

Forward by John Malloy, Director of Education, Toronto District School Board in *Learning for Leading: Lessons from Ontario's Leading Student Achievement Project* by Ken Leithwood (in press)

In the world of education, we need to guard against the propensity to implement ideas, research, and best practices in a “mile wide, inch deep” fashion. No one would argue with our commitment to provide the best learning opportunities for our students, and staff, but this commitment demands that we are engaged in a continuous process of learning that is challenging, that takes time, and demands perseverance.

I have had the privilege of being part of the Leading Student Achievement project in the province of Ontario since its beginning in 2005. Dr. Ken Leithwood, supported by our Ministry of Education, partnered with our principal associations and district leaders to help us think about how to improve student learning in classrooms, in schools, and across each district. The Leading Student Achievement project has assisted us to think about leadership in different ways. We learned that principals and superintendents play a significant role to mobilize all educators to share their expertise and leadership so that student learning will improve.

Another important characteristic of the Leading Student Achievement project is the amount of time we have been engaged in this learning which has informed practice and research. Starting with a small number of boards in the province of Ontario in 2005, it has grown to include most of the boards in Ontario. I think that it is notable that we have been engaged in this project for over 12 years because many large learning initiatives simply do not persevere this long, and we may find ourselves moving from one new idea to the next. Each year, leaders from schools and districts have been coming together to ask critical questions about how we can support and improve student learning. This group of leaders not only meets together to learn, and to collaborate with one another, but also makes commitments to try different strategies back in their districts. The Leading Student Achievement project does include

collaborative inquiry, it does include the gathering of evidence, and the insights that have emerged from this process have informed policy. It is important to note now that the learning has sometimes challenged popular beliefs regarding effective leadership, regarding school improvement, and regarding how students learn best. What I appreciate about the Leading Student Achievement project is that we are not afraid to challenge perceptions and perspectives based upon new learning. I am not sure that large scale learning processes are always willing to challenge widespread attitudes about teaching and learning in the way we did through this project. For example, we all believe that learning teams and networks are very important and that they should be supported in our districts. We learned that though these learning teams are very important, they were not necessarily effective just because people sat in a room together and talked about their practice. With each passing year, as we continued to go deeper with our questions about effective leadership that help students learn better, we continued to develop a better understanding of the conditions that are required for certain strategies to be successful, and most importantly we learned that the learning never ends!

So many important insights have emerged from this project and are described in this book. A few notable examples are that having a leadership development strategy is only effective when that strategy is explicitly connected to student learning in classrooms. This leadership development strategy is strengthened by networks both within schools and between schools. We learned about the key learning conditions that are required for student learning to improve and in turn where leadership effort should be focused. These key learning conditions include academic press or higher expectations, a disciplinary climate, collective teacher efficacy, trust between teachers and parents and students, and a dogged determination to protect instructional time and to use this time meaningfully and effectively. By learning together, reflecting on our practice, analyzing the evidence and sharing our insights with each other, we continued to strengthen and deepen our understanding of effective leadership which in turn supports our students to be the best they can be.

Improvement of schools and student learning is hard work. Large scale improvement processes are even more complicated because of the commitment to bring about improvement in multiple places and in different contexts. It is so refreshing to be a part of a messy, interesting, challenging process, over many years, leading to greater wisdom about how to exercise effective leadership in schools and districts. How different this experience has been compared to the traditional ways we sometimes learn. How important it is to participate with a community of learners over a considerable period of time who are willing to change attitudes and practices because of what we have learned together. I trust that you will gain many new insights and perspectives in the pages ahead.