

Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success / Learning to 18 Strategy

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Aims of the study and theoretical framework

The Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L18) Strategy reflected a commitment by the Ontario Ministry of Education (hereafter “the Ministry”) to improving secondary school success for all students and increasing the provincial secondary school graduation rate to 85% by 2010-2011. The origins and motivations of the SS/L18 Strategy can be traced in part to reactions to a four-phased double-cohort longitudinal study by Alan King (King, 2002, 2003; King et al., 2004) which cited alarmingly low graduation rates within the province (68% in 2003-2004) and identified credit accumulation in Grade 9 and 10 as a key predictor of secondary school graduation. In addition, subsequent research (Ferguson, Tilleczeck, Boydell, Rummens, Cote & Roth-Edney, 2005; Institut franco-ontarien, 2005) identified student disengagement as a critical component of students’ early departure from secondary schools. Together, these findings motivated the development of specific programs to help every student acquire the required number of secondary school credits to graduate from secondary school.

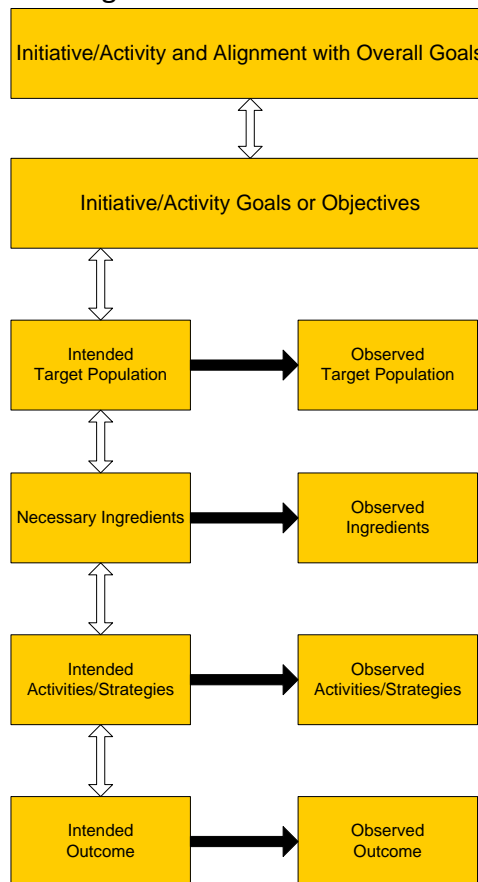
The Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy (“SS/L18”) was a broad, province-wide (Ontario, Canada) strategy designed to ensure that every student successfully completed secondary schooling and reached his/her post-secondary goals, whether these goals involved apprenticeship, college, university, or the workplace. As part of the SS/L18 Strategy, the Ontario Ministry of Education (“the Ministry”) implemented supports to encourage the development of innovative and flexible educational approaches to improve students’ learning experiences and outcomes, and to foster positive student engagement in learning while respecting students’ individual needs and circumstances. These supports included consultation, targeted additional funding, policy and legislative changes, and improved resources and training that recognized regional, social, and cultural differences within the system. The Ministry articulated five key goals for the SS/L18 Strategy:

1. To increase the graduation rate and decrease the number of students leaving school without graduating;
2. To support a good secondary school outcome for all students;
3. To provide students with new and relevant learning opportunities;

4. To build on students' strengths and interests; and
5. To provide students with an effective transition from elementary to secondary school that improved students' opportunities to succeed.

The evaluation, designed to appraise the extent to which the SS/L18 Strategy as implemented was aligned with the Ministry's goals and was producing the intended outcomes, followed a familiar evaluation framework (see Popham, 1971; Stake, 1972; Stufflebeam, 2000. See Figure 1. This framework was useful in: (a) determining whether the goals and objectives of a program were sufficiently explicit and specific; (b) determining whether the intended components of the program, including the target population, resource allocation, programs, and outcomes were logically related to the goals and to each other; and (c) evaluating the gap between the intended and observed components of the program. Stage 1 of the evaluation focused on identifying the *intended* elements of each initiative or component. Stage 2 focused on identifying the *observed* elements to determine whether there are gaps between the intentions and actual implementation of each initiative.

Figure 1: Diagram of the Evaluation Framework



Methods and data sources

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was chosen to address these questions. The sources of qualitative data included several hundred in-depth, semi-structured field interviews and focus groups with key informants from the Ministries of Education and of Training, Colleges and Universities, more than 40 school boards, more than 50 schools and nearly 10 colleges across the province. Key informants included senior managers from both ministries, education officers, consultants to the Minister of Education, directors of education, Student Success Leaders (SSLs), superintendents of programs, school trustees, college presidents and vice-presidents, school principals, members of school Student Success Teams (including several Student Success Teachers (SSTs)), teachers who were not members of their school's Student Success Team, parents, and students.

