



Understanding System Leadership Links to Student Success

By Dr. Jim Brandon, Dr. Garry McKinnon, and Dr. Dale Bischoff

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) is fostering system and school leadership practices that support students to be engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit. This article shares insights from research into the three-year School Leadership Learning (SLL) initiative undertaken by the province's public charter school superintendents and school leaders.

Through reflection, co-learning and inquiry, participants report a deeper understanding of leadership links to student success in keeping with the ideals of *Inspiring Education*. Three emerging findings about leadership learning within the draft *Professional Practice Competencies for School Leadership in Alberta* (PPCSLA) will be of interest to jurisdiction and school leaders.

TAAPCS School Leadership Learning: Origins and Evolution

In May 2011, school principals and assistant principals from the 13 charter

schools in Alberta began a journey of learning to develop a deeper understanding of school leadership and to grow in their ability to positively impact learner engagement. Dr. Garry McKinnon facilitated this highly successful series of interactive dialogue sessions and follow-up learning activities through the following school year. With the support of Alberta Education funding since the fall of 2012, TAAPCS has continued this important work in its School Leadership Learning initiative.

The draft PPCSLA has served as the guiding framework for our evolving leadership capacity building efforts over the past three years. In year one the focus was on engaging school principals and assistant principals toward a deeper understanding of the seven professional practice competencies and making the PPCSLA a living document. The program focused interactive dialogue on each competency, provided opportunities to problem solve around related scenarios and helped participants to

make connections to their real-life experiences in their specific leadership contexts.

From the beginning, participants were encouraged to make the learning session experiences meaningful by maintaining a reflective journal based on their day-to-day experiences as school leaders and to access the expertise of the network of co-learners. Dr. McKinnon prepared a series of blogs based on the seven competencies to further ongoing dialogue, personal reflection and the development of professional learning plans and action strategies. The inquiry-based leadership blogs are posted on the Connect Charter School website (<http://goo.gl/SmFts>). Each blog offers questions to ponder and school leadership suggestions for further consideration.

Over 40 participants representing each of the 13 charter schools in the province have been involved in the SLL initiative. Focus on the seven leadership competencies has continued and several school administrators and superintendents have taken on an active role in

facilitating our learning sessions. Dr. Jim Brandon, Director of Professional Programs at the University of Calgary's Werklund School of Education, is serving as an *outside expert* who coordinates the learning sessions, supports the multiple program elements and conducts the participatory research component. Learning sessions have focused on fostering engaged leadership development through differentiated and job-embedded professional learning experiences designed to address the realities of varying school contexts.

As well, TAAPCS Executive Director Dr. Garry Andrews and a steering committee are providing collaborative oversight to the initiative, including the participatory research component on SLL's impact. In addition to ongoing data gathering following each learning session, a total of 22 educators were involved in individual or focus group interviews in May, June and July of 2013.

The interviews took place in 11 schools in six Alberta communities: Valhalla, in the Peace River region; on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River south and west of Stony Plain; Ardrossan; Edmonton, Medicine Hat; and Calgary. Eleven school principals, six assistant or associate principals, and six superintendents participated in this portion of the data collection process. Data collection for year three will be undertaken in May 2014.

Multiple Forms of Leadership Learning

Charter school community expertise is being utilized to deepen understanding and application of the PPCSLAs through a series of professional learning sessions within an open community of leaders concept. These were well facilitated by 16 experienced practitioners in year two. Eight members of the group have facilitated in the first three sessions in the current year. Session participants have consistently indicated that they appreciate the community building aspects of these sessions, which have engendered openness and relational trust. They have created a space to learn about the diversity of cultures and approaches within the larger charter school community.

This professional learning approach has been loosely based on Timperley's (2011) notion of iterative cycles of inquiry. Participants reported that it worked best when

As superintendents, experienced principals and those newer to school leadership have reflected on leadership practice and talked about the complexities of their daily work through the filters of the seven leadership competencies, it has been impressive to observe the evolution of openness, trust and willingness to engage in dialogue and knowledge-building.

they were stimulated by evidence informed leadership practices and were given sufficient time for reflection, deep dialogue and action-oriented inquiry. The opportunities to co-learn with colleagues from various organizational levels and to take professional learning into each other's school contexts were highly valued by participants.

Over the past three years, learning experiences have been carefully designed to promote the active engagement of the school administrator participants in developing professional leadership growth plans; utilizing survey feedback from staff members; reflecting on the *Charter School Leadership Rubric* (derived from the *Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools Catholic Administration Practice Model*, 2011), maintaining reflective journals; responding to the series of blogs on school leadership; and enhancing the learning experience through interacting with co-learning partners and visiting their partner's schools. In the current year, Viviane Robinson's (2011) research informed and highly readable book, *Student-centred leadership*, is being used to foster reflection, dialogue and evidence informed leadership action.

Participants continue to provide feedback on each session. Comments and suggestions are summarized and distributed to all TAAPCS leaders and Alberta Education representatives. Adjustments to programming are made in response to the suggestions and feedback.

School leaders are developing peer learning partnerships and engaging in co-learning visits to partner schools between sessions in

relation to their professional leadership learning and inquiry- plans and in keeping with system expectations. In addition, interactions among experienced and those newer to school and system leadership in all aspects of SLL build on our open community of leaders concept and inquiry orientation.

Research Findings: Alberta's Professional Practice Competencies

Research generated insights presented in this section may be helpful to the Ministry in moving the adoption and implementation of the *School Leadership Framework* forward. First, the *Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders* document is appreciated by TAAPCS school and system leaders and is seen as a useful framework for shaping and supporting school leadership practice.

