Successful Strategies for Improving Literacy

No one questions the importance of literacy; it is one of the measures most frequently used to predict the economic potential of nations, the general well-being of communities, and the personal success of individuals. Statistics Canada found that lower literacy scores among 15-year-olds are associated with leaving school early. In *The Costs of Dropping Out of High School*, Human Resources Development Canada reported that students with lower literacy rates have more difficulty integrating into the labour market. These reports should not be surprising to anyone – certainly not to students themselves, who recognize the relationship between a good education and a good job and are staying in school longer than ever before.

Although literacy has long been recognized as the key to student success, until recently parents, students and the public in Ontario had few objective ways to measure the literacy skills of the province’s graduates. With the introduction of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) in 2002, reliable data on reading and writing through the end of Grade 9 is now available for all students in Grade 10, when the test is first taken, and for older students who re-take it after an unsuccessful earlier attempt. It is, of course, these “previously eligible” students – to use the language of the testers – who are most at risk, and many schools and school boards are developing programs to ensure that they succeed on their second attempt.

The results of province-wide tests like these provide a snapshot of student literacy skills at the moment they are taken, but they are only useful if the data, once collected and shared, leads to improved literacy over time. Since it was announced in 1998, the OSSLT has already provided schools and school boards with data that is helping them improve their literacy programs and the literacy skills of their students.

A Personal Touch Pays Off

Steve Blake, principal of Sinclair Secondary School in Whitby, Ontario, wanted to see improvement in his school’s OSSLT results. In October 2002, 81 percent of first-time eligible students were successful in both reading and writing; but of those taking the reading component for a second time, only 60 percent succeeded. Based on these results, which were consistent with data gathered locally, he decided to make literacy – both reading and writing – a school-wide priority.

School staff invited students who had demonstrated weakness in literacy skills to participate in after-school programs for both reading and writing. “We used a personal approach,” said Blake, “inviting both the students and the parents to become involved...”
with the program.” He believes that personal touch had a lot to do with the program’s initial acceptance. “Most students took us up on our offer.”

The personal touch continued through the ten, twice-a-week sessions, where specially prepared teachers used individualized materials, based on students’ own interests, to direct practice in reading passages, understanding instructions, using graphic organizers, and building vocabulary. The students had plenty of opportunities to recognize and respond to the three types of questions they would face on the literacy test.

Making students comfortable from the beginning was central to student success. “We always began with snacks and cold drinks,” said Nancy Cotter, one of the program instructors, who emphasized the importance of an inviting atmosphere in building self-esteem. She pointed out that when students can’t read, their self-esteem is already wounded.

According to Sinclair student Jamie-Lynn Fraser, the strategy worked. “The remedial module reinforced important points to remember when writing the OSSLT. The extra practice helped prepare me to be successful on the test.”

From the beginning, Blake was convinced that improved literacy needed to be a school-wide effort. “In the school, we increased our emphasis on reading and writing strategies in all areas of the curriculum,” he said. “And we used expertise wherever we could find it – from the board, from other schools, from our colleagues in the elementary schools.” EQAO data on literacy at the individual, school, board and provincial levels was both an incentive to improve and an improvement tool.

After its first year, the program’s results speak for themselves. Of those students attempting the OSSLT for the second time, the overall success rate was 74 percent. First-time eligible students also saw a sizable increase in overall success, up from 81 percent to 88 percent.

**Literacy Crosses the Curriculum**

Clearly, a data informed approach to literacy works. École Secondaire Garneau in Ottawa has achieved consistently high first-time success rates over the three years since the OSSLT was introduced. In 2002 and 2003, 86 percent and 87 percent of first-time eligible students passed the test. Rather than resting on its laurels, however, the school has introduced a variety of initiatives to improve the French literacy skills of its students from grades 7 to 12. “We use the OSSLT as a starting point to talk about literacy, to develop programs that will improve student achievement in reading and writing, and to integrate these programs into our every day teaching,” said principal M. André Paradis.

The literacy improvement initiatives at Garneau focus on classroom activities throughout the school. “Improving literacy skills is not the responsibility of the French teacher alone, but of each teacher in the school,” said Paradis. “It is as much the responsibility of the science teacher and the math teacher.” And so, in September all teachers participated in a
training session to develop the reading and writing components of their courses and help prepare students for the OSSLT.

