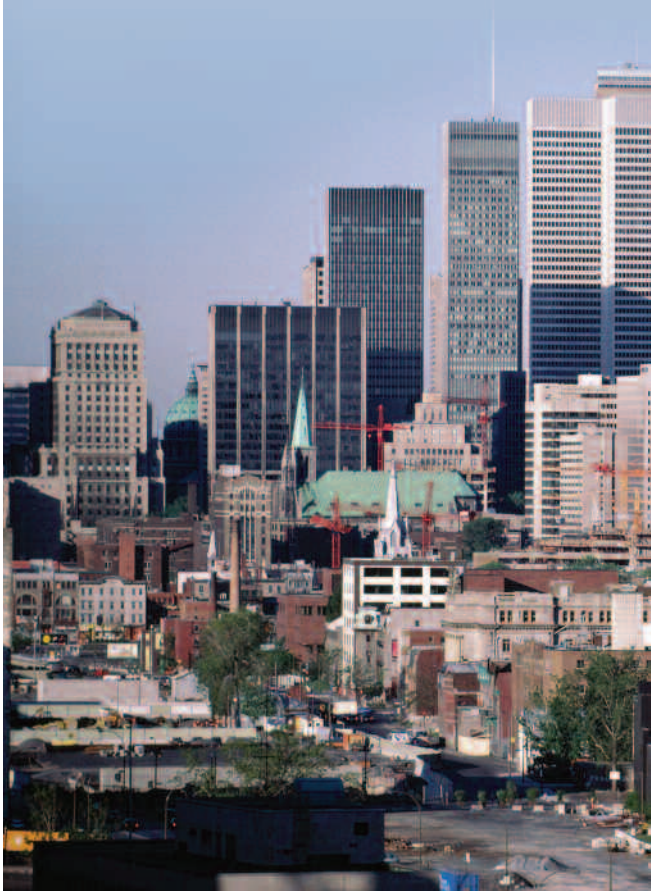
Successful large-scale change doesn't require punitive forms of accountability and teacher-proof curricula. Ontario is showing that positive partnerships between educators and policy makers can be the best strategy.

BY BEN LEVIN, AVIS GLAZE, AND MICHAEL FULLAN

In many parts of the world, education change might have the right goals — better outcomes for students, including students from groups that had previously lagged behind average achievement levels. But many of these efforts have used wrongheaded approaches or failed to pay enough attention to what we are learning about effective large-scale change. In particular, many strategies place too much emphasis on test results as the main way to drive improvement.

Photo: Photos.com

Ontario's education change strategy embodies vital principles, grounded in research, that are associated with meaningful and sustainable change.



In contrast, Ontario's education change strategy embodies vital principles, grounded in research, that are associated with meaningful and sustainable change. Changes are respectful of professional knowledge and practice, and their main elements are coherent and aligned at the provincial, district, and school levels. Key partners — the provincial Ministry of Education, school boards, schools, and provincial and local organizations of teachers, principals, and others — work together. Change strategies are comprehensive and emphasize building capacity for improvement through professional learning, strong leadership, necessary resources, and effective engagement of parents and the broader community. Great emphasis is placed on public communication so that people know what is happening and support the schools. Most of all, there has been a relentless focus over several years on the same basic strategy. We believe this is an example of large-scale change that is effective and sustainable.

Ontario has about 2 million children in its public education system. The provincial government provides essentially 100% of the funds for all four sets of locally elected school boards, reflecting Canada's constitutional requirement for public support of minority-language and Catholic schools. School boards (the equivalent of a school district in the U.S.) range in size from a few hundred students to about 250,000 in the Toronto District School Board. The province has nearly 5,000 schools extending across 400,000 square miles — the size of the eight southeastern states put together. The average elementary school has about 350 students; the average secondary school, fewer than 1,000. Ontario also has a very diverse enrollment, with 27% of the population born outside of Canada and 20% visible minorities. Ontario's 120,000 or so teachers and most of its support staff are unionized. There is a mandatory provincial curriculum.

Thus, education in Ontario has all the challenges one might anticipate — large urban areas and very remote rural areas, significant urban and rural poverty levels, high levels of population diversity, areas with sharply dropping enrollment and others with rapid growth.

During the 1990s, Ontario education was troubled. The province had significant labor disruption, lots of public dissatisfaction, increasing private school enrollment, and poor morale leading to high teacher turnover. However, in 2003, a new government was elected with the renewal of public education as one of its highest priorities. A premier with a deep commit-

ment to education and talented ministers brought strong political leadership to bear. The Ontario education strategy that began in 2003 has two main components:

- A commitment to improve elementary school literacy and numeracy outcomes, and
- A commitment to increase high school graduation rates.

