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*Closing the Achievement Gap* . . . . . closing  
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# Principal Congress 2009

Roger Martin, *Keynote Address*

UÑ *Video highlights of Martin's keynote address are available at*

## RESOURCE MATERIALS\*

UÑ *Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management* (Gardner, 2003)

UÑ *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* (2007), *Report of the*

UÑ *Task Force on the Future of Ontario Education*

\*Resources are from the Ministry of Education, unless otherwise specified.  
The final report for Principal Congress 2009 is available at



# Principal Congress 2010

Richard Elmore, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Practice-Based Approach to Improving Schools*, Harvard Education Review, 79(2), 10-16. <http://www.heer.org/issue792/10-16>

UÑ Video highlights of Elmore's keynote address are available at

<http://www.heer.org/issue792/10-16>

## RESOURCE MATERIALS

UÑ <http://www.heer.org/issue792/10-16>

UÑ *Ideas Into Action for School and System Leaders*, <http://www.heer.org/issue792/10-16>

<http://www.heer.org/issue792/10-16>

UÑ <http://www.heer.org/issue792/10-16>

<http://www.heer.org/issue792/10-16>, 2 (3.3-5) . *Instructional Rounds in Education:*

# Principal Congress 2011



Douglas Willms, *Principal*

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UÑ *Video highlights of Willms's keynote address are available at*

## RESOURCE MATERIALS

UÑ *The School Effectiveness Framework* (2010),

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UÑ *Core Leadership Capacities* ( ) *Ideas Into Action: Five Core Capacities of Effective Leaders* ( 200 ),

UÑ *What Did You Do in School Today?: Transforming Classrooms Through Social, Academic and Intellectual Engagement* ( ) (200 ),

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## Reflective Writing Responses

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We found it was important to acknowledge the difficulties and obstacles to improvement and success. We had to reframe the obstacles into opportunities for growth and learning for staff and students. It was important to get teachers on board with a belief that we could achieve and that we would be successful. To ensure improved results, we performed a gap analysis, employed resources, and engaged our staff in professional development where necessary.

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I can envision the benefits that would be brought to students via a new school culture, but it is taking longer than I ever thought for staff to buy in. I need to spend



to collective decisions that align with board goals. This in turn will improve the quality of our instructional practices. I will observe how sta initiate new ideas from the points I raise, how readily sta buy into the theories of action we plan, and how sta begin to contribute independently to our collective plan. These observations will in turn give me evidence to feed into my own double-loop learning.

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I looked for ways to involve the sta in the recognition and planning stages. To start with, I proposed a visit to a demographically equivalent Lighthouse school so that we would not be able to say the gap between their school and ours was because of socio-economic and similar factors. Before our visit we prepared a signi cant number of questions that we emailed to the school. The dialogue during the trip was one of the best professional dialogues I have ever been a part of. We left the school with a clear direction and a focus that emerged from within rather than being dictated from above. The collaborative learning with the other school was amazing and prompted a di erent level of communication within our own team as well.

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## Influencing Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes

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The year has been a steep learning curve for me as we reshape the school's culture. The school suffered a blow when their principal was removed and I was unexpectedly placed there. There was a fear among teachers that I was there to judge, supervise, and report. As a result, I purposefully used the first two months to connect with them as individuals before I visited their classrooms on an official basis. My slow wade into the waters allowed staff to re-establish their confidence and also allowed families and students to get to know me and my commitment to supporting this very positive school environment. Once I felt they trusted me as a leader and saw me as a team player, I slowly began to introduce my goals for school improvement.



The immediate challenge is to bring all staff on board, to collectively and consistently effect positive change. Part of this challenge is that the staff has a huge distrust for administration. The previous few years have been difficult for them, and they have felt unsupported. This has affected their level of passion and commitment to improving. The challenge for me is to lead and facilitate in a way that will bring staff back together to get working on the critical pieces that will affect student achievement.



As a principal you need to develop your personal vision of goals for staffing, the program, and the physical plant. At the same time you need to develop a system to gather information from staff about what their needs are in this same regard and then do your utmost to help them achieve their professional goals. This develops trust to the point that staff will follow you – even if they don't completely understand your personal vision (despite your frequent "selling" of it) or even if they disagree at the start but support the process out of respect for you.





