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Spring 2016

The official magazine for the College of Alberta School Superintendents



The Impact of Powerful System Leadership Teams



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Spring 2016

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Message from the Minister of Education

The Honourable David Eggen

Building a Greater Understanding and Acceptance for All

It's no secret I believe Alberta has one of the best education systems in the world. I am proud of the work we have done, as partners in education, to prepare our kids for future success.

Unfortunately, having a world-class education system doesn't do a lot of good for those who feel they don't belong.

When our kids feel unsafe or unwelcome at school, they may miss opportunities to learn. They may also miss opportunities to fully participate in their school community. Making friends, joining teams and taking part in extracurricular activities are important social and emotional parts of school life.

At Alberta Education, we want all schools to be welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments, in which students, staff, families and community partners treat each other fairly and kindly.

Our schools should foster healthy relationships and positive mental health. They should celebrate diversity as a strength. They should respect values, rights and responsibilities. Schools should help build a greater understanding and acceptance for all, as our students and staff are cared for and learn to care for each other in return.

Last June, the *Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children* received Royal Assent. The Act enshrined sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity as prohibited grounds for discrimination in the *Alberta Bill of Rights*. It also amended the *School Act* to add requirements around supporting students who wish to establish gay-straight or queer-straight alliances.

During meetings last fall, many elected school officials asked our government for guidance in this area. To that end, Alberta

At Alberta Education, we want all schools to be welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments, in which students, staff, families and community partners treat each other fairly and kindly.

Education developed a number of tools to assist school authorities in developing their policies, including *Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions*.

This document contains constructive suggestions for teachers and schools that may be accommodating a transgender student (or a transgender staff member, parent or caregiver) for the first time. The guidelines **do** identify that students should be able to access washrooms congruent with their gender identity and that non-gendered, individual washrooms should be available. They **do not** restrict flexibility to call parents by their chosen title—whether that be mother, father or something else.

The best practices in this document have no impact on curriculum, nor do they supersede the *Alberta Bill of Rights*. Parents retain their prerogative to withdraw children from instruction about human sexuality or from instruction or exercises that are primarily and explicitly religious or patriotic in nature. Parents will also continue to receive advance notice when religious and human sexuality topics are going to be part of a class discussion or lesson. Students will not be penalized for being absent from these discussions or lessons.

Our work in supporting members of the LGBTQ+ community is just one of the ways

that we, as a ministry, are working to support you in creating the kinds of schools our students deserve. Information about the changes to the *School Act*, the new guidelines, and a variety of other resources for safe and caring schools are accessible on our redesigned website, www.education.alberta.ca/safe-and-caring-schools/legislation.

Launched in December, the new look for www.education.alberta.ca is the result of significant research and testing with students, parents, teachers and administrators, who helped us create a new approach aimed at more efficiently providing information and services to Albertans.

One key change is the consolidation of content into fewer pages, tied together by major categories and organized by steps of the school journey, rather than spreading information out over a larger number of separate pages and documents. This dynamic sorting system allows us to better organize a large amount of content that grows over time. We understand this is a significant change and we are continuing to make improvements based on user feedback.

I hope this new website and these resources will serve all school communities well.

I look forward to our continued collaboration as we focus on the future with our students' best interests at heart. ■



Message from the President

John Waterhouse | College of Alberta School Superintendents

Leadership Learning: The Impact of Powerful System Leadership Teams

For years the research on improving student learning seemed to conclude that the school was the level where reform and improvement that ultimately impacted student learning took place. This is still true to an extent, but it has become far more evident in recent years that sustainability and transferability are beyond the level of the school. In his research on system level improvement of student learning Fullan (2011) stated that, “Individual schools cannot get on—or if they do, cannot stay on—the moral track unless the whole district is working on the problem. District leadership is every bit as essential as school leadership; 100 per cent of the schools are implicated in this action (p.39).

This recognition of the significance and essential nature of system level leadership is echoed by Lezotte (2008) who, once a firm believer in the school as the focus of improvement, later concluded that district level leadership is a critical success factor. DuFour and Marzano (2011) refer to Lezotte’s subsequent research in the conclusion that, “In time, however, the researchers found schools could not remain effective without the support of central office. A principal and key staff could help a school improve student achievement through heroic effort, but they could not sustain the improvement or survive the departure of key leaders without the support of the district and a commitment at that level to promote effective schooling practices (Lezotte, 2008) (p.28).”

Looking further into the research,

it becomes clear that powerful system leadership is characterized by actions that result in improved teacher capacity, which then in turn impacts student achievement in a positive manner. This direct chain of impact from system leader to student achievement is expressed by Simon Breakspear in the following way: System leadership behaviors change school leadership behaviors, which change teacher behaviors, which change student learning behaviors, which results in improved student outcomes.

This focus of system improvement on impacting teacher quality is supported time and time again as the key target or purpose of system leadership. John Hattie expressed the reason for a concerted focus on teacher quality in his assertion that: “The message is simple—what teachers do matters. However, this has become a cliché that masks the fact that the greatest source of variance in our system relates to teachers—they can vary in many ways. The codicil is that what “some” teachers do matters....The current mantra is that teachers make the difference.... This message, like most simple messages, is not quite right.... Not all teachers are effective, not all teachers are experts, and not all teachers have powerful effects on students (Hattie 2009, p.34).”

Powerful system leadership accomplishes improvement in student learning by ultimately increasing the capacity of classroom teachers. This premise, and reminder, is captured in the statement, “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its

teachers” (Barber and Mourshed, 2007, p.4).

As system leaders engage in our own learning and supporting the learning of all the people throughout the systems we lead, it is always helpful to take a step back and reflect on the most significant role we ultimately have—that of impacting teacher classroom practices. This evidence-based construct holds that in order for system leadership to be considered powerful it must demonstrate its impact by ultimately, and in a significant manner, improving the quality of classroom instruction provided by teachers to students. ■

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Message from the Executive Director

Barry Litun | College of Alberta School Superintendents

The Impact that Powerful Leadership Teams Can Have

For much of 2014 and the first half of 2015, there was considerable political uncertainty in Alberta. The fact that there were four different premiers and three different Education Ministers during the 15 month period from March 2014 to May 2015 is the evidence I provide to support my view that there was political unease in the province.

With the current government having been given a solid majority mandate by the electorate in May 2015, it is clear to me that many of the “big decision” items that were delayed or “on hold” for the better part of the past two years will now move forward rapidly. The impact that powerful system leadership teams can have during this impending time of change and opportunity in education is immense, therefore the articles in this edition of *The CASS Connection* serve as great examples of strong system leadership teams that currently are in place in Alberta.

I feel that it was fortuitous that in 2013 the CASS Board of Directors commissioned three Alberta researchers, Dr. Jim Brandon, Dr. Paulette Hanna & Dr. Dot Negropontes, to conduct a study entitled *Superintendents Who Lead Learning: Lessons from Six Highly Successful School Jurisdictions*. The study was published in October 2015 and is available, at no charge, on the CASS website (www.cass.ab.ca) by clicking on the Communication button and then the CASS Research Papers link.

In this message, I share excerpts from the Foreword that I wrote for the report of the study’s findings. I encourage you to consider downloading and referring to the full report as you move forward in your important work as a system leader.

Excerpts from the Foreword to *Superintendents Who Lead Learning: Lessons from Six Highly Successful School Jurisdictions*

One of the three goals outlined in the current Strategic Plan for CASS states “Leadership Capacity is built and supported.”

I believe that superintendents and teams of system leaders are best positioned to establish the practices and to provide the supports required within their respective jurisdictions to achieve this goal.