These priorities were chosen because public confidence in and support for education depend on demonstrated achievement of good outcomes for students. These core goals are supported by a large-scale strategy based substantially on Michael Fullan's work.[1]

The core strategies are also complemented by a range of other initiatives. Some of these initiatives, such as strengthening school leadership or renewing curricula, are necessary to support the key goals. Of particular importance was a commitment to reduce class sizes in the primary grades. Other initiatives, including provincial support for negotiating four-year collective agreements with all Ontario teachers in 2005, were necessary so that all parties could focus on improving student outcomes instead of being distracted by labor issues. Still other initiatives, such as attention to character education, safe schools, and healthy schools, are important because public support for improved outcomes can be sustained only if people know that these fundamental needs of students are being attended to. Even where there is a strong focus on a few key goals, the ancillary and potentially distracting issues still require attention. The challenge is getting the balance right.

A STRATEGY FOR IMPROVED STUDENT OUTCOMES

Ontario framed its education strategy around achieving clear and ambitious goals for elementary literacy/numeracy and high school graduation.

The goal of Ontario's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was to have at least 75% of 6th-grade students able to read, write, and do mathematics at the expected level by spring 2008. While this represents a substantial gain from the 55% of students who met the standard in 2003 (after several years of static results), the public will not accept, and the education system cannot be satisfied with, a situation in which even one in four students fails to develop key skills that they will need to participate fully in our society.

As of 2003-04, only about 60% of Ontario students were graduating from Ontario's 800 high schools in the normal four years, and only about 70% were graduating even after taking an extra year. These are clearly unacceptable levels in a knowledge society. The province has set a target of having at least 85% of entering 9th-grade students graduate from high school in a timely way by 2010. Reaching this goal would put Ontario near the top among Canadian provinces but would still leave the province below several other OECD countries.

Ontario framed its education strategy around achieving clear and ambitious goals for elementary literacy/numeracy and high school graduation.

The two strategies — elementary literacy/numeracy and high school graduation — share many common elements, such as:

- Creating dedicated infrastructures in the ministry and school boards, staffed by outstanding educators, to lead and guide the overall initiative;
- Engaging school and district leaders to set ambi-

■ *BEN LEVIN served as deputy minister (chief civil servant) for education for Ontario from 2004 to 2007; he was previously deputy minister of education for the province of Manitoba. His career spans work in government and as an academic and researcher. He now holds a Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. AVIS GLAZE retired in June 2008 from her position as Ontario's first Chief Student Achievement Officer and CEO of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. She has been a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, and director of education (chief superintendent) in Ontario school boards and has received many awards for her contributions to education. MICHAEL FULLAN is the former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He is recognized as an international authority on education reform. In April 2004, he was appointed Special Advisor on Education to the Premier, and Minister of Education in Ontario.*

tious but achievable targets and plans for gains in student achievement;
- Developing leadership teams for each strategy in every school district and every school;
- Providing extensive, carefully targeted professional development for educators to support the strategies through improved instructional practices;
- Targeting attention to key underperforming groups, including some minority students, ESL students, students in special education, aboriginal students, and boys;
- Supporting effective use of data to track students and intervene early where problems are occurring;
- Supporting research to find, understand, and share effective practices; and
- Supporting ancillary practices, such as an expansion of tutoring and fuller engagement of parents and communities.

In addition, other key elements of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy are:

- Adding thousands of new teaching positions to reduce class sizes in primary grades to a maximum of 20, and supporting teachers to use smaller classes most effectively;
- Adding specialist teachers to enrich teaching in areas such as art, music, and physical education while also providing more preparation and professional learning time for classroom teachers; and
- Implementing a 'turnaround' program that provides additional support and expert advice for interested schools facing the most significant challenges in improving achievement.

In addition to the common elements already mentioned, key components of the high school graduation strategy include:

- Supporting a 'student success teacher' in every high school as a champion for success for all students and ensuring that every high school student is well known to and supported by at least one adult on staff;
- Building stronger transition models between elementary and secondary schools so students get off to a good start in 9th grade;
- Increasing the focus on and resources for literacy and numeracy in all areas of the high school curriculum;
- Expanding program options through more cooperative education, credits for genuine external learning, and dual credit programs with colleges and universities;
- Creating a 'high skills major' that allows school boards to work with employers and community groups to create packages of courses leading to employment and further learning;
- Introducing legislation to embody the changes in the overall strategy and also requiring students to be in a learning situation (school, college, apprenticeship, work with training, and so forth) until high school graduation or age 18;
- Revising curricula in some key areas, such as mathematics and career education; and
- Creating a Student Success Commission, with representatives from the teacher federations, principals, and superintendents, to support effective implementation of the strategy in schools and to prevent disputes at the local level.