Closing the achievement gap means examining each student, case by case, and putting strategies in place to address the problems that stand in the way of closing the gap. Engaging sta in this process can be challenging since it requires self-re ection about what is working and what is not working in their instructional practices. Moving all sta forward requires a safe collegial environment – a professional learning community that sets common goals and measures but also provides support and avoids laying blame.

Good leaders are highly visible – they lead “from everywhere”. As I walk around in my daily classroom visits, I regularly photograph and post to our online school discussion site examples of best practice – room organization or layout, word walls,



of primary literacy assessments on her class and reflecting on her journey as a teacher, “I now know I suck at teaching letter–sound recognition to my students and I need to do a better job.” Her remark, stated to other primary teachers and myself, indicated the level of trust and safety she must feel to be able to make such a revealing statement about her practice, which may lead others to be truthful in examining what they are doing to improve student learning and achievement, and how well they are doing it.

If I were to tackle this challenge again at another school, I would immediately establish professional learning communities that would focus on the required change and monitor the best practices closely. I would also meet with teachers on an individual basis regularly to discuss their professional and personal needs, and would expect them to value instructional time. Since teaching has become a more challenging job, I would allocate school funds to support the goals and provide the professional development needed to meet the goals. I would also be more direct with dissenting staff members and be very upfront about our goals and the need for accountability.

If I were to start over again at this school, I would spend more time building

scheduling, and the giving of permission that if a new practice initially does not work, then that is fine.

I will continue to be creative in scheduling and timetabling in order to meet the needs of teachers . . . finding the balance between classroom instruction and the need for in-service training, mentorship, and professional development. I want to become better able to filter information and to align new initiatives as much as possible in order to reduce the amount of paperwork needed for the many initiatives we have become involved in. These next steps reflect my theory of action because I believe in the initiatives . . . we need to get better at how these initiatives are implemented, presented, delivered, and timed so that teachers are not left to feel as though they are never doing enough.

As innumerable communications pass my desk, my first question is always, "How will this improve student achievement?" If the activity is labour-intensive for teachers but will result in positive outcomes, I will bring the opportunity to the teachers. If the activity looks very labour-intensive and appears to have little impact on student growth, I will try to find a way to minimize the burden on teachers.

In order to continue to implement differentiated instruction, I think we need to work hard at allowing teachers opportunities to learn from each other. Those teachers who have made the shift are a wealth of knowledge for others – funds and resources need to be channelled to support knowledge sharing, and principals

teachers. Initiatives and practices that are teacher-directed and -led are more sustainable and have greater impact, in my experience.

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Sometimes teachers get “locked in” to seeing students by level (“She’s a level 2 student”) instead of believing the students have the potential to work at higher

were given the opportunity to attend a conference on A&E. This led to great discussions and provided an excellent opportunity to learn more about A&E. The group who had attended the conference then led some of the A&E sessions offered at the second PD day and spent time with their department, sharing their new knowledge with others.

## Staffing and Assignments

“getting the right people on the bus”

Staffing allocations (teaching assignments) are extremely important. The choice of who teaches which classes will have a definite effect on not only student achievement but also student engagement, and this will also be reflected in student atten-



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We have placed two very experienced teachers in the primary grades. They are reading specialists, are very familiar with the curriculum, know how to differentiate instruction, and can effectively implement strategies and resources to benefit our students.

State literacy coaches were assigned to the program to provide support for teachers and intensive remediation for students.

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It took significantly longer than I expected to change the thinking of my staff. After careful consideration, I made a decision in consultation with the superintendent to request an administrative transfer for one teacher. Over the next two years, changes in grade and division assignments of a group of teachers also took place. A couple of teachers who were not happy with a reassignment in turn applied for transfers to other schools or retired.

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### Allocating Time

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engaging in inquiry that is rooted in our school goals and inspired by their own students' learning.

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While two or three teachers from a given grade are freed up for an hour, I take the classes to the auditorium for a special presentation. During this time teachers meet to discuss student engagement strategies and how to embed these in their classrooms.

## Aligning Resources with Needs

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We have moved some school resources into the Grade 9 group to facilitate this change. It will require a positive and trusting relationship between the teachers and the administration. The support personnel will help with materials and suggestions for the teachers to lessen the workload in the beginning so as to help the change gain momentum.