I base my belief, in part, on research by Robert Marzano and Timothy Waters, published in 2009 in *District leadership that works: Striking the right balance*. Not surprisingly, the research by Marzano and Waters affirms that the single most influential factor impacting student learning is the effectiveness of the teacher.

Notwithstanding the impact of an effective teacher, what is striking in the study by Marzano and Waters, and affirmed in this study, is the impact that superintendents and system leadership can have on student learning and achievement. Marzano and Waters found that exceptional system leadership (98th percentile) could result in an increase in student achievement, when the student was taught by a teacher identified in the 50th percentile, by as much as 13 percentile points in reading and 17 percentile points in math.

As you read through this publication you will see the evidence that demonstrates the importance of education leadership by superintendents and system leadership teams, and the positive impact that leadership can make on student learning and achievement.

It is also important to note that the lessons learned and identified in this study

corroborate and supplement the findings within *The Alberta Framework for School System Success*, published by CASS in 2013.

School jurisdictions, led by superintendents and system leadership teams that make decisions based on research and in the best interests of students, will attain the goal as stated by Marzano & Waters, “Imagine a school where you become a better educator just by being part of the staff. Imagine a school division where this exists everywhere.”

In Conclusion

To conclude this Executive Director’s message, I want to thank all the writers who have contributed to this edition of *The CASS Connection*. Your willingness to share your experiences provides opportunity for colleagues to learn from you and with you. During the upcoming changes in education in Alberta, we must work together to ensure we take advantage of the opportunities that will be afforded us to provide outstanding educational experiences for all students in the province.

Finally, thank you to the many sponsors that advertise in *The CASS Connection*. Your support enables us to publish the magazine, which is shared with all education partners in the province as well as all the parallel organizations of system leaders across Canada. ■

Reference

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Nurturing Instructional Excellence

By Christopher MacPhee, Violet Parsons-Pack, Darin Larson, Canadian Rockies Public Schools



An ELT debrief. Photo courtesy of Daniel Thomson.

Canadian Rockies Public Schools (CRPS) has been focused on Nurturing Instructional Excellence since the conception of its visionary work surrounding *Inspiring Hearts and Minds*, embarked on in 2007. This has been a multifaceted endeavor, with one aspect focused on direct work with teachers in the classroom using the Teaching Effectiveness Framework (TEF) (Friesen, 2009), while another aspect has been the focus of the district wide administrative team on the Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta (PPCSLA). The overarching aim of all professional learning has been to work towards the achievement of the Shared Vision of Instructional Excellence.

The most important variable affecting student achievement is the quality of teaching; the second most important variable is the degree to which a principal works with their

teachers (Reeves, 2004). Taking both of these factors into account, the Educational Leadership Team (ELT), which is comprised of CRPS school administrators and district leaders, asked themselves two questions:

1. How can the professional practice competencies for school leaders in Alberta improve teaching practices, student engagement and student learning?
2. If leading teacher learning and development is the leadership dimension with the biggest impact on student learning (Robinson, 2011), how do principals effectively develop their capacity to sponsor evidence-informed professional conversations as a way of leading and nurturing teacher learning?

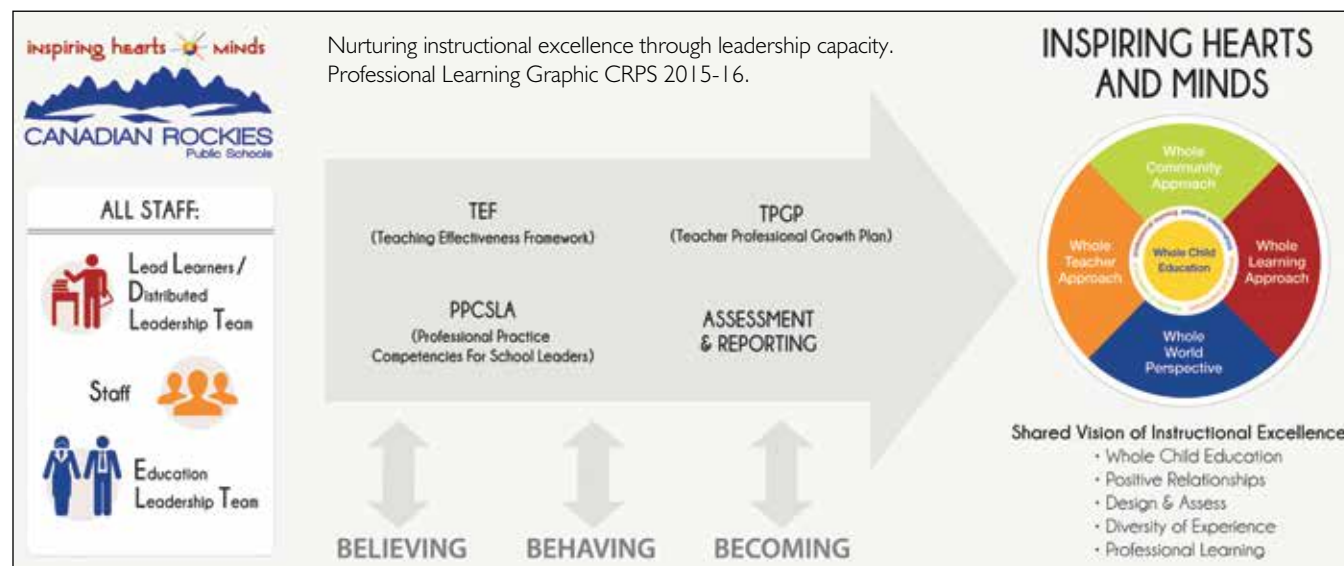
To answer these questions, the ELT, along with their partners from the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary and the Galileo Educational Network, developed the Nurturing Excellence in Instructional Leadership (NEIL) Initiative. In this model, teachers invite members of the ELT into the sandbox, where the classroom becomes the learning stage for the leadership team, along with teachers and students. The administrators hone their skills in relation to identifying and supporting effective instructional practices as supported by the TEF. The new twist on the learning takes place when team members are observed providing feedback to teachers during post observation conferences and then, in turn,

are provided focused feedback on the effectiveness of their post conference feedback.

Because the TEF fundamentally frames all professional learning at CRPS, it is also the common lens through which all NEIL inquiry processes engage leaders and teachers in their evidence-informed professional conversations. In particular, this inquiry into how the PPCSLA can improve teaching practices, student engagement and student learning embodies Principle #5, Improving Practice in Company of Peers, as leaders commit to improving their own practice and to advance the learning of colleagues.

The NEIL Inquiry rounds involve a series of conversations and observations:

- An initial conversation between the teacher and administrator during which each identify their own areas of desired growth
- A pre-observation conversation among the teacher, administrator and observers where all roles and goals are defined. The teacher identifies areas of feedback requested from the principal, including artifacts for evidence of student learning, then the administrator identifies competencies around which they want feedback from the observing team.
- A classroom observation.
- A post-observation conversation during which the principal provides requested feedback to the teacher. During the



conversation, the two observers focus on and gather evidence around leadership practices. Observers then provide feedback to the principal regarding practices they demonstrated during the conversation that helped nurture teacher reflection, deepen understanding of instructional excellence, and identify the leader's next steps. Teachers also have the opportunity to provide feedback directly to the administrator and the observation team.

- A teacher debrief conversation where teachers who have been observed meet together with the learning coach to further discuss their NEIL experience. The teachers identify leadership practices they find effective in supporting teacher learning by focusing on improving professional conversations.
- An ELT debrief conversation, where teams use the NEIL round and the teacher debrief feedback as the basis for deeper discussions about leadership practices that support teacher learning and thinking, for example, deepening understanding of the TEF, framing respectful questions, engaging in evidence-informed conversations and identifying next steps.

