Working Together for Student Success

A School Improvement Planning Guide

This booklet is a companion to the EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning.
Board of Directors

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EQAO is pleased to present *Working Together for Student Success: A School Improvement Planning Guide*.

Ontario educational leaders share a deep commitment to improvement. Many initiatives are underway in schools and boards to improve the school environment, enhance instructional practice, genuinely engage parents and other education partners and, ultimately, enhance student achievement.

The role of the principal is complex and multi-faceted. Principals and other school leaders need effective tools that help them focus, streamline, manage complexity and achieve measurable outcomes.

The school improvement plan can integrate many of the tasks associated with instructional leadership and school management into a unified and coherent whole. It can help school leaders assess school strengths and weaknesses, clarify goals, plan effective improvement strategies, successfully motivate, lead and manage, and achieve consistent and substantial improvement.

I encourage all school leaders to take full advantage of the improvement planning process to support school leadership and achieve our shared goal of student success.

As always, I welcome your comments and suggestions on how to improve this booklet and enhance EQAO’s role in supporting and facilitating informed professional practice. I hope you find this booklet informative and useful and wish you continued success.

Marguerite Jackson
Chief Executive Officer
What’s Different About This Booklet?

*Working Together for Student Success* is a succinct overview of successful school improvement planning, which you can easily read and refer to throughout the planning process.

As a companion to the more detailed *EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning*, this booklet outlines the five key steps of the planning process in a simple step-by-step fashion and provides sources for more in-depth information.

You will find this booklet useful as a guide for developing your own plan and as a means of sharing the basic principles and processes of school improvement planning with your improvement planning team and the broader school community.

Look for these features throughout the booklet:

**Ideas in Action**
Practical tips and suggestions contributed by experienced educational leaders from across Ontario.

**Sources and Resources**
Sources of more detailed information you may wish to consult during the planning process.

**Inside the Guide**
At a Glance

- **Engage** school community partners.
- **Investigate** school strengths and challenges.
- **Communicate** findings to the school community.
- **Plan** effective strategies for improvement.
- **Evaluate** and monitor implementation.

Planning for Improvement

School improvement planning is a process, a management tool and a discipline. It includes investigating school strengths and challenges, planning effective strategies for improvement, implementing improvement strategies and evaluating results.

School improvement planning is a powerful means of engaging school staff and the broader school community in a process of continuous school improvement.

It is also an effective management tool, integrating many of the tasks of instructional leadership and school management into a coherent whole.

The improvement planning cycle

School improvement planning is not a process with a fixed beginning and end. While the school improvement plan, as a written document, may cover a year or a range of years, the process itself is a continuous cycle of planning, implementation and evaluation that provides a framework for consistent and sustainable school improvement over time.
About this model
The planning model presented in this booklet includes all of the characteristic features of effective school improvement planning, as outlined in the *EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning*.

It presents these features in a condensed step-by-step fashion and clearly outlines the purposes and processes associated with each step. While you may wish to rearrange or modify this model to suit your particular improvement planning needs and requirements, it is important to ensure that all features of the model are reflected in your plan.

Getting the most from this booklet
Before beginning the improvement planning process, familiarize yourself with the key features of each improvement planning phase. You will find a convenient summary of the process at the beginning of each step.

Review the detailed instructions for each phase and become familiar with the sources listed to deepen your knowledge and skills.

In addition, you may wish to share this booklet with members of your school community to ensure that they understand the overall purpose and process of school improvement planning.

Inside the Guide
See page 30 of the *EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning* for a self-evaluation checklist that highlights the recommended practices throughout the planning process.
Step 1: Engage

Effective school improvement planning hinges on the engagement, participation and shared decision-making of all those who are involved in, or have an interest in, the life of the school. It is critical that principals, teachers, support staff, board leaders, students, parents, school councils and members of the community be engaged not only in setting goals and priorities, but also in supporting the achievement of those goals and evaluating the success of improvement strategies over time. When undertaken as a genuine partnership, school improvement planning becomes a powerful vehicle for consensus-building and student success.

