

*Building a Community of Readers
- One Student at a Time*

**Improving Literacy in the Primary Years
Report to the Trustees
March 2006**

Our Core Beliefs for Literacy

- ★ All students can achieve high standards given sufficient time and support.
- ★ All teachers can teach to high standards given the right conditions and assistance.
- ★ High expectations and early intervention are essential to success.
- ★ Literacy is the key to lifelong learning.
- ★ Literacy instruction must be embedded across the curriculum.
- ★ All teachers of all subjects, from JK to Grade 12, are teachers of literacy.
- ★ Families and members of their communities must be encouraged and supported in taking action to promote student literacy.

Recommendations for Improving Literacy in the Primary Years

1. BEST START Early Learning Centres

The early years from conception to age 6 have the most influence of any time in the life cycle on brain development and subsequent learning, behaviours and health (McCain and Mustard, 1999). Learning begets learning: learning is a dynamic process and is most effective when it begins at a young age and continues through adulthood (Heckman, 2000). Children who are ready to learn when they start school are more likely to complete school; find employment; and make positive contributions to society (Hertzman and Keating, 1999). When we support our youngest children, society reaps the benefits over many years as those children develop into healthy, educated, confident, and productive adults. Investing in our children is an investment in the future of our community.

Best Start is a government-wide priority. It is one of the multi-year strategic transformation initiatives that ministries will undertake to support the government's key priority of student success. It is a comprehensive and ambitious early learning and care strategy that requires different ministries to work together to address the factors that put young children at risk, and to create communities that support healthy child development and learning. Best Start is a partnership with parents that recognizes the key role parents play in preparing their children for school. It is also a partnership among ministries and among different levels of government (i.e., provincial, federal, and municipal) to help provide the services and supports to help children succeed.

Best Start will:

- help parents help their children to be successful in school;
- enhance existing services and introduce innovative approaches to healthy child development, early learning and care; and
- bring community services together in a comprehensive, flexible, integrated, and seamless way so children and parents can access them at familiar neighbourhood locations.

The Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board

(PVNC CDSB) is fully committed to the BEST START initiative and is a signatory to four regional agreements identifying the local visions and the strategic planning associated with the achievement of them. *School First Policy* identifies the school as the best location for the provision of the services supporting young children and their families.

The Board has agreed to facilitate the opening of thirteen BEST START learning centres in our schools as of September 2006. An additional six schools have been identified for further development pending approval of BEST START plans submitted to the Province of Ontario for approval.

2. Assessment for Learning Program

Students, teachers, principals, superintendents, and trustees require valid information to make decisions to improve student achievement. Evidence Informed Decision Making (EIDM) based on researched strategies for improvement will facilitate the most effective and the most efficient use of our resources. The two key questions are: What information needs to be collected? and How can this information be used to improve student achievement?

A number of educators require information to make decisions to support increased student learning. Classroom teachers collect evidence on student achievement almost daily and this information is shared with students and parents regularly. However, their information is not widely shared with other colleagues or administrators. Developing common practices for assessment and sharing insights on those results creates a learning community for teachers which can build their own professional capacity. Teachers need to be able to articulate *what they do* and *why they do it* based on research. Collecting data based on common assessments and standards is the first step towards evidence-based decision making.

International research shows that the principles of *Assessment FOR Learning* improves student confidence and academic performance, especially for students who struggle. *Assessment of* and *for* learning are both important. Traditionally we have many assessments *of* learning in place, and if we are to balance the two, we must make a stronger investment in assessment *for* learning. Providing feedback to students through diagnostic and/or formative assessments improves student learning.

The Province of Ontario administers an *Assessment for Learning Program* through the Education Quality and Assessment Office (EQAO) in Grades 3, 6, and 9. These snapshots of student achievement provide feedback to educators, and the general public, on an annual basis. Classroom teachers administer *Assessments for Learning* daily, providing immediate feedback to students on their progress. Feedback received from these diagnostic and/or formative classroom assessments inform us about the need for additional assessments or changes in our instructional techniques. Being reflective in our processes is good practice, and it helps us to identify individual student needs so that we might differentiate our instruction for them. Making informed decisions about teaching practice requires accurate

data collection. Identifying concerns and celebrating successes can be enhanced through improved information gathering.