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We are working hard to incorporate programming and supports for Aboriginal students, who are entering school at different grades and levels and from a wide range of family circumstances and challenges. We try to identify their needs prior to school entry so that we can be better prepared to assist them to be successful, and we have incorporated Native Languages courses taught by Aboriginal teachers.

## The Principal's Role as Resource

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been more than happy with the extra support for their students and have adopted high-yield strategies more readily when they see them in action.

I think the reason this process works for us is because we have seen its impact in the lives of our students. We are an inner-city school with many of the socio-economic issues that come with it. However, our student achievement over the last two years, as indicated in our Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) scores and our school-based data, has steadily improved, and I do believe we are levelling the playing field for many of our students. I feel my role as instructional leader is pivotal in this process, and I continually challenge myself to learn as much as I can on a daily basis and to find avenues for my own professional learning to support the process back at school.

I am continuing my personal development by reading about strategies to promote courageous discussions with my team. I take part in discussion groups, and I work closely with a coach who, for several years, has been demonstrating her considerable expertise in highly collaborative teamwork.

I think that it is important to demonstrate that it is through the concerted effort of every member on the team, including myself, that we will develop system-wide strategies that truly help every student. Finally, we will be more confident that teamwork is the foundation of a high level of achievement on the part of both students and teachers.

One of my roles is that of an instructional leader in the junior division, and I realize that I have not focused enough on the other divisions. Certainly work within the junior division has started, but the intermediate team has not consistently been provided with my time and energy. The creation of a primary book room is a good example of poor strategizing on my part. If I were to do it over, I would move right to creating a book room for the whole school. Although my focus was on primary, the other divisions should have been included more in a variety of areas.

## Outside Resources

Consultants from the office of student services came to coach our teachers and learning-resource teachers so that IEPs that meet the students' needs could be developed. The various expectations listed in the IEPs are now attainable and measurable. They are also realistic, and they motivate the students. We now offer a writer to the student who requires this service, and we are working a lot more with the learning-resource teacher to get the accommodations in place.

The addition of a literacy/numeracy coach at our school is an asset. The numeracy learning centres have evolved, and they address the various learning styles of all of our students. Classroom instruction has become more explicit, and our discussions at PLC (Professional Learning Community) meetings concentrate more on data analysis. I can already see the changes being made in the classrooms.

Listening to the needs of the staff and getting my own hands dirty in the process served as the key practice that effected change. Staff recognized that I did not have all the answers, was willing to say so, and knew where to go to find the assistance that we needed. Inviting others from beyond the school to share in the growth that our staff had made was key. Hearing words of encouragement and thanks for taking on the challenge was well received by all.

## Hiring and Selection

I looked for teachers who in their own lives were slightly off the beaten path. I routinely tried to scare off anybody who sent me a résumé. Some thanked me for my candid talk and politely declined to continue their application route. However, by getting high-energy, committed people in the Literacy and Special Ed positions,

even if they were only in their second year of teaching, we were able to start to turn things around.

I lobbied for a vice-principal who I knew had exceptional technological skills and an intermediate background so that I could work with the junior division.

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## Collecting and Using Data

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... assessment data ...

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With support from the board and OFIP (the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership), we were able to, in our PLCs, narrow our focus and look carefully at our data, to dig deeper and work to understand what the data was telling us about student learning. The dialogue was rich, and learning for staff was evident. Intermediate staff seemed less able to obtain a deep understanding of what the information was telling them. Data for Grades 3 and 6 seemed irrelevant to them, and they felt the suggested high-yield strategies did not fit their settings. I thought that introducing the *Think Literacy* documents might provide an opportunity for learning. Personnel from the board provided some in-service training for the intermediate staff, and I further utilized board supports to review, discuss, and give practical examples. To stimulate further discussion, I introduced Grade 9 and 10 data and board benchmark data, such as those drawn from Computerized Access to Support and Information (CASI) and Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA) results. But I still feel that we are missing the deeper understanding and true implementation.



