

# High School Graduation



# High School Graduation

K–12 Strategies That Work

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A Joint Publication





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# Foreword

**T**he provision of public education to all children is one of the remarkable achievements of humanity. As recently as 50 years ago, the idea that virtually all young people could and should complete a secondary education would have been considered a dream, or wildly unrealistic. Even in “rich” countries, it is only recently that high school graduation has been seen as something that everyone should attain.

Today, across the globe, there is consensus on this issue. Political leaders campaign on it. College and university presidents want students with highly developed analytical and learning skills. Employers recognize that the economy depends on highly educated citizens when they ask for specific employability skills to address the demands of the workplace. Parents want their children to have the advantages conferred by more education, and students understand how important high school completion is for their futures. All stakeholders want schools to achieve higher levels of student success and graduation while, at the same time, helping students to develop personal, social, and interpersonal skills along with character attributes such as respect, responsibility, empathy, and fairness. And yet, in school systems everywhere, many students are not as successful as they can be.

While much of the rhetoric about education revolves around the idea that the competitiveness of a nation depends on the skills of its citizens and their ability to continue learning throughout their lives, that is only one aspect of the importance of education. Students also need to be attuned to the needs of their world and their local communities as they engage in community service and volunteerism. Education is recognized as vital to social cohesion and societies that are tolerant and caring. More than ever, there is a sense of urgency in achieving these outcomes as education is increasingly recognized as a driving force for societal improvement.

Educators everywhere are well aware of the mandate to realize both excellence and equity in student achievement. They are removing barriers to student success and ensuring that schools work to address the diverse needs of current student populations. Much has been accomplished, but there is much more to do. Students' backgrounds still play too large a role in shaping their futures, when what is wanted is a world in which outcomes are determined by effort and ability, and, more importantly, by the intervention strategies of the school, rather than accident of birth.

To realize this goal will require a coordinated effort and shared responsibility among all partners. Educators understand that high graduation rates benefit from a strong foundation that is established in the early years of a child's education. Engaging students and instilling a passion for learning begins in the early grades. As well, ensuring that there are intervention strategies for those who are not succeeding is needed at all grade levels. The sooner we begin, the greater the likelihood of rescuing those who need our support. At the same time, more and more evidence shows that people can turn around their lives at any point, and it is never too late for a student to move onto a better path and achieve success. No educator should accept the idea that if students have not been successful at some given point, the door is closed for good. Schools must be relentless in helping students achieve success, whatever their past.

*High School Graduation: K–12 Strategies That Work* validates the work that teachers, principals, systems leaders, and other educators have been doing in Ontario, across Canada, and around the world. Educators deserve gratitude, commendation, and encouragement for what they have already achieved in improving student achievement and narrowing achievement gaps. Ontario has increased its high school graduation rate by more than 20%, along with improving in literacy and numeracy skills of students in elementary schools, because of carefully designed and implemented improvement strategies. The lessons learned are powerful and consistent with other research on what it takes to bring about lasting system improvement.

One of the three goals of education in Ontario is to build public confidence in the education system. Public attitudes towards education have improved in the last nine years, and educator morale also improved significantly. The emphasis on helping educators improve their skills has been critical and will last for a long time. Schools will thrive when educators feel that there is no turning back and that they need to continue to build their knowledge of what works to improve achievement. The public, which sends its children to schools and pays the bills, deserves no less.

This book provides a comprehensive overview of the strategies that were used to improve education in Ontario. One important message is that success is dependent on a whole system approach at the district, school, and classroom levels. Schools cannot achieve the desired results alone. It takes a coalition of partners and the building of strong alliances to improve learning and graduation rates. The writers also make a strong case for the importance of parent and community engagement, which the literature has demonstrated have an important impact on student achievement.

