

Principal's Sabbatical Report

Focus: To visit schools in Toronto to identify methods to improve boys' achievement, especially in multicultural environments.

Mr Christopher Rooney
Principal Liston College

This report is a summary of the methods six Principals of successful high schools in Toronto are employing to improve the achievement of students within their schools. Each school has a deliberate plan for improving student achievement.

Acknowledgements:

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Mr. Michael McMorrow: Superintendent Toronto District Catholic Schools' Board
Ministry of Education:

Executive Summary:

Objectives

This report covers the interventions of the principals of six successful schools in Toronto to improve student achievement. The purpose of my visit to Toronto was to interview the principals of each of these schools to learn from their successes with a view to implementing some of them at Liston College for the same purpose. I wished to learn of any specific strategies that were used to improve the achievement of boys. All six schools achieved above the Provincial average in the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) Grade 9 numeracy tests and the Ontario Secondary Schools Literacy Test (OSSLT) at Grade 10.

Key Findings

The key findings are summarised as follows:

- All six schools used extensive monitoring and tracking of students particularly those students who were at risk of not achieving the literacy credits necessary for graduation
- All six schools had a comprehensive programme of credit recovery to ensure that students had an opportunity to gain credits after initially failing to do so
- All six schools employed the Student Success Leader (SSL) to co-ordinate the credit recovery programme
- Two of the co-educational schools had specific programmes to assist boys gain the literacy credits
- There was extensive use of achievement data from contributing elementary schools
- All schools grouped the students into three study bands – Academic, Applied and Essential Learning
- The use of Summer School at the end of the school year as a means of improving student achievement

- There are no external exams for Canadian high school students except the OSSLT which dominates the graduation process
- Extensive course counselling for students at the end of Grades 9, 10 and 11

Conclusions

The conclusions from the key findings are

- Secondary schools in Ontario are better resourced than those in New Zealand
- Schools promote the view that students can achieve by providing more opportunities for them to succeed
- The issue of boys' achievement compared to girls' achievement is becoming more apparent in Ontario
- A student achievement programme is in place before the students begin their high school studies

Recommendations

The following recommendations are the result of my findings.

- That closer monitoring of student achievement at Years 7 and 9 be part of the school programme
- That early reporting to parents of students at Year 7 and for students new to the College at Year 9 takes place
- The use of the Specialist Classroom Teacher (SCT) to support students and teachers at Years 7, 8, and 9
- The use of year 13 students as tutors for Year 7 students
- Review of curriculum level for students at risk of not achieving in numeracy and literacy to ensure that the level is appropriate for each student

Purpose:

The purpose of the visit was to identify strategies employed by the principals of successful schools in raising student achievement. I was particularly interested in methods used to improve the achievement of boys. I visited six schools, of which two were boys only and the other four were co-educational, to interview these principals. I hoped to be able to incorporate some of these strategies into our current programme for improved student achievement at Liston College.

Rationale and Background information:

In the results of the 2003 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) information, Canada was ranked third out of 40 OECD countries taking part in the programme in the reading literacy scale. For the mathematical literacy scale Canada ranked seventh. With mean scores of 528 and 532 respectively, Canada achieved above New Zealand whose scores were 522 and 523 in the same tests.

The PISA test has taken place in 2000, 2003 and 2006. It tests students aged between 15 years and 3 months and 16 years and 2 months. The school year that the student is in when the test is administered is not considered. The students take a test of Mathematics, Reading literacy, Science and Problem solving in a two-hour period.

I chose these two measures for numeracy and literacy as they gave a valid means of comparison between the two countries. There was a PISA study completed in 2006 but the results were not available when I selected the schools for my study. I chose Ontario as a representative province for Canada because of the diversity it offered.

I wanted to study schools which were either achieving above the national average or had made continuous improvement, were multi-cultural or were mid-decile in terms of socio-economic status. I wished to focus on strategies used to improve the achievement of boys and my intention was to visit boys' schools to establish this. I chose Toronto as a city which would offer the best options in terms of my criteria because of its size.