What to Do

- Assemble a broadly based school improvement planning team.
- Determine the readiness of the team for the improvement planning process.
- Build a foundation of knowledge about the school, its environment and the planning process.
- Set timelines and responsibilities for managing the process.
How to Do It

Seek the engagement of all school community partners

Developing improvement plans in partnership with the broader school community will engender a sense of shared responsibility and commitment to the improvement process. To encourage broad participation, ensure that all school community partners are aware of the school’s improvement planning process. Explain the purpose and goals of the process and invite participation. Keep in mind that the prior knowledge, interests and concerns of various communities (teachers and parents, for example) may vary widely. Tailor your communication to the specific information needs, concerns and interests of each school community partner. When building a school improvement planning team, consider the following potential participants:
- teachers;
- support staff;
- school council;
- parents;
- students;
- the school’s supervisory officer;
- board leaders;
- centrally assigned resource staff and
- community members.

Determine the readiness of team members

School improvement planning makes varied demands on team members depending on their roles and responsibilities. While there will be a valuable sharing of expertise among team members, some may require training or other forms of assistance to carry out their roles effectively. Before the process begins, consider participants’ knowledge and skills and plan to assist them as needed, before or during the process. Team members may need support in such areas as
- working with data;
- understanding teaching, learning and assessment;
- distinguishing between large-scale assessment and classroom assessment;
- awareness of the provincial curriculum and EQAO assessments;
- developing improvement strategies;
- measuring progress;
- monitoring progress and
- understanding the improvement planning process.
Put the improvement planning process in context

Ensure that all members of the improvement planning team are equipped with a sound general knowledge of the school and its community. The following information may enhance their overall understanding:

- the community served by the school (demographic, socio-economic overview);
- the school’s mission and goals;
- the school’s programs and facilities;
- professional development programs undertaken or planned;
- school board support of and involvement in the improvement planning process;
- school board or provincial initiatives that may impact positively, support and enhance school initiatives;
- EQAO data over time and past improvement planning and the results it achieved.

Establish responsibilities and timelines

It is important to establish guidelines and expectations early in the improvement planning process. Finding the time to engage meaningfully in the process will be challenging for some participants. Discuss these challenges openly to ensure that participants’ needs are accommodated so that they can participate fully throughout the planning cycle.

Ideas in Action

Sharing Through Parent Nights

“We introduced the OSSLT at Grade 8 and Grade 9 parent nights, which we called ‘Read, Write and Pass.’ Parents learned about the test, experienced sample questions, and were given suggestions on how they could prepare their children.”

John Bowyer, Principal
Henry Street High School
Durham District School Board
You’re on an Improvement Track When

• the school improvement planning team is inclusive;
• tasks and roles are clearly defined;
• the members of the team understand their roles and are equipped for and committed to fulfilling them;
• the members of the team understand that improvement planning requires long-term, continuous and consistent action over time;
• the broader school community is aware of the process and understands why it is being undertaken and what it is intended to achieve and
• there is a clear, shared vision for the school.

Sources and Resources

The Education Improvement Commission publication *School Improvement Planning: A Handbook for Principals, Teachers and School Councils* contains helpful information on identifying processes that will ensure equal participation and contribution by all members of an improvement planning team. This publication can be found on the Ontario Ministry of Education Web site at www.edu.gov.on.ca.
Step 2: Investigate

While observation can yield many valuable insights, data provide an accurate and verifiable “snapshot” of school performance and serve as a powerful foundation for effective improvement planning. Data enable more precise and probing questions to be explored. They can identify school strengths and weaknesses and pinpoint the sources of both. Likewise, they can provide a yardstick against which school improvement strategies can be measured for effectiveness over time. Confidence in the understanding of data gathering and interpretation is a critical underpinning of school improvement planning and an important foundation of effective instructional leadership.

What to Do

• Gather data from a broad variety of sources.

• Explore contextual factors as well as achievement data.

• Determine significant trends, patterns and relationships.