The PVNC Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting Committee was formed during the 2004–2005 school year; comprised of classroom teachers, school administrators, consultants, OECTA representatives, and the Superintendent of Learning Support Services. One of the goals of the committee was to develop an **Assessment for Learning Program JK through Grade 12** and to review whether or not the Mid-Year Assessment should be continued as part of that program. The committee recommended that the Mid-Year Assessment no longer be a mandatory requirement and the administration agreed. However, teachers can still use it in their classroom on a voluntary basis. The committee development a new JK through Grade 6 Assessment for Learning Program to partially replace the Mid-Year Assessment. The collection of assessment data for the purpose of learning at the classroom, school, and system levels is still an integral part of our decision making processes. The committee will be working on the Grades 7 through 12 program during this school year.

Details of the JK through Grade 6 Assessment for Learning Program

In JK, the Teacher’s School Readiness Inventory (TSRI) will be implemented towards the end of this year. Additional information regarding implementation will be forthcoming. The EDI (Early Development Index) was implemented in SK during the month of March 2006, and it will be completed every other year. This is an initiative of the Ontario Early Years Centres and is supported by the Ministry of Education. Our coterminous Board, KPR, administered the EDI during the 2004–2005 school year. Data from both assessments will provide valuable insights into child “readiness for school” that will help focus pre-school programs within our communities.

Primary staff (SK–3) have received training on the use of PM Benchmarks and many of our teachers have been using this tool since last year. This year we have purchased a kit for every SK through Grade 3 classroom in our system. Primary teachers are required to administer this assessment on three occasions throughout the school year except for SK teachers. Class reports are to be submitted to school principals in early November or shortly after the initial diagnostic assessment has been completed. Teachers are then required to complete an additional PM Benchmark assessment prior to the second term report card and report the scores to the school principal. The final assessment is to be completed late May or early June. The end of the year PM Benchmark assessment results will be submitted to Learning Support Services. Teachers are encouraged to use the PM Benchmark data as part of a student’s reading grade for each reporting period. Each school is required to track student achievement on PM Benchmarks using a tracking board.

Finally, students in Grades 1 through 6 will be completing the Writing and Math Provincial Exemplars towards the end of this school year. The Provincial Exemplars were developed by teachers from across the Province in order to provide everyone with ‘exemplary’ samples of levelled student work. Teachers are required to administer the assessments provided and evaluate each student submission using the rubrics in the documents. The Provincial Exemplars provide at least two excellent assessments for each grade. It is highly recommended that students receive multiple opportunities to practice the exemplars prior to the assessment data collection in May/June. Students should be submitting their best work for grading by their classroom teacher.

It will be expected that teachers will pass on the actual graded exemplars and the PM Benchmark data for their students to the next teacher when the current school year ends. This information will provide excellent baseline data for the teacher in the next grade. A teacher holding a child’s sample of best work prior to the beginning of the school year will assist him/her with the development of differentiated instructional strategies for the beginning of the new school year.

The primary purposes of the Assessment for Learning program are:

- to improve student achievement,
- to provide feedback for teachers to develop instructional practices for whole class instruction and differentiated instruction to fit the learning needs of all students,
- to assess and report on our progress,
- to determine priorities for improvement,
- to make effective budget and program decisions, and
- to maintain excellent performance.

3. PVNC Parent and Volunteer Reading Program

Parental involvement is a key element in a school’s plan to make every child a successful reader. While the school has primary responsibility for formal reading instruction, children are more likely to succeed when their parents are actively involved in their education.

Parents need to know that children learn to read in a series of developmental stages that lead over time to independent reading. The booklet [Helping Your Child Learn to Read: A Parent’s Guide](#) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001) is a practical resource for helping parents to understand the developmental stages. It describes the characteristics of the beginning reader, the emergent reader, the early reader, and the fluent reader. It also offers tips for helping children learn to read. Teachers can help parents by describing the most appropriate home activities at each stage in a child’s reading development.

The best time for children to start learning to read is when they are very young. The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth has found that children who had been read to several times a day at the age of two to three years did substantially better in Kindergarten than those whose parents did not read as often. The same study found that

children who experienced a stimulating preschool environment had significantly higher scores on standardized vocabulary measures.

Parents and other family members who are able to volunteer in the classroom can provide valuable support for the classroom reading program. For example, they can read aloud to children, help them with homework, and practise sight words and letter recognition. For children whose home language is not the language of instruction, parent volunteers who speak the same language can help to ease the transition into school.

