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Superintendents

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A guide to support system education leaders in building their professional capacity

This guide also includes strategies for further application of the Community of Practice model within school authorities.

Continuing
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

Grounded in the **Guiding Principles and Learning Outcomes** of the CASS Continuing Education Program, this guide is intended to serve two purposes:

> **1** To support system education leaders in demonstrating professional competence and engaging in ongoing reflection about their own professional practice through participation in a professional Community of Practice.
>
> **2** To support system education leaders with leveraging the Community of Practice model within their school authorities for a variety of purposes, including engaging staff in professional growth and reflection, advancing initiatives, implementing change, gathering feedback, and generating new knowledge.

CASS CEP Guiding Principles

- **Responsive** – The CASS CEP responds to the professional learning needs of system education leaders by providing collaborative, flexible, and responsive learning opportunities to build professional capacity.
- **Research-informed** – The CASS CEP applies research and data-informed practice to support professional growth in system education leadership.
- **Innovative** – The CASS CEP develops and delivers accredited professional learning about system education leadership based on the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS)

CASS CEP Learning Outcomes

Learners in the CASS Continuing Education Program will . . .

- **Engage** in ongoing critical reflection about research informed opportunities for enhancing system education leadership, teaching, and learning.
- **Work collaboratively** with diverse teams to problem solve and apply teamwork strategies for creating shared understanding about system education leadership.
- **Examine** research and data sources to determine relevancy to support planning and decision-making in a culture of continuous improvement.
- **Acquire and apply** foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit for the benefit of all.
- **Explore** innovative approaches to leading and managing operations and resources to create optimal learning environments for students.
- **Demonstrate** ethical behaviours by applying the Alberta Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers and Teacher Leaders (2022), in all matters and interactions.
- **Foster** the development of professional competency in system education leadership within self and others.
- **Evaluate** issues, trends, and engagement practices related to achieving optimal learning for all students in a variety of leadership contexts.

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Superintendents

Continuing
Education
Program

The concept of a community of practice comes from learning theory where the term was coined to describe the dynamic and living learning communities that exist in organizations and communities (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Lave and Wenger (1991) are credited with first using the phrase "community of practice" which they defined as a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.

The concept is now being applied across organizations and sectors as a strategy to create new knowledge, solve problems, advance professional learning and growth, and achieve organizational goals. Communities of practice allow for groups of people who share a common interest or have common goals to come together "to learn, share information, and reach their individual and group objectives" (Research Impact Canada, n.d.). These communities of practice can become "drivers of knowledge exchange, problem-solving and innovation"(Goncalves, 2024).

> " A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. "
>
> (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002)

Cambridge et al. (2005) stated that communities of practice are important because they:

- **Connect people** who might not otherwise connect.
- **Provide a shared context** for people to share ideas and experiences to build understanding.
- **Enable dialogue** so that people can explore new possibilities, solve problems, and create new learning.
- **Stimulate learning** by creating opportunities for mentoring, coaching and reflection.
- **Capture and diffuse existing knowledge** so that people can enhance and improve their practice.
- **Introduce collaborative processes** to encourage the flow of ideas and information.
- **Help people organize** and purposefully plan actions to achieve desired results.
- **Generate new knowledge** to help people adapt to changes and new ideas.

Communities of practice are unique and different from regular teams or collaborative structures that might exist within an organization. Social learning and "thinking together" are key characteristics of a community of practice (Goodhue & Seriamlu, 2021, p. 3). Members of a community of practice come together to learn from and with each other. They are united by a common area of interest or role, they may share problems of practice, and they may have common or complementary expertise and experience.

According to Wenger-Trayner (2015) there are three characteristics of a community of practice that are crucial to its success:

DOMAIN
Members are committed to a shared domain of interest and have a shared competence within this domain.

COMMUNITY
Members engage with each other, interact, build relationships, help each other, and share information and resources with each other.

PRACTICE
Members are practitioners who share practices and solve problems with each other drawing on their own experiences and expertise.
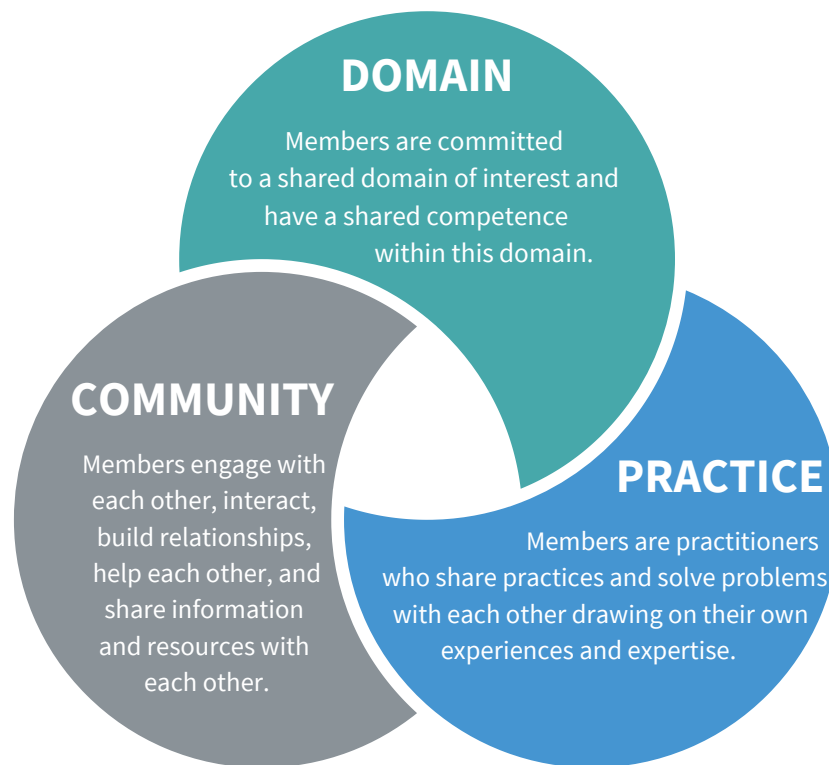
Figure 1.0 Characteristics of a Community of Practice
Adapted from Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2015)