• Identify key issues to be explored and addressed.
How to Do It

Use rich data sources to deepen understanding

Schools have, and should take advantage of, many types of data in addition to EQAO data to support the improvement planning process. These include

- **school and board data**, including report card information, attendance and suspension data, behaviour incident data and other relevant information;
- **classroom data**, such as rates of homework completion by individual students or the number of books read and
- **contextual data** that can provide insight into factors affecting student learning beyond the school’s control, such as language background, demographics and socio-economic status.

Ensure that all relevant factors have been examined

Research shows that many factors influence student learning, including

- **context**, such as enrolment, socio-economic status and demographics;
- **inputs**, such as student attendance, class size and teaching qualifications;
- **processes**, such as professional development and parental involvement and
- **results**, such as classroom assessments and provincial assessments.

It is important to consider all these factors to ensure that decision-making is based on a comprehensive and meaningful profile of the school.

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**Students at Risk**

“We use data to identify students at risk. Once identified, these students’ academic achievement is reviewed and their teachers participate in a grade-level meeting to offer insight, share information and make recommendations. Information gathered at these meetings is in turn used to form the basis of student interviews, to plan pathways and to plan remediation.”

Lou Friscolanti, Principal
Bishop Ryan Catholic Secondary School
Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board

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Ideen in Action
Review the data to identify patterns, trends and relationships

Following data gathering, all relevant data should be analyzed and reviewed to identify areas for improvement.

- **Achievement data** should be evaluated on the class, school, board and provincial levels.
- **Contextual data** should be examined to provide an in-depth understanding of the key internal and external factors affecting student achievement.
- **Data correlations** should be explored to determine how contextual and achievement data may be related.
- **Data comparisons** such as data over time, across schools with similar demographics or across the province can often be useful in uncovering trends and patterns.
- **Disaggregated data** such as data on various subgroups of students or individual students can also serve as an effective tool to identify groups or individuals in the school who may need assistance.

Identify key issues to be addressed

At the conclusion of the data gathering and analysis phase, the improvement planning team will have a comprehensive school profile to use as the basis for improvement planning and for evaluating current or past improvement strategies. At this point, it is critical that the school leader ensure consensus has been reached on

- key strengths;
- key areas for improvement;
- factors underlying school performance;
- how the school compares with the board and the province and
- an assessment of ongoing or previous improvement strategies.

Sources and Resources

Using a Variety of Data Sources

The Education Improvement Commission publications School Improvement Planning: A Handbook for Principals, Teachers and School Councils and The Road Ahead IV: A Report on Improving Schools Through Greater Accountability provide useful information on using a variety of data sources. These publications can be found on the Ontario Ministry of Education Web site. Visit the EQAO Web site to access Using Data to Promote Student Success: A Brief Guide to Assist School Administrators in Interpreting Their Data.
You’re on an Improvement Track When

• the school leader models the importance of data collection and analysis and its value in guiding school improvement;
• rich data sources, including school and board data, provincial achievement information and contextual factors, are gathered, examined and compared to provide the broadest possible basis for analysis and decision-making and
• teachers understand and appreciate the importance of the data gathering and analysis process to assist in making strong connections between data and instructional practice.

Inside the Guide

See page 7 of the EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning for a comprehensive listing of data sources you can use to expand and deepen your knowledge of school context, inputs, processes and results.

See page 10 for a series of questions you can use to explore contextual and achievement data and make effective data correlations and comparisons.
Step 3: Communicate

Effective communication with parents, the school council and the broader school community is a critical component of effective school improvement planning and an important demonstration of accountability. Likewise, effective communication among school staff and at the board level is critical to ensuring that the improvement planning process is comprehensive, inclusive and reflective of all points of view. It is important to keep in mind, when communicating, that knowledge levels and information needs vary widely. Communication should be tailored in language, format and style of delivery to the specific needs of each audience.

What to Do

- Develop a communications strategy to reach all members of the broader school community.
- Communicate data and school improvement plans clearly and effectively.
- Engage the community in discussion and reflection.
How to Do It

Have a communications plan in place

Communication is an important component of school improvement planning and should be integrated into the improvement plan itself. A communications plan need not be complex but should take into account

- the broader school community, including school staff, students, parents and members of the school board, school council and community;
- the interests, needs and concerns of each group;
- the natural points of contact with each group, such as parent-teacher interviews, which may be used as effective vehicles for communication and
- the form and style of communication most appropriate to and preferred by each group.