During my research it was clear that I would have difficulty finding sufficient boys only schools which would be suitable for my study. There are many boys schools but they are almost always private schools. Public high schools in Canada are exclusively co-educational. I selected two boys only schools and four co-educational schools all of which met the criteria described above. I decided that six schools would be a valid sample which would enable me to make meaningful conclusions at the same time making it possible to use public transport to access the schools. I realised that the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) was larger in area than the Greater Auckland Area and could present logistical difficulties in travelling to and from.

These were all Catholic schools and are described as Public in the Ontario province. In New Zealand they would be classified as Integrated State Schools. The significant difference between the Ontario schools and those in New Zealand is that there are no restrictions on the number of students who are not Catholic who are eligible for enrolment. These schools are

fully funded by the Government and must accept any student who wishes to enrol regardless of their religion. As a consequence the percentage of students who were not Catholic ranged from 20% to 48% in the schools I visited. All of the schools were more successful in the province tests than the other immediate local high schools, and were attracting students from these schools as a result of their success.

In the Ontario education system students attend elementary school until Grade 8 and then move to high school at Grade 9. In Canada a student in Grade 8 would be equivalent to Year 8 in New Zealand. There are no Intermediate schools or middle schools in the Public education system. Students graduate from high school at the end of Grade 12 if they have achieved 30 credits in a mixture of compulsory subjects and optional subjects including the Ontario Secondary Student Literacy Test (OSSLT) at Grade 10. As there are no external exams in Ontario students who graduate with the Ontario Secondary School Diploma do so entirely on the basis of school-based assessment. The importance of the OSSLT becomes clear when it is a pre-requisite for graduation, and therefore, entrance to university or other tertiary qualification. It is the only obvious high-stakes assessment in the Ontario secondary education system.

Methodology:

Having decided on the criteria for schools I made contact with the Superintendent of Schools in the Toronto Catholic District Schools Board. He was able to advise me on which schools would meet the multi-cultural and socio-economic criteria. The Ministry of Education website for Ontario is very informative and enabled me to identify schools through academic achievement. In the absence of national exam results I used the EQAO and OSSLT results to identify those schools which achieved above the Provincial average.

The EQAO is the equivalent of ERO in New Zealand and reports on Province-wide test results for individual schools. These results are also included on the web site of every school. It was a relatively straightforward task to select the suitable schools once the information was available. I decided to select six schools as a representative sample for my study. I e-mailed the principals of eight schools which met the criteria and explained the purpose of my visit. I received six positive responses.

I sent a copy of my questionnaire to each of the principals before I confirmed a meeting time with them. This formed the basis of my interview with the principal. In Schools A, B, D and F, I met with the principal only. In school C I met with the principal and other senior managers and in school E I met with the principal and student success team.

I e-mailed the Superintendent of the TDCSB who advised me that the Board has a plan for improving student achievement across the district. He explained the governance model for Canadian schools which is quite different to New Zealand. In Canada a District School Board governs schools. Each has elected members and appointed members including the District Superintendent. There are no individual school boards as we have in New Zealand.

In preparing for the visit I sent each principal a copy of the questionnaire. I was in email contact frequently to clarify any issues and to ensure that my visit was convenient. I deliberately chose to visit near the end of the Canadian school year when senior students would be involved in their final exams and principals and senior managers would be more likely have time to meet with me. Two of the principals completed the questionnaire by e-mail and two other principals had completed copies at the time of my visit.

I spent half a day with the principal either exclusively or with his senior administrative team. Three schools were from the TDCSB and three were from the Dufferin-Peel Board in Mississauga which is a city within the Greater Toronto Area similar to North Shore City or Waitakere City in the Greater Auckland Area. They ranged in size from 800 to 2500 students. The six schools provided a good sample for data collection.

