JK–Grade 1 Assessment and Intervention Strategies Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**CODE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROJECT: JK–GRADE 1
ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES**

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The goals of the CODE Special Education Project: JK–Grade 1 Assessment and Intervention Strategies were to identify and implement effective, evidence-informed assessment and intervention strategies for all students in JK–Grade 1; build teacher/school capacity; share strategies through leadership networks; and develop a monitoring tool to support boards in implementing effective JK–Grade 1 assessment and intervention strategies.

The CODE project focused on collaboration at the regional level, involving the six Ministry of Education regions, with French-language boards working together as a seventh region.

In addition to the regional work, lead superintendents from the seven regions of the province came together to share effective practices. School districts implemented their own CODE projects. As a result, at a pivotal time of exciting new directions for early learning in Ontario, the CODE project made an impact at the school, district, regional and provincial levels to support JK–Grade 1 students.

Information about the project was collected from regional and board reports and from notes taken at provincial and regional meetings. System leaders with a variety of titles from both special education and curriculum departments participated in formal telephone interviews. All of the data revealed the realities of the dynamic and complex environments in which people work, and helped to identify key "lessons learned" from the CODE JK–Grade 1 project.

THE CODE PROCESS

1. **ALIGNMENT WITH KEY PARTNERS**

The project involved a partnership with the Ministry of Education and was aligned with other Ministry initiatives. The CODE leadership team participated in liaison meetings with project leaders from the Special Education Branch, the Early Learning Division, The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, and the Regional Offices to share information about early learning initiatives.

2. **LEADERSHIP AND RELATIONSHIPS**

The CODE leadership team combined a vision for the project, based on deep knowledge about special education and professional learning issues, with creativity and flexibility about ways and means. Notes from project meetings reveal the CODE leadership team repeatedly trusting the interactive process in the regions. The team refused to limit creativity by setting out detailed

guidelines for project outcomes and, as a result, fostered a context in which regions could focus on what was important to them in relation to JK–Grade 1 assessment and intervention.

While participants praised the creative design of the project, they also commented about positive relationships with CODE over the years, the influence of the CODE team, and CODE's unique ability to ensure that project goals were met.

3. **PROJECT DESIGN**

Three key components of the design of the CODE project contributed to its success.

a) **Regional Design**
Across the province, there was strong support for the regional design of the CODE project:

> "We benefitted from the opportunity to get together, to share ideas and decide on next steps. It was really interesting to see what was common across the boards and to see the gaps. It was good as well to hear what was happening across the province when the lead superintendent for our region would come back from meetings at the provincial level. That was really valuable. I always came away with more insights and new learning and I was always thinking about the next steps for us."

> Curriculum administrator interviewed June 29, 2010.

When regional representatives all came together in May 2010 to make their final presentations, they provided the following assessments of the regional process:

- Effective process that allowed self-reflection at board levels—looked at own practices
- Tremendous sharing of resources and practices
- Helped build relationships across boards and at different levels
- Intentional professional learning
- Forced collaboration between curriculum and special education
- Will affect implementation of the monitoring framework at the regional level
- Contribution to a reflective process regarding evidence-informed beliefs and practices
- Opportunity for us to model a professional learning community at the regional level
- Created expectations by participants to continue the collaborative work that was started

> Meeting Notes: Final meeting with Lead Boards, May 19, 2010.

b) **The *Collection of Evidence Template***
The CODE leadership team designed the *Collection of Evidence Template for Lead Boards.* The template was designed as an outline to guide district and regional thinking about effective, evidence-informed assessment and intervention practices, and to inform a provincial description of evidence-informed practices. The template promoted collaborative exploration of five elements: Assessment and Intervention Strategies/Use of Data; Parent Engagement and Community Collaboration; Instructional Leadership; Professional Learning and Capacity Building; and System Process/Organization. There were many reports about the value of the template as an important aspect of project design. Here is one representative example:

"The monitoring framework will support great decisions for kids because there will be a clear understanding about the need for a comprehensive approach, covering the five elements in the CODE template. ... We will monitor the program in this way, reflecting on the questions for each element. It is important to have this framework to support work with different audiences. It is a great planning and evaluation tool. We have used it in other projects to see if all the dots are in place. We can use it to support broader learning for students of all ages."