Use a variety of media

It is important to keep in mind that communication occurs when it is received, not when it is sent. The school newsletter must be received and read. The school Web site must be visited. Meetings and workshops must be attended. In addition, media vary in their suitability to a particular communication task. Face-to-face meetings, for example, are ideal for training or discussion. Telephone calls are suited to passing on reminders or short notices. Printed documents may be required to convey detailed information. Use a variety of media in your communications and maintain a consistent message across all communications. Effective media may include

- newsletters;
- telephone;
- Web sites;
- presentations to groups and other face-to-face meetings;
- special events;
- brochures or flyers and
- report card inserts.
Communicate data and improvement plans

Sharing data such as EQAO results and information about school improvement planning with parents and other community members is crucial. Helping parents and the broader school community understand the use of school data will help to build a partnership and encourage their involvement in the school’s improvement planning process.

- Ensure that parents can put information in context by giving them sufficient background information, such as a description of EQAO’s role in provincial assessment, the school profile and the purpose and goals of school improvement planning.

- Provide sufficiently detailed information to give parents an accurate and whole picture of student assessment and the improvement planning process and an appreciation of the complexities and importance of both assessment and improvement planning.

Engage school community partners

Following the communication of school data to the school community, welcome parents and others in the broad school community to participate in the school improvement planning process. Involving school community partners in the analysis of data will equip them to make valuable contributions to the planning process. Subsequently, it is important to inform the entire school community of the initiatives arising from the improvement plan when it is complete.

Ideas in Action

Assessments at a Glance

“Our board has produced a very good summary of the Grades 3 and 6 Assessments of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, which our staff really appreciate. This kind of ‘at a glance’ format would also be a very useful tool to consider for parents.”

Carol Ryerse, Principal
St. Michael’s School
Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board
You’re on an Improvement Track When

• all members of the broader school community see evidence that their opinions and ideas are valued and that their needs and concerns are being addressed;

• parents, school council and community members are well informed about the life of the school and the improvement planning process on an ongoing basis and

• parents, staff, school council and members of the broader school community clearly understand the data, such as EQAO results, at the school, board and provincial levels; what these results indicate; where success is being achieved; and where further action is necessary.

Ideas in Action

Building Parental Involvement

“We held two very successful workshops for parents in May. One was for parents of Grade 10 students who failed the test, the other for parents of Grade 9 students. The focus of the workshops was to give these parents strategies to prepare their children for the test over the summer months.”

Jane Ashley, Principal
Crestwood Secondary School
Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board
What to Do

- Review previous improvement plans.
- Identify key improvement strategies.
- Define performance targets and measurable success indicators.
- Set responsibilities, timelines and milestones.

In the majority of cases, the process of gathering and reviewing data will have generated a clear picture of the improvement planning issues that need to be addressed. In fact, the challenge often lies in setting priorities for action. Doing a limited number of things well is the key to success. Keep in mind that school improvement planning is a long-term and continuous process. Ensure that action plans are realistic and that you account for time, materials, training and other implementation factors. Perhaps most important, ensure that the improvement planning team and all teaching staff understand the benefits of the process and are motivated and prepared to get fully involved.
How to Do It

Develop a framework for the improvement plan

Organization and clarity are keys to developing an effective improvement plan. Write the plan to be clearly and easily understood by a reader with no previous knowledge of the school. A detailed and well-organized plan will ensure that all participants in the process have a shared understanding of key goals, roles, responsibilities and timelines. In developing a framework for the improvement plan, include the following:

- the school profile;
- the data findings that led to the current plan;
- background information highlighting the relationship between previous improvement plans and the current plan;
- school board and provincial initiatives that will impact, or are integrated into, the current plan;
- a clear statement of goals and performance targets;
- key improvement strategies to be implemented in such areas as teaching practice, school environment and parental and community involvement;
- the measurable indicators to be used in determining the success of the plan;
- roles and responsibilities;
- required resources and
- timelines and milestones for status updates.