The sources of quantitative data were the responses from online surveys developed by the evaluation team, to which more than 14,000 secondary students and school staff responded, as well as student achievement data provided by the Ministry. Surveys were designed to complement the depth of information provided by the interviews and focus groups by gathering data from a wider population.

The student data¹ provided by the Ministry of Education were comprised of:

- student biographic and achievement data for students in Grades 9 to 12 stored in the Elementary/Secondary Data Warehouse (ESDW) for the academic years 2000-2001 through 2004-2005
- student biographic and achievement data from the Ontario School Information System (OnSIS) for the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 academic years, and
- individual student records from the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 academic years on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT)

Results and discussion

Overall, the SS/L18 Strategy improved the learning conditions for, and the success of, secondary students in Ontario.

What changed between 2003 and 2007 in Ontario's secondary schools to help students succeed?

¹ All student data had personal identifiers removed to protect confidentiality

A number of changes to increase student success occurred in the secondary school system over these four years. There was good evidence of an overall shift from an *implied or presumed* focus on the learner to an *explicit and highly intentional* focus on the learner as the focal point for the work of schools. Changes highlighted during the field visits include:

- improved communication among different system actors,
- increased focus on tracking and monitoring individual students (especially with respect to the transition period between elementary and secondary school),
- increased focus on a caring school culture, and
- expanded program choices and flexibility for students, including
- increased flexibility in meeting diploma requirements.

, , and ***What were the main benefits arising from these changes?***

The benefits most frequently reported by school and school board adult informants were classified as human-related benefits. These benefits include: improved internal communication within schools, increased student engagement, and improved teaching practices.

There was less evidence that the SS/L18 Strategy led to benefits with respect to improved communication with community partners or stakeholders and to supporting the systematic sharing of effective practices.

Measurement and accountability-related benefits account for the second most frequently mentioned category of benefits produced by the SS/L18 Strategy by those interviewed. Primary among these were improvements in student monitoring and tracking and in data use.

The findings also point to resource-related benefits as important outcomes of the SS/L18 Strategy. Three specific resource-related benefits were identified by informants as resulting from the SS/L18 Strategy: an increased number of program options, increased scheduling flexibility, and increased access to human resources—primarily teaching staff and Student Success Teachers—to support student success.

The most significant academic-related benefits reported by informants were: smoother transitions from secondary school to postsecondary education and/or work and between the elementary and secondary levels, improvements in test results, and improvement in graduation rates and a decrease in drop-out rates.

Informants also identified systemic benefits from changes associated with the SS/L18 Strategy. Systemic benefits reflect changes in values, dispositions or beliefs manifested by many individuals and/or at various levels of the educational system. The most often cited systemic benefits produced by the SS/L18 Strategy were a change in the school's expectations for students and an improved professional culture.

Which elements of the SS/L18 Strategy and actions yielded improved student success?

Overall, the great majority of survey respondents who were familiar with specific elements of the SS/L18 Strategy (such as expanded cooperative education, apprenticeships, Student Success Teachers, Credit Recovery, School-College-Work Initiatives, Dual Credit programs, and Specialist High Skills Majors) agreed or strongly agreed that these initiatives helped student to be more successful. Survey data also suggest that different elements of the Strategy were complementary and worked to meet the diverse needs of students.

What specific support mechanisms enabled the strategy to progress?

Government provided additional resources –financial and human – to support the change process and the changes themselves. Data collected throughout both stages of this evaluation led the evaluation team to conclude that many factors were instrumental in supporting changes that helped increase student success, including:

- targeted funding,
- the designation of dedicated student success staff in each school and of Student Success Leaders in each board,
- increased scheduling and funding flexibility,
- the provision of professional development opportunities,
- improved information sharing about individual students,
- increased focus at key transition points of students' educational trajectories,
- specific components of the SS/L18 Strategy that have acted as foundations or rallying points for the development of supportive pedagogical practices and alternative means of assessing student progress and success,
- the increased availability of previously-established programs such as cooperative education and apprenticeships, and
- the development of innovative offerings such as SHSMs and dual credits.

Responses to the survey showed that secondary school staff generally agreed that educators possess the professional skills and knowledge needed to implement the SS/L18 Strategy. Secondary school staff who responded to the survey were concerned,

however, that staff allocations were insufficient to support the *full range* of initiatives implemented under the SS/L18 Strategy.