The Learning Support Services department will provide a template for appropriate training and support to enable parent volunteers to make a meaningful contribution. The department will also actively recruit volunteers through corporate promotions and networking with our many community partners. However, parent volunteers cannot be expected to be reading experts. Children who are experiencing serious reading difficulties should be helped by professionals who are highly trained in reading instruction.¹

4. Early Learning Steering Committee

An Early Learning Steering Committee will be formed during April 2006 consisting of all of our early learning stakeholders. The initial meeting will take place with only the PVNC representatives on the committee (JK/SK teachers, resource teachers, speech and language pathologist, consultants, and principals). The purpose of this meeting will be to identify the current best practices being used throughout the board. Members will also receive a package of best practices from other district school boards across the province. A gap analysis will be performed to identify areas of strength and areas of opportunity for improvement.

The second meeting will include members of the community that provide services to children aged 0-6 and their families. We will discuss how each group can support the other in their efforts to make sure that all students can learn to read and achieve at a high level.

The initial goals of the Early Learning Steering Committee are:

- to develop an entry to school plan that will build early relationships with parents registering their children at our schools to make them feel part of our Catholic family;
- to provide resources to parents to develop consistent school readiness for all children entering JK;
- to provide contact information for parents regarding community resources for pre-school children;
- to facilitate meetings between various professionals focusing on children;
- to communicate to our partners what a child needs to know before entering school; and
- to improve student 'readiness to learn' levels, as identified through the EDI assessment, by working with our community partners.

5. Aligning the PVNC Library Plan with the Primary Literacy Plan

A meeting of the Library Management Committee will be held in the Spring of 2006 to revise the PVNC Library Management Plan. The meeting will focus on the alignment of the current library plan to support primary literacy. Changes to the plan will be brought forward to the board for approval.

6. Early Intervention Teachers

Even with effective classroom instruction, some children will need additional supports or interventions. However, teachers should consider supplemental interventions only when effective and adapted instruction has failed to resolve a child's reading difficulties. Effective intervention requires that teachers recognize as early as possible those children who are experiencing reading difficulties; tailor instruction to address their needs; and provide for supplementary instruction when necessary. If adequate screening and assessment procedures are in place, early intervention may begin even before formal instruction in reading.

Interventions that are begun when children are very young have a much better chance of success than interventions begun later. Interventions begun at Grade 3 are much less likely to succeed than early interventions. It is essential to identify reading difficulties by Grade 1 and to put appropriate supplemental interventions in place immediately. In this way, reading problems can be tackled before they become entrenched and before repeated failures affect children's motivation and compound their difficulties in learning to read and write.

Implementation Process

By Grade 1, all schools should have in place for children a process that allows for the timely implementation of instruction following diagnostic assessment. Once a teacher recognizes that a child is experiencing reading difficulties, the teacher and the child must have access to diagnostic assessment services, specialized interventions, and appropriate instruction. The intensity or duration of the interventions should be based on comprehensive diagnostic assessment. There should be seamless continuity between regular classroom instruction and interventions, and a high degree of cooperation among qualified staff who are serving the same children. The staff should spend the vast majority of their time planning for and delivering instruction directly to children.

Characteristics of Successful Interventions

No one intervention works for all children with reading difficulties. However, interventions that succeed for many children have several characteristics in common. Typically they involve more instructional time for children, but extra time is not enough.

Other characteristics include:

- carefully planned assessments that allow for continual monitoring of the child's response and lead to modifications of the intervention when indicated,
- teaching methods that are supported by research on how children learn to read and how they should be taught,
- considerable attention to the materials used (e.g., predictable, patterned, easy-to more-difficult texts), with a focus on interesting and enjoyable texts at appropriate reading levels,
- an array of activities (e.g., word study, reading, rereading, and writing) ¹

Successful interventions generally occur on a daily basis and may occur in focused, short blocks of time, or in longer blocks, with appropriate accommodations in classroom instruction. The intervention should occur outside of the Literacy Block (two hours of uninterrupted literacy focused instruction) so that those students who struggle receive additional literacy support. Carmel Crevola, currently advising the Province of Ontario through the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, recommends that an intervention program be at least 20 weeks in length with five lessons per week for the each student not reading at the minimum standards.

Successful interventions are strongly linked with regular classroom instruction supported by sound research, reflect an understanding of effective reading instruction, and are culturally and linguistically appropriate for the individual child. It is critical that interventions be measured against these criteria, and that their effectiveness in helping children with reading difficulties be carefully assessed and monitored. This requires ongoing dialogue between classroom teachers and intervention teachers.