Our results for our primary and junior divisions on the provincial measures of achievement, EQAO, are not as strong as they should be, given our community's high scores on the Early Development Instrument (EDI) and the fact that we are a community of high socio-economic status. The challenge was to assist teachers in finding the balance between focused use of classroom assessments (as, of, and for learning) to inform day-to-day student work and of data from standardized assessments such as CASI, DRA, and EQAO so that both kinds of information can be applied to improve our student achievement on external accountability measures.

We have begun to raise the profile of credit accumulation data, graduation rates, and rates of students who are achieving at levels 3 and 4 to complement our understanding of how effective our school is overall. This change in focus has shown us the value of targeting the needs of our current group of students. This year, our school's focus is on using achievement data from a variety of sources to guide our practice. Ideally, we would get to a point where teachers would have access to their current students' achievement data at the start of each term and would make



instructional decisions tailored to specific needs. For this focus to be successful, teachers would need to be well equipped with a variety of instructional strategies and tools to meet the differing needs they would face.

The more successful forays have involved providing release time and strategically selecting leaders within the school who not only are able to make sense of the data and take ownership of it, but are also teachers who have the respect of their colleagues.

We analysed the EQAO data and examined the report card marks, and our analysis shows that in general, students' difficulties are in the area of reading – more specifically, the ability to establish connections. Further, the results show that it would be beneficial to work on the students' vocabulary. The alignment of assessment practices is helping us to better target the strategies to use. The school improvement team is aware that student learning is ongoing, and that the success of our students is everybody's business.

...and I think that's the key to success. It's not just about the data, it's about the people who are using it.

If I could go back in time, I would have assessed the situation differently by examining the data more closely. Staffing and budget decisions could have been different, although great strides were made in the primary division. A needs assessment of the junior division would have highlighted their needs sooner and would perhaps have influenced the direction of professional development.

## Sustaining Improvement

...and I think that's the key to success. It's not just about the data, it's about the people who are using it.

The focus of my professional dialogue with staff during meetings and individual conversations was about our commitment to raising standards for all students. I continuously challenged the thinking and learning of staff to further develop their professional practice. There was a constant need to refocus and reframe challenges into action statements that were within our circle of influence as educators. I openly challenged stereotypical thinking by examining data we had about our students, our community, and our school. We celebrated every success, no matter how small it seemed.

...and we have been successful in building a culture of learning and student achievement. At these meetings, I continue to teach the sta how to track and analyse data with our data-collection tool, Le Co re. We discuss the School Improvement Plan and alter it when necessary. I continue to meet with sta members to make sure that they are con dent about the PLC approach and to help them with their development. At our Macro-PLC meetings, we discuss challenges we face and strategies for overcoming them.

Our monthly meetings are becoming forums for instructive discussions about learning and student achievement. At these meetings, I continue to teach the sta how to track and analyse data with our data-collection tool, Le Co re. We discuss the School Improvement Plan and alter it when necessary. I continue to meet with sta members to make sure that they are con dent about the PLC approach and to help them with their development. At our Macro-PLC meetings, we discuss challenges we face and strategies for overcoming them.



...implementation dip ... optimism

We su ered an implementation dip after the rst year of our school improvement plan. It showed us that we had to refocus on instruction, with more sta dialogue and shared planning. We had to continue to build the relationship between assessment strategies and e ective classroom practice and support. We needed to strive for “best practitioners”, rather than just focusing on best practices.

All sta must be responsible for this process of change. If we want change to occur everyone must have a role and an accountability loop and must feel supported along the way. I nd asking teachers to work in teams with reporting loops assists me as the instructional leader in charge of the school. I also engage sta in courageous dialogue to enrich thinking, remove barriers, and keep focused. Too often school goals can be shifted due to anecdotal comments that are not founded in data. It is my job as the school leader to help process this type of thinking and manage all teams' ongoing progress towards our goal.

...and we have been successful in building a culture of learning and student achievement. At these meetings, I continue to teach the sta how to track and analyse data with our data-collection tool, Le Co re. We discuss the School Improvement Plan and alter it when necessary. I continue to meet with sta members to make sure that they are con dent about the PLC approach and to help them with their development. At our Macro-PLC meetings, we discuss challenges we face and strategies for overcoming them.