When I met with each principal I used the questionnaire as the basis of my data collection. As I had previously gathered the achievement data from the schools' web sites I was able to discuss it quickly and focus on strategies behind the achievement. In all schools I was given a comprehensive tour. I made notes on the questionnaires and recorded the responses on the template. In two schools I had the opportunity to discuss strategy with key people and in the other four schools I engaged exclusively with the principal. All schools had achievement targets which were set by the District Schools' Board which is responsible for the governance of all of the schools – elementary and secondary within their administrative area. In two of the co-educational schools the principals were actively identifying ways to improve boys' achievement through the use of Board targets. In both of these schools, boys' achievement was identified as the key factor in improving overall achievement. In the other two co-educational schools the principals were satisfied with the current achievement of boys and with the systems in place to meet their learning needs.

My meeting with the Superintendent was not focused on the questionnaire, as it is not directly applicable to his role. He did discuss Board policy for improving student achievement and did acknowledge that boys' achievement was an issue to be addressed. He quoted the EQAO and OSSLT statistics which show that in all board areas success rates for female students is greater than that for male students. This also translates into graduation statistics. He acknowledged that boys' achievement was an issue that needed to be addressed. He emphasised the importance of student engagement with learning and spoke of his vision for the Board of every student leaving school with a clear study and/or career plan in mind. He discussed the Board's commitment to achievement for all students and supported schools in their initiatives to raise achievement. He discussed the future direction of secondary education in the TDCSB which parallels the current Ministry of Education discussion on Personalised Learning.

For the purposes of this report I agreed that I would not identify individual schools by name I have used letters to identify the schools as School A to F.

Findings:

From my interviews and the collected data I have identified the following factors which either explain the success of the schools or contribute to it.

Before the students arrive at the secondary school standardised data for numeracy and literacy is available from the contributing elementary schools. All students at Grade 3 and Grade 6 complete the EQAO tests in Reading, Writing and Mathematics. This information is available to the secondary school before the students enrol. In all six schools the Guidance team met with the elementary teachers of the students in the middle of the second semester to discuss the placement of students for the following year. Once the students enrol at high school they have to pass the EQAO Numeracy and Literacy tests at Grade 9 and Grade 10 respectively.

In Ontario there are three curriculum streams – Academic, Applied and Essential Learning. The elementary teachers at the meeting described earlier recommend students for one of these courses. Academic courses are essentially curriculum delivered at a higher level in English and Mathematics at Grades 9 and 10 as well as subject choice. This is offered to students who are likely to study at university. Applied courses offer English and Mathematics at a lower curriculum level and a different set of subject choices. To graduate with the Secondary School Diploma a student must gain credits from these courses. The curriculum content of these courses is agreed at the province level. A further course called Essential Learning is set up for those students whose learning difficulties are so pronounced that they would be unlikely to achieve success in either of the other courses. These courses are designed at school level to meet the learning needs of the students at this local level. These subjects do not have credits which count towards the Secondary School Diploma.

Parents have the final say in terms of the learning pathway of their children at Grade 9. The school has to place the student in the course of the parents' choice even if it is against the professional judgement of the elementary teacher and the Guidance team in the secondary school. At this early stage students who are at risk of not achieving at high school are identified. They are given the opportunity to attend summer school before commencing their secondary education. Essentially this is a catch up programme of numeracy and literacy to help those students at risk. Classes run for four weeks in August and students typically attend either in the morning or the afternoon. While it is not compulsory for students to attend summer school it may be a factor in deciding which course the student will follow in Grade 9. In each of the schools I visited, the Mathematics and English programmes at Grades 9 and 10 are scheduled at the same time. This enables students to move from one programme to another. This is particularly helpful when a student has not achieved the credits to continue the subject at that level for the following year.