Academic coordinator interviewed June 18, 2010.

c) **Responses to Changing Circumstances:**

The CODE team demonstrated its flexibility in responding to changing circumstances during the project year. The biggest change was the introduction of the Early Learning Program. The CODE team described the need for a change of focus at the February meeting, particularly for more emphasis on parent engagement and community collaboration. The regions and boards were quick to integrate new directions for the Early Learning Program into their CODE projects.

4. **COLLABORATIVE EFFORT**

One of the main achievements of the JK–Grade 1 project was the development of strong regional networks. The networks moved beyond sharing of resources to deep reflection and questioning. System leaders across Ontario, with many different roles, were open to acknowledging the limitations of their own practices, stating that another board's practice was more effective, and that they had plans to change as a result of the shared learning.

The project also fostered collaboration between special education and curriculum departments.

"What was new in terms of collaboration in the CODE JK–Grade 1 project was the involvement of curriculum, special education and speech-language pathologists—all meeting outside their own boards. There was also a unique collaboration between small and large boards. Cross-board connections were made between people who otherwise wouldn't have met. All boards in the region had involvement from both curriculum and special education, and board projects were often led by curriculum people."

Lead Superintendent interviewed June 18, 2010.

5. **MONITORING AND SELF-EVALUATION**

There was a great deal of evidence—from presentations at meetings, final reports, and formal interviews—that the CODE JK–Grade 1 project fostered reflective conversations and self-evaluation, both at the regional and district levels.

Boards in three regions used a *Stage of Implementation Continuum* to obtain data about current practices related to the five elements. For one example, each board in the London region developed a report on its own stages of implementation for identified practices and compared that data with the regional results as presented in the final report for the London region.

6. **CONTEXT AND CHANGE**

The CODE Special Education project changed the context of discussion in regions across the province and resulted in change at the board level:

> "During the project I experienced principals, coordinators, superintendents and others involved in detailed discussions. ... Discussion embeds the learning so much more. It means that people are so much more likely to go back and put the learning into practice."
>
> Superintendent of Education/Special Education interviewed June 25, 2010.

> "After regional meetings we shared websites, information on memory sticks and great long e-mail attachments that clogged your e-mail, all about effective practices that were shared. ... The connections continued and we are using some of the information in schools. In our board, we identified eight schools and used material directly from the regional sessions."
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> System Principal, Learning Support Services, interviewed July 5, 2010.

7. SUSTAINABILITY

a) Knowledge Mobilization in Districts and Schools
There were many indications that the momentum of the CODE project would be sustained, with regions reporting that they want to keep the project going. Two regions developed a website or electronic resource to share innovative tools and practices, with information about the use of each tool or strategy.

b) Knowledge Mobilization across Ontario
The final report of the CODE Special Education JK–Grade 1 project is available on the CODE website, www.ontariodirectors.ca. Results of the CODE JK–Grade 1 initiative will also be sustained in *CODE Chronicles*, which can be accessed from the CODE website.

The CODE website also provides evidence of effective practice from board and regional reports for each of the indicators for the five elements described in the *CODE Monitoring Framework*. A separate, protected site is available to superintendents, who are invited to continue to add examples of effective practice to share with colleagues across the province.

STUDENT, SYSTEM, AND PARENT OUTCOMES

Some overarching trends and key lessons learned related to student, system and parent outcomes were highlighted repeatedly during the CODE JK–Grade 1 project.

1. Oral Language Foundation
The project had a major focus on the importance of oral language in the early years as the foundation of literacy and of all school learning. There were promising examples of effective practices with proven outcomes for students and teachers. Boards reported evidence to support the tools and strategies being used to promote student oral language development. There were

also reports of video evidence of improvement in the ability of educators to model and use oral language stimulation strategies.

2. **Entry and Transition Planning**
There was evidence of effective practice for preschool transitions, which included collaboration with day care settings and a wide range of community agencies.