When planning for the implementation of a community of practice, it is important to thoughtfully consider the characteristics of your unique community. Each community of practice is different and should reflect the goals and intentions of your organization.

Community of Practice
PURPOSE

- Consider the domain of your Community of Practice. What is the shared area of interest or concern that brings your group together? Do members have shared expertise and competence as practitioners?

- Use the following sample sentence to clarify the purpose of your Community of Practice:

  This community of practice is intended for _____
  who share an interest in (or concern for) _____
  and commit to learning together how best to _____

- Determine the purpose of your Community of Practice. Communities of Practice can have many purposes including:

  - Sharing knowledge
  - Shared learning
  - Building professional capacity
  - Building a bank of resources
  - Solving problems of practice
  - Gathering feedback/input to inform a plan or decision
  - Advancing initiatives
  - Implementing a change

Draft a purpose statement for your Community of Practice:

Questions to Consider:

- What is the shared area of interest and/or expertise of the members of this Community of Practice?

- Is there a concern shared among members of this Community of Practice?

- For what purpose are you convening this Community of Practice?

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Continuing Education Program

Community of Practice
MEMBERSHIP

- Given the purpose of your Community of Practice, consider who the ideal members should be. For example, if the purpose of your community is to make a decision about a new initiative, are the decision-makers sitting at the table?

- Members of a Community of Practice may have different roles and levels of participation and these roles may ebb and flow over time (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 77):

  - **Core Members**: small group of participants who energize and take charge of the community to ensure its continued relevance and focus.
  - **Active Members**: participants who are regularly engaged with the community and committed to its purpose and progress.
  - **Occasional Members**: participants who engage selectively when a topic is of interest or relevance to them.
  - **Peripheral Members**: observe the community and want to be kept informed but do not necessarily see themselves as active members.
  - **Transactional Members**: interact with the community and make contributions as required but are not members.

List potential members for your Community of Practice:

Questions to Consider:

- What is the profile of an ideal member for this Community of Practice?

- Are there certain people who must be members in order for the community to achieve its purpose?

- What is the ideal size of your community of practice?

- How will members be invited to join the community?

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Community of Practice
LEADERSHIP

- While Communities of Practice may sometimes be self-organizing and self-managing, it is somewhat a myth that "there are no leaders in a true Community of Practice" (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). There is a need for a leadership role within any Community of Practice - someone (or a group of people) who:

  - sets up meetings
  - crafts guiding questions or topics for discussion
  - facilitates note-taking and knowledge-gathering
  - clarifies the roles and responsibilities of members

  - convenes the community
  - keeps the community on track and aligned with their purpose
  - facilitates processes for decision-making (if required)
  - liaises with other leaders

- Considering the purpose of your Community of Practice, design a leadership structure for the community. This could involve a single person or team taking on the leadership and coordination of the community. It could also involve members of the community sharing the leadership roles.

Design the leadership structure for your Community of Practice:

Questions to Consider:

- What will the leadership structure of this Community of Practice be?

- What will be the role and responsibilities of the leader(s)?

- How will the leadership structure be communicated to the members?

- How will the leader(s) be supported?

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Continuing Education Program

- In order to create "an environment of trust where people feel safe to participate" (Mighty Team, 2024), it is advisable to create a set of norms for your Community of Practice. These norms should outline the guidelines for the members of the community.

- The norms should be aligned with your school authority's values and beliefs. They should be personalized to your community and may include statements about how the community will:

  - ensure that all members have a role and a voice
  - stay on track and aligned with its purpose
  - manage conflict and disagreement
  - make decisions or recommendations
  - gather shared resources or knowledge
  - invite new members to join the community as required
  - decide when they have achieved their purpose

- Norms should be shared with the community and agreed upon by all members.

Draft norms (or a process for developing these) for your Community of Practice :

Questions to Consider:

- Are the norms aligned with the purpose for this Community of Practice?

- Are the norms aligned with the school authority's values and beliefs?

- How are the norms developed and shared with the community members?