The board currently uses a model referred to as the "Fifth Block" program that is researched based and aligns with our current Four Blocks model of language instruction in primary. This program must not only be maintained; but it should be expanded based on the needs of the school, as identified through EQAO and board assessments . Although there are limited funds to support this intervention, it is clearly the vision as to which we should aspire in order to adequately support our struggling readers. All early literacy research identifies that the implementation of an intervention program being taught by a trained intervention teacher will yield the highest achievement results for children.

7. Primary Literacy Support Teachers

Administration is recommending that the current delivery model of primary Prep and Planning be switched from Core French to Literacy Support. The board currently spends \$973,545 to provide Prep and Planning support using French Second Language teachers. From a philosophical standpoint, re-directing funds from Core French to Literacy Support is intended to help the Board achieve its Literacy goals. As a matter of fact, over the next two years the amount of time provided to teachers for Prep and Planning will continue to

increase. Therefore, it is a question as to whether or not spending approximately \$1,000,000 per year should be spent on Literacy support or French as Second language instruction in primary.

The administrative recommendation was based on the following points for and against the change in delivery of Prep and Planning:

Reasons why Core French should remain in the primary grades

- ✓ The program is well liked by the primary students.
- ✓ We have excellent teachers providing the Core French program to our primary students.
- ✓ It is an oral-based program that involves songs and phrases that are engaging for students.
- ✓ Our coterminous board does not offer Core French in primary, and therefore, it represents a competitive advantage to attract those parents who want the program in primary.
- ✓ The Board has spent money on resources over the years to support the program.
- ✓ Changing the program may discourage some Core French teachers from remaining in the program because the primary component is a very enjoyable part of it.

Reasons why Literacy Support should replace Core French

- ✓ Additional time spent on supporting all students in literacy is supported by the research.
- ✓ The more primary children are immersed in literacy the greater likelihood that they will become independent readers.
- ✓ A literacy support program developed by the Learning Support department will provide a common approach to supporting our primary students using researched-based practices.
- ✓ Research shows that we have a narrow window of opportunity between the ages of four and seven to help a student to learn to read.
- ✓ The gap between the low performing and the high performing students is narrowest in the primary grades (Hill & Crevola). The gap widens as the students move through the grades, and therefore, the ideal time to make a difference with the achievement gap is in the primary years.
- ✓ PVNC is one of only seven district school boards (out of 72) in the province of Ontario that provides Core French instruction to students in Grades 1 through 3. Most school boards that do provide Core French in primary also only provide 20 minutes of it per day in Grades 1 and 2. In most school boards across Canada, formal instruction in French language commences at Grade 4 or Grade 5. Primary Core French is mandatory in only one province—New Brunswick.
- ✓ Providing Core French to students in primary is not supported by the Ontario Provincial government financially or academically. This program is not currently based on any Ministry approved curriculum because the Provincial Core French curriculum begins in

Grade 4. Students in the Province of Ontario are required to receive 600 hours of Core French instruction by the end of Grade 8.

- ✓ Both of our coterminous boards, Kawartha Pine Ridge and Trillium, do not begin FSL instruction until Grade 4.
- ✓ Most research being done on French language acquisition is being conducted with various French Immersion models and not Core French instruction. No evidence could be found to support that the provision of a primary program in Core French has any significant impact on French language acquisition.
- ✓ What has been demonstrated is that success in French Immersion is due largely to other factors other than “hours of instruction” (Swain and Lapkin). Learning a second language is facilitated most importantly by the presence of other equally important factors such as:
 - Motivation and ability (CRCCSB, 1995)
 - Intensity of instruction (Genesee, 1987) (Netten, 2000)
 - Quality of program based on maximum transfer to ‘real life’ (Wilson and Connock, 1982) (Caldas and Caron-Caldos, 2000)
- ✓ There is significant research on the impact of second language learning on first language acquisition. For most students the impact is minimal, unless you are struggling with your first language. Again, the research is based on French Immersion models and not Core French, but multiple researchers (Cummins, 1980; Valdes and Figueroa, 1994; Gutierrez-Clellen, 1999; and Ireland, 1998) do suggest that learning a second language in early primary years may not be ideal for those students who are experiencing difficulties with first language acquisition
- ✓ French language boards in the province do not introduce second language (English) instruction until Grade 4.
- ✓ PVNC, like many other boards across Canada, experiences difficulties attracting qualified FSL teachers. The board currently has seven teachers using a letter of permission to teach French language.
- ✓ There are limited classroom resources available for teachers in primary Core French because the market for them is so small across Canada that it is not profitable for the publishers to produce them.