Integrate with previous improvement plans

School improvement planning is long-term, fluid and continuous. An effective plan will maintain continuity with previous plans.

- Examine previous improvement plans in light of the current data.
- Identify the successful and unsuccessful strategies.
- Identify the strategies to maintain, fine-tune or replace.

Ideas in Action

Expert Panels for Teachers

“We’ve had great success with what we call ‘Expert Panels’ for teachers. For example, we might have a math teacher hold a session on how to read graphic text. It’s a great way to engage staff in a cross-curricular way.”

Ruth McFadden
Lead English Teacher
Alexander Henry High School
Algoma District School Board
Identify priorities and key improvement strategies

After gathering the data and reviewing and reflecting on the previous improvement plan, consider the priorities for school improvement. When selecting and developing key strategies, keep the following in mind:

- Data should guide the selection of improvement strategies.
- Looking at best practices in other jurisdictions may help in developing new approaches.
- State strategies in terms of the specific actions to take.
- Clearly outline professional development and other supports.
- Identify the support you need from the school board.
- Identify provincial resources and initiatives that could support the improvement strategies selected.
- Detail the roles, responsibilities and actions required to implement each strategy.
- Strategies should take into account the needs of students achieving at or above the provincial standard, as well as those achieving below the provincial standard.
- Identify the selected strategies as short-term, mid-term or long-term.

Clearly define success indicators

Selected improvement strategies should be clearly linked to well-defined, measurable success indicators. All participants in the process need to be aware of and understand the performance targets and the fact that progress will be assessed periodically in a measurable and concrete way. Keep in mind that:

- report card, EQAO and other data are key indicators of success;
- formative assessment and summative evaluation can be used to observe and measure progress and
- in the plan, success indicators need to be clearly defined and should indicate how the school will determine whether its goals have been reached, what evidence the school will consider in this determination and what the expected outcomes are for students.

Inside the Guide
See page 33 of the EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning for a suggested improvement planning template.
Identify roles, responsibilities and resources

A school improvement plan is a guide for action. It is critical, therefore, that the plan clearly indicate when, where, how and by whom actions are to be taken and what additional supports and resources will be required to facilitate that action. Guidelines to keep in mind:

- Link each selected strategy to one person who will assume a leadership role and champion the strategy over time.
- Specify the person responsible for carrying out each task.
- Timelines may vary from a few months to one or more years. Ensure they realistically reflect all of the activities associated with a strategy, including data collection, analysis and synthesis; implementation; professional development; and status updates.
- Resources, both material and human, are a critical component of school improvement success and should be considered a school priority.
- Allow time for communicating progress as the strategy unfolds and for dialogue among teaching staff, the improvement planning team and other members of the school community.

- Ensure that the improvement plan includes a calendar-style summary of intended actions and milestones throughout the year to allow all participants, regardless of their personal involvement, to view the entire planned period at a glance.

Ideas in Action

The Importance of Focus

“Select one primary area as a focus for improvement. Don’t expect to do everything at once. Meet as teams to analyze the results. And bring in a ‘third opinion’—an outside source or fresh set of eyes to review the results and offer observations.”

Paul Lacalamita, Principal
St. Timothy Catholic School
Waterloo Catholic District School Board
You’re on an Improvement Track When

- you celebrate strengths and successes as well as discuss the challenges;
- motivational skills are working to build enthusiasm for the improvement process and the anticipated benefits;
- action plans are realistic and appropriate to available time and resources and
- members of the team are getting the professional development and other supports they need to implement the plan successfully.