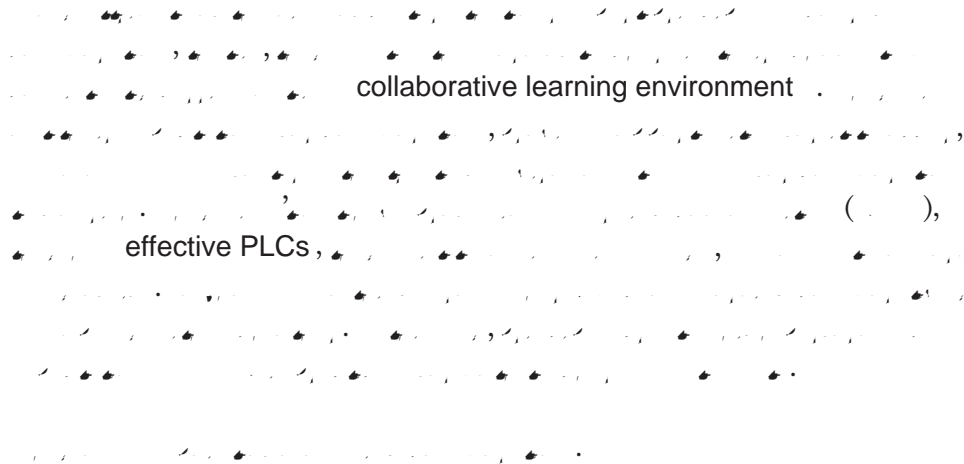
As an intermediate division, we have been moderately successful but still need to go so much broader and deeper. We began with an expert talk and book study on the theory and then took elements of each high-yield strategy to try in our





as a deliberate teaching strategy in their classrooms. As an example, the technique of using exit cards – cards that students complete at the end of a class to state what they have learned – as a strategy to check for learning was presented at a sta meeting last year. The idea was met with enthusiasm, and we have seen much evidence of its use among many sta members in the current year. Teachers share stories of how this technique has allowed more students to express themselves and ask questions.

We have had success when teachers work in cross-panel groups such as 7–12 to look at how they can develop a continuum for success. Support by subject specialists at the secondary level is beneficial to elementary teachers, who have expressed concerns about teaching some of the more difficult concepts in math, for example. Elementary teachers, conversely, have a lot of experience with differentiation that they can share with their secondary colleagues. Encouraging this type of collaboration allows for excellent and relevant professional development for teachers.



Our theory of action is asking teachers to enter into a partnership with their students to improve both their own learning and that of their students. It is therefore necessary that the working environment reflect the same relationship. By modelling and entering into such a partnership with the teachers, the administration can improve teacher instruction. But this is not a one-way street – we also will be learning from them. If the culture of school practice becomes one of partnerships with a goal of improved learning for all participants, then the school will become a dynamic learning environment fuelled by synergy.



My early observations as principal were that it was not a priority for teachers to reflect on their own practice. If the concept of PLCs was to be successful in our school, I knew that I had to hook this very committed and wise group of teachers with an angle they could not resist. I chose to stress the element of research. I began slowly in the early years, providing them with articles about a variety of

The school's leadership team is cultivating a change in perception and culture, wherein literacy development is not seen as the responsibility of the English department, the school's literacy lead, or the literacy committee. Instead, literacy development is regarded as a school-wide, focal endeavour that is supported by all staff members in their daily practice.

We have come a long way for a group of individuals that sat in silence waiting for someone to tell us what to do. We have become a collaborative idea-sharing community with one common purpose – student achievement and school success.

Thinking as a collective unit is a new norm.

If I needed to implement effective PLCs in a different school, I would structure the process much differently. I would make sure that each session had a particular focus around student achievement. I would provide questions, articles, student work, data, etc., to focus the discussion. It would also be very important to be part of each session. The teams need to have the administrator as part of the PLC on a



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This year we have decided to use school council evenings to run events that encourage parents to come to the school. We capitalized on our past knowledge that parents don't tend to come for meetings, but they do come if there is a potluck dinner and if their children are an integral part of the event. One evening, we informed parents and their children about the demographics in our school and how strengthening literacy in their first language helps to strengthen literacy in English. We then watched a video entitled "The Peace Tree" and had families come together to make ornaments symbolizing peace across the cultures for a tree that we decorated subsequently in a neighbouring mall.