To date, the ELT and the teachers involved have found the rounds to be challenging and exciting. Teachers have commented:

"...it's so important for leaders to get to all classrooms regularly so that they can support everyone's learning and they know who they are leading." (*Teacher comment, NEIL Inquiry October 2015*).

"Great, positive, really helpful because I came away with specific feedback and no fluff. I have a plan for next steps and my leader is coming back to observe what I learned and will try. This has created a more constructive relationship

between us." (*Teacher comment, NEIL Inquiry January 2016*).

"Got helpful feedback that really helped me rethink my project. I feel more focused on the essential learner outcomes and I'm also rethinking my evaluation and assessment process. Some great tips too." (*Teacher comment, NEIL Inquiry January 2016*).

The administrators also recognized the positive effect of this approach in their school and across the district.

"This process (NEIL cycles) is contributing to the relationships between schools. This is significant as each school contributes to a reciprocal learning environment. As teaching and learning improves in one school, other schools are 'pushed' to improve their teaching and leadership effectiveness." (*Administrator comment, NEIL Inquiry October 2015*).

"The NEIL process gives me the means for a very clear, purposeful observation with specific directions about what to observe that focuses on student learning. The post-conference conversation stays authentic, non-judgmental and meaningful for the teacher. It can also lead to a purpose for the next steps and next visit." (*Administrator comment, NEIL Inquiry January 2016*).

In reflecting on the process thus far, Superintendent Christopher MacPhee describes the professional learning at CRPS as a convergence of learning to the point where everyone, regardless of role within the district, is on the same learning pathway toward instructional excellence and improvement of student learning.

He says, "We are witnessing first-hand a culture of collective efficacy that is en masse throughout the district. It is our belief that what is happening at CRPS can be replicated throughout

districts both in and outside of Alberta as long as some essential components are maintained—relational trust, consistent and research-based messaging, human resources, and all partners brought to the table in a meaningful way."

As we move forward with the NEIL Initiative, we hope to obtain additional evidence that this focused approach, centered around evidence-informed respectful learning conversations, will further enhance the competencies of our leaders in the area of instructional leadership. This, in turn, will nurture teacher learning, leading to improved instructional quality in the classroom and ultimately improved student learning. ■

Christopher MacPhee, Superintendent of CRPS, provides visionary leadership to the district. MacPhee has recently been appointed as second vice president of CASS.

Violet Parsons-Pack, Assistant Superintendent of CRPS, provides support for learning and innovation throughout the district.

Darin Larson, currently a Lead Teacher, enjoys bringing professional learning to life in classrooms throughout CRPS.

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A Community of Practice for Principals

By Corrie Ziegler, Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium



The role of the principal has changed significantly over the past half century. Principals are faced with complex challenges, ongoing change and limited budgets," (Alberta Education).

Providing meaningful, ongoing, relevant and collaborative learning opportunities for principals has been proven difficult, as their challenges are so diverse. Principals are often reluctant to engage in professional learning opportunities for a myriad of reasons, such as finding it challenging to leave their buildings and responsibilities, feeling guilty about spending time or money on their own professional learning, or the professional development that is offered is perceived as non-relevant, etc.

Based on the diverse challenges of a 21st century administrator, the Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium (ERLC) decided to design and facilitate a Community of Practice for Principals (COP-P) that enables the integration of work and learning where learning is part of work, not separate

from it. A COP can provide a space for principals to grapple with complex problems, as well as successes, through the sharing of implicit knowledge.

Knowledge sharing and the space and time to talk about the role makes the implicit understanding more explicit.

COPs have the potential to engage their participants in deep reflection and inquiry, and apply co-created knowledge into action in their local school community, (Creating Communities of Practice).

The COP-P was built around the following characteristics:

- **Shared domain:** This creates a common ground for learning. For the COP-P, the shared domain is the seven dimensions outlined in the *Principal Quality Practice Guideline*, 2009 (PQPG). Principals are exploring how the seven dimensions come to life in today's schools, within the context of ongoing change and limited resources.
- **Community:** Building relationships and creating a trusting community is critical for collective learning. This is achieved through active participation in joint activities, discussions, problem-solving opportunities, and information sharing related to the seven leadership dimensions.
- **Practice:** The members of the COP-P have the opportunity to experience leadership in action and view first-hand how other principals lead in their schools. In addition, the participants are actual practitioners and build a shared repertoire of resources and ideas that they can utilize within their schools, (*Creating Communities of Practice*).

Throughout the spring and fall of 2015, ERLC invited principals from across the Edmonton region to join this new and exciting COP-P. Forty-six leaders decided to join, representing 11 districts, five private schools, and a range of elementary, junior high, middle school and high school leaders. The diversity within this group represents a wealth of experience, expertise and knowledge, which are powerful ingredients for deep learning.

This COP-P began with a half-day orientation session in October of 2015 when leaders reflected on the role of the principal, reviewed the essential elements of a COP, reviewed the seven dimensions outlined in the PQPG, and generated questions related to the PQPG that they wished to explore. These questions provided a real life, relevant and authentic domain for exploring the challenges of leadership as outlined in the PQPG.

During the remainder of the 2015-2016 school year, the COP-P will visit five Edmonton and area schools, which include two kindergarten to Grade 9 schools, a middle school (Grades five to eight), a high school and one school with grades from kindergarten to Grade 12. These schools are from both the public and separate systems.

Each visit focuses on two to three of the leadership dimensions outlined in the PQPG. The principal of the hosting school is actively involved in the visit and provides a brief presentation related to the highlighted leadership dimension(s). These presentations are personal, credible, humble and provide an honest perspective of their leadership practice related to the dimensions highlighted.

Each visit engages the principals in a range of activities and approaches to learning, led by a skilled facilitator. To date, principals have had the opportunity to engage in activities such as a self-guided, focused tour of the hosting schools, the sharing of artifacts related to the leadership dimensions, question and answer sessions with the hosting principal, self reflections, readings and discussing related research, posting ideas and artifacts on an online collaborative work space, and more.

Participating principals have expressed much satisfaction with this form of professional learning, as exemplified through the following comments:

"It has been an excellent environment to build relationships with other colleagues. I really enjoy the process of moving into different groups during the session as it provides opportunities to meet other colleagues. Small group discussions around topics are also very meaningful."

"The COP-P has been constructed to be a place of open honesty where we are not only encouraged but are expected to share both our successes as well as our challenges as principals. It is evident that no single principal has the magic formula to create a perfect school. We are all navigating this journey together and through this COP-P, can share some of the practices that help our schools to thrive. We can also put our heads together to try to come up with creative solutions to our issues. It is a learning experience where we capitalize on each other's strengths, and lean on each other for support where needed."

"What I have enjoyed about this professional development opportunity is the topics and conversations are directly related to the principal quality standards, which are our guiding principals. Exploring and examining each standard allows us the opportunity to see what it looks like in other school settings and get ideas that we can build into our own leadership practice. We have time to share, collaborate and network as a principal group, which is a unique and beneficial experience."

"Through my involvement thus far, I have gleaned knowledge from my peers, and observed

different styles and structures of leadership firsthand in the leader's own environment. Their strengths are apparent when you see the school culture, tone and timbre of the staff, and student interactions. I have appreciated the opportunity to read professional articles and discuss them with peers, improving my practice and deepening my understanding."