Second, we have found that sustained engagement with and knowledge-building around individual competencies is most helpful when it leads to thoughtful application, further reflection and supportive dialogue in the company of leadership colleagues. Iterative cycles of learning, acting, reflecting and sharing hold even greater promise.

Third, understanding the complexities of school leadership practice and the inter-relational nature of the competencies can be deepened through evidence informed dialogue about problems of practice, scenarios, cases and stories.

All participants reported that the SLL initiative helped them to move to a deeper

understanding of the competencies. New principals found that the PPSCSLA was a useful framework for their first year evaluations by their superintendents. Almost all participants indicated that the work in the SLL initiative heightened awareness of the complexity of school leadership and underlined the importance of ongoing growth and development through reflection, dialogue and inquiry. Although the competencies can be understood well in isolation, skillful application requires a more holistic approach.

TAAPCS leaders appreciate the *Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders* document and its usefulness as a framework to guide for school leadership practice. The need for ongoing research and evidence gathering to strengthen and adapt the PPSCSLA over time is felt to be an important component in document's continuing relevance.

Research Findings: Leadership Learning in Alberta

Initiative participants embrace *Inspiring Education's* transformative agenda and are

using the sessions, blogs and conversations to deepen leadership practice and to grapple further with the challenges of helping teachers and students to move further in these directions. This section presents three key findings or leadership learning lessons that have surfaced through our research. We believe they may be helpful to jurisdiction and school leaders in the province.

Leadership Learning Lesson One: Focus on Student Success. The SLL is clearly focused on student success—the “Essential Purpose of Educational Leadership,” as described in the PPSCSLA (Alberta Education, 2012). This first research generated theme, *focus on student success*, has been evident in every aspect of the initiative; in every learning session, in every research interview, in every growth plan, in every blog; and in every co-learning school visit.

In the current year, we are working to deepen understanding of the PPSCSLAs by focusing on leadership learning inquiry related to Alberta's new student outcomes, other Ministry initiatives within the umbrella of *Inspiring Education*, problems of practice

and important educational issues. In and between the most recent two SLL sessions this approach is being formalized into what Helen Timperley describes as *Leader Inquiry and Knowledge-Building Cycles*. Such professional learning cycles include:

1. Identifying competencies your teachers need to meet important student learning goals (the Ministerial Order on Student Learning in our case);
2. Identifying competencies your leadership team requires to support teacher and student learning;
3. Identifying actions to deepen professional knowledge;
4. Engaging teachers in reflection and new learning; and
5. Gauging impact, bringing evidence to illustrate leadership, teacher and student growth (2011, p. 22).

Leadership Learning Lesson Two: Co-Learning in a Community of Leaders. Collaboration within an open community of leaders (Barth, 1990) emerged as one of the most powerful themes from our work together. As superintendents, experienced

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principals and those newer to school leadership have reflected on leadership practice and talked about the complexities of their daily work through the filters of the seven leadership competencies, it has been impressive to observe the evolution of openness, trust and willingness to engage in dialogue and knowledge-building. Responsiveness to participant feedback and the use of participant facilitators importantly indicates that leadership is being *developed with* participants rather than being *developed for* them.

This second key finding from the SLL initiative indicates that leadership learning is enhanced within open, trusting and diverse communities of leaders. The construct of *co-learning*—wherein superintendents, experienced principals and those new to formal school leadership positions actively engage in facilitating, sharing, learning and inquiry—has considerable potential. Learning with and from colleagues at other levels and from other settings is viewed as a powerful leadership development approach. For the participants who took this concept further and engaged in reciprocal school visits, the depth of co-learning was even greater.

A related co-learning element might be described as *using the wisdom in the room*. Of the 24 members of this learning community who have facilitated sessions to date, five have served in the superintendency in other public school systems, six hold doctoral degrees, and all have worked as school leaders during their careers. Four committee members have had extensive involvement in the development of the PPCSLA in varying roles since the spring of 2005. Their credibility, expertise and openness to learning from others has been a vital component of the SLL.

Leadership Learning Lesson Three: Multiple Forms of Leadership Learning. There are multiple ways for leaders to develop and learn. It was evident in the variety of approaches to supporting student engagement, learning and well-being that were demonstrated, discussed and digested by the diverse array of leadership learners who participated in the SLL.

The best evidence on professional learning is instructive. No activity or

process, whether facilitated by others (e.g. coaching, modeling and engaging with professional readings) or self-directed (e.g., discussing mutually identified problems, reflection and inquiry) was consistently associated with improved student success. What was important? The knowledge and skills learned as a result of engagement with the activity or process (Timperley, 2011, p. 6).

The variety of leadership learning tools utilized in this initiative support multiple forms of leadership learning. There is no one best way to become a more competent school leader. No standardized template dictates a one size fits all mandate for leadership development. Rather, our initiative suggests that the PPCSLAs enable multiple forms of leadership learning (Barber, Whelan, & Clark, 2010; Timperley, 2011).

Conclusion


An important aim of our ongoing work on school leadership development is that it would not only benefit public charter

school leaders, but would also serve to inform engaged leadership learning throughout the province. Based on evidence from our research so far, exemplary school leadership practice can emerge from multiple forms of iterative inquiry cycles that are clearly focused on student learning within a supportive community of leadership learning. In the longer term, these approaches hold promise for sustained leadership learning in a wide array of Alberta leadership contexts. ■

A full list of references is available upon request. Please contact Shannon Savory at ssavory@matrixgroupinc.net.

Dr. Jim Brandon is Director of Professional Programs at the University of Calgary's Werklund School of Education; Dr. Garry McKinnon was Superintendent of Schools for 25 years in the County of Wheatland and the Golden Hills School Division, and he is now Superintendent of Connect Charter School in Calgary; Dr. Dale Bischoff is Superintendent of Aurora Charter School in Edmonton.



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