All six schools have a programme for monitoring all students who have been identified as being at risk. This involves the Student Success Team which includes the Careers Advisor, Guidance Counsellor, the Head of English, the Head of Mathematics, the Student Success Leader and the senior administrator responsible for tracking student achievement. (Some schools used the term Student Services Team but the purpose was the same.) The progress of these students is monitored literally on a weekly basis. The same process is used when a student is identified as failing to maintain progress. This co-ordinated response was evident in all six schools. It was clear that a student in the Academic stream had to achieve all the

credits to maintain his place in the programme. If he did not, he would move to the Applied programme and could only return to the Academic programme when he could demonstrate that he could achieve the credits. This was either through attending summer school or through taking catch-up courses at lunchtime or after school.

The Student Success Leader is a relatively new initiative from the Ontario government. It is similar in concept to the Specialist Classroom Teacher in New Zealand but there are two significant differences. They are full-time permanent positions and are in addition to entitlement staffing. They do not have a timetabled teaching programme and are there to assist students rather than teachers. Clearly they assist teachers indirectly. In four of the schools this person works exclusively with Grade 9 and 10 students. In all six schools they worked with those students who had been identified at risk of not achieving.

A report is sent home at the end of four weeks on every Grade 9 student. At this point the Student Success Team will have up-to-date data on students at risk. This can include students who were selected for the Academic course but who are now struggling to meet the demands of the course. All six schools send reports at this early stage. Two schools use this as an opportunity for parents to meet with the Student Success Team to discuss strategies for improving achievement.

I was impressed with the efforts to monitor students at risk in Grades 9 and 10. While all six schools monitored students throughout their time at school there was a clear emphasis on monitoring and tracking students at the earlier grades. Students could not study a subject at a higher level without gaining credit for it. All students study 8 subjects at both Grade 9 and 10. At the end of Grade 9 a student needs 8 credits to take these subjects at Grade 10. If the student does not have the credit in a particular subject he will take the subject at Grade 9 until he can reach the pass mark to gain credit. This is another reason why summer school is an effective way of enabling students to catch up before moving to a higher curriculum level. The SSL will work with students in this situation to help them achieve the credits throughout the year. All schools used this catch-up programme for Grade 9 and 10 students. The SSL works with small groups of students who have not achieved a pass mark in a test. In Schools A, D, E and F this mark was set at 50%. In the other two it was set between 50 and 60% depending on the subject and the course. In all cases students who did not achieve the pass mark were given the opportunity to work with the SSL and effectively re-sit the test after being taught by the SSL.

All schools employed an ongoing catch-up programme in addition to the one described above. One school used Grade 12 students as tutors to work with students who had not gained numeracy credits. Two other schools used Grade 12 students as general tutors for Grade 9 and 10 students after school. One other school used teachers to give additional teaching time to students for part of the lunchtime. This contact time from teachers was included in their teaching programme.

The importance of the Grade 10 literacy test, the OSSLT, cannot be overstated. As it is a requirement for graduation - it is a high stakes test. This is a test of literacy which takes place in March and takes all of one school day to administer. It is externally set and marked. The results are published in the local newspapers and are available on the EQAO website. All students in the Academic and Applied classes are expected to sit it. Success rates in this test

are compared between schools and the public nature of the results is an important factor in school choice for parents. The test is sat in March and the results are available in June just before the end of the school year. All schools have a thorough analysis of the results to identify areas for improvement and to modify strategies to meet Board targets. In the last week of my visit the 2007 results were sent to schools. At the time of my visit they had not yet been made public.

In all six schools the curriculum emphasis immediately before the OSSLT exam is on preparing for it. The members of the Student Success Team responsible for literacy in three of the schools gave clear written guidelines to all teachers of Grade 10 students in the weeks prior to the test. These guidelines focused on techniques required to pass the test. In all six schools it was clear that students were well prepared for the test. In the immediate period before the test the Student Success Team worked extensively with students at risk of not passing the test. In two of the four co-educational schools the principals reported that more boys than girls were involved in these classes.

