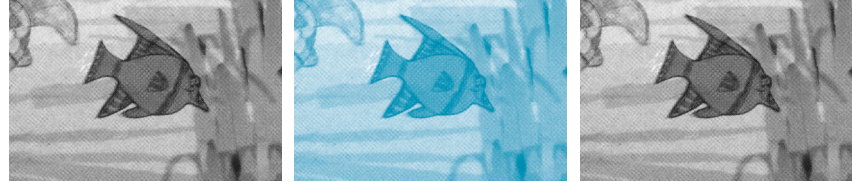


# What Can We Learn from Schools on the Move?



The Schools on the Move, both the 42 identified in 2007 and the 23 identified in 2006, represent the face of change in Ontario education. Over the last few years, the province has made great strides. Schools on the Move have taken advantage of increased resources and a more positive climate in the Ontario education world. What can the province learn from their experience?

## The Big Lesson: Address the Challenges

Schools on the Move are well along the path of school improvement. They have already dealt successfully with the difficulties that commonly confront schools in initiating change, recognizing that challenges are opportunities for learning. Where EQAO results were low, schools acknowledged the urgency of trying new approaches. When schools became aware of other schools achieving greater success with similar student populations, principals, and teachers recognized that perhaps they could do better but that different strategies might be required. Principals and teachers, developing a sense of collective responsibility for improvement, began building a collaborative culture of mutual support and professional learning. They invited parents to become partners in their children's learning and often engaged the broader community as well.

Schools on the Move have also achieved considerable success in addressing the challenges that inevitably emerge as schools implement new approaches. Principals and teachers designed job-embedded learning that focused on the professional skills and knowledge that were most crucial for improving students' learning. Schools found many ways to get through the "implementation dip", celebrating early successes and constantly reinforcing each other's efforts. Schools worked to overcome teacher isolation, fostering greater openness and trust.

Mastering new approaches for teaching literacy and mathematics empowered teachers and increased their confidence and determination. Increasingly, classroom doors were open to colleagues as teachers found that working together was not only more successful but more enjoyable. In particular, collaborative efforts paid off in the area of understanding and using data. For many teachers, this is a difficult challenge, one that requires new concepts and new practices. As Schools on the Move became more comfortable with using data to make decisions and to track children's progress, their teaching interventions became increasingly precise and effective.

## Different Challenges at Different Points

### Challenges in initiating change

- Building belief that high expectations for academic learning, particularly for needy populations, can be met in conjunction with supporting children's emotional, physical, and social needs
- Providing support for teachers to learn about alternative approaches, such as new research-based strategies for teaching reading, writing, or mathematics
- Identifying practices that may have served them well in the past but may not be effective in the emerging context

### Challenges in implementing strategies and learning from results

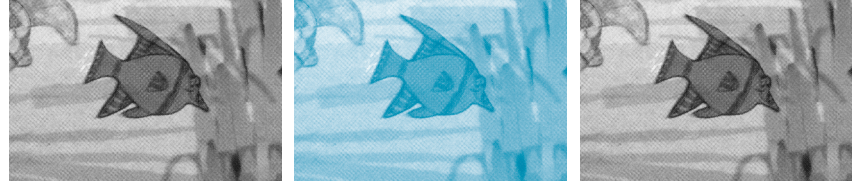
- Building a culture of collaborative work based on student data for all educators
- Staying the course through the "implementation dip" – using new instructional strategies feels awkward or difficult until teachers become more skilful with them
- Overcoming uncertainty about data and the complexities of how to use it

### Challenges in sustaining improvements over time

- Adjusting to changes in leadership or staff (key leaders leave or vital knowledge/skill is lost)
- Maintaining momentum and intensity
- Understanding plateaus (in terms of EQAO scores, increases may be harder to achieve – "the easy gains are already made")

Rather than being concentrated in the principal, leadership in Schools on the Move is increasingly shared, with many staff members taking responsibility for different aspects of the school's improvement work. Principals nonetheless have provided the spark and impetus as instructional leaders in the schools and have connected the schools to external ideas and support (e.g., superintendents of schools, consultants, other schools).