Sources and Resources

Peer experience is sometimes more compelling for teachers than expert theory. When teachers explore innovative practices that produce results (through action research, for example) they become change advocates and encourage others to adopt new practices. The following are excellent sources of information to support innovative practice:

- Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC)
  http://www.ERIC
- Action Research at Queen’s University
  http://educ.queensu.ca
- The Ontario Action Researcher
  http://www.nipissingu.ca/oar
- Orbit magazine
  http://oise.utoronto.ca
School improvement plans will be effective only when they are kept in the forefront through ongoing monitoring, evaluation and discussion. It is fair to say that what is measured and monitored will be acted upon. A well-executed plan becomes an integral part of the life of the school and informs the daily experiences of students, teaching staff and the broader school community. It is important to note that monitoring and evaluation do not represent a “final step” in the process but lead naturally into a continuous cycle of engagement, communication, planning and ongoing improvement. Adopted in this way, as the focal point of school activity, school improvement planning can invigorate staff, inform and engage parents and community members, streamline and enhance school leadership and provide significant and lasting benefit to students.

**What to Do**

- Provide support to staff in implementing change.
- Measure progress.
- Refine and revise strategies to improve student achievement.
- Report on and celebrate successes.
How to Do It

Provide support to staff and other team members
Change will enliven the school community, but it may also generate anxiety, uncertainty and the need for extra support. The school leader should pay attention not only to progress being made but to the concerns of staff and other planning team members. He or she may need to
• provide additional professional development support;
• revise or fine-tune strategies and
• reassign roles and responsibilities among team members.

Monitor implementation
Once the plan is finalized, it is critical to have a systematic process for ensuring that strategies are being carried out according to plan and that they are leading toward the desired results. Observation activities and data collection could include the following:
• Ensure that all elements of the improvement plan are progressing on schedule.
• Communicate with those responsible for implementation to ensure that what was planned is translating successfully into practice.
• Determine whether professional development and other supports are effective in supporting the plan.
• Ensure that new resources are being used.
• Measure outcomes using multiple sources of data at the classroom, school, board and provincial levels to evaluate progress.
Reflect, fine-tune and revise

It is important to build multiple reflection points into the plan, to gather feedback and to decide on adjustments that might be needed to improve its effectiveness. Frequent reflection and discussion also give the school community an added opportunity to celebrate successes, provide needed support and motivate staff and members of the improvement planning team. It is recommended that

• specific individuals be assigned the tasks of monitoring implementation and results;
• the plan be reviewed frequently and revised as issues arise;
• multiple points for discussion and reflection be built into the process;
• professional development be provided, where required, to enable staff both to carry out strategies and monitor results over time and
• the broader school community be informed frequently about the school improvement plan’s successes and any adjustments and refinements being made.

Ideas in Action

What You Practise Is What You Improve

“To encourage our students to read more, we ensure our library has contemporary subject matter covering topics of real interest to the teen reader, where the material is set at an appropriate level for their reading skills and comprehension. We added a library club and now have a place where it is cool to be seen reading awesomely interesting stuff! Since we met these objectives, we now have a library full every lunch period. What you practise is what you improve.”

Debra Ford, Principal
Sir Guy Carleton Secondary School
Ottawa-Carleton District School Board
You’re on an Improvement Track When

- the school improvement plan is adopted as a central focus for instructional leadership, teaching and learning, parental involvement and all other aspects of school life;
- staff are supported in making the changes necessary to fulfill their roles and responsibilities in the improvement plan;
- monitoring and frequent communication are used to keep the plan “alive” in the school, to celebrate innovation and success and focus on areas requiring further refinements and
- school staff, students and parents can tell you about a key feature of the improvement plan.

Ideas in Action

Provide Structure and Support

“Our board requires school administrators to make literacy and numeracy visits to all primary and junior classes at least four times each year. Checklists, shared with teachers in advance, are used to indicate the level at which teachers are implementing key program elements. This approach provides the structure and the support to successfully implement new initiatives.”

Pat Cavan, Principal
St. Edmunds Public School
Bluewater District School Board
Research has shown that effective school improvement planning leads to student success. The improvement planning process gives the school leader a comprehensive framework for effective instructional leadership and school management and leads to a nurturing and engaged school community.

*Working Together for Student Success* provides a clear window into this powerful process. Consider the resources listed in this booklet to deepen your understanding of effective school improvement planning and use the process to engage the school community, build professional practice and support continuous student success.

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**Inside the Guide**

See page 24 of the *EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning* for a comprehensive list of resources you may wish to use to deepen your understanding of the improvement planning process.