Preparation for the OSSLT began in Grade 9 in all six schools. When the Grade 10 students sat the OSSLT test, the Grade 9 students sat a mock version of it and the teachers in the school marked this test. The purpose of this exercise varied between schools. Two used it solely to give the students experience of the test under strict test conditions. Three others used it as part of their annual assessment of students. One school used it as a benchmark for planning for the following year. If students do not pass the OSSLT in Grade 10 they re-sit it in Grade 11. If they fail it at this stage they can sit an alternative test at Grade 12. A student cannot graduate without the literacy credits regardless of how successful he is in the other subjects.

The credit recovery or credit rescue programme was a feature of all six schools particularly in Grades 9 and 10. Its use is outlined earlier in this report. An additional feature of this programme was for students to move from the Applied course to the Academic course in Grades 9 and 10. Essentially students had to demonstrate their ability to meet the demands of the higher curriculum level. To do this they had to successfully pass the tests at the higher level in English and Mathematics. They could do so by attending after-school classes in two schools or lunchtime classes in another. In schools C, D, E and F, students could have assistance from the SSL. In schools A and B there were no specific classes to assist students to move from the Applied course to the Academic course but the students could take the tests and if successful could move into the higher stream.

To move from the Applied course to the Academic course from Grade 10 to Grade 11 students had to pass subjects by attending summer school at the end of Grade 10. For example Science taught in the Grade 10 course was not sufficient preparation for the Academic course at Grade 11. Similarly students attended summer school at the end of Grade 10 to demonstrate their ability in subjects required at Grade 11 Academic courses but which they had not studied at all in Grade 10 in the Applied course.

As stated previously the purpose of my visit was to identify strategies which contributed to improving boys' achievement. In the two boys' only schools these were apparent. In addition to the interventions mentioned above these schools both had extensive reading

programmes in place. Both schools made use of the SSL to support the literacy strategies which were in place. One of these schools had public displays of its reading programme in corridors around the school. This constant reminder of the reading culture of the school was having a positive impact on student attitudes to reading. In two of the co-educational schools boys' achievement was identified as an issue to be addressed. In both schools the success rate for females was greater than males in the OSSLT and both principals identified improvement in the achievement of boys in this test as the main challenge to improve overall pass rates. In both schools the use of the SSL was seen as a means of achieving this by assisting with credit recovery in literacy.

In the other two co-educational schools the principals noted that the difference between male and female achievement at OSSLT was not significant. One possible explanation could be that the range of achievement initiatives in place in both schools was catering for the learning needs of the boys. Another explanation could be that as both schools have a high overall pass rate for the OSSLT the greater success for female students was not perceived as significant in the overall achievement picture.

One feature in five of the schools was the extensive course counselling for students at the end of Grade 10. The significance of this is related to graduation success rates. Students who are at risk of not graduating in two years' time through a lack of credits are identified and given intensive course counselling before deciding on a study programme for the following year. In four of the schools this involved considerable contact with the students' parents or guardians. In the other two schools this was significant but not as extensive as the others. This course counselling maximised the opportunities for success in a number of ways. The student was given his full academic record of achievement up to that point. He was able to discuss potential career options and the subject implications involved with this. He was able to discuss alternative options with the goal of 30 credits for graduation. The option of attending summer school as a means of catching up on credits is also discussed at this point. By identifying these students at risk the school was able to intervene at this stage to improve the likelihood of success.

Recommendations:

There are a number of implications for Liston College which give rise to the recommendations in this report. Closer monitoring of students at Year 7 and 9 to identify students at risk of not achieving at an early stage is a priority. Once this is in place, tracking of students in Years 7 to 10 will need to occur to ensure that the students who have been identified are supported to improve their chances of success. The same process would be used to identify and monitor students who were not making the progress that they ought to regardless of their current level of achievement. This could involve the use of an academic dean to co-ordinate both the monitoring programme and the teaching programme. At present we do not have one and we need to investigate options for introducing this role.

The use of the Specialist Classroom Teacher (SCT) for teacher/student support particularly at years 7 to 9 is an option. If we were able to address the students at risk at this level we would contribute significantly to improving overall achievement.