Glaze, Mattingley, and Andrews all played pivotal roles in the implementation of Ontario's school and district improvement strategies. It was my privilege to work with them as colleagues in those efforts. As dedicated and skilled individuals who worked extensively with educators and schools, they know the importance of practitioner perspective on what really works in bringing about continuing improvement in teaching and learning. They discuss the need for a strong focus on literacy, numeracy, and other foundation skills and a strong orientation to excellence with equity. The use of data for decision making, developing strong leadership, assuming accountability for student learning, and using effective instructional practices are all essential components. As well, the need to engage the larger community in improving learning is fully explored. Other key strategies to build character and develop citizenship skills are discussed as integral to the outcomes needed for society. Equally important is the fact that they are asking you, their colleagues, to engage in the extension and refinement of knowledge on practices that improve student outcomes, broadly conceived.

One of the many practical strengths of this book is the wide array of specific interventions strategies and proven practices that can be used at all stages and transition points in schools. There is no shortage of successful practices at our disposal, but these interventions must be focused and intentional. This book highlights many of the carefully designed supports for students who are not succeeding, with the strong message that failure can no longer be tolerated. It is a book by practitioners for practitioners.

This book distils many, many years of experience and a great deal of wisdom in terms that all educators can understand and use. It's my pleasure to be able to endorse and support this work. I know all readers will find it valuable.

*Dr. Ben Levin*

*Professor, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education*

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# Preface

**E**ducators today are strategically placed to realize both excellence and equity in outcomes for students—to raise the bar for all students and to close the achievement gaps. Variations in learning should no longer be attributed to background factors. Indeed, schools must remove barriers, empower students, and create the conditions necessary to ensure success for all.

This call to action is not an abstract theory of what could be, but rather an approach that educators are already taking in their districts, schools, and classrooms—an approach that is already producing significant results. Educators are already convinced that they cannot give up now or show signs of disenchantment or discouragement. They are aware of their role in building a civil society, focusing on results, and advocating for students from diverse groups and those who live in poverty. In other words, educators are fully aware that the focus of education in the next few years has to be on removing the barriers that prevent an improvement in graduation rates. This mission is very important to the students from groups that have a history of failure or of dropping out of school. The need to build alliances and coalitions to support learning and to ensure that schools serve the needs of all students will take center stage. Politicians and parents alike will continue to demand that schools use the strategies at their disposal to raise the bar for all students and close achievement gaps for those who have not been successful in the past.

The litmus test or, indeed, the question we must ask ourselves is this: Can we afford to replicate the status quo? Under our watch, can there be “throwaway” kids? Will our society remain competitive in the global arena if a significant number of students cannot read, write, or do mathematics? Can we accept the fact that a large number of students will not graduate from high school? Can we, as educators, tolerate the waste of human potential if some students leave our schools without the education they deserve?

There is a cacophony of voices demanding improvement in the number of students who graduate from schools. There are persuasive arguments for a focus on the moral, economic, social justice, and human rights imperatives of schooling. Educators are taking this clarion call very seriously in their efforts to live up to the promise of making education a driving force for societal improvement and global competitiveness. Improving graduation rates will depend on educators and policy makers evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies that they are currently using from kindergarten to Grade 12, and revisiting the criteria for assessing the effectiveness of learning environments. It will require deep commitment to action and to monitoring what effect the implementation of their strategies is having for the success of our students. Student success, in terms of graduation, is not only dependent on the quality of instruction and educational experiences in high schools; it is also dependent on the strong foundation of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that is laid. It is also dependent on the establishment of high expectations for the success of all students beginning in the early years of a child's education.

The most important role of schools today is to ensure academic engagement and achievement from kindergarten to Grade 12. Our schools are uniquely positioned to equip our young people with the skills they require to be successful, contributing adults in our society. This challenge, however, is constant throughout the full breadth of the child's educational journey; specific interventions must be in place at all stages and transition points along the continuum. It is critical that educators recognize that improved graduation rates are dependent on improving teaching and learning throughout students' journey from kindergarten to the end of high school. Waiting until high school to challenge and engage students or to implement intervention strategies is too late. Success is dependent on a whole-system approach at the district, school, and classroom levels, across the grades, beginning with strategies that are implemented at the first indication that students are not performing according to the established standards and criteria. These strategies must be focused and intentional with specific, appropriate, and targeted supports for students who are not succeeding. A strong safety net must be in place to give students more chances to achieve graduation. In the study *Unlocking Potential for Learning* (Campbell, Fullan, & Glaze, 2006), it was clearly shown that sustained improvement in student achievement depends on schools, districts, and provinces adopting an aligned approach that builds the capacity of teachers, school leaders, boards, district leaders, parents, and community allies. *High School Graduation: K-12 Strategies That Work* provides a comprehensive

approach to school and district improvement using proven strategies to enhance student achievement and increase graduation rates.