3. **Site-based Professional Learning**
Project participants all stressed the value of site-based professional learning in which educators study student data and student products together and plan effective interventions. The level of detail about site-based learning that was shared in CODE project meetings is demonstrated in the following account:

> "[A speech-language pathologist] described the ways in which the SLPs are heavily involved in providing professional learning for teachers, especially regarding phonological awareness and oral language. ….Then, in a tiered approach, the SLPs modelled the way to move from whole-class to small groupings, using the same text. They also developed a chart to address any level of the hierarchy of oral language learning and choose appropriate texts and tasks."

> Meeting Notes: Presentation by a speech-language pathologist, regional meeting, April 28, 2010

Board reports provided detailed examples of site-based professional learning:

> Two kindergarten teachers and two consultants worked together to plan a teaching cycle that used play-based classroom experiences to develop and increase contextual vocabulary and the proficient use of oral language. The teachers implemented the program during a four-week cycle and collected data using observations, conversations, student work and videotaping. … The teachers and consultants analyzed student achievement for the cycle and identified the lessons learned during the team project. Data indicated that the play-based centres increased the use of oral language, and the vocabulary used in focus lessons was observed to be transferred to the centre conversations.

> District School Board final report

4. **Adapting Commercial and Board-Developed Tools**
There were comments about teachers questioning the value of collecting assessment data that do not directly inform classroom interventions. There were also reports about teachers adapting commercial and board-developed assessment and intervention tools to make them more useful in promoting higher levels of thinking. This readiness to adapt established tools and practices indicates that teachers have increased confidence in their own classroom observations and a professional sense of empowerment. Boards reported that teachers are more supportive of the materials if they have a role in adapting them.

5. **Curriculum and Special Education**
There were many reports across Ontario about the new collaboration between curriculum and special education, and about plans to continue with joint work as a result of the CODE project. The project initiated professional conversations about the most effective ways to help children, beginning by providing differentiated tier 1 instruction for all students.

The final report from the French Language Region noted a progression from questions that delayed the project—about whether the CODE project was a special education or curriculum initiative—to excitement about working together, with plans to continue joint meetings in the future.

6. **Multidisciplinary Focus**
The multidisciplinary aspect of CODE projects was highlighted repeatedly. There were comments about this focus at the school, board, and regional levels.

At the school level, teachers were working with special education resource teachers and consultants to reflect on data and engage in dialogues about the most effective interventions. Boards reported that they had multidisciplinary teams reflecting on current practice and sharing tools and strategies during the CODE project. All of the regions reported on the multidisciplinary teams involved in their discussions. Here is one example:

> "We had speech-language pathologists, coordinators, superintendents, special assignment teachers, principals, resource teachers, consultants, and a psychologist in our regional meetings. I would challenge anyone coming in from outside without knowing the people ahead of time to listen to the dialogue and then identify people by their roles."
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> <div align="right">Lead Superintendent interviewed June 17, 2010.</div>

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE GROWTH

School-Level Implications

1. **Conducting Further Classroom Research**
The CODE Special Education JK–Grade 1 project has underlined the need for more research about early learning and the precursors to reading and writing skills. Educators of JK–Grade 1 children need to draw upon their knowledge and experience to conduct systematic classroom inquiry. Voices from the schools are extremely important in educational research.

> Educational performance data deserve intelligent interpretation. Indeed, sustainable improvement depends on it. ...and when teachers have the professional discretion to use data to justify trying innovative approaches without anxiety and intimidation, then data can play a powerful role in improving learning and increasing achievement.
>
> <div align="right">Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2009). The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change, p. 39.</div>

2. **Implementing *Essential for Some, Good for All***
The Universal Design for Learning principle of "Essential for Some*;* Good for All" kept emerging during the CODE JK–Grade 1 project. Although no one is suggesting that every support provided for special circumstances must be extended to all, "Essential for Some; Good for All" is such a powerful concept that there are important reasons to continue to extend this philosophy and practice across Ontario. Some examples are as follows:

- The use of a sound field system in Kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms demonstrated improvement in class attention, behaviour, speech understanding, academic outcomes, reading outcomes, and in teacher vocal health.

- Boards implemented the Autism Spectrum Disorders Project to enhance the transition process into schools for students with special needs. They realized the effectiveness of using key features of that process as a basis for the entry process into schools for *all* JK children.

- Project participants noted that educators change the classroom environment to change learning for students with special needs; e.g., by providing visual reminders for steps in a task, or darkening the desktop before placing white paper on it to help children with attention problems to focus on print. A "lesson learned" from the CODE project is that such adaptations can be useful for *all* children.