This COP-P has been successful for several reasons. Since time is at such a premium for principals, there must be high value for the time invested. The COP-P has been designed to address intensely personal issues and challenges for the participating principals and walk away with fresh ideas and insights into solving their challenges. To keep the energy and interest levels high, it is important to create a variety of activities and approaches to learning. A skilled facilitator, who spends the time and energy to take care of logistics and effectively facilitate the space for the inquiry, is necessary. Finally, as deep learning will not occur if trust is lacking, the COP-P is continually working to create high levels of trust.

The seeds for powerful learning have been planted through this COP-P and will

continue to grow as this community blooms. The ultimate goal will be to foster more strength, confidence and a diverse, well-rounded skill set in the participating principals, so that they can continue to effectively lead a quality learning environment. It will be exciting to see how this COP-P continues to grow and learn together throughout the remainder of this school year. ■

Corrie Ziegler has been an educator for over 36 years in the roles of teacher, principal, supervisor and director. She has led AISI projects, managed teams, and has facilitated numerous sessions on a broad spectrum of topics related to teaching and learning. Ziegler is currently facilitating the Community of Practice for Principals through a contract with the Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium.

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Principal Quality Practice Guideline, 2009 Alberta Education.

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Leveraging Team Strengths Via "E-Circles"

By Timothy Cusack, Edmonton Catholic Schools

Creating conditions which empower success is essential to developing and deepening the leadership capacity of a team. Inspired by Margaret Wheatley's exploration of how to achieve synergistic and high impact systems in her book *Leadership and the New Science*, I wish to share how a process model called "E-Circles" inspired in kind by the three E's (Engaged Learners, Ethical Citizens, Entrepreneurial Spirit) of the 2013 Ministerial Order (M.O.), can promote richer levels of stakeholder engagement and increase distributive leadership across a community of practice.

In essence, E-Circles is a model that helps "create structures that are flexible and adaptive," (p.9). It is a living system that becomes self-organizing and self-evolving as it enables all stakeholders to have more voice and investment in interpreting and acting upon the needs of our present reality. The idea stems from Wheatley's observation that: "In every organization, we need to look internally, to see one another as the critical resources on the voyage of discovery," (p.9). This process actively seeks to engage and leverage the skill, talent and creativity of all team members. It promotes working smarter; not harder! It promotes building trusting relationships.

"An organization rich with many interpretations develops a wiser sense of what is going on and what needs to be done. Such organizations become more intelligent," (p.67). This excerpt jumped off the page as I read Wheatley's book in the winter of 2014. As principal of a large junior/senior high at the time, I was seeking ways to activate more teacher voice in the various conversations that are pertinent to continuous school growth. I started with my Faculty Council.

We wanted to immerse ourselves in the language of the M.O. and thus divided ourselves into three distinctive groupings



How do we create structures that are flexible and adaptive, that enable rather than constrain? Margaret Wheatley (p. 9).

(E-Circles) and challenged each group to look at issues and needs through their respective lens. As a starting point, we examined the role and function of our leadership team. How do we engage with our community? Are we honoring the voices of all stakeholders? Can we maximize opportunities and use resources better? We spent quality time examining the way we were "always doing things" versus how we might move forward in unlocking more potential for distributive leadership opportunities.

In short order, our previous model of Faculty Council evolved from that of a "sit and get" meeting agenda driven body to that of an action oriented system that proactively sought to expand, enhance and energize the educational experience for all partners and stakeholders of our learning community.

Wheatley states that, "One of an organization's most critical competencies is to create conditions that both generate new knowledge and help it to be freely shared," (p.110). In planning for the 2014-2015 school year, I asked all staff, including educational assistants,

admin support, the school technician and custodians, to select one of the three-E's that they would like to "go deeper with." We then created the E-Circle lists, which were balanced by representation across all disciplines and levels. I asked each of my three assistant principals to join one group and serve as facilitator. We had created a process model that guided discussions with a three-E focus at both the micro and macro level.

The E-Circle process entails a challenge or provocation that the team needs to address. Each E-Circle examines, understands and communicates the function and role of their respective E-lens, using the language of the M.O., with the whole community. Then, using a jigsaw method with sub-groups of each circle, the three circles present the ideas generated. We called it cross-pollinating. Then the collective group hears all the "big rock" considerations. All ideas are recorded then emailed to all members who can further add to the list.

This process allows for a richer sharing of energy that Wheatley claims enhances communication. She asks: "Why would we stay locked in our belief that there is one right way to do something, or one correct interpretation to a situation, when the universe demands diversity and thrives on a plurality of meaning?" (p.73). We know that people will support what they create. This new model gives us more channels of communication, distributes leadership amongst more partners and allows us to build synergy. Wheatley adds: "We can rely on people as 'bundles of potential' figuring out solutions, learning quickly and surprising ourselves with new capacities," (p.179). This underpins the key requirement of the E-Circle model: building trusting relationships!

Let us look at an example of E-Circles at work. Traditionally, the joyous task of building the supervision schedule falls to one lucky assistant principal. We now had three eager E-Circles ready to roll up their sleeves and get their hands on a matter near and dear to their



heart. The Ethical Citizen Circle invited representatives of our local ATA executive to present on assignable time so that we could review the contractual parameters of assignments prior to delving into the Three E perspectives of establishing a supervision schedule.

In one hour we had leveraged three-fold the ideas on how the school could move forward. Three pages of engaged, ethical and entrepreneurial ideas were generated! All members were encouraged to share views and ideas. Everyone had the opportunity to be an owner. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the process as I, as principal, needed to be comfortable in lowering my authority so that everyone could have authentic say in the conversation. What came next was inspiring!

After cross-pollination, two members from each circle asked if they could spearhead a team that would collate the data, review the common themes and generate a proposal in creating the schedule. They did and brought back a plan in very short order that served as the blueprint for the semester. Future adjustments to the schedule were made via that E-Circle collaborative team. People were happier with the process and felt that they were heard in the conversation.

We went on to look at several other topics over the year: extracurricular commitments, a new timetable, supports to English Language Learners, planning for a major modernization, to name a few. We found that the E-Circle process allowed us to achieve a great amount of sharing in less time. In turn, we gifted the remaining staff meeting time that would have normally been used for "sit and get" agenda items to teachers so they could have more time to collaborate, plan, mark, contact parents, etc. We eventually added student and parent

voices into our E-Circle discussions as the question or matter at hand warranted.

The E-Circle model has since been used at other district sites to generate ideas and activate stakeholder voice in exploring: a district literacy/numeracy plan, examining French Immersion Programming needs and exploring aspects of Inclusive Educational planning. Via E-Circles, we endeavour to work smarter and seek to maximize the quality of teaching and learning that transpire in our community.

This approach can unlock creativity, increase team capability, and deepen commitment and ownership. It has a positive impact in creating an energizing and collegial communication system. Wheatley encourages us to "engage with each other, experiment to find what works for us, and support one another as the true inventors (architects of learning) that we are," (p.9).

This structure has helped us to better understand needs, respond to challenges, create synergy, and, as a community of practice, learn deeply from and with each other! ■

Timothy Cusack serves as Assistant Superintendent, Learning Services Innovation, with Edmonton Catholic Schools. He can be reached at timothy.cusack@ecsd.net.

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School System (School) Leadership: Six Steps to Success

By Mal Clewes, Retired Superintendent, Lethbridge School District No. 51

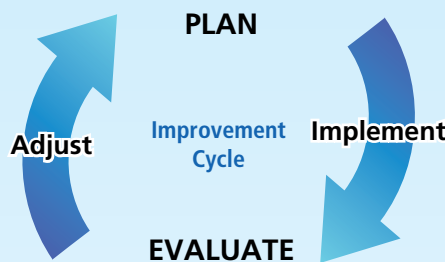
School jurisdictions will typically devote considerable energy to the selection of leaders for schools and for their central administration. It seems less common, however, for much direction to be provided for administrators once they have been appointed. The following steps will hopefully outline a framework for some of the key roles performed by superintendents and their leadership teams at the jurisdiction level, but most of the concepts apply equally well to school principals.