What barriers to increased student success were identified? And how were these addressed?

Although efforts had been made by the Ministry, school boards, and schools to inform students of the programs and initiatives of the SS/L18 Strategy that were available to them, one challenge facing the Strategy after four years was a relative lack of student awareness of the Strategy and its components. Although most students were familiar with at least one of the components of the Strategy, many were unaware of the range of programs and supports available to them.

Information gathered from interviews and focus groups offers valuable insight into other barriers facing the SS/L18 Strategy. The challenges most frequently reported during field visits were human-related challenges, including: staff perceptions and student dispositions, the needs of specific student subpopulations (especially students with persistent or marked behavioural difficulties), and inadequate or underdeveloped pedagogy in specific areas of practice.

Resource-related challenges accounted for the second most frequently mentioned category of barriers to student success and to the effectiveness of the SS/L18 Strategy. The specific factors that were most frequently mentioned by respondents as impeding greater student success were: insufficient human resources, limited funding, lack of (programmatic) flexibility, and issues related to transportation and/or school location².

The concerns expressed during the interviews and focus groups regarding human resources and transportation were echoed by the responses of secondary school staff to the online survey. Survey respondents reported a lack of physical and human resources at their school to implement successfully all components of the SS/L18 Strategy. The Ministry continued to address these challenges by acknowledging the great need for human and other resources to ensure student success by allocating funding for such resources. For example, the Ministry invested over \$100 million for the hiring of 1,600 additional teachers.

Resistance and/or misunderstanding of the SS/L18 Strategy's values, beliefs or goals and to resulting barriers on student success, as gleaned from interview and field visit data, were deemed to reflect systemic challenges. Public perceptions (especially persistent

² Smaller rural or remote schools found it very difficult to offer the promised range of programs.

negative or inaccurate perceptions about the values of different educational pathways) were widely identified as the most significant systemic barrier to student success.

Challenges related to data collection and use were sometimes identified by informants as examples of measurement and accountability challenges facing the SS/L18 Strategy. The knowledge and capacity to properly collect and use meaningful data were less well developed than necessary to get a reliable sense of student performance at the aggregate level, according to the field data. These challenges were being addressed by the development of an efficient and accurate provincial data collection system and a professional learning program about the uses of data. These changes led to increases in the frequency of data collection and in increases in the quality of these data in the majority of schools and school boards visited. a. This change process was not complete and there were still reported instances of problems with data collection and use.

The pressures of curricular expectations were also frequently mentioned during field visits. Informants regularly indicated that the vast amount of mandated curricular content and the timelines within which this content was expected to be addressed were acting as significant barriers to greater student success.

What further strategies and actions were suggested to further increase secondary student success?

Given the frequency with which human- and resource-related barriers to student success were mentioned by respondents, it was no surprise that school and school board informants focused most of their recommendations on actions relating to with human- and resource-related factors. Suggested personnel-related improvements related to various aspects of capacity building, communication with primary stakeholders and meeting the diverse needs of learners. The three most frequently suggested resource-related improvements were meeting staffing needs, increasing or permanently securing existing funding to offer suitable program options and conditions, and increasing flexibility around program and course delivery.

Systemic improvements drawn from informant statements addressed the need to continue reinforcing a system-wide culture shift from teacher-centred to learner centred education, on increasing awareness of the value of different educational pathways within the system and with the larger public, and on fostering a climate of planning certainty at all levels of the educational system.

Over and over, informants told the field team that it was important for the Ministry to “stay the course” with the SS/L18 Strategy. Informants unequivocally stated that the flexibility and variety afforded by the SS/L18 Strategy were significant determinants of educators’ ability to stay focused on relevant goals and to maintain morale.

Was there evidence that graduation rates increased and drop-out rates decreased?

Informants stated that graduation rates were increasing as a result of the SS/L18 Strategy. The Ministry reported that provincial graduation rates increased from 68% in 2003-04 to 75% in 2006-07.

Was there evidence that structures and supports were changing to better provide viable pathways for all students and that new learning opportunities build on the strengths and interests of all students?

The expansion of cooperative education opportunities, the development of Specialist High Skills Majors and Dual Credit programs, and the increased opportunities for apprenticeship placements were examples of the efforts being made to provide more viable pathways for students and more flexible delivery. Survey data showed that students generally felt that they received good advice and guidance for career preparation and for planning their future education. However, many teachers reported still knowing very little about what is available to students after graduation other than university.