The next month, we hosted a potluck dinner in a common room where booths were set up around the perimeter, highlighting aspects of different cultures and what being respectful to each culture looked like. At each booth, guest readers used document cameras and LCD projectors to read dual-language books to families and model how these books can be used to share the love of literacy with children. Over the course of the evening, we enlisted some parents to come to the school at particular lunchtimes to read dual-language books to students as an extracurricular activity.

We then ran a third night where interpreters worked with staff to teach parents

am in classrooms on a regular basis. Each visit provides me with insight into how teachers provide students with opportunities to develop socially, academically, and intellectually. These visits enable me to share with parents/guardians the ways in which our curricular engagements are authentic, varied, and rigorous.

התנאים האלה יבטיחו לנו את ההצלחה הנדרשת. אנחנו יחד עם הורים ומוסדות חינוך אחרים נמשיך לעבוד על פיתוח תוכנית הלימודים ופיקוחה.

For us, staying the course will be imperative to success. We now have many parents

We work closely with the parish community, parents, the police, social services for families and children, and a variety of community agencies. Students' ability to focus on academic achievement is sometimes challenged by other issues going on in their lives. Sometimes we don't have the manpower or expertise to deal with the problems. It is important to know when the issue is bigger than the school level, and to ensure that positive partnerships are in place for these situations. Keen observation skills and a heightened sense of awareness are expected of all staff. This includes custodians, education assistants, teachers, vice-principals, and principals. Parents are notified at the outset of a potential problem and are given access to the appropriate support networks. Students simply cannot do well in school if they are sidetracked by other issues. We continue to work with the OPP and agencies available to help parents understand the issues at hand and all available choices.

## Involving the Community



Students are encouraged to move beyond their classroom setting. I often meet with teachers and parents to develop ideas for ways to provide students with opportunities in the community. Our community involvement may include visiting our local nursing home, shovelling driveways for snowed-in seniors in the neighbourhood, or creating positive partners for students who need companionship.

We focus on sports programs that make sense for our school and lead to community involvement; for example, we have partnered with the town to introduce a school hockey team and a curling program. Teachers, parents, and volunteers from the community spend time with our students. We also have a community policing program in place, in which a police officer spends at least one lunch hour per week



## ● Assessment

Example 1: The first part of the assessment is a multiple-choice question. The question asks the student to identify the correct answer from a list of options. The student is given 10 minutes to complete the question.

Example 2: The second part of the assessment is a short-answer question. The question asks the student to explain the difference between two concepts. The student is given 10 minutes to complete the question.

Example 3: The third part of the assessment is a problem-solving question. The question asks the student to solve a problem. The student is given 10 minutes to complete the question.

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P. The second part of the assessment is a short-answer question. The question asks the student to explain the difference between two concepts. The student is given 10 minutes to complete the question.

P. The third part of the assessment is a problem-solving question. The question asks the student to solve a problem. The student is given 10 minutes to complete the question.

Example 4: The fourth part of the assessment is a multiple-choice question. The question asks the student to identify the correct answer from a list of options. The student is given 10 minutes to complete the question.

Example 5: The fifth part of the assessment is a short-answer question. The question asks the student to explain the difference between two concepts. The student is given 10 minutes to complete the question.

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( ... *Growing Success*, pp. 2–3, ... )

### FURTHER RESOURCES

... 2010 ... *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* ... 1–12.

## ● Building Strong School Cultures

... (Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change ( ... ), 200 )

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3. “Deprivatized practice is when teaching practice goes public, teachers visit one another’s classrooms to observe lessons and materials and to mentor and to solve problems in the living laboratory of instructional space.” Louis, Marks, and Kruse, 1996, as quoted in Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures (see next page).

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( ... .. 2010 ... .. *Ideas Into Action, ... .. Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures: Putting the Promise Into Practice, ... ..* ... ..)

● **Closing the Achievement Gap**

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● Core Leadership C





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*In Conversation:*  
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● **Expert Problem Solvers**

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## ● Implementation Dip

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## ● Instructional Regime

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Through the assistance and support of our literacy coach, board program coordinators, and our superintendents, we decided to focus on selected aspects of balanced literacy and the three-part math lesson.

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- Relationships with Parents

● Roger Martin

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● Student Engagement

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FURTHER RESOURCES

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● Tacit Knowledge

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● Willms, Douglas

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