Leadership for Parent and Community Involvement: Lessons from Recent Research in Ontario

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We all expect a lot from school principals. We expect them to be knowledgeable instructional leaders as well as effective managers; we expect them to implement reforms from above but also to push back when the mandates seem unreasonable; we expect principals to have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work well not only within schools, but also within districts and within communities. In addition to these expectations, current educational policies are shaping principals’ work in particular ways. For example, the province’s investment in literacy development, in conjunction with the publication of EQAO results, leads many principals naturally to emphasize literacy and an annual test.

When principals take on certain areas of concern, does other important school leadership work necessarily take a back seat? For example, thanks in large part to the work—and additional resources—of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, in Ontario it is currently impossible to imagine a principal saying, “Sure, literacy is important, but our kids cannot do literacy well.” So why, then, was it so common for us to hear during a recent research project something distressingly similar about parental involvement? At one school experiencing some school improvement success we heard, “Parent and community connections and involvement are important, but our parents are not able or interested in being involved with the school.” How should we make sense of this statement? In this article we describe some troubling patterns we noticed among principals during a recent research project, we suggest some explanations for why these patterns exist, and we conclude with recommendations for positive next steps.

This article is based on research conducted during the 2005-2006 school year and funded by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of the Ministry of Education. The study was a partnership between the Secretariat, two large school districts in Ontario, and the Centre for Urban Schooling at OISE/UT. As part of the study, teams of researchers visited 20 schools selected by their districts for having demonstrated exemplary improvement results although the schools faced “challenging circumstances.” During the visits researchers interviewed administrators, teachers, parents and students to learn how different members of the school community explained why the school was experiencing
success and what challenges the school faced. Researchers also administered a school climate survey to all teachers. Individual case studies were written for each school and provided to the principals for their assessment of accuracy and emphasis. After revision of the case studies, the research team then conducted cross-case analysis.

One of the most interesting findings from the research was that all of the schools, no matter how different they were from one another, demonstrated a strong focus on literacy and literacy programs. In every school, consistently, we witnessed and heard about many literacy strategies important to effective literacy teaching and learning. Almost all schools had literacy rooms and used techniques such as the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) wall to track student progress and to program appropriately to meet individual students’ needs. In addition to Reading Recovery and ESL instructors, there were literacy coordinators or lead teachers in most of the schools who provided on-going support and professional development to their staffs.

The impact of the provincial policy was quite vivid. During interviews, principals spoke to us clearly about the paramount importance of this literacy work for their students. Principals talked about the resources that have come to schools in staffing, in programs and materials, and in professional development geared towards creating positive literacy learning in schools. For example, one principal explained the central role of the Ministry in literacy development when she said, “It’s very clear. I think all of the documents coming out, all the expert panel pieces have just solidified for us [a focus on literacy], and again we’ve used some of those great tools for our teachers. It’s not just my vision or the District’s vision; this is what’s happening across the province. So there is no confusion that we are all coming to the same place. We’re all focused on the same literacy goals.”

Another principal made clear the centrality of the literacy work, saying, “Well literacy is a huge focus, not only in the school, but in [the district]…Everyone in [the district] is working towards the same literacy plan.”

The provincial government has decided that increasing literacy scores across the province is essential and has put much money and resources into making this growth happen. Furthermore, it is clear that this provincial literacy funding is for literacy use, meaning that the province holds school districts accountable for spending this money on literacy and for raising the literacy scores in their board. In a Ministry document from September 2004 the Ministry states that

the McGuinty government’s goal is to see 75 per cent of 12-year-olds reaching the provincial standard on province-wide reading, writing and math tests by 2008. Only 82,000, or slightly more than half of students, are achieving that standard today. In June, the government announced $160 million in new resources for the "Education Foundations Program" to assist more students each year reach high levels in reading, writing, comprehension and math. The investment is already showing results (Ministry of Education, Press Release, September 2004).
No one can deny that it is a positive thing for resources to go into literacy programming. The high level of these resources in conjunction with the inherent accountability (EQAO results) have had an important impact on how schools ‘do’ literacy. And although there are potential drawbacks to any standardized and centralized top-down policy and although there are several questions about the literacy policy to examine in future research—Does one size fit all? Are the literacy learning materials responsive to the needs of schools in different contexts?—our point here is to emphasize that when the province decided that it wanted an improvement in literacy scores and invested significant resources, policy reached into schools and into classrooms.

The second most consistent thing we learned when we looked across the twenty schools was that all principals talked about parent/community connections as significant, but unlike with literacy policy, principals’ views varied widely on the subject. And the view we heard most frequently emphasized what principals said they couldn’t do, not what they could. Parents were routinely described more as a deficit than as an asset to their children and their children’s education. Many principals spoke to us candidly and openly about the difficulties they have when trying to build connections to parents; some principals did so diagnostically, by way of identifying areas for growth, but more described the absence of deep connections with parents and community simply as part of what they took for granted about their work in those particular schools, a fact of life over which they felt they had little influence.

