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Leadership Sustainability: A Canadian Case Study

Dr Lyn Sharratt, Superintendent of Curriculum and Instructional Services, York Region District School Board, Ontario, Canada

Background / Rationale

This case study explores issues of leadership sustainability by examining a large school district with which we are associated. It is a particularly appropriate case for the topic, because the district has been intensively engaged in a district-wide reform for the past five years and has relied heavily on mobilizing leadership at all levels of the system. The question of interest is, “under what conditions can leaders in the system sustain their efforts individually and collectively?” The York Region District School Board (YRDSB) is a large multicultural district just north of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. YRDSB is a rapidly growing district with a diverse socio-cultural and linguistic population speaking over 100 different languages in its public schools. On average, YRDSB has opened 5 elementary schools a year for the last five years. There are a total of 147 elementary schools and 28 secondary schools with over 108,000 students and 8,000 teachers.

The district decided to focus on improving literacy for all students through a model now known as the Literacy Collaborative (LC). Key features of the approach include:

- Articulating a clear vision and commitment to the system literacy priority and continually communicating the commitment to everyone in the system;
- Building a system-wide comprehensive plan and framework for continuous improvement (SPCI);
- Using data to drive instruction and determine resources;
- Developing administrator and teacher capacity to teach literacy for all students;
- Establishing professional learning communities at all levels of the system and beyond the district.

Scope (Aims and Objectives)

District leadership: developed a strong team of Curriculum Coordinators and Consultants focused on balanced literacy classroom practices; linked YRDSB to external expertise, particularly with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT); benchmarked the program against global best practices; and annually evaluated LC’s implementation effectiveness. Capacity-building professional development (PD) focused on literacy, assessment, instructional strategies, and change management in order to develop the collective efficacy of teachers and administrators to raise the bar and close the gap of student achievement through 1) new knowledge competencies and skills, 2) enhanced resources, and 3) greater motivation.

Process

The district continues to invest in on-going, systematic PD. Schools had to commit to implementing the 13 parameters (Sharratt and Fullan, 2005) which included school teams attending monthly Literacy Content (led by Curriculum Coordinators and Consultants) and Change Management sessions (led by Fullan and Rolheiser).

Resources (anticipated and used)

The strategy involved developing and supporting school literacy teams, starting with an initial cohort of disadvantaged schools (17) in 2001-2002 and adding schools over a four year period until all 175 schools, elementary and secondary, in the district were involved. Each school team consisted of three people - the Principal, the Literacy Teacher (a leadership role typically released for .25-.5 of their teaching assignment to work along-side the Principal and classroom teachers) and the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT).

Results / Expected Outcomes

There is a longstanding saying in the change literature that “change is a process not an event”. Such a process was actualized in York Region District School Board, not just because the professional development sessions were continuous over multiple years, but also because the strategy required school teams, working with their staffs, to apply ideas between sessions to continually embed them into everyday practice in their schools. Ideas were constantly applied and discussed as the district emphasized “learning in context” i.e. learning by applying new ideas and building on them.

Each June, the district organizes a Literacy Learning Fair in which the literacy leadership teams from all schools present what they have accomplished and learned. All school reports reflect the three LC goals: to increase students’ achievement by:

- using data to drive instruction and the selection of resources;
- building administrators’ and teachers’ capacity for successful classroom instruction; and
- establishing professional learning communities across the district.

The Literacy Learning Fair is part celebration and part pressure and support to ensure that all participants strive to reach new levels of student achievement.

There is little doubt that there is widespread support for the LC initiative in the district. In April 2005 we conducted a survey of all school teams in the district. We achieved 387 or 76% surveys returned from LC participants. The results from the survey showed that a very high percentage of school leaders perceived the LC initiative had a strong positive impact. The percentage of respondents scoring 4 or 5 on a five point impact scale for selected questions was:

The Literacy Collaborative has:

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| 1. Provided teachers with a wider-range of teaching strategies | 90% |
| 2. Helped ensure adequate resources to support students | 78% |
| 3. Raised the expertise of teachers within their schools | 88% |
| 4. Increased the school-wide focus on literacy | 95% |
| 5. Clarified the role of all teachers in the support of literacy | 78% |
| 6. Provided more attention and assistance to students at risk | 83% |

7. Raised literacy expectations for all students 90%
8. Produced more consistency and continuity in literacy across subjects 75%
9. Fostered a more positive attitude among staff re literacy teaching 85%
10. Facilitated sharing of expertise with teachers from other schools 69%

Although this survey does not tap into the perceptions of individual teachers, the members of each school's leadership team are engaged in close interaction with the teachers in their home schools. We conclude that it is accurate to say that the system as a whole has been energized by the strategy and the results being obtained.

Quantitative data have also been analyzed over 5 years and are presented in the table below (Sharratt & Rolheiser, 2006, in press).

5-Year Span in EQAO Results in YRDSB (1999-2005)

EQAO (Method 2)	1999 (baseline year before District Literacy focus)	2005	% Increase
Grade 3 Reading	59	69	10%
Grade 3 Writing	66	75	9%
Grade 3 Mathematics	70	80	10%
Grade 6 Reading	61	75	14%
Grade 6 Writing	59	72	13%
Grade 6 Mathematics	63	76	13%
% ESL/ELD Learners	Gr. 3 4% / Gr. 6 4%	11% 6%	7% 2%
ESL/ELD Grade 3 Reading	34	56	22%
ESL/ELD Grade 3 Writing	47	69	22%
ESL/ELD Grade 3 Mathematics	62	75	13%
ESL/ELD Grade 6 Reading	27	53	26%
ESL/ELD Grade 6 Writing	27	62	35%
ESL/ELD Grade 6 Mathematics	62	74	12%
OSSLT	Oct. 2002 77%	Oct. 2004 87%	10%
Reading at the end of Grade 1	59%	83%	24%

Impact of Literacy Collaborative Reform Model on Sustainable Leadership

Quantitatively, we asked 79 school principals (61 elementary and 18 secondary) three questions to determine the conditions or elements that are conducive to sustaining focus and energy on continuous improvement, in this case, in a district focused on increased literacy achievement for all students (Fullan and Sharratt, 2006).

1. How do you sustain your school's literacy initiative as a leader?
2. How do you maintain energy/renewal for your staff to sustain the literacy focus?
3. How do you maintain your energy and renew yourself to sustain the literacy focus?

From the responses received, four propositions, from the perspective of conditions that favour leadership renewal and sustainability, emerge:

Proposition One: Sustainability is not about prolonging specific innovations, but rather it is about establishing the conditions for students' continuous improvement.

Proposition Two: Sustainability is not possible unless school and system leaders are working on the same agenda.

Proposition Three: Proposition two notwithstanding, sustainability is not furthered by school and system leaders simply agreeing on the direction of the reform. Rather, agreement is continually tested and extended by leaders as both school and system leaders put pressure on each other. Sustainability is a two-way, or multi-way street.

Proposition Four: We have a fair idea about what makes for sustainability within one district under conditions of stable leadership over a 5 or more year period, but we still do not know how sustainability fares when district leadership changes, or when state leadership changes direction.

Our general conclusion is to make the notion of leadership sustainability transparent--- foster open discussions about whether energy sustainability is flourishing or flagging. LC clearly enables the education energy, expended in YRDSB, to be renewed.