



Supporting Systemic Literacy Success

Improving literacy outcomes across a school system requires more than individual initiatives or isolated professional learning. It depends on clear direction, shared responsibility, and consistent structures that connect system priorities with school and classroom practice. The following strategies highlight practical leadership actions for building coherence, strengthening educator capacity, and supporting sustained improvement in literacy instruction.

1. Establish a Culture of Collaborative Vision

A shared vision becomes meaningful when it is reinforced through regular structures, common priorities, and ongoing dialogue. System leaders can create greater coherence by making literacy improvement a consistent focus, examining evidence together, and approaching challenges with curiosity and collective responsibility.

- **Create a Consistent Senior Team Agenda:** Establish a standing weekly agenda item that reflects collaborative visioning, examination of school and system data, school planning processes, and monitoring of literacy and math goals.
- **Adopt a "Curious, Not Judgmental" Mindset:** When reviewing data, look for underlying causes of student underachievement, rather than assigning blame. Use this curiosity to peel back the layers and identify exactly where the system needs to do better.
- **Commit to Backwards Planning:** Define your end goal in relation to student achievement in literacy and work backwards to determine the strategic instructional moves and capacity-building required to reach it.

2. Operationalize Data-Informed Leadership

Data can help system leaders move from broad priorities to more precise decisions about instruction, intervention, and resource allocation. When screening and diagnostic assessment data are examined across classrooms and schools, leaders can identify patterns, monitor progress, and direct support where it is most needed.

- **Use Screening Data as a System "Pulse":** Establish a consistent schedule for literacy screening and use the resulting data to understand patterns across the system as well as within individual schools and classrooms. Screening data can help leaders identify areas of need and inform next steps for instruction and support.
- **Allocate Resources Based on Evidence:** Use screening and diagnostic assessment data to strategically direct staffing, such as Early Intervention Teachers (EITs) and literacy coaches, to the schools with the greatest identified needs.
- **Use Assessment to Identify the Next Instructional Step:** Use assessment information not only to understand how students are performing, but also to identify the specific skills that require further instruction. Approaches such as oral dictation can help educators determine targeted next steps and monitor whether students are acquiring those skills over time.

3. Lead Instruction Through High Expectations and High Support

Leading instructional change requires both clarity about expectations and sustained support for the people responsible for putting those expectations into practice. System leaders can strengthen implementation by making instructional priorities transparent, building administrator knowledge, and creating opportunities for educators to learn with and from one another.

- **Model Transparent Instructional Leadership:** Conduct strategic school improvement visits using predetermined, transparent questions. Share the questions in advance to ensure there are no surprises and reinforce that the purpose is support and shared learning, not a “gotcha.” Follow visits with purposeful debriefs that help principals identify what they observed, where gaps remain, and what next steps are needed.
- **Invest in Administrator Capacity:** Provide principals and vice-principals with regular opportunities to deepen their understanding of effective, evidence-informed instruction, assessment, and the use of data. Strengthening administrator knowledge and confidence supports their ability to lead instructional improvement within their schools.
- **Build Confidence Through Coaching:** Use coaching, co-planning, and co-teaching to build educator confidence and capacity over time. Early intervention teachers, literacy coaches, and other instructional leaders can work alongside classroom teachers to model instructional practices, collaborate on instruction, and provide support as educators become increasingly confident implementing new approaches independently.

4. Scale and Sustain Change Across the System

Sustained improvement depends on coherence across departments, grade levels, and leadership teams. System leaders can strengthen implementation by developing shared language, extending effective practices beyond the primary grades, and creating structures that allow educators and leaders to learn from one another within and across school boards.

- **Connect Work Across Departments:** Ensure tiered instruction and supports are planned collaboratively across Special Education, Teaching and Learning, Indigenous Education, EDI, and other relevant teams. A shared approach helps prevent important work from becoming isolated within individual departments.
- **Develop a Common Language:** Build a shared understanding of what Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 supports look like across the system. An interdepartmental resource can help ensure that educators and leaders are using common language and have greater clarity about the purpose and intensity of support at each tier.
- **Extend Literacy Support Beyond the Primary Grades:** Continue to strengthen evidence-informed foundational literacy instruction and intervention across intermediate and secondary grades. Support collaboration and information sharing across transitions, including between Grade 8 and Grade 9 educators, so students who continue to require literacy support receive the support they need as earlier improvements move through the grades.
- **Collaborate Across Board Boundaries:** Create opportunities to learn with and from other school boards by sharing approaches, examining promising practices, and discussing challenges and solutions. Cross-board collaboration can strengthen collective capacity to improve outcomes for students across Ontario.