Possible use of Year 13 students as tutors for students at risk of not achieving, particularly in numeracy and literacy. This could be useful for Year 7 & 8 students who would benefit from one on one tutoring. One of the boys' schools used this successfully in helping Grade 9 students to improve their reading. We could re-structure the study programme for the Year13 students to implement this initiative.

Close monitoring of the curriculum level for students at risk would be necessary and would be part of the monitoring process. When students are ready to move to a higher curriculum level they could do so. This would be the responsibility of the Head of Department in Years 7 & 8 and the Heads of Mathematics and English. The academic dean would co-ordinate this.

Whatever new initiatives are introduced as a result of my study will have to be sustainable assuming that they are successful, and will need to be provided from the existing resources. The challenge is to re-allocate existing resources to implement the changes. I believe the initiatives can assist in improving student achievement and that the improvements can be sustained by continuing to closely monitor student progress

Conclusions:

All of the schools I visited were well resourced by New Zealand standards. The staff-student ratios for the students who were at risk were low. There are mandated student teacher ratios which schools must comply with. In addition all had highly integrated software which assisted the tracking and monitoring of student achievement. Extensive achievement information from the elementary schools was available to the high schools before the students enrolled.

All schools had a view that students can achieve rather than fail. This led to the concept of credit recovery or credit rescue. The involvement of a Student Success Team was an important method of co-ordinating the intervention strategies for students a risk. Opportunities for re-assessment after intensive teaching were impressive.

New Zealand achieves well, given the level of resourcing compared with Canada - (refer to the PISA statistics mentioned previously). However it is clear why the gap between the top performing students and the bottom students in Canada is much less than in New Zealand. The use of summer school at the end of grade 8 as a catch up programme for students at risk of not achieving helps to reduce this gap. The same type of programme is available at the end of each year until grade 12- the final year of secondary schooling. The fact that students had to achieve the credits at grade 9 before taking the subject at grade 10 also helps to close this gap.