1. Establish Clear Expectations

In order to achieve success in any venture, the goal must be clear. A newly appointed administrator will usually be placed in an environment where a vision, mission and overarching goals have been established, but the expectations of the position are not always clear or complete. Although it will require some effort, there is real value in developing a comprehensive role description for every position within the school jurisdiction, the more detailed the better.

The description should identify all areas of responsibility, including relationships with other positions, committees and organizations, and should identify critical timelines where applicable. Job descriptions, if kept current, will serve as useful guides for employees and should also form the basis for evaluation.

The role description should be reviewed annually with the view to making the most appropriate allocation of responsibility within the school or jurisdiction and, ultimately, to



provide the best service for students. A complete description of the roles played by all staff is also invaluable to the critical process of succession planning.

2. Implement a Cycle of Planning and Evaluation

On rare occasions, success can be achieved without a great deal of effort. More often, however, progress occurs as a result of careful planning. The implementation of a cycle of planning and evaluation is a sure way to bring about improvement in any venture, whether it be a short-term project, such as organizing a board retreat, or a long-term initiative, such as improving student literacy.

The cycle begins with the development of a plan that clearly describes what is to be done and how it is to be accomplished. The various components of the plan are then implemented and their success is evaluated. Based upon the evaluation results, adjustments are made and a new and improved plan is created. Once this cycle of continuous improvement has been incorporated into the culture of the organization,

change and innovation will be encouraged and new initiatives will be introduced as plans for improvement. A clear example of the application of the improvement cycle is the annual updating of role descriptions described earlier.

3. Be Visible and Accessible

By definition, leaders need to be out in front, to be visible. The administrative demands placed upon school superintendents, principals and their leadership teams can seem overwhelming at times and a significant part of the work is most efficiently done in the office. It is critical, however, that leaders be visible on a regular basis within the jurisdiction.

To be effective, school system administrators need to demonstrate a sincere interest in the fine work being done in the school system and to be accessible to those directly involved in education. This is best accomplished by assigning each member of the leadership team to a small group of schools and other work sites and developing an annual schedule of regular visits.

Visits should be publicized well in advance in order that staff might arrange to communicate their accomplishments or concerns. Visitations will prove invaluable in developing an understanding of educational programs, identifying areas of strength and weakness, and getting to know staff. The presence of educational leaders in schools and classrooms, and their attendance at school events, will enhance their credibility with staff. It will have a positive effect on staff morale and will enhance community support for schools.

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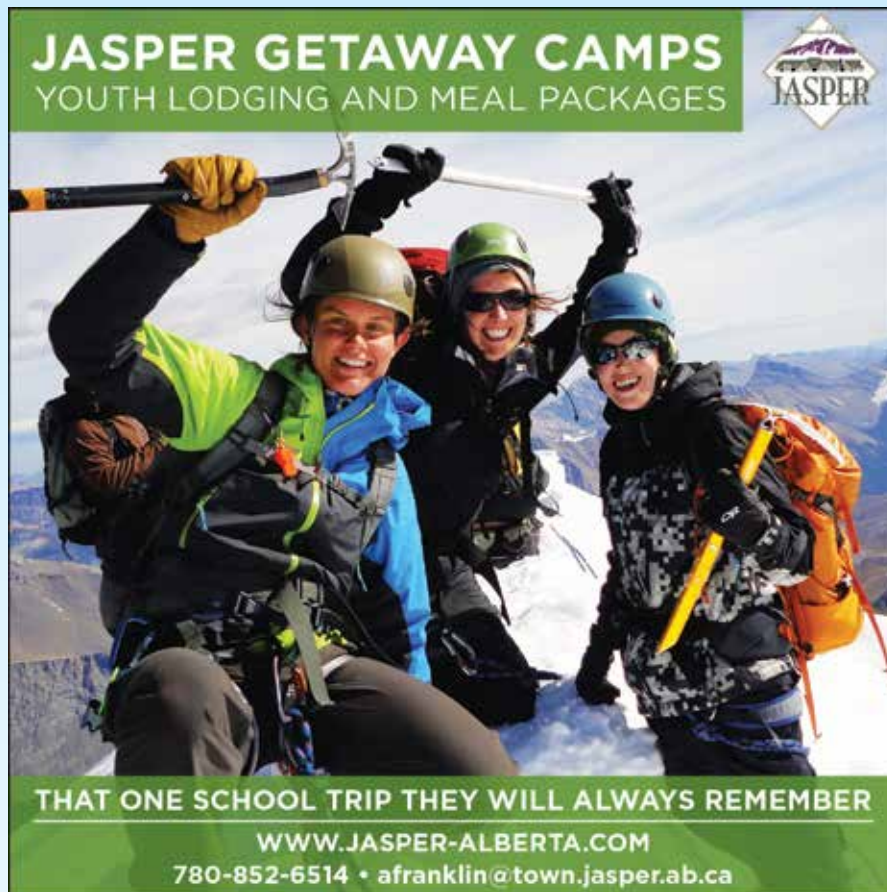
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4. Communicate Appropriately

The ongoing success of any administration depends upon clear and open communication within the jurisdiction and with the community. In addition to the important personal interaction between leaders, staff, students and the public, described earlier, a few other suggestions to ensure effective communication are as follows:

- Widely publicize vision, mission and significant goals;
- Emphasize current educational priorities;
- Encourage regular teacher-parent communication;
- Provide opportunities for input and give feedback in a timely manner;
- Establish open lines of communication with significant community agencies, such as health and justice;
- Provide clear and concise meeting agendas to the affected parties well in advance;
- Distribute meeting minutes soon after the conclusion of meetings; and
- Utilize appropriate media in disseminating information and soliciting input.

Continued on page 16



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5. Reinforce and Encourage

In order to maintain the focus on providing the best possible educational experience for students, it is important to emphasize the major educational goals of the jurisdiction with staff. It is also important for staff to receive feedback from supervisors on the work they are doing. This is best accomplished during regular visits to schools and other work sites.

Members of the leadership team should provide encouragement for staff, show gratitude for their contributions and recognize their accomplishments. It is also important, however, that public recognition be provided for outstanding service (such as an Excellence in Teaching Award).

Recognition of exceptional effort rewards worthy individuals, inspires others to excel and tends to improve overall morale within the jurisdiction. Educational leaders should serve as ambassadors for the jurisdiction and should take every opportunity to promote its accomplishments within the community.

6. Keep Things Fresh

Change should be synonymous with the business of education, but it is still possible for some who work in schools to become complacent in their positions. One of the prime duties of school superintendents is to inspire teachers to constantly search for strategies that will be the most effective in teaching their students, and to encourage other staff to strive for excellence in their respective positions.

It is incumbent upon educational leaders to keep current with educational research, pedagogical innovation and changes in technology, and to share new developments with staff. This sharing should take place through the appropriate forms of communication, professional development programs and through staff mentorship.