Students and staff agreed that initiatives such as Dual Credit programs, Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSMs), expanded cooperative education, apprenticeships, and School-College-Work Initiatives (SCWIs) helped students by providing interesting new learning opportunities. A majority of students who responded to the survey said that they were often or always interested in what they are learning in class and that they were able to take courses that they found interesting and challenging.

Was there evidence that structures and supports changed to better assist students in their transition from elementary to secondary school?

Improved communication, especially between secondary schools and their feeder elementary schools, the development of student profiles, individual timetabling for students identified as “at-risk,” and other transition activities were discussed during school visits. Respondents reported a strong focus on ensuring that students experienced a successful transition into secondary school.

The vast majority of secondary school staff who responded to the survey agreed that their school was making new efforts to welcome Grade 9 students, to make students believe that they can succeed in secondary school, and that teachers in their school monitored how Grade 9 students are doing. Three-quarters of staff respondents agreed that their school creates individual timetables that build on students' strengths.

Was there evidence that accountability measures (monitoring, tracking, reporting and planning) were being used in schools and by school boards to drive improvement?

The vast majority of staff survey respondents agreed that monitoring measures were in place in their school and were being used to support improving student success.

Was there evidence that capacity to implement the SS/L18 Strategy was being built in schools and school boards?

Survey responses indicated that the Ministry focused on building capacity among SSTs, principals, vice-principals, and guidance or career counsellors from 2003-2007. Direct capacity building for teachers *who were not part of the Student Success Team* was less well developed or prevalent.

Was there evidence that schools and school boards act upon their student and school-level data and information to intervene with and support students appropriately?

Survey data showed that most secondary school staff agreed that data was being used more than before to help support individual students in their school. Data use was also identified during interviews and focus groups as a challenge. Many interviewees reported having access to data but being unsure how to use these data to support improvement. However, informants in some schools described active professional conversations using student achievement data at the individual, course/class and school level to monitor progress and inform changes

Was there evidence that schools and school boards were making decisions in an effort to align resources and practices to the goals of the SS/L18 Strategy?

Secondary school staff members reported that efforts are being made to align resources and practices to the goals of the SS/L18 Strategy. The vast majority of respondents agreed that teachers in their school build literacy skills into their daily lessons, that their school could and did make individual timetables that build on students' strengths, and that there was a new focus in their school on building students' competencies in mathematics.

Conclusions

While there was broad agreement about many of the core principles and impacts of the SS/L18 Strategy across the province's educational system, the qualitative data revealed that the practice of and results associated with the SS/L18 Strategy varied considerably across school boards and schools. For example, the quantitative and qualitative data sources both showed clearly that specific core components such as Credit Recovery and Credit Rescue, cooperative education, and the existence of dedicated student success personnel are generally well known and implemented across the province.³ Yet the interviews and focus groups also revealed that how each component was understood and operationalized locally differed markedly from one school board to another and even among schools that are part of the same school board. This posed a challenge to the Ministry as well as to individual schools in assessing which components are best at promoting student success, what circumstances or conditions supported or impeded the effectiveness of these components, and what indicators could be used to reliably demonstrate the relevance of these components⁴.

At the same time, the data show quite clearly that unique local initiatives and programs established for the particular purpose of meeting local students' needs were often just as important to the promotion of student engagement and success as major core initiatives among those working on the frontlines.⁵ Many examples were provided of such initiatives and programs, including the use of engagement coaches or mentors; financial assistance programs for poor students (through independent foundations); dedicated homework clubs; breakfast or meal programs; student success and leadership camps; mentoring programs for Aboriginal youth established in conjunction with

³ The coding team looked for specific evidence that specific components of the SS/L18 Strategy were known and being implemented in schools. The analysis shows that Credit Recovery and Credit Rescue, taken together, accounted for 20% of informant statements pertaining to component implementation. Also important were dedicated student success personnel (12% of coded statements), cooperative education (10%), professional development (10%), SHSMs (7%), as well as literacy and Grade 8 to 9 transition programs (both of which accounted for 6% of coded informant statements pertaining to implementations).

⁴ Evidence in support of this conclusion is found in various descriptions of Credit Recovery and Credit Rescue, which reveal (a) significant overlap between these components with respect to their conceptualization and their implementation; (b) the use of local "admission criteria" for students to access these components which can vary considerably across schools, thereby making large-scale comparisons difficult; and (c) occasional confusion between the focus and intent of each component.