There are many evidence-based approaches that are being implemented in many jurisdictions across the world. Those promising practices must be adopted, and strategies that do not work must be abandoned. Many jurisdictions are proving that all students can learn and succeed given time and proper supports. This means that it is necessary to ensure that all teachers and principals have access to these approaches and should be encouraged to improve on their knowledge base in an effort to sustain the gains that have already been made. Our experience is that it takes different approaches and renewed effort to bring about improvement at different stages along the journey, especially as one gets closer to the target. What we also know is that this work has to be done with a sense of urgency. The fact is that the students cannot wait—nor will their societies, as each country strives to take its place in the global economy.

In Ontario, improving graduation rates has been a key priority. Over the past nine years, continuous progress has been achieved. The research-informed strategies outlined in this book are based on the firsthand experiences of the authors who were provincial leaders in the development and implementation of Ontario's improvement strategy for kindergarten through Grade 12. This book provides an improvement framework for school district leaders, school administrators, classroom teachers, and policy makers. It documents the instructional strategies and improvement processes used to bring about the changes that have resulted in continuous improvement in student outcomes.

Education benefits all members of the community, and making gains in achievement requires the support of all those who have a vested interest in this critical undertaking. The importance of developing community alliances and building coalitions to support learning is important; schools cannot do this alone. Through the development of networks, the sharing of promising practices, and the support of one another, schools and their communities keep the momentum for improvement alive.

*High School Graduation* is a detailed, comprehensive resource for the principals, teachers, superintendents, directors, and policy makers whose primary quest is to improve their schools and districts and to help all students achieve at higher levels and graduate from high school. This book outlines high-impact, research-informed strategies that have been demonstrated to improve student achievement. The

authors have provided practical processes, tools, and templates that will assist jurisdictions to achieve their improvement goals. Sample tools such as templates for improvement planning are included.

There is, indeed, a sense of urgency in improving student achievement. Schleicher (2006) asserts that, regardless of where we live in the world or where we stand in terms of development, the ability to compete in the fast-growing economy with demands for high-level skills hinges on significant improvements in the quality of schooling outcomes and a more equitable distribution of learning opportunities.

In 2011, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) said that Canadian students do well not only on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); they do so despite their socioeconomic status, first language, or status as Aboriginal Canadians or recent immigrants. OECD stated that Canada has achieved success within a system that accommodates a diverse student population. Researchers examined Canada's success through an in-depth look at the province of Ontario and validated our strategy, which they described as combining a demand for excellence with extensive capacity building, and fostering a climate of trust and mutual respect among all stakeholders (OECD, 2011).

Teachers, principals, and all those who work in schools are to be commended for the progress they have already made. But as time progresses, we cannot rest on our laurels. We know we can do better. We know that we can raise our expectations of the number of students who can graduate from high school successfully with our guidance, support, and effective teaching.

As countries across the globe focus on educational improvement, there is an expressed need by educators to discover and implement the strategies that improve student learning and achievement. This book documents Ontario's success story and provides a reflection on the reasons the approaches that were selected, from a field of possibilities, worked. Educators across the world will find that many of the processes described can work in their own contexts. It also helps that the Ontario system has received external recognition and validation for its focus on excellence and equity and for closing achievement gaps.

We invite educators to share our enthusiasm for the future of education. We certainly have the will and the skills to improve graduation rates. This requires inspired, persistent performance and motivation, and an enduring belief that our efforts do, indeed, enhance life chances. Our confidence is based on recognition of what we have already achieved. We know we can do even better. We must

keep the momentum alive. Improving graduation rates is a mission that is possible and one that we embrace with confidence.