Special attention should be paid to those aspiring to leadership positions within the jurisdiction. A leadership development program could be organized that is open to all interested staff. Such a program would help identify and train potential administrators and would bring together staff from across the school system, thereby helping participants become more knowledgeable of the complexities of the jurisdiction. The

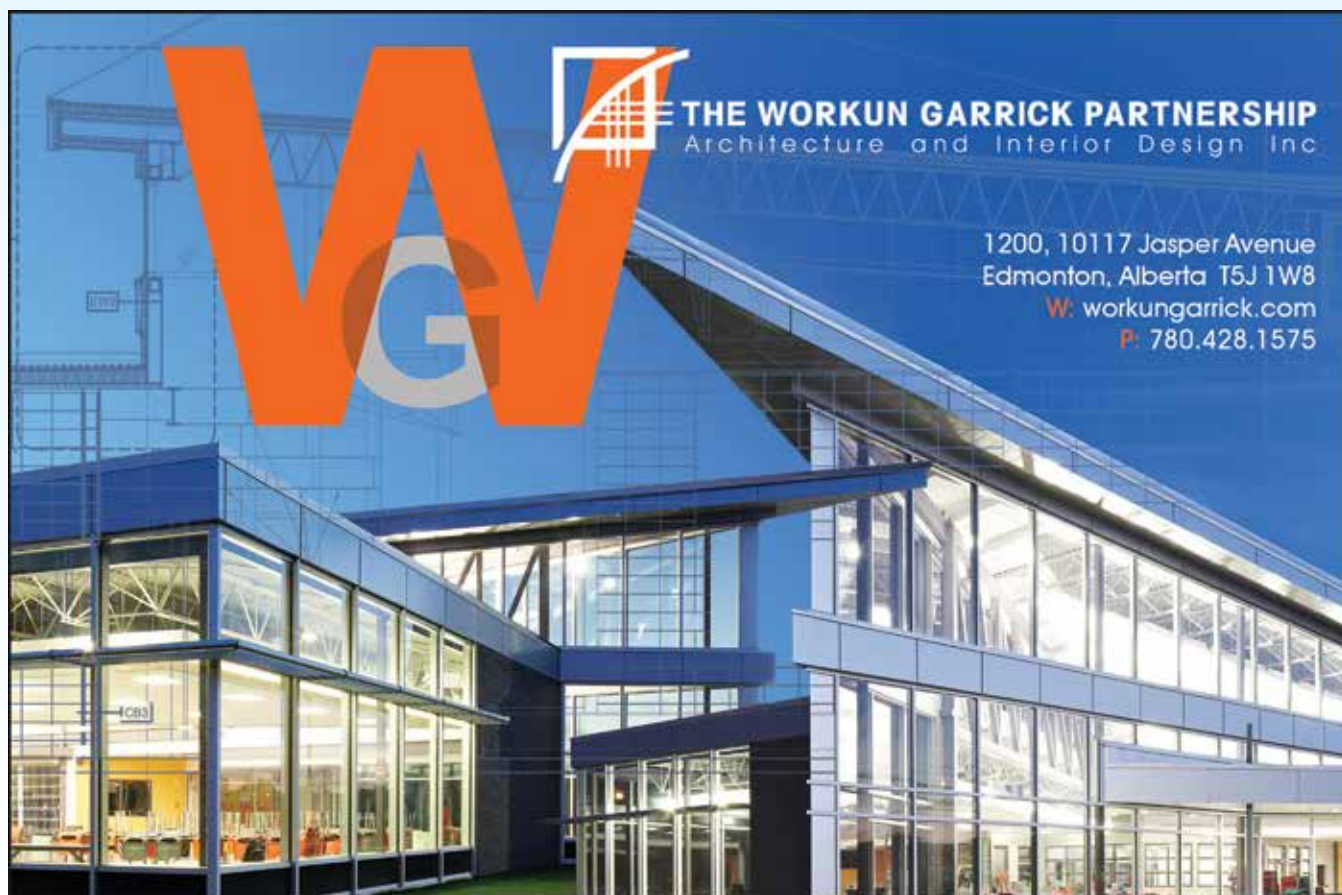
implementation of a jurisdiction-wide leadership program can improve understanding of the challenges facing the school system and can have a significant impact on staff morale.

During the annual review of job descriptions, members of the leadership team (and all staff, if possible) should consider exchanging some responsibilities for the next year. This is of particular value in the preparation of those aspiring to more senior positions with broader responsibilities. The periodic transfer of administrators is also strongly recommended as a means of re-energizing and encouraging growth in the individual and the jurisdiction.

In Conclusion

The education of our children is an onerous task but none is more sacred or more important to the success of our society. It is incumbent upon our educational leaders to plan and to guide their jurisdictions in the most effective way possible. ■

Mal Clewes has served as Superintendent of Schools with Lethbridge School District No. 51 and has been a junior high school and senior high school principal. He can be reached at mjclewes@telus.net.



A Successful Approach to Organizational Leadership at a First Nations School Authority

By Ryan Anderson, Nipisihkopahk Education Authority

When it comes to system leadership, there are many ways to succeed at achieving the goals and vision of an organization. According to Bolman and Deal, authors of *Reframing Organizations*, there are a number of different frames or approaches to structuring an organization—the approach a superintendent or system leadership team can take. Each frame has its own merits and can be successful in its own right, but one thing that is true about all of them is that the approach taken by the system leadership team will ultimately dictate the organizational culture and success of the school jurisdiction.

Nipisihkopahk Education Authority (NEA) runs five band-operated schools on Samson Cree Nation in Maskwacis (formerly Hobbema). Like its provincial counterparts, it has a central office team that works to support the success of its schools, staff and students. Kevin Wells, the Superintendent of Schools, has informally embraced the Human Resource Frame as a way to structure his central office “Learning Team” and for that team to lead by example in the organization.

The Human Resource Frame is based on the following tenets:

Tenets	Human Resource Frame
Metaphor for organization	Family.
Central concepts	Needs, skills, relationships.
Image of leadership	Empowerment, egalitarianism.
Basic leadership challenge	Align organizational and human needs.

Of all the frames or approaches that one can take when it comes to leading an organization, the Human Resource Frame is most indicative of the Cree traditions and culture in Maskwacis. It is not surprising then that Wells uses this approach as the organizational leadership style at NEA.

The Family Metaphor

The adage that it takes a village to raise a child is quite literal for the Plains Cree in Maskwacis. This requires an HR practice that will facilitate positive interaction between school, home and community. With all of its teachers holding Alberta teaching certificates, NEA boasts a healthy balance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers and staff. This is sometimes difficult to achieve in First Nation schools; many do not have enough certified teachers from the community and therefore rely on non-Aboriginal teachers to come in and teach on reserve.

As of the 2015-2016 school year, however, approximately 65 per cent of all staff at NEA is First Nations and a majority are from the Maskwacis area. In addition, every school principal is an experienced teacher, most having graduate degrees in education, all are First Nations and all but one is from Maskwacis. So, in relation to the family metaphor, NEA has focused on hiring the right people, keeping them, investing in them and empowering them to succeed.

In terms of district leadership, Wells has been strategic in choosing his leadership team. With myself being the exception, having joined the



Lennon Buffalo and Blake Okeymow are students participating in the Annual NEA Powwow.



Members of the Learning Team with Jared Buffalo and Garvey Soosay during the Grand Entry at the Annual NEA Powwow.

district in 2013, every other member of the Learning Team has been with the organization for at least 15 years—teachers and leaders who have demonstrated success, who know the context in which they work, and have spent years building relationships of trust with the school community.

Wahkohtowin

Wahkohtowin is the Cree word for kinship or relationships. It is a foundational aspect of Cree culture and is a core value that is instilled in its people from the time they are children. When it comes to building an organization that is focused on its people, it is important that the Learning Team exemplify this trait as well.

In January 2016, Alberta Education hosted a meeting in Wetaskiwin for all provincial jurisdictions and First Nations school authorities in the area. It was the first time in recent memory that each of the education stakeholders at the federal, provincial and jurisdictional level from this area were together in the same room at the same time.