The two strategies have also been backed by significant new resources. In 2007-08, the government provided about $350 million annually in additional funding to reduce class sizes in the primary grades. The total annual value of the Literacy and Numeracy

Strategy is at least $450 million, while the high school graduation strategy is worth some $300 million annually. (To put this in perspective, Ontario's total education expenditure in 2006-07 was about $18 billion.)

SUSTAINING ELEMENTS

In addition to its specific elements, the Ontario approach is respectful, comprehensive, coherent, and aligned, which will make the changes significant and sustainable.

Respect for staff and for professional knowledge. The Ontario focus on student outcomes rests on the belief that educators have enormous skill and knowledge to contribute to school improvement. Respect for professionals is shown in a variety of ways.

- The public statements of the government and ministry support public education and the work of educators and support staff.
- The government abolished some policy elements (such as paper-and-pencil testing of new teachers) that were seen by teachers as punitive and replaced them with policies (such as induction for new teachers and changes to teacher performance appraisal) that support professionalism. Despite declining enrollment, staffing has increased, teacher workload is reduced, and preparation time has increased.
- The strategies build on successful practices in Ontario. Almost everything happening at the provincial level draws on practices already under way in schools somewhere in the province.
- There are many opportunities for teacher learning at all levels, from schools to networks of schools to districts to provincial activities.

Comprehensiveness. As outlined earlier, Ontario's approach to improvement is not based on just one or two elements. For example, the focus on literacy and numeracy is complemented by strong support for other curricular areas, such as physical education and the arts. The theory of improvement recognizes schools as ecologies, so it gives attention to building capacity in teachers, improving leadership, involving parents, changing policies, adding resources — all at the same time. It is also important to pay attention to issues that could turn into huge distractions, such as avoiding labor disputes, dealing with safety issues, or ensuring that school buildings are in good repair.

Ontario's strategies rest on the belief that educators have enormous skill and knowledge to contribute to school improvement.

Coherence and alignment through partnership. Because public attention and political direction can change quickly, sustainable improvement in schools requires real commitment and participation by all of the partners — teachers, administrators, boards, and the broader community. Fullan advocates for the "trilevel solution," in which governments, school districts, and schools work together on common approaches and strategies. An explicit part of the Ontario approach involves building strong relationships and close connections with districts, schools, and other organizations.[2] The staff members of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat work very closely with school district leaders to ensure that strategies are fully aligned and complementary. At the secondary level, student success leaders in each board, funded by the ministry, play an important role in ensuring greater alignment.

Efforts to build and sustain strong partnerships all take place within the common emphasis on improving student outcomes.

The Ministry of Education has put in place several mechanisms for consultation with partners. A Partnership Table brings the minister of education together with major stakeholders on a regular basis. The minister and senior ministry staff meet regularly with the main provincial organizations, including teachers, principals, and superintendents. Parent and student organizations also play an important role in policy development and implementation.

The ministry has worked hard to build positive relationships with school boards. When boards and the ministry fight in public over funding levels, for example, the whole public education system suffers because citizens get a negative message about our ability to provide high-quality education.

Given the problems created in Ontario education by earlier conflicts with teachers and support staff, particular steps were taken to involve teachers and their organizations. The ministry involves the teacher federations in policy development and supports their professional development work. Efforts are also made to work more closely with support staff groups and to recognize their need for involvement and for professional development.

Principals also play a vital role in the Ontario strategy because they are widely recognized as playing key roles in school improvement. Ontario principals were forcibly removed from the teacher unions in the late 1990s, creating some very difficult relationship issues. Professional development for principals has been expanded, and efforts are being made to improve some of their key working conditions, though the job of principal remains very challenging.

Changing the negative and combative public discourse around education in order to build public confidence was itself an important policy goal. However, the efforts to build and sustain strong partnerships all take place within the common emphasis on improving student outcomes. Therefore, they have a common value core and a strong focus on building capacity everywhere in the system to support student success more effectively. In the end, people will support public education if they believe it is delivering good results for the province's children and young people. So communicating honestly with the public about successes and challenges is essential.

WHAT'S THE PROGRESS?