When asked about the biggest challenges in his school one principal stated, “You know, I’ve asked parents for help, and without reply. So the kids go home and the parents are either working long hours or don’t speak English, and so in a way the kids kind of rule the roost for a while when they get home. We could call parents and bring them in, but that doesn’t usually solve the problem.” When describing what made working at his school challenging another principal described the parents of his students. “A challenge would be parents supporting their kids at home,” he said. “And I don’t know if they don’t have the time because they’re working weird shifts, or two jobs, or they’re single parents or if they don’t understand how to help their kids at home in a real way.” A different principal echoed this sentiment saying, “One of the biggest challenges we have is the involvement of parents. The bulk of the community, sometimes the parents are working two jobs or working shifts, and language issues, they’re not here as much as we would like them to be so that’s an issue and a challenge for us and its been a challenge for a while.” During our research visits we were often told of the lack of participation on the part of parents. For example, one principal said, “I’ve worked at schools in different areas where you have a parent council meeting and there’s like 30 or 40 people in a room that come out to give their opinions and here we’re lucky if we get two parents to show up.” Another quote exemplifies what we heard several times at several different sites during our research. When characterizing what the biggest challenges were facing the school, another principal told us, “Parents and non involvement; there are a lot of parents who are not involved in the school. You know, trying to get them involved and to get them to help at home, that’s a big challenge. There are a lot of students who need that and they don’t have that.”
So, what do we make of principals’ assertions about parent involvement? In some comments, such as “we’re lucky if we get two parents to show up,” we got the sense that low parental involvement was seen to be inevitable rather than a specific challenge needing serious concrete planning as would be the case if the person was discussing low literacy progress. In other comments, like “they don’t understand how to help their kids at home in a real way,” we hear parents being described as a “problem,” something schools need to accept and work around. And even when principals had sympathetic hypotheses for low parental involvement—two jobs, home language different from the language used at school—there seemed to be little understanding that the school itself might have something to learn from the parents, or that learning these things might help the school in its instructional mission. Seldom did principals tell us that there is a need for schools to learn from parents in terms of figuring out a way to build a new kind of relationship which accepts both parties as valuable and as contributing to the successful learning of children.

The provincial government has recently developed a Parent Involvement Policy. On October 19, 2006, Minister of Education Kathleen Wynne, in announcing new resources said “We recognize that parents play a vital role in the development and education of their child and the success of our schools. That is why we are providing targeted funding to help parents overcome any challenges they have regarding involvement—so they can better support their children’s learning” (Ministry of Education, Press Release, October 19, 2006).

As part of the implementation of the Parent Involvement Policy the Minister announced $1 million province-wide for school council grants to help create a more welcoming environment for parents. As well, the Minister announced $750,000 for parent focused regional and provincial projects.

These seem like worthwhile first steps, and the policy seems to envision parents and public schools working together in a collective endeavor. But the announced policy also appears to overlook the emerging lessons from other provincial policies like the literacy initiatives that have linked policy expectations with significant additional resources and serious, publicly measured “accountability.” We note in the policy no mention of additional resources specifically for professional development of principals and teachers to build parent/community outreach skills, nor have resources evidently been directed toward hiring new staff such as School Community Workers to bridge the cultural, class and racial divides that can often exist between schools and the parents and communities which they are supposed to serve. We note no change in the prevailing EQAO definition of a good school to include assessment of a school’s effectiveness in encouraging positive parental/school relationships. How will the province know if schools are in fact improving their connections between schools and parents? How, if at all, will principals—particularly those who seem to see parents in such deficit ways—learn the skills to work more effectively with parents?

For families whose experiences in school have not been positive, for families who come from a completely different education system elsewhere in the world, for families who do
not speak or understand English, building and maintaining a strong connection to a school will be a slow and difficult process. For a principal driven to raise test scores, making connections outside the walls of the school may seem to hold little measurable benefit when “benefit” is defined narrowly. Distances between schools and their communities can be bridged and the principalship represents a crucial bridge between home and school. So how do we shape parent and community involvement policies that take into account the complexity of the task, that respect the fact that teachers’, administrators’, and parents’ time and energy are scarce resources, and that emphasize that collaborative relationships are not just tools for other kinds of school improvement but are in fact themselves symbols and substance of the struggle for good schools?

Policy mandates that only rhetorically encourage principals to make these connections, and leave them to do it on their own without substantial material support and shared understandings of concrete measures of progress, seem unlikely to live up to anyone’s aspirations for the policy’s impact. In this article, are we suggesting that the province’s emphasis on literacy leads to an under-emphasis on parental involvement? Of course not. The purpose of the comparison, however, is to argue that policy priorities and resources matter. If we believe that parental involvement is important but we have no way to measure it, few resources to support it, and if some principals in the field seem to approach the topic with negative dispositions, we should not be surprised if our rhetoric not only disappoints but also builds skepticism into the system.

Literacy and numeracy are among the most important purposes of public schooling. They do not, however, constitute the entire list of what public schools can do or should do. Other public purposes of public education include connecting communities and institutionalizing public participation in the building a more equitable and just society. Schools cannot do this work alone, just as they could not raise literacy achievement solely on the basis of shared hope and aspiration. Resources and funding for parent/community connections would go a long way towards realizing this democratic purpose of schooling and toward providing our young people with a more equitable society in which to learn and live.

To learn more about school-community partnerships and to hear from parents, principals, and educators involved in successful collaborations, attend the National Inner City Conference in Toronto April 19-21, 2007 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. The Conference is titled: Inner City, Strength in Diversity/Advocating for the Future. Check the conference web-site: www.tdsb.on.ca/innercityconference

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