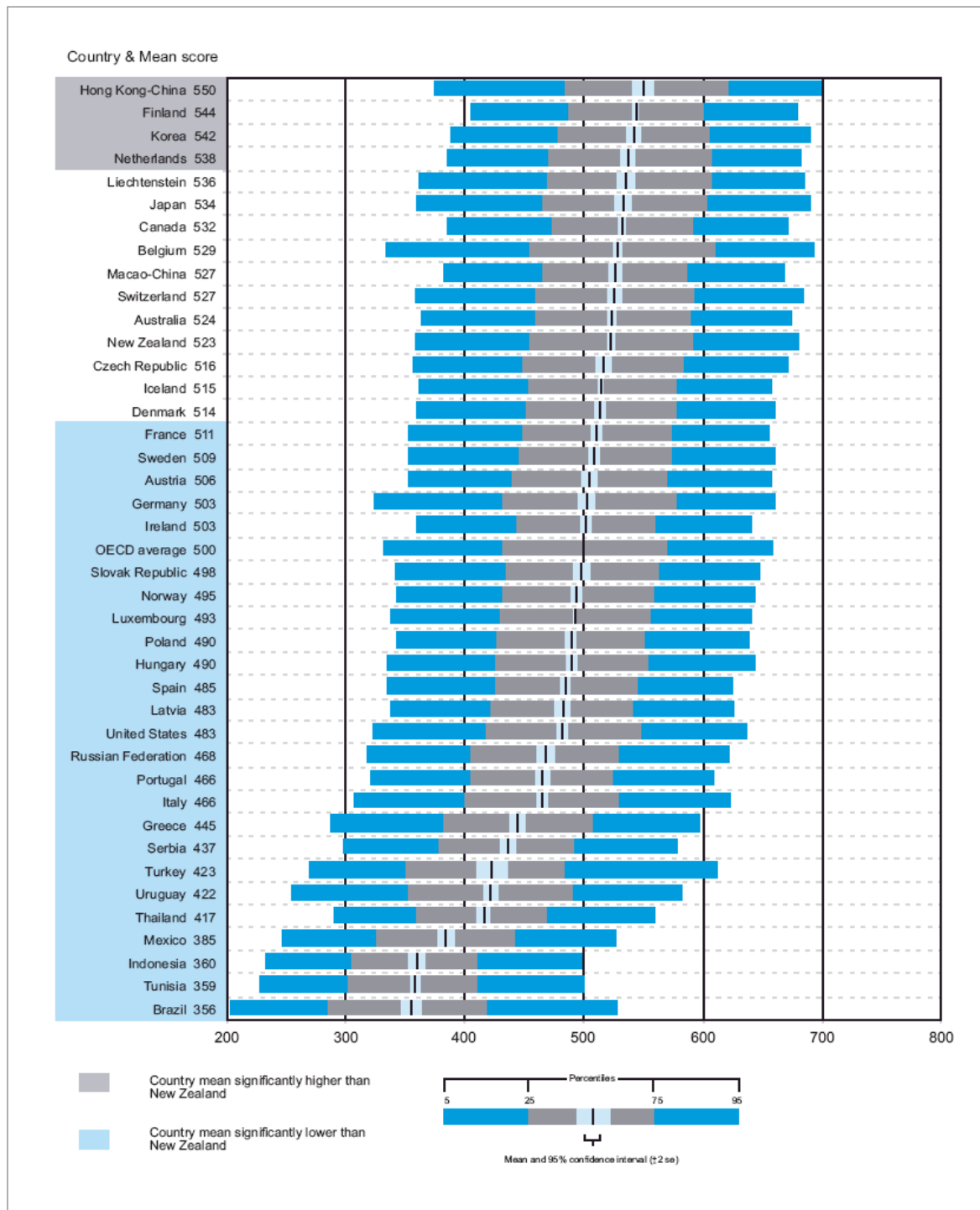
The issues associated with boys' achievement relative to girls' are becoming more apparent in the Ontario education consciousness and with parents. Both of the boys' schools have increasing pressure for enrolments from neighbouring co-educational schools. Their academic success is a key motivator for parents and students. In two of the co-educational schools which I visited the Principals have identified boys' achievement as an issue to be resolved.

Limitations

As I indicated previously in this report I was unable to find six suitable boys' only schools for the purposes of my research. I was aware of this before I agreed on my selected schools. This could have been resolved by broadening the scope of the study to include the satellite areas outside the GTA. This would have added some boys' only schools which would have been suitable but would have presented logistical difficulties in terms of transport and time constraints on visiting principals.