⁵ Indeed, the evaluation team found that 15% of the informant statements pertaining to implementation could only be classified as pertaining to the miscellaneous category "other initiatives". Examined in conjunction with the category "alternative programs", which accounted for 5% of all informant statements, this suggests that the relevance of localized, highly customized program delivery options is perceived

community partners; childcare supports for parenting students; and others too numerous to name. The flexible and customizable nature of these programs appeared essential to meeting local needs and to promoting student success, especially among at-risk or high needs students. The challenge for schools, school boards, and the Ministry was to develop means by which the effectiveness and relevance of such programs can be monitored and successful practices shared to ensure that they continue to contribute to student success and to achieving the goals of the SS/L18 Strategy.

What was perhaps most encouraging and strongly supported by the data was that the core messages and values associated with the SS/L18 Strategy appeared to be well understood and increasingly accepted. The evidence amassed by the evaluation team suggests that the SS/L18 Strategy is understood as representing a significant culture shift that is associated with meeting the needs of all students, ensuring the success of all students, paying particular attention to the needs of low-achieving or at-risk students, and recognizing the importance of different educational pathways. This was further reflected in the frequency with which major goals of the SS/L18 Strategy such as supporting good outcomes for students, increasing graduation rates and decreasing drop-out rates, building on students' strengths, providing relevant learning opportunities, and supporting students through major transitions were mentioned by the informants. It was on the basis of this evidence and of the findings outlined elsewhere in this paper that the evaluation team concludes that the SS/L18 Strategy appeared to be achieving a number of its objectives.

The Change Process Taking Place in Ontario Secondary Schools

Ontario has pursued a course of action that has encouraged much needed change in secondary schooling. Since 2003, the Premier and Ministers of Education have used their leadership positions to articulate broad outcomes for the changes: increasing graduation rates, ensuring higher levels of knowledge, and ensuring that students leaving school are prepared for the opportunities available to them. Government gave prominence to the individual and societal benefits of persistence and success in secondary schooling. And, although not without controversy, Government also signalled to students, their parents and the surrounding community that it was prepared to use its legislative authority to make it more difficult for students to leave school prior to graduation.

As an agent of change, Government mobilized three important ingredients: social pressure for change, the articulation of the benefits of change, and penalties for the

maintenance of the status quo. To facilitate the needed changes, Government removed many of the principal barriers to change. First, and perhaps most important, the SS/L18 Strategy was predicated on respect for the persons responsible for carrying out the mission of Ontario's secondary schools and for their professional judgement. Many school and school board informants made reference to the "[teaching] profession being valued again." As evidence of the respect accorded to professionals, these informants pointed to the discretion accorded to teachers and administrators in developing approaches and initiatives, the encouragement to experiment and modify one's approach if the experiment was unsuccessful in achieving the desired outcome, the ability to make and modify decisions, and the provision of resources in support of the plans developed and the decisions made. Many school and school board administrators interviewed expressed satisfaction with the flexibility embedded in the implementation of many of the SS/L18 initiatives and expressed the wish that this flexibility to meet local needs be maintained.

Government was strategic in allowing for the accommodation of alternatives where such alternatives are aligned with and capable of producing the desired outcomes. It allowed experimentation, permitting people to practice, apply and assess the effectiveness of the change, and has encouraged the modification of practices that have not produced results or the abandonment of practices and initiatives that proved unworthy of modification.

The enthusiasm that the SS/L18 Strategy engendered among practicing professionals was palpable and infectious. The changes that occurred in Ontario's secondary schools would not have taken place if it were not obvious that Government respects the persons responsible for carrying out the mission of Ontario's secondary schools and their professional judgement.

Concluding Observations

Overall, the SS/L18 Strategy has garnered an enthusiastic response from all parties. While there were reservations about some features among some audiences, the dominant reaction was enthusiasm and optimism. Parents of students who faced challenges reported that their children had renewed interest in coming to school. Teachers and administrators who once looked forward to retirement had been reinvigorated and were planning to continue teaching. Students who endured their school experiences as they might a prison sentence and students who had failed in school were experiencing success in opportunities that were previously unattainable.

While there are elements that participants did not like or about which participants expressed concern, the overwhelming response of the majority of participants was that the SS/L18 Strategy was improving the learning conditions for, and the success of, secondary students in Ontario. It was averred that increasing students' school success has a ripple effect, improving their success outside of school as well in, for example, increasing the likelihood of post school employment and diminishing the likelihood that successful students will become involved in the criminal justice system. These are, of course, empirical assertions that deserve to be investigated as the SS/ L18 Strategy matures over time.

The majority of respondents either implicitly or explicitly attributed the success of the SS/L18 Strategy to "teachers who care." The predominant view – expressed by almost everyone, including those with reservations about specific elements – was that it should continue for the benefit of Ontario's secondary students and for the citizens of Ontario.

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