



Advancing Student Achievement in Literacy & Numeracy

Perspectives of Alberta's
System Education Leaders



CASS

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WHAT WE HEARD

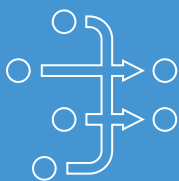
This study included 47 system education leaders representing 24 rural, urban, and remote Alberta school authorities. Participants shared their experiences and perspectives regarding improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy, and the analysis of the interview data resulted in six interrelated themes.

Six Emergent Themes

— INPUT FROM —
 **47**

**System Education
Leaders**

— REPRESENTING —
 **24**
**Alberta School
Authorities**



THEME 1

Coherent System Direction

SUB-THEMES

- ✓ Alignment of organization structures and process
- ✓ Narrowing of priorities
- ✓ Collaborative processes for coherence
- ✓ Conceptualization of frameworks and strategic plans as living documents



THEME 2

Evidence-informed System Education Leadership

SUB-THEMES

- ✓ Sophistication of longitudinal and comparative data analysis practices
- ✓ Data literacy and evidence interpretation
- ✓ Normalization of evidence-based decision making
- ✓ Multiple sources of evidence for continuous improvement



THEME 3

Instructional Capacity Building Through Embedded Professional Learning

SUB-THEMES

- ✓ Embedded and sustained professional learning
- ✓ Shared instructional language understanding
- ✓ System-wide consistency of instructional practice
- ✓ Collaborative professional learning structures
- ✓ Building multi-level leadership professional capacity
- ✓ Intentional differentiation and responsiveness of professional learning supports



THEME 4

Creating the Conditions for Improvement

SUB-THEMES

- ✓ Trust and psychological safety
- ✓ Relational leadership
- ✓ Distributed leadership
- ✓ Adaptive leadership

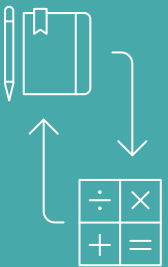


THEME 5

Structural & Contextual Conditions

SUB-THEMES

- ✓ Classroom complexity
- ✓ Curriculum implementation
- ✓ Human resource capacity and staffing challenges
- ✓ Geographic and contextual realities
- ✓ Sustainability and quality of instructional resources



THEME 6

Differentiated Development of Literacy & Numeracy Coherence

SUB-THEMES

- ✓ Differential maturity of literacy and numeracy practices
- ✓ Teacher preparedness and confidence
- ✓ Early years foundations for literacy and numeracy success
- ✓ Collective K–12 responsibility for literacy and numeracy



Common Tensions

These six tensions synthesize many of the challenges that surfaced repeatedly across the 24 interviews and help explain why improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy is often complex despite a high degree of commitment and expertise among educators in the school authority.



Participants sought to establish common instructional expectations and consistent practices across schools while preserving professional judgment and responsiveness to local contexts. Participants emphasized the importance of balancing organizational coherence with educator autonomy and innovation.



Participants emphasized the importance of using evidence to guide improvement efforts while ensuring accountability processes remained supportive, relational, and responsive to contextual realities. Participants frequently described accountability as a process of collective learning rather than compliance.



URGENCY

VS



CAPACITY

Participants recognized the priority of improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy, while acknowledging the realities of staffing shortages, competing priorities, initiative fatigue, and limited implementation capacity. Many described the challenge of maintaining momentum without overwhelming educators.



INNOVATION

VS



SUSTAINABILITY

Participants expressed interest in adopting new instructional approaches, resources, and technologies while remaining mindful of long-term affordability, implementation feasibility, and organizational sustainability. Decisions were often influenced by concerns about funding stability, subscription costs, and staff capacity.



INSTRUCTIONAL PRIORITIES

VS



CLASSROOM COMPLEXITY

Participants identified literacy and numeracy improvement as central priorities but acknowledged that increasing classroom complexity, diverse student needs, and inclusive education expectations frequently competed for instructional attention and resources.



PROVINCIAL EXPECTATIONS

VS



LOCAL REALITIES

Participants described the need to respond to provincial curriculum, assessment, and policy expectations while adapting implementation approaches to the unique geographic, demographic, cultural, and organizational contexts of their school authorities. Effective implementation often required balancing provincial direction with local responsiveness.

Key Insights

1

System coherence requires disciplined focus and organizational alignment.

2

Relational leadership functions as a foundational condition for instructional improvement.

3

Distributed instructional leadership strengthens implementation capacity.

4

Embedded professional learning is essential for sustained instructional improvement.

5

Data literacy is a critical leadership competency.

6

Sustainability must be a system-level priority.

7

Administrator instructional leadership professional capacity requires a continuous improvement process.

