

RESEARCH *in* BRIEF

THE IMPACT OF THE LITERACY AND NUMERACY SECRETARIAT: CHANGES IN ONTARIO'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

The definition of literacy, in both language and mathematics, is constantly evolving and by today's standard, requires more highly sophisticated understanding and skills than ever before. Merely passing is not good enough for the current generation. Strong skills in reading, writing and mathematics are critical to a child's future prospects in the complex society of the 21st century.

"The Secretariat will ... build upon the spirit of innovation that already exists in many schools and boards. We will redouble our efforts to create an even more supportive climate and highly skilled staff to increase capacity for achievement. We will seek new avenues for the engagement of all education stakeholders so that they participate fully in helping Ontario's students prepare for a future that requires higher levels of skills in literacy and numeracy."

– Avis E. Glaze, Founding CEO, The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

SNAPSHOT

The Ontario government created the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) in 2004 to help develop, coordinate and deliver a strategy that would lead to improved student learning and achievement in language and mathematics. The government set a goal that at least 75 per cent of Ontario students, by age 12, will achieve Level 3 or higher on provincial assessments of reading, writing and mathematics. When the Secretariat began its work, only 54 per cent of Ontario elementary students were achieving a Level 3 or higher on these assessments. Today 68 per cent of students have met the standard, suggesting both progress and the need for continued effort.

The LNS strategy focused on consensus building and engaging staff, schools and boards in collaborative work. Other key emphases included (1) building instructional and leadership capacity, (2) fostering a culture of research and inquiry in classrooms as well as schools and boards, (3) improving school and



board planning (through creating an Ontario School Effectiveness Framework), and (4) designing targeted interventions for lower-performing and/or struggling students/schools/boards.

In 2006, the Ministry of Education contracted the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (CLLRNet) to evaluate the first few years of LNS initiatives, and to determine whether, and in what ways, the Ontario education system was being changed as a result of them. CLLRNet was asked to focus on the benefits of the changes for students and their teachers (not just test scores), and to draw lessons from the findings, as a guide to the ongoing improvement of Ontario's system.

METHODOLOGY

The ministry engaged CLLRNet (including a team of university-based researchers, knowledge officers and expert practitioners) and the evaluation took place in two phases (February 2007-June 2007 and July 2007-October 2008).

The researchers collected and examined data from the following sources:

- Documents, resources and PD tools
- Focus groups (representatives from all levels at eight school boards, LNS Student Achievement Officers [SAOs], and other ministry staff)
- Surveys (principals and teachers across Ontario)
- Random sample of schools (Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership [OFIP] schools and non-OFIP schools)
- EQAO data, student achievement scores, board-level survey data

KEY FINDINGS

Over its brief history, Ontario's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat has had a major, and primarily highly positive, impact on Ontario's education system. Benefits include:

- There have been clear, sustained and cumulative increases in reading, writing, and to a lesser extent, mathematics achievement results of Ontario students, since the LNS began.
- An impressive number of initiatives can be documented, and broad support has been directed at the improvement of literacy and numeracy skills.
- At the classroom level, more time is devoted to literacy activities, and instructional capacity has increased. These changes appear to be associated directly with LNS initiatives and with the related initiatives of LNS partners.
- As a particularly proactive branch of the ministry, with a regular presence in schools and boards through its SAOs and initiatives, LNS is a key change agent for Ontario education.

Ongoing challenges include:

- need for greater attention to mathematics, including more professional learning for SAOs in mathematics instruction
- broader access to current, relevant, research-based materials
- need for attention to the balance between high-level comprehension skills and fundamental decoding skills in reading instruction
- improve understanding and use of assessment materials

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

1. Increase the emphasis on improving mathematics performance.
2. Ensure that instruction includes an appropriate emphasis on foundational skills, including vocabulary, decoding accuracy and reading fluency for reading and transcription skills for writing.
3. Assist teachers, principals, and administrators to understand the value of additional outside support for literacy (and mathematics) instruction and to guide decision making.
4. Support internal capacity building, including protecting institutional memory and enhancing the professional learning community for staff within the LNS.
5. Improve communication about, and access to, LNS materials.
6. Ensure that available, relevant, research-informed knowledge that can improve instructional practices is integrated into all phases of LNS activity.

WHAT IS ONTARIO DOING ABOUT RAISING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS?

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) was pleased to receive the (CLLRNet) recommendations and has used this external evaluation, as intended, to refine its approach. Original LNS emphases remain – collaboration and relationship building, innovation and capacity building, supporting a culture of research and inquiry throughout the education system. In addition, more focused attention is now being given to supporting improved classroom instruction, both in foundational language skills and in mathematics.

ABOUT THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR



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LINKS

The Impact of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat: Changes in Ontario's Education System (Spring 2009)

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/OME_Report09_EN.pdf

Note: Between 2001 and 2010, The Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (CLLRNet) supported research, training and knowledge exchange programs to improve the language, literacy and numeracy skills of Canadian children. This work was supported primarily by Industry Canada's Networks of Centres of Excellence Program. That funding ended in 2009, and the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network ceased operations on March 31, 2010.

A number of CLLRNet initiatives (e.g., The Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development, Foundations For Literacy, Foundations For Numeracy) continue to be supported by other sponsors and partners. For a complete list, visit www.cllrnet.ca/.

KEYWORDS

Literacy;
numeracy;
language;
mathematics;
elementary education;
capacity building;
large-scale school change;
improving student achievement