

« Letter to the Editors, continued

of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning. Provincial assessments that gather information from every student provide an essential foundation of data that educators, policymakers, and researchers rely on to plan for student progress. The evidence of success is clearly painted by the multitude of school, board, and government initiatives that have been developed (thanks in part to the analysis of EQAO results) and that have led to better outcomes for tens of thousands of students across the province. Because of Education for All, the many CODE projects that school boards undertook over the past three years have had a significant impact on improving the results for students with special education needs. Over the last three years, results in reading, writing, and mathematics for students with special education needs have improved, with the greatest improvement being 21% in writing.

Every year, EQAO surveys school principals and teachers at the time of the assessments, and their responses confirm the value and importance they place on the student achievement data generated by the full-census assessments. More than 3,400 elementary school principals and more than 7,000 teachers responded to the 2008 survey.

- Of elementary school principals, 94% used the previous year's EQAO achievement results and questionnaire data to communicate with teachers about student achievement and to guide school improvement initiatives relating to reading, writing, and mathematics.
- Of elementary school principals, 91% used EQAO's data to identify program strengths and areas for improvement in reading, writing, and mathematics. Seventy-eight percent used the data to pinpoint where resources were needed.
- Of Grade 3 and 6 teachers, 79% and 73% respectively used student and school EQAO achievement results and questionnaire data to identify areas of reading, writing, and mathematics program strength and areas for improvement.

EQAO reports not only provide a snapshot of student achievement at the end of key stages in their education, but also give contextual descriptions of the school community so that the results can be interpreted in the appropriate context.

The power of good information cannot be underestimated, and this good information must be gathered from a variety of sources over time. The key to continual improvement is to determine what we want our students to achieve and then to ensure that they are learning. To quote Gabriel Filippi, the Canadian mountaineer who successfully reached the summit of Mount Everest, our goal should be to help every child reach his or her summit. Educational leaders outside the classroom—whether they are school principals, directors of education, or ministers of education—work to create the conditions that produce large-scale success and allow the best and most effective learning to take place. For more than a decade, that work has been assisted by the detailed and curriculum-based information provided by EQAO's full-census assessments.

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CODE Funds Support Professional Learning Communities in ALCDSB

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The Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board continues to celebrate the successes made possible through the CODE funding. In 2007–2008, the ALCDSB student services and curriculum departments worked collaboratively to plan how to best use the CODE dollars to promote and leverage the principles outlined in Education for All. We focused on moving teachers and administrators from knowledge awareness about student learning to knowl-

edge mobilization, where best practices about student learning are shared between schools and across learning networks within the board. The decision to support school-based professional learning communities (PLCs) not only recognized the importance of job-embedded professional development but also allowed the teacher participant to concentrate on instructional strategies and student achievement evidence in focused and collaborative ways.

CODE dollars were used to release teachers to work in professional learning communities (PLCs). Administrators, teachers, and special education resource teachers engaged in processes of inquiry focused on their teaching and assessment practices and analyzing student learning, allowing teachers and administrators to focus on student learning as the goal. In "Professional Learning Communities, A Model for Ontario Schools" (October 2007), the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat states: "In order to focus on learning rather than teaching, student attainment of knowledge and skills must be consistently considered and reviewed. A reflective cycle must be initiated—that is, a cycle in which every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress" (DuFour, 2004, p. 10)." Our CODE project allowed ALCDSB to move one step closer to realizing professional learning communities as an integral part of our teaching and learning culture.

The ALCDSB CODE project allowed for system-level collaboration on a number of initiatives, including those supported by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (OFIP, Turnaround, and School Effectiveness Framework), and a focus on differentiated instruction through student success. The parameters of the PLCs were clearly outlined and included three broad areas of focus: early intervention; differentiated instruction; and assessment as, for, and of learning. Reporting templates were collected as data and included the PLC agenda, instructional strategies discussed, types of data used to inform the PLC dialogue, lessons learned, and artifacts to share with other schools.

Many primary-division PLCs focused on making connections (text to text, text to self, text to world), analyzing students' written responses to text-to-self connections, and developing strategies for improving levels of connections. This first step will be further developed in 2008–2009 as our schools focus on using the model of Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway to focus professional learning communities on student achievement.

Our project highlighted the role of principal as instructional leader and enabled administrators to further develop their skills in facilitating purposeful PLCs with goals connected to school improvement planning and, for some, connected to their school effectiveness framework.

Through CODE, ALCDSB schools were supported in planning effective PLCs. Monitoring continued PLC work through the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) in 2008–2009 will allow our board to continue developing a comprehensive, differentiated approach, not only in consideration of effective instructional practices to enhance teaching and learning, but as a shift at the system level in how professional learning is planned for and experienced by teachers and administrators in ALCDSB.

Sustainability of best practices in Catholic education can result from a focus on our collective and collaborative efforts to enhance student learning. When teachers and administrators are given opportunities to dialogue in focused ways about student learning, the culture of schools shifts based on the understanding that we, as educators, are responsible for all of the students in our schools. Professional learning communities have been powerful, are linked to high-yield strategies, and have had an impact on the learning culture for both adults and students in ALCDSB.

Our students are our future. Success for all is promoted by a system-level recognition that professional learning communities model lifelong learning, which impacts the role of the teacher in the classroom, the principal as instructional leader, and our students—learning with each other and for each other. ●

✉ Comments about this article? Email bullock@alcdsb.on.ca

Using the Web-Based Teaching Tool and An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement to Deliver a Tiered Approach to Early Intervention

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The Durham District School Board (DDSB) recognizes early intervention as a key element in improving student achievement. The CODE project has been one initiative that has provided specific support in this area. By using the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario's Web Based Teaching Tool (WBTT) and Marie Clay's An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement, Senior Kindergarten and Grade One teachers throughout the board have been provided with a consistent means of collecting diagnostic and formative assessment data regarding early literacy achievement. Professional learning opportunities have focused on assisting teachers in translating assessment data into useful information for planning instruction and for delivering a "tiered approach to intervention" (Education for All Expert Panel Report, p. 60).

The project has existed in 38 schools within the district, and these schools have remained constant since 2005. Schools were selected to participate based on their allocation as a "high-achieving" or "low-achieving" school, although the "priority school" status has changed for some of these schools since the beginning of the project, with some high-achieving schools being recently designated as OFIP 2 or OFIP 3. Nineteen high-achieving and nineteen low-achieving schools were selected to participate. A teacher leader with experience both as a Literacy Coach and in the area of special education was designated as project facilitator and helped manage the project. This individual worked closely with both the Special Education Department and the Programs Department, acting as project researcher and liaison.

The following article highlights the lessons learned during the project in relation to the key elements of Professional Learning, Instructional Leadership, Assessment, School and System Organization, and Communication. It includes encouraging data regarding improved student achievement and teacher capacity. Plans for sustaining the project initiatives in order to continue to build on the project's worthwhile outcomes will also be highlighted.

Professional Learning

The Education for All Expert Panel Report emphasizes a number of key belief statements and recommendations related to professional learning. The panel states that:

- "Classroom teachers are the key educators for a student's literacy and numeracy development."