During that meeting, Elder Roy Louis of Samson Cree Nation taught the group that “Wetaskiwin” is a Cree word that means “the place where peace was made.” It references the establishment of peace between the Plains Cree and Blackfoot peoples as they ended their historical conflict and determined their traditional boundaries and territories. At that time he encouraged all leaders to consider the meaning of the word and how education leaders can come together to collaborate in a way that would benefit all children on and off reserve.

The result of that meeting not only reflected a positive and collaborative move forward, but it also exemplified the value of Wahkohtowin as a characteristic of NEA’s organization.

Egalitarianism: The Circle

According to Bolman and Deal, one key aspect of a human resource focused organization is creating a sense of equality among its members and to empower teams to succeed. They also suggest that the majority of North American organizations do not really succeed in either of these key areas. To address those common pitfalls, NEA

empowers the Learning Team through the traditional Cree approaches of equality and collaboration.

Traditionally, the use of a circle has played an important role in the Cree way of life. As a form of dispute resolution, it was not uncommon to have elders and members of family and community sit together to solve problems and work through challenging issues or situations. In the same way, NEA has employed a dispute resolution policy that allows employees, families and other members of the school community to request a circle to address challenges from a cultural perspective.

Additionally, NEA has symbolically espoused the circle in the way the central office is built and the way meetings are held there. Structurally, all of the offices in the building are situated around the perimeter of the building facing inwards. The center of the building is comprised of common workspaces, including the staff and the boardrooms. The design of the building facilitates collaboration because the common areas of the office are intuitively the easiest and

most accessible places to work. In both the staff room and the boardroom, the seats are arranged in the form of a circle, implying that all members of a group are considered equals in their contribution.

In addition to the symbolic use of the circle, the Learning Team is also empowered to collectively make decisions and work together on major initiatives. Since 2013, the Learning Team has aligned assessment practices across the district and has implemented a collaborative response model to meet the learning needs of all students. Throughout this process, Wells facilitated the research and development, and then supported the findings and decisions of the group.

The result has not only empowered the Learning Team to work together, but it has brought positive systemic changes to the school calendar, the use of PD time and improved instructional leadership. Because Kevin Wells, Superintendent of Schools, knows of the needs and skills of his employees, he has been able to step back, trust in his team and then support them in moving NEA forward.

Conclusion

System leaders know that there are many ways to ensure organizational and leadership success. It is also true, as has been mentioned at recent CASS sessions, that when one member of a team or organization fails, to some degree, the leadership of that team or organization fails as well. Like many system leadership teams, the Learning Team succeeds because NEA focuses on meeting the needs of its people through a Human Resource Frame. ■

Ryan Anderson oversees instructional services and literacy at NEA. He has also worked as a teacher, vice principal and acting principal in the public system.

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Positive Persistence

By Heather Kane, Calgary Catholic School District

Calgary Catholic School District is the largest Catholic school district in Alberta; it serves over 58,000 students in Calgary, Airdrie, Cochrane, Chestermere and Rocky View County, and has over 5,000 full and half time staff combined. Instructional Services is one of the many departments that comprise the staff of the Calgary Catholic School District, who come together as a team, to ensure the mission, vision and values of our district are visible and viable in all the work we do.

Instructional Services is responsible for providing support and services to district schools for the religious education program and all instructional programs for kindergarten to Grade 12 learners, including students with diverse learning needs. Specifically, Instructional Services supports our students in recognizing their strengths, enabling them to grow and to be successful.

Positive persistence is the key to success for Calgary Catholic's Instructional Services Team. The leadership is composed of a superintendent, directors and supervisors, who work collaboratively, relentlessly and consistently to make a positive impact on students. To gain perspective on how the Instructional Services Administrative Team provides powerful leadership, we begin by considering the research emphasized in three leadership books. The tone and approach to leadership found in these books is varied, however, the goal remains the same and that goal is *success*.

Simon Sinek in *Start with Why*, advises that when an organization can clearly articulate the "why" or purpose of its existence, everything can be filtered through this "why" and will resonate with employees and stakeholders. For Instructional Services, that "why" is *Success for All Students*, which resonates throughout the district. Susan Scott indicates in *Fierce Leadership*, that no one possesses the entire picture, but we all have pieces of the puzzle. Every two weeks the Instructional Services Admin team meets to put that puzzle together to ensure continuity and consistency exists across each of their portfolios. David Rock in *Quiet*

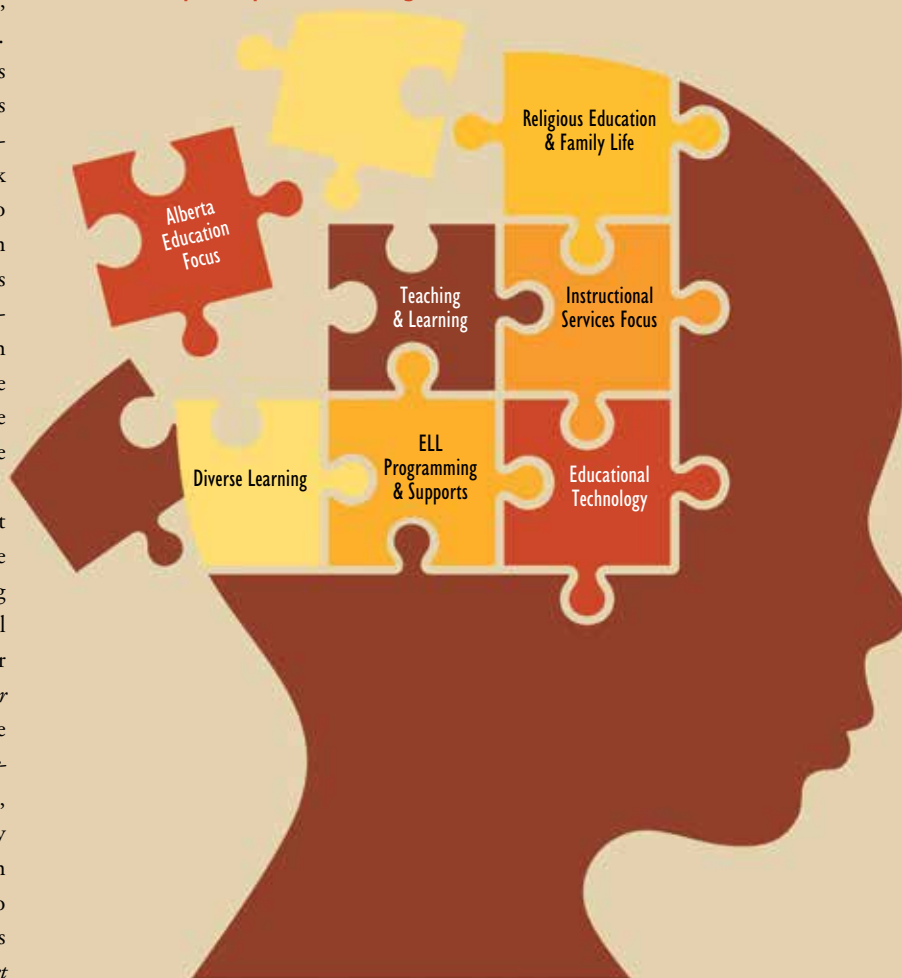
Leadership, emphasizes the importance of considering the way we think. By focusing on solutions, accentuating the positive and challenging ourselves, we begin to use our knowledge in a different way. Members of Instructional Services make decisions daily that emphasize best practice and support for student success.