Schools on the Move are at different points in their journeys. Most are finding that they gain renewed energy from the success of their efforts, as student achievement continues to improve. Evidence from school improvement research around the world, however, suggests that sustaining improvement over an extended period of time is not easy. Momentum is lost as key people retire or move to



positions in other schools or in the school district. Frustratingly common is the experience of finding that student achievement, especially as indicated by test scores, reaches a plateau. Research in Ontario and elsewhere suggests, however, some successful strategies for sustaining improvement or resuming upward movement following a plateau. Some of these are the same strategies that accompany successful implementation of change, such as: continuing to support collaborative cultures strongly focused on learning; developing increasingly precise understanding and use of data, especially for early identification and intervention for children falling behind; and keeping up enthusiasm and energy through continued celebration of successes. Two strategies are particularly critical – first, shared or distributed leadership, which makes the school less dependent on the principal or another key staff member and, second, networking with other schools with similar contexts and challenges.

What has emerged from the visits to Schools on the Move, and is making the difference for student achievement, is similar to what researchers have identified in schools in Canada, the United States, England, and elsewhere. Five major themes seem to capture the environments in Ontario Schools on the Move:

### 1. Organizational culture

Schools on the Move have collaborative cultures, with teachers and administrators committed to learning together. The schools have moved beyond the old “egg crate” model of isolated classrooms to “open doors”, with mutual support and shared risk taking. Staff members are open to new ideas and new practices; they try to identify what is needed to be more successful with teaching and learning. All staff, custodians, and secretaries as well as teachers, are included as key members of the team. Parents also participate in the school community in various ways.

### 2. Focus

The schools have created an environment where learning is the top priority, and literacy and numeracy are crucial. The schools are focused on improving literacy and numeracy and infuse this throughout the school program.

### 3. Leadership

Leadership creates an environment in which teachers and administrators work and learn together. Leadership is distributed and shared, not concentrated, for example, in a single administrator.

### 4. Assessment, accountability, and use of data

Administrators and teachers feel a sense of responsibility for children’s learning. EQAO data are seen as helpful and informative, and are taken seriously as a source of useful information about what is happening in the school. However, teachers go well beyond EQAO data – they developed and are using other assessment data as well, including tasks that teachers develop collaboratively. They use various means, such as data walls, to track student progress and identify groups of children who need particular interventions.

### 5. Links beyond the school

These schools are not isolated – they are closely connected with their school boards and usually embedded in family of schools programs. Superintendents of schools visit frequently, know what’s happening and help schools find resources or other supports. Many schools have also forged strong links with their local communities and, increasingly, with other schools, not only in their own board but beyond.

## Maintaining the Energy for Change

One of the most powerful strategies for maintaining and increasing the energy for change is connecting with other professionals engaged in the same enterprise, as well as continuing to infuse the schools with new strategies or refinements of strategies already in place. Research on networked learning communities in the U.K. highlights the importance of joint work, as opposed to simply storytelling and offering assistance. The research shows there is a need for collaborative self-assessment, along with the kind of serious inquiry that challenges assumptions.

As Schools on the Move have shown, genuine improvements in teaching and learning arise in a climate of professional collaboration, within which educators learn new strategies and refine strategies already in place.

# Staying the Course



At The Literacy Numeracy Secretariat we recognize how hard Ontario educators have worked to make a difference in the lives of so many children. Our public education system, like others around the world, is responding to new challenges of the 21st century – increased globalization and the shift to a more diverse and knowledge-intensive society. The stakes are higher than ever for our children; they need to meet very challenging standards of literacy, numeracy, thinking, and citizenship if they are to do well in today's world.

We thank you for what you do every day to ensure that new generations will thrive.

Schools on the Move is one of a number of initiatives supported by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat that fosters learning within and across schools. The first group of Schools on the Move were pioneers in this provincial sharing. They had already established a culture of sharing in their own boards and were willing to learn with others outside the walls of the school. We are delighted that 42 additional Schools on the Move have accepted an invitation to be part of the initiative. Next year, we will be adding approximately 40 more schools, creating a network of 100 schools ready to share their learning with others across the province.

Many Schools on the Move have achieved improved student achievement in challenging circumstances and are leading the way in using the high-yield strategies identified by education research to systematically raise achievement. Schools on the Move have high expectations for every child and use careful record keeping and data analysis to chart children's progress. They dedicate large blocks of uninterrupted learning time for both literacy and numeracy instruction.

We know Schools on the Move reflect the commitment of an entire community – students/teachers/administrators/support staff/parents/supervisory officers/district school boards. Each one's role is integral to the success of the school.

Just think of where we will be in five years with the growth of such learning communities across the province.