- One region referenced the need for sensitivity in working with Aboriginal populations, and then noted that the same practices are useful in working with all parents. It is important to establish a trusting relationship first, and to listen to parents before engaging them in discussions about student needs.

3. **Creating a Multidisciplinary Context**

The big picture that summarizes almost all of the examples of "Essential for Some; Good for All" is the need to have special education and curriculum departments at all levels working together. As the CODE JK–Grade 1 project demonstrated, whenever there is a question about effective interventions, the first place to seek assistance is from special education.

4. **Using Assessment to Inform Intervention**

Final reports, discussions at CODE project meetings, and interview responses demonstrated the need to promote what Lorna Earl and Steven Katz refer to as "a shift from calculation to interpretation." Collecting data is no longer enough. System leaders want to know how to support teachers in "experimenting and learning from actual data" and using data "to uncover patterns and to generate hypotheses" (Lorna Earl and Steven Katz [2006], *Leading Schools in a Data-Rich World,* p. 5).

5. **Supporting Oral Language Learning**

There was an identified need across the province to support teachers in building capacity to teach oral language as the foundation of literacy and learning. There was much discussion of the need for better, more precise ways to assess it—and even more urgently, to align effective interventions with that data.

6. **Promoting Parent Engagement**

There were frequent reports that boards need to find new and creative ways to engage parents at a deeper level. Here is one representative example:

"The second gap was presenting assessment findings to parents in a consistent way across each district and ensuring that parents were involved in understanding the goals of the intervention process. Our districts must continue to 'energize' all of the education partners."

Final regional report, May 2010.

Board-Level Implications

1. **Supporting Classroom Research and Review**

Boards need to create a climate that encourages teachers to conduct classroom research and to question and revise commercial and board-mandated assessment tools and strategies. This climate can be fostered by:

- acknowledging teacher input and suggestions;
- setting up a cyclical review process for all mandated assessments; and
- supporting classroom research projects which promote questioning and revision of established tools and practices.

2. **Improving Monitoring Practices**

There were many discussions across the province about monitoring, what it means, and the most effective ways to do it. This was an area of board improvement that was frequently mentioned as an area for growth.

3. **Providing Electronic Data**

The need for ongoing tracking of the impact of different interventions over time was referenced frequently. There were reports that the use of electronic data would support this tracking, promote the sharing of data, and enhance system monitoring of effective practices. All of the comments about an increased interest in monitoring and electronic data collection demonstrate support for transparency and peer interaction.

> "...there is no way that continuous improvement can occur without constant transparency fuelled by good data. ...When transparency is consistently evident, it creates an aura of 'positive pressure'— pressure that is experienced as fair and reasonable, pressure that is actionable in that it points to solutions, and pressure that ultimately is inescapable."

> Fullan, Michael (2008), *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do to Help Their Organizations Survive and Thrive,* p. 14.

4. **Building Multidisciplinary Capacity**

Boards have a key leadership role in creating an environment that supports and promotes site-based, collaborative learning. A key aspect of site-based professional learning which was referenced many times is the need to enhance the collaboration between special education and curriculum departments and to promote multidisciplinary approaches in schools and districts.

Regional-Level Implications

Participants in the CODE project want to continue to work together at the regional level and to conduct joint research at the regional level.

Provincial-Level Implications

Project participants highlighted the expectation that lessons learned during the CODE JK–Grade 1 project would inform the implementation of the Early Learning Program. They also noted the need for the Ministry of Education to support joint work between special education and curriculum at the school, board, regional, and provincial levels. The Ministry was also asked to recognize and support new roles for speech-language pathologists in providing site-based professional learning for classroom teachers.

All of the comments and reports in support of the five elements and the use of the indicators and reflective questions that were part of the *Collection of Evidence Template* stress the need for a province-wide self-evaluation tool for JK–Grade 1. Regions and boards welcome the introduction of the *JK–Grade 1 Assessment and Intervention Strategies Monitoring Framework*, and have expectations that it will increase understanding of the multi-faceted nature of early learning issues, promote capacity building at all levels, and support more consistent practice across the province.