With so many different avenues to success, it can be easy to lose focus and invest time, money and energy in ventures that are like fool's gold, shiny and bright, but worthless. How do we maintain our focus and keep on the path to success? How do we know we are successful? When reflecting on what makes Instructional Services a strong and effective leadership team, four key factors emerged as contributing to our goal of student success: focusing on outcomes, data

informed decision-making, building capacity and holding members accountable. These key factors contribute to positive results and are evident in the daily work of Instructional Services; are reflected in district results and begin with the semi-monthly Instructional Services Admin Team meetings.

The first key factor is focusing on outcomes. In Calgary Catholic, *Success for All Students*, guides all our decision-making and aligns our work. How will this have a positive impact on students? How will this support students in reaching their academic goals? How will we meet the needs of all students if we provide this resource? These are some of the questions posed and considered by members of the Instructional Services team and embedded in our positive persistence. Consistently,

All of these puzzle pieces come together to create SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS!



each member of Instructional Services works towards a common goal. Rooted in our faith, decisions that align with the goal of *Success for All Students* are finalized and monitored.

The second key factor, data informed decision-making, enables Instructional Services to concentrate on outcomes and align our work with clarity and precision. Teams work together to analyze data, to discuss strategy and to develop cohesive and comprehensive plans that support students in achieving their goals. An example would be our mental health strategy, as explained in the winter issue of CASSA's magazine, *Leaders & Learners*. The strategy was developed based on research data from the accountability survey and the "Tell Them From Me" survey. Initiatives that support the strategy are the "Go to Educator," professional development for staff, which utilizes the expertise of Dr. Stan Kutcher, parent forums on mental health and student participation using the 4th R and physical literacy. These activities are interwoven into our work to create a seamless focus for the district.

The third key factor, building the capacity of all members in the Instructional Services team,

is crucial. As each member joins the team, they are supported and guided by other members of the team. Information and structure is shared along with the stories of successes and challenges that help to create a strong trust network and promotes risk-taking and innovation. Although they may be a new member on the team, they are valued for what they bring to the team, as well as what they bring out in the team. One person cannot do it all and it is in supporting each other and trusting in the abilities of the team, that a bond is quickly established.

The fourth key factor of holding members accountable is complex. The only person who you can hold accountable is yourself, which is central to the achievement of the team. Although each team member has a designated portfolio, they are consistently supported by other Instructional Services team members. In order to effectively consider various options in supporting students, all members of the team must be informed and involved.

Breaking down silos is intentional for this strength-based approach used by Instructional Services. Creating a sense of interdependency contributes to the cohesive nature of the team,

while fostering independent growth allows everyone's voice to be considered. Collectively, we engage in supporting student success. Chief Superintendent Gary Strother indicates that it is this "relentless consistency" of Calgary Catholic, which is at the heart of all we do. We are an effective leadership team; we focus on outcomes, we use data to inform our decision-making, we hold ourselves accountable and we make a difference in the lives of students. Our impact is the *success of all our students*. ■

Heather Kane is Director, Instructional Services, Calgary Catholic School District. She can be reached at heather.kane@cssd.ab.ca.

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Assessing the Digital Landscape

The Alberta School Employee Benefits Plan (ASEBP) is a health and welfare trust governed by 10 Trustees. ASEBP offers a wide variety of health benefits and promotes programs that sustain healthy lifestyles and workplaces for over 55,000 covered members and their dependants in 58 school jurisdictions across the province. ASEBP is pleased to contribute a regular column in The CASS Connection.

By Jennifer Carson, BBA

It's now 2016, and while Doc Brown and Marty McFly may be disappointed at the lack of (functioning) hoverboards and flying cars, technology has come a long way. The invention of the internet paved the way to communication networks, creating communities beyond those based on close physical proximity. We are cyber-neighbours to our peers within the same professional fields or interest groups, and all we have to do is speak—electronically, that is.

Here at ASEBP, we want to foster healthy public education communities through our benefits and services, ensuring they are easily accessible when and where our members need them. We felt it was the perfect time to survey the digital landscape to evaluate our opportunities for improving and expanding our digital services.

The Digital Properties Review

We pride ourselves on high levels of customer service and effective communication is crucial to achieving this. We are in the midst of an important time

in terms of technological advancements; because of this, digital communication is continuously growing and creating new avenues to interact. While we have existing digital properties, we see potential to grow, further improving service delivery and communicating information about these services more effectively through digital means.

The Digital Properties Review was an effort to canvas and assess the efficacy and usability of our current web-based properties; specifically, ASEBP's public website, My ASEBP (including Apple-a-Day and the Drug Inquiry Tool), our mobile app and the Employer Services Portal (ESP). The review was conducted with the end users in mind—our covered members, and school jurisdiction staff and leadership—with the understanding that feedback is the foundation of successful development. The goal of this review was to determine if there were opportunities to expand our digital services; this could entail adding functionality to current services, combining existing ones or adding completely new

services, as well as providing clarity about our benefits and services for our various audiences.

The Process

From August to December of 2015, we enlisted the services of nForm, a local digital strategy consulting firm, to audit our current digital properties. The review was conducted in Edmonton, but thanks to digital tools, was able to engage members and school jurisdiction staff across the province through voluntary online interviews.

Quantitative aspects of the review utilized analytics, such as the number of visits to the website, how much time was spent on the site and which webpages were the most visited. Qualitative results were provided through the covered member and school jurisdiction staff interviews, industry competitor comparisons and a day-long workshop with a cross-section of ASEBP employees. The digital properties were discussed in relation to our strategic focuses and the needs of our members and school jurisdictions.

The Findings

The most positive feedback we received from all those participating in the one-on-one interviews was that ASEBP is a highly trusted provider—we were thrilled to hear this.

The review found our public website welcomed 140,000 visitors in the past year, with approximately 17,000 unique visitors each month. The website experienced the most traffic in January, March and June. We also learned that our most visited pages included the home page, the overview of the Extended Health Care plan, the Health Spending Accounts (HSA) page, the page dedicated to our claim forms and the page with our contact information.

Findings also revealed that members had some difficulty in completely understanding their benefits. In addition to simplifying benefit coverage content, other opportunities were identified, such as making the website mobile-friendly and more clearly communicating our focus on health and the education sector.

My ASEBP, our secure portal allowing members to manage their benefits, had 20,000 visits each month last year. The most popular pages included the home page, the HSA activity and expenses pages, and the benefits claims' history pages. The review found that certain aspects of the tasks that can be completed on My ASEBP (e.g. submitting HSA expenses, updating banking information) could be streamlined.

ESP, a secure portal launched in March 2015 that allows school jurisdiction staff to manage employee benefit enrolment and much more, enjoyed 44,000 page views per month. The most visited pages of the site were the employee profile, the transaction details and history, the start page and the home page.

The review used the findings to create a comprehensive digital strategy map, complete with strategic principles, desired stakeholder outcomes and necessary—and prioritized—activities to achieve the outcomes.

Moving Forward

Technological advancement is a sign that we, as a worldwide digital community, are moving forward. We recognize that the digital landscape is vast and rapidly changing, and the Digital Properties Review allowed us to step back and assess how we can adapt to these changes to best meet our members' needs. Our goal is simple—to improve our digital products and services and ensure ASEBP remains at the forefront of technology. As *Back to the Future* would have you believe, the future is now. ■

Jennifer Carson is the Chief Executive Officer of ASEBP and has worked in the health and benefits industry for over 25 years. During her nine years at ASEBP, Jennifer has championed the organizational transformation from purely a benefits provider to a health services and benefits provider of choice. ASEBP was named one of Alberta's Top 70 Employers for 2015.



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