Community of Practice
LAUNCH

- When you are ready to launch your Community of Practice, consider how you will do so in a way that engages members and ensures the validity and sustainability of your community. Ensure that your launch plan is aligned with the purpose of your Community of Practice.

- Consider the following in your planning:
  - **Frequency and length of meetings**: keeping in mind that "regular meetings help to strengthen ties among members and promote participation, shared practices and understandings" (Staempfli, 2020, p. 9).
  - **Format for meetings** (virtual or in-person): depending on the purpose of your community and the location of members one or both of these formats may be best.
  - **Content of the meetings**: consider what will occur during each meeting such as standing agenda items, guest speakers or presenters, content presentations, or breakout group discussions.
  - **Gathering of knowledge and sharing of resources**: consider the tools and resources you will leverage to gather community knowledge, share resources among members, and collect legacy items created by the community members.

Draft a plan for the launch of your Community of Practice:

Questions to Consider:

- How often, when, and where will the community meet?

- What will occur during the meetings?

- What experiences and activities will engage the members and help them achieve their purpose?

- What technology or resources might be required?

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Community of Practice
COLLABORATIVE PLAN

Community of Practice Date & Time	Topics, Activities, Processes, Content to be Covered	Resources Required

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- In a successful Community of Practice, the results of participation need to be value-added and evident to the members (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Consider gathering feedback from your members along the way to ensure that the Community of Practice is meeting their needs.

- Connect back to the purpose of your Community of Practice. Think about the evidence you might collect to demonstrate achievement of that purpose. There may be a product or decision that comes out of the Community of Practice work, or there may be evidence collected about participants' learning and professional growth.

- Consider what the legacy of your Community of Practice will be and how you will communicate that legacy with other stakeholders.

- Plan and take the time to celebrate the accomplishments and growth of the members of your Community of Practice. Reflect on and recognize the progress that individual participants have made. Celebrate the progress that the community as a whole has made and the impact they have had.

Draft a plan for celebrating success and sharing the results of your Community of Practice:

Questions to Consider:

- How will feedback be gathered from the members of the community?

- How will the community know when they've achieved their purpose?

- How will reflection and celebration be embedded within the activities of the community?

- What will the community's legacy be?

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Connection to
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

- Participants in communities of practice will "hone their professional skills as practitioners (Conn, 2024) and "deepen their knowledge and expertise" (Wenger et al., 2002).

- Alberta's Professional Practice Standards set the criteria for quality superintendent and system education leadership, which should result in optimum learning for all students (Alberta Education, 2023a, 2023b). Both the Leadership Quality Standard and the Superintendent Quality Standard include competencies that reference a commitment to ongoing professional learning and continued growth.

> " A leader engages in career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection to identify opportunities for improving leadership, teaching and learning. "
> (Alberta Education, 2023a, p. 3)

- Superintendents and system education leaders are therefore obliged to engage in self-reflective practices and identify areas for continued growth and development.

> " A superintendent engages in career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection, identifying and acting on research-informed opportunities for enhancing leadership, teaching and learning, and completes professional learning on the code of professional conduct for teachers and teacher leaders. "
> (Alberta Education, 2023b, p. 3)

- Participation in an effective community of practice may be one way that superintendents and system education leaders can reflect on their own practice and continue to improve their skills as leaders.

- The learning and new knowledge acquired from participating in a community of practice will not automatically translate into improved professional practice. Participants need to engage in self-reflective practice and connect the learning to their own professional competency, purposefully planning to implement their new knowledge, skills, or learning.

- Self-reflective practice may not be something that comes naturally. It requires certain skills and techniques. For more information about self-reflective practice, please visit the CASS Self-Reflective Practice for System Education Leaders page on their website.

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Connection to
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Questions to Consider:

- What new learning, knowledge, and/or skills did you acquire as a result of participating in this Community of Practice?

- How will these new learnings, knowledge, and/or skills translate into your professional practice?

- What self-reflective practices will you use to continue to build your professional capacity?

Draft a plan to leverage the learning acquired during your participation in this Community of Practice to build and enhance your professional capacity as a reflective leader:

Community of Practice
FURTHER APPLICATION

"A growing number of people and organizations in various sectors are now focusing on communities of practice as a key to improving their performance"
(Wenger-Trayner, 2015)

- System education leaders have an opportunity to leverage the Community of Practice model within their school authorities to achieve organizational goals and build knowledge and professional capacity. Within school authorities, communities of practice can be leveraged to:
  - Build professional capacity
  - Share knowledge
  - Share learning
  - Build a bank of resources
  - Solve problems of practice
  - Gather feedback to inform a decision
  - Advance initiatives
  - Implement a change

- The components of a Community of Practice outlined in this guide can support system education leaders in designing and implementing effective communities of practice within their school authorities.

List the possibilities for the application of a Community of Practice model within your school authority:

Questions to Consider:

- How could you leverage a Community of Practice model within your school authority?

- What might be the benefits of implementing communities of practice within your school authority?

- What teams or structures do you already have in place that might be tweaked to fit the community of practice model?

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Continuing Education Program