Building the Capacity to Lead

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Sharing leadership is making the difference in schools in Ontario. Efforts by school districts to build capacity to implement literacy strategies are being helped by school leaders—both principals and teachers—working together to improve student learning.

As we all know, bringing about change in schools and school districts is hard work. Such change requires a focus on building “capacity,” a term used widely in educational literature. Capacity describes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individuals. Many educators now also discuss “school capacity,” the elements that increase the chances that the work of a whole school will result in higher student achievement. Recent research indicates that school capacity is enhanced when there is a collaborative professional community that supports teachers’ work together, when there is coherence among the various programs within the school, when there are appropriate resources to support the staff and when the principal provides the leadership needed to make all this effective. “District capacity,” a more recent focus, describes the work done by a school district to support the building of school capacity. All three types of capacity—individual, school, and district—are critical to improving learning opportunities for students.

We examined the interaction of school and district capacity in the implementation of literacy initiatives in the York Region District School Board (YRDSB), a fast-growing area north of Toronto. We observed the change process in four elementary schools at different stages of implementation of district-supported early literacy initiatives over a two-year period. Interviews, focus groups, professional meetings, and professional learning experiences in each of the schools were used to document each school’s change journey.

In 1999, YRDSB educators set out to improve the early literacy achievement of students in pilot elementary schools. Along the way, however, they realized that, in addition to improving scores on standardized assessments, the initiative was also building professional learning community, encouraging the growth of shared leadership, and creating a culture responsive to change. The success of the pilot project encouraged the development of a districtwide initiative called the Literacy Collaborative. By 2004–2005, all 167 schools in the system were participating in this initiative.

**What Have We Learned About Leadership?**

A key element in the development of the Literacy Collaborative has been the role played by leadership. We were able to track this in each of the four case schools during implementation.

Principals in YRDSB focus on their own professional learning by participating in the district’s professional development for the Literacy Collaborative with their school team. Principals are seen to be learners of literacy in the same way as are the Literacy teacher and other teacher-leaders. This approach has three benefits. First, the principal becomes an instructional leader and can speak knowledgeably with school staff about literacy practices. Second, teachers
get the message that the Literacy Collaborative is indeed an important initiative because the principal attends the sessions with them. Third, principals and teachers build a commitment to shared leadership as they discuss, strategize, and develop common understanding about literacy change during their co-learning at the sessions.

**The Literacy Collaborative in York Region District School Board**

As part of the Literacy Collaborative, each school is required to make a three-year commitment to provide released time for a designated Literacy teacher (generally a half-time position), create a daily two-hour Literacy block for students, and establish a literacy team, comprising the Literacy teacher, the principal, and a special education resource teacher. The team may also include the Reading Recovery teacher, the division lead teacher, the ESL teacher, and perhaps a classroom teacher, as well.

This team attends two kinds of district-planned professional development sessions. Leadership and Change professional development days are facilitated by faculty from the University of Toronto and are designed to teach strategies for strengthening shared leadership at the school and for building capacity for change. In addition, district specialists run Literacy Content sessions, where teams develop plans for teaching literacy that are appropriate for students at their school. These sessions are supported by the district, which provides supply teachers to the school, and attendance is mandatory. The team must also make a commitment to collect data on the progress being made in literacy.

In our case schools, there was evidence of much work being done to develop leaders and of the impact of that leadership in building school capacity. As encouraged by the district, these four schools were all practising a model of distributed leadership that encouraged teacher-leaders to take on a variety of responsibilities. Distributed leadership had been practised at Ambleside Public School for many years—indeed, the school had a reputation in the district for leadership in the Literacy Collaborative. Teachers were encouraged to explore informal leadership roles and to take on the planning of school events, such as a study group or a day of shared professional practice.

In the second year of our research, one-third of the students at Ambleside moved to a newly opened school, and every formal leadership position changed. The smaller school size (fewer students and staff) meant that a greater proportion of the staff were now active in leadership roles. While this made more demands on the teaching staff, it also helped a number of them recognize their own leadership qualities. The staff at Ambleside felt supported by the district in this time of change. District consultants and superintendents were very active during the transition, supporting new leaders and helping to build a sense of coherence.

We discovered through our research at all four schools, however, that the use of the term *leadership* was problematic when discussing teachers’ roles. Staff at Jefferson Public School typically equated leadership with administration. Teachers were uncomfortable applying the term to themselves, describing themselves as “collaborators,” for example, rather than leaders. When asked about building leadership capacity, respondents discussed collaborative qualities, such as listening to others, taking initiative, embracing risk, and having the confidence to dialogue.

At Green Meadows Public School, the leadership had been so successfully distributed that when the school’s very influential Literacy teacher assumed the role of a coordinator at the district office, the change was reasonably seamless. Leaders at Green Meadows had been forward-thinking enough to involve others so intimately in this role that a replacement was found quickly and effortlessly. As part of the transition, other teachers stepped up to help. Several pitched in to focus on successfully lifting the literacy scores of at-risk primary students. Others focused on developing a binder on assessment practices to guide junior and intermediate teachers in their data collection. The leadership capacity that had been built within their school resulted in the continuation of important literacy work despite the departure of a key player.
The Challenges of Shared Leadership

This approach has not been without its challenges. Shared leadership requires a great deal of time and effort. It also necessitates discussion among many players, and time must be allowed to deal with differences of opinion. The leadership teams tend to be larger and need to meet frequently to deal with a variety of issues. This changing approach to school leadership provides the opportunity to create communities of leaders and make teachers feel more engaged and empowered, but it also means that many decisions may take longer, and there may be more meetings.

Distributed leadership requires that formal leaders relinquish a fair proportion of their power, allowing teachers to take some of that power and responsibility. Formal leaders need to be able to distinguish between the issues that are non-negotiable—items for which the formal leader makes the decision—and those that benefit from greater involvement from members of the school community. This is a difficult balance for school leaders and requires a remarkable sensitivity to the needs of the school.

Shared Leadership: The Key to Unlocking School Potential

As York Region District School Board and many other school districts are discovering, it is only when attention is paid to distributing leadership that we truly unlock the potential in schools. As administrators and teacher-leaders share their skills and expertise, they are better able to meet the needs of all learners in their care. An investment in supporting the development of leadership capacity is truly a wise investment.

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