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# About the Authors



**Dr. Avis Glaze** is a well-known international leader in education. As Ontario's first chief student achievement officer and founding CEO of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, she played a pivotal role in improving student achievement in Ontario. Avis is currently the founder and president of her company, Eduquest International, Inc.

Avis has worked at all levels of the education system—from classroom teacher to superintendent of schools, director of education, and education officer. She was research coordinator with the Ontario Women's Directorate of the Ministry of Labour. She also served as Ontario's education commissioner and senior adviser to the Minister of Education.

Avis was commissioner on the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, influencing the direction of education in the province. She represented the Canadian government with education reform in South Africa and at the UNESCO conference on inclusive education in Riga, Latvia. As well, she has worked with educators in Australia, New Zealand, England, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Singapore, the Caribbean, and many parts of the United States.

Avis has received honorary doctorates from several Canadian universities, including her alma mater, the University of Toronto. She has won more than 40 awards for outstanding contribution to education, including Educator of the Year, the Sandford D. McDonnell Lifetime Achievement Award for Character Education offered

by the Character Education Partnership in the United States, and the Order of Ontario.

She has been involved in a landmark research on Ontario high school girls and has written many articles on topics as diverse as leadership, career development, character education, diversity, equity, and inclusive education. She co-authored *Towards Freedom: The African-Canadian Experience* (with Ken Alexander) and *Breaking Barriers; Excellence and Equity for All* (Glaze, Mattingley, & Levin, 2012).



**Ruth Mattingley** has provided leadership in education provincially, nationally, and internationally. Ruth was formerly the senior executive officer at the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, Ontario Ministry of Education. In this role, Ruth worked closely with Ontario's chief student achievement officer, Dr. Avis Glaze, to develop Ontario's provincial strategy for improving achievement in literacy and numeracy for elementary school students. Ruth also worked closely with school districts and schools across Ontario as they developed strategic plans that focused on improving student achievement. Ruth is currently an associate with Edu-quest International.

Prior to joining the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, Ruth was a superintendent of education with the Lambton Kent District School Board with portfolios ranging from curriculum development and implementation, special education, and human resources, as well as supervising a family of schools. Ruth also has experience as an elementary school principal, classroom, and special education teacher.

Ruth has worked with educational leaders both within Canada and internationally with a focus on district and school improvement planning, high-impact strategies for improving student achievement, equity and diversity, and improving student achievement in schools in challenging circumstances. Ruth has written numerous articles and recently co-authored *Breaking Barriers: Excellence and Equity for All* (Glaze, Mattingley, & Levin, 2012).

Ruth is a past president of the Ontario Public Supervisory Officers Association (OPSOA) and a past president of the Canadian Association of School Administrators (CASA). She was the recipient of the OPSOA Distinguished Leadership Award and the Ontario recipient of the CASA Excel Leadership Award.



**Rob Andrews** is the director of the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategic Implementation, Innovation and Support branch of the Student Achievement Division at the Ontario Ministry of Education. He has also served as a teacher, vice principal, principal, and superintendent of education with the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board (Peterborough, Ontario) with responsibility for student success, alternative education, and secondary school

reform. Rob spent an additional year serving as an education officer for the Strategic Policy Branch of the Student Success Branch at the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2005–2006. He has been involved with Ontario’s Student Success initiative since its inception in 2003 and has worked in this capacity with directors of education, supervisory officers, Student Success leaders, secondary school principals, Ministry of Education staff, teacher teams, and consultants to develop and implement professional supports. With an emphasis on the four “pillars” of student success, these supports focus on the leadership, facilitation and strategies that allow for broad changes in secondary school programs, transitions to secondary schools, supporting students at risk, and changing school and system culture with respect to serving all students. He has also been engaged in planning for the enhanced use of instructional technology in the teaching and learning process.

Rob has been involved in school and community collaboration and has engaged key stakeholders in the analysis of system data, in the performance of baseline establishment, gap analysis, goal and target setting, strategic planning, implementation, and monitoring for initiatives related to the Student Success portfolio. He has been a secondary school teacher and administrator since 1987 and has extensive experience with adult and alternative education. He holds a master of education degree in educational administration and has been a supervisory officer in Ontario since 2006.