The two main strategies are relatively new. The Lit-

eracy and Numeracy Secretariat began operation only in early 2005, and the most important elements of the Student Success Strategy came into place later that year. However, both built on work already under way in a number of school boards. Because of this foundation, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat had a substantial impact on teaching practices and students' results in less than two school years, as confirmed by an independent evaluation.[3] Results on Ontario's provincial assessment have improved substantially and broadly over the last four years. The target has been exceeded in the French-language sector, where nearly 80% of 6th-grade students are now achieving the provincial standard, but in the English-language sector the 2008 result was 67%, still short of the goal. In terms of real students, the improvement means that about 16,000 more students per grade are now achieving the provincial standard each year compared with 2003. The number of schools with very low performance has fallen from nearly 20% of all schools to fewer than 5%. So, while there is still much room for improvement, the gains have been very significant. Nor are these results just a matter of taking tests. Gains on tests matter only if they represent real improvements in student skills, and teachers across the province confirm that they are seeing real skill improvements for students, not just increases in test results. Ontario has avoided a focus on test preparation and drill.

The indicators for high school improvement are also positive. Graduation rates are rising — from 68% to 75% in 2006-07, meaning that each year some 10,000 more students are graduating than was the case five years ago. Results on the provincial 10th-grade literacy test — not a particular focus of the changes — have improved substantially. Credit accumulation in grades 9 and 10, which strongly predicts graduation, is also improving, so there should be further significant improvements in graduation rates in the next few years. Here, too, an independent evaluation has confirmed positive changes.[4]

Just as important, Ontario schools are experiencing a level of energy and enthusiasm not seen for quite some time. Fewer young teachers are leaving the profession and fewer teachers are choosing early retirement — tangible indicators of improved teacher morale. Thousands of teachers are participating voluntarily in summer professional development programs offered by teacher unions and school districts. More teachers are giving positive responses on surveys of their level of satisfaction with their work.

In the fall of 2007, the government was re-elected,

with support for public education once again a major factor in the election. Early in 2008 they released a new strategy paper, *Energizing Ontario Education* (available at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng) that continues the main approaches from their first term but also stresses the importance of building public confidence as well as system capacity for improvement. So Ontario education can count on another four years of positive change.

Use of research evidence and data will be critical in this effort as Ontario learns more about practices that are effective.

CHALLENGES

No change of this magnitude occurs without challenges. Two are particularly important to note. First, Ontario schools and teachers are feeling that they are confronting many initiatives all at the same time. Even though educators are positive about the elements of change, putting them all together has been stressful. One might describe the situation as being a bit like eating all the Halloween candies at once; each one tastes good, but too many at one time does not produce a happy result!

This situation is improving to some degree as there are fewer new initiatives and more focus on deeper implementation of those already under way. Ongoing capacity building and support also reduce the stress of the new. Nonetheless, at all levels of the system there is still a need for more alignment and coherence, and fewer distractions, than educators have faced in the last three years.

The second challenge deals with resources. The government has increased funding for public education by nearly 30% since fall 2003. However, schools and boards still face financial pressures in matching resources to demands. All partners will need to re-examine current practices and allocations of staff and funds and ask whether these actually are the most effective ways to use resources in support of students. In many areas — from transportation to special education to professional development to use of substitute teachers — there may be opportunities to improve efficiency. Effective use of research evidence and data will be critical in this effort as Ontario learns more about practices that are more effective, and shares that knowledge more widely.

CONCLUSION

Change researchers have long argued that there is a body of knowledge that can support effective and satisfying improvement in public education. The Ontario case is an example of large-scale change in education that focuses on improvement in positive ways. It is respectful of educators, fair to students and communities, and based on the best available knowledge. It helps people get better at their work and builds public support for public education. When many of the right elements can be brought together, energy and positive results ensue. We can have results without rancor or ranking.

While the main elements of the Ontario strategy come from our and others' research it was policy makers and other leaders at all levels of the system who brought these ideas to life, translating them into specific, context-linked reality. It is only when leaders themselves, drawing on best knowledge, create the strategies and put them in place that we can expect results.

We draw two main lessons. The first is to recognize that capacity building linked to results must be the main driver. The second is to recognize the fallacy that heavy-handed accountability can create success; instead, getting better results is being more accountable. Policy makers would do well to heed the lessons deriving from the Ontario experience — balancing accountability and capacity building and integrating top-down and bottom-up forces in strong partnerships.

---

1. Michael Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 4th ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

2. Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, *The Impact of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat: Changes in Ontario's Education System* (London, Ont., 2007).

3. Charles Ungerleider, *Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success Strategy, Phase 1 Report* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).

4. Ibid.