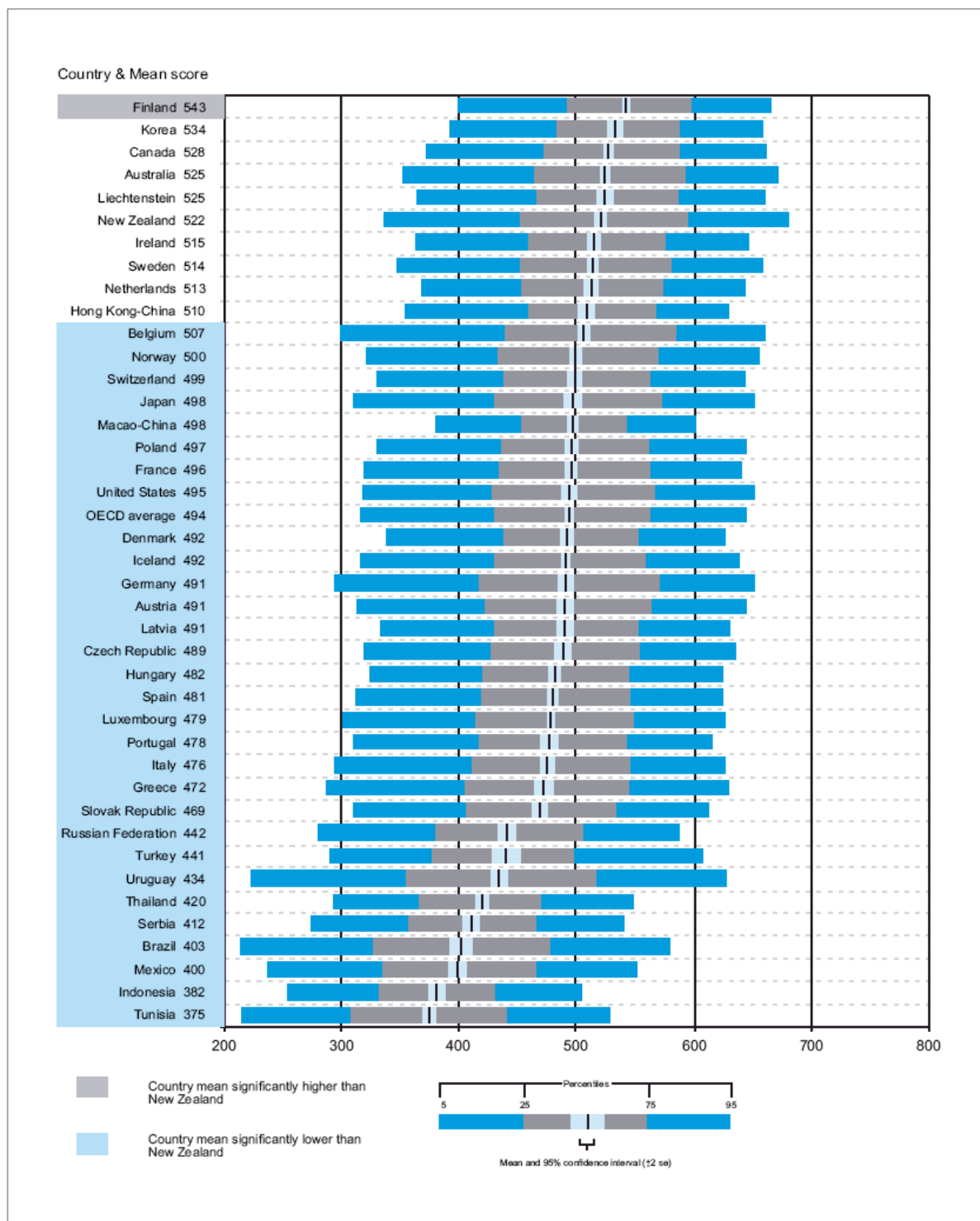
I did not investigate the role of Professional Development of teachers in improving student achievement. This is an issue which ought to be the subject of a separate study. My purpose was to identify strategies employed by the principals within the current programmes.

Appendix 1: Distribution of student performance on the combined mathematical literacy scale in PISA 2003



Source: Table 2.5c in OECD (2004a), with adaptations

Appendix 2: Distribution of student performance on the reading literacy scale in PISA 2003



Source: Table 6.2 in OECD (2004a), with adaptations

Appendix 3: Questionnaire



**C S ROONEY
LISTON COLLEGE**
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HENDERSON
AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND

SABBATICAL TO CANADA 2007

School Name:

Principal:

Address:

Co-Ed or Single:

Questionnaire:	Response – Feedback:
1. Is there an entrance test?	
2. If there is an entrance test – how is this information used?	
3. Are the classes streamed?	
4. Do students change subjects during the year?	
5. How are individual students tracked - from start of enrolment to current?	
6. Is there a Reading programme in place?	
7. Is there a Writing programme in place?	
8. Is there a Numeracy programme in place?	
9. Do you have achievement targets?	
10. How do you prepare students for State exams?	
11. If Co-ed: Is there any specific programmes in place for boys?	
12. What reporting system is in place to communicate / report to parents?	
Administration:	
1. How is electronic data used?	
2. How does the Administration department support the Teaching staff?	