8. Establishment of Primary Literacy Coaches

The primary literacy coaches’ main goal is to improve reading achievement by working collaboratively with teachers to deepen their understanding of the reading process and extend their repertoire of instructional strategies. These teachers support principals in ensuring effective reading instruction throughout the school.

To be effective, literacy coaches should have a thorough conceptual understanding about the reading and writing process, how children and adults learn, and how to create opportunities for them to learn effectively. Lead literacy teachers must have a clear and well-articulated vision of what is possible in student achievement in reading.

The main responsibilities of literacy coaches include:

1. Observing, coaching, and mentoring other teachers

Literacy coaches help their team members to refine their instructional strategies by observing, coaching, and mentoring them in the classroom. The role of the coach is to:

- model effective instructional strategies;
- work with the principal and teachers to schedule the literacy block;
- help teachers to reflect on their practice;
- help teachers to establish routines which allow for effective literacy instruction;
- model how to use professional resources to improve instructional strategies;
- help teachers to make meaningful connections between reading theory and classroom practice;
- work with new teachers and their mentors to establish a classroom reading program.

2. Promoting learning teams

The teacher-coach supports the primary division learning team in its ongoing development. The role of this teacher in professional development is to:

- consult with teachers on topics for ongoing learning;
- lead professional training sessions in areas determined by the priorities and goals in the school literacy plan;
- lead discussions among teachers on current reading practices and current reading research;
- provide opportunities for teachers to share their own effective practices with each other;
- work collaboratively with principals and other lead teachers in the board to develop and share effective practices;
- engage in ongoing professional learning and self-reflection;
- support the principal in scheduling regular in-school literacy meetings.

3. Managing resources

Books, tapes, and other learning materials are essential resources for early reading instruction. Time and attention need to be given to selecting, maintaining, and distributing these resources. The role of the coach is to:

- share appropriate professional resources with teachers;
- establish a framework or process for tracking early literacy resources in the school;
- instruct teachers on how to use leveled materials;
- work with classroom teachers and the library support specialist to establish resource priorities.

4. *Analyzing and interpreting student achievement data*

The ability to assess literacy is the foundation for systematically improving student achievement in reading. To help their teams develop this ability, coaches must:

- model how to use assessment tools effectively;
- support teachers in assessing student reading achievement at specific points during the school year;
- model how to use student achievement data to plan for instruction;
- work with the principal to analyze student achievement data;
- work with the principal to interpret aggregate data from classroom assessments in reading for Kindergarten to Grade 3;
- participate in developing and revising the school literacy plan as part of school improvement planning.¹

PVNC has spent considerable amounts of money in training staff and supplying resources for primary leads in literacy and math over the past 4 years. Lead teachers have shared some of their expertise and resources with other staff members. This past year, the board has used a grant to train additional teachers in primary. However, research indicates that professional development needs to move beyond the ‘sit and get’ model of one-shot workshops, conferences, and in-service days that unload copious quantities of information onto teachers. Opportunities to practice the strategies with individual guidance supplied by trained teachers result in the greatest gains in capacity building of staff and improved student achievement. Research, and the experiences of other district school boards in Ontario, indicate that an allocation of a half time (.5) FTE teacher per school to this responsibility bring the greatest gains in capacity building of teachers. The amount of staff allocation would need to be adjusted to consider the size of the primary teaching team at the school. The introduction of Literacy Coaches would be phased in over time as budget permits. Currently there are two Literacy Coaches working in eight of our schools on a pilot basis. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat provided the funding for these positions. A report will be forthcoming on the project.

9. *Establishment of primary book rooms in all elementary schools*

The creation of dedicated primary book rooms has been highly recommended by all of the early literacy experts. The principals have already received information through previous memos regarding the setting up of a book room. Some schools have already moved forward with this initiative. The rooms contain a wide selection of levelled books for students and alternate forms of literacy including audio tapes, software, newspapers, and magazines. Central storage of materials encourages sharing and discussion around appropriateness of materials. A book room may be set up in a portion of the library, an unused office, an empty closet or any other available space that can be dedicated to it. Financial support for the establishment of book rooms will be provided by central budget and school budget.

¹Early Reading Strategy: The Report of the Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario 2003