“Our goal is to make the teaching and learning of reading and writing skills, such as a summary or opinion piece, explicit within the content of each course,” explained Mme Joane Séjui, Literacy Coordinator. As a result, all teachers are required to review at least two reading and writing skills in their courses, and at the beginning of each semester the school uses OSSLT preparation units in a variety of subjects.

The school, with the help of the Board, offers a 25-hour course for students with special needs, available both during the summer and in September.

**One Size Does Not Fit All**

Just as individual schools are beginning to use their literacy test results to plan school-based improvement programs, school boards are using the data to target support for literacy where it is most needed. The Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) is using EQAO statistics to ensure that Ministry of Education funding for at-risk students ends up where it is most needed.

Recognizing that a single strategy will not suit all schools, the board has offered a variety of options: some schools hire an instructor for remedial literacy; some hire occasional teachers to tutor students during lunch hour; some offer special tutoring in the weeks leading up to the OSSLT. Teachers from a variety of subject areas also work with students using the OSSLT format, allowing them to become more familiar with the literacy tasks they will be asked to complete.

Students reported that working with the materials provided to prepare for the OSSLT reduced their stress levels and gave them a greater sense of confidence. Specific assignments also prepared them for the kinds of tasks they would be required to perform. "In one assignment we looked through several magazines to find the best price on a lot of items for Christmas. This assignment helped me know it's important to know what I am looking for when I read," said Heather Slewidge, a student at West Carleton Secondary School. Fellow student Daniel Dowd found a writing assignment most helpful: “We wrote a myth for a child and illustrated it in a little book. It made us see a different way of expressing ourselves.”

In implementing its school-based initiatives, OCDSB recognizes that its commitment to improved student reading and writing skills depends on its teachers. It has offered professional development workshops for teachers in all subject areas to reinforce and build on their literacy teaching strategies. “We need to continue to involve teachers and provide them with materials and strategies as part of ongoing professional development,” said Lesleigh Dye, a Student Success Leader for OCDSB. “This is beneficial because it helps teachers become more familiar with the cross-curricular nature of literacy.”

Ottawa Carleton, too, has seen its commitment rewarded with greater student success. Among students re-taking the OSSLT in October 2003, the overall success rate
Successful Strategies for Improving Literacy
Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test

(including both reading and writing) was 67 percent. The number of first-time eligible students passing both components of the test increased as well, from 81 to 85 percent.

Test Results Point to Improvement Strategies
Although sometimes disappointing, the numbers generated by these test results are intended as an aid to improvement rather than as a judgment or verdict. Conseil scolaire de district catholique du Nouvel-Ontario (CSDCNO) in northern Ontario analyzed its results and knew it needed to focus on improving its students’ reading and writing skills. “We need testing and we need to look at what the results tell us; the results are an indication of where we can improve and what literacy skills each student is missing,” said Pierrette Nadeau, Student Success Leader with the board.

In February 2002, 68 percent of the board’s first-time eligible students were successful on the OSSLT. These results prompted the board to target those students who had not yet passed. Like all boards, CSDCNO offers a course for students who have been unsuccessful in passing the test, but Nadeau prefers that students re-take and pass the test. So, in the six weeks leading up to the fall test, one teacher in each school worked with these students’ individual literacy needs for one or two hours a week.

In order to improve its overall success rates in future years, the board is incorporating literacy activities throughout the curriculum and is also looking at exemplary practices in other school boards. They will also develop and maintain a profile of each student’s literacy skills between Grades 7 and 10. “Literacy is always at the forefront of what we do,” said Nadeau. “Each month we do something to promote literacy, whether it’s a book fair or a special reading activity…Our goal is for all teachers to focus on literacy.” The emphasis seems to be working. Last year, 75 percent of first-time eligible students passed the test, a 7% increase since 2002.

It’s the careful use of data and information that gives large-scale tests like the OSSLT their power to drive improvement, to provide insight into areas of strength and weakness and to help ensure the right programs are directed to the right students.

This concerted commitment to literacy improvement, based on reliable data and sound planning, is paying dividends in student performance. And the dividends are more than higher scores on a provincial test.

For further information, please contact:

Robin Dafoe
Director, Corporate and Public Affairs
1-888-327-7377