8

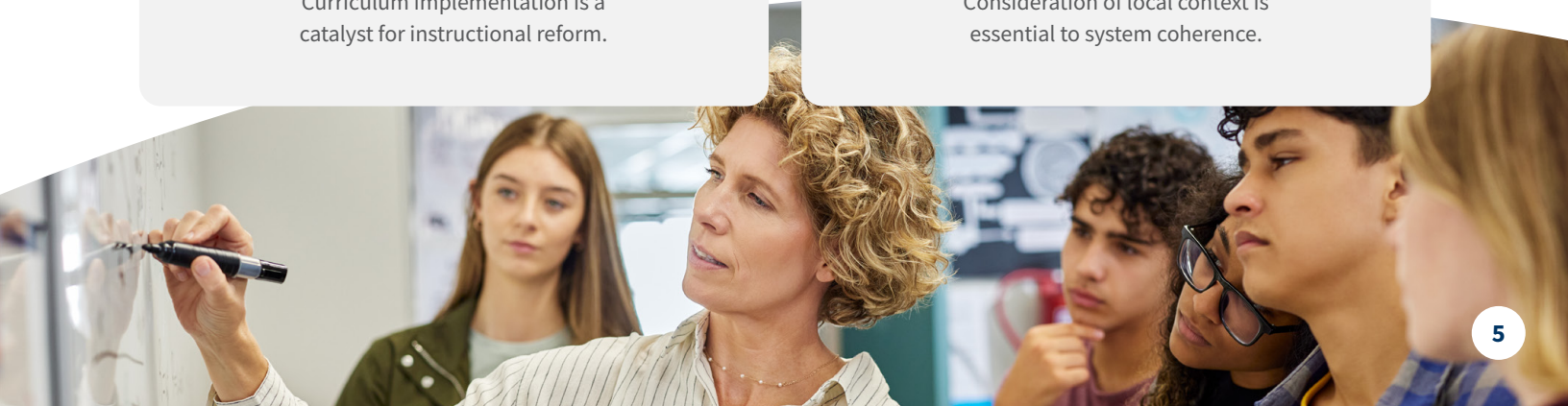
Collective professional responsibility for student achievement in literacy and numeracy must extend across the K-12 education system.

9

Curriculum implementation is a catalyst for instructional reform.

10

Consideration of local context is essential to system coherence.



Considerations for System Education Leaders



Coherent System-Wide Instructional Alignment

The findings suggest that literacy and numeracy improvement efforts are strengthened when instructional priorities, professional learning, assessment practices, intervention structures, and resource allocation processes are aligned across the school authority. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of narrowing priorities, maintaining organizational focus, and establishing shared instructional expectations to support coherence and reduce fragmentation.

Enhance Organizational Data Literacy

The findings highlighted that effective use of evidence depends on more than access to data. Participants emphasized the importance of developing organizational capacity to interpret, contextualize, and act upon multiple sources of evidence. Data literacy emerged as a critical competency supporting evidence-informed decision-making and continuous improvement.

Strengthen Distributed Instructional Leadership

Participants described instructional improvement as a collective responsibility that extends beyond formal leadership positions. Instructional coaches, division leaders, principals, teacher leaders, and collaborative leadership teams were identified as important contributors to building capacity, supporting implementation, and sustaining instructional improvement across schools.

Strengthen Literacy & Numeracy Professional Responsibility

Participants emphasized that improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy achievement should not be viewed solely as the responsibility of elementary teachers or specific subject specialists. The findings suggest that collective professional responsibility for literacy and numeracy must extend across grade levels, disciplines, schools, and leadership roles to support coherent improvement efforts.

Design Sustainable Improvement Systems Responsive to Local Contexts

The findings demonstrated that improving student achievement is shaped by local realities, including staffing challenges, geographic conditions, resource availability, and student needs. Participants emphasized the importance of designing improvement efforts that are scalable, sustainable, and responsive to the unique contexts of individual school authorities.

Leverage Curriculum Implementation

Although curriculum implementation was frequently described as a significant organizational challenge, participants also viewed it as an opportunity to strengthen instructional coherence, collaborative inquiry, professional learning, and evidence-informed practice. Curriculum renewal often served as a catalyst for broader instructional improvement efforts.

Strengthen Early Years Literacy & Numeracy Foundations

Many participants identified Kindergarten to Grade 3 as a critical period for literacy and numeracy development. Early identification, intervention, foundational skill development, and high-quality instruction were frequently described as essential conditions supporting long-term student success and reducing achievement gaps later in schooling.

Strengthen Instructional Supports for English as an Additional Language (EAL) Learners

Several participants identified increasing numbers of EAL learners as an emerging consideration influencing student achievement in literacy and numeracy. The findings suggest that school authorities may benefit from strengthening language-responsive instructional practices, professional learning, intervention supports, and collaborative structures that integrate language acquisition within literacy and numeracy instruction.

Prioritize Relational Leadership

Relational trust emerged as a foundational condition supporting instructional improvement. Participants described how visibility, presence, trust-building, psychological safety, and collaborative relationships enabled educators to engage in professional learning, instructional risk-taking, and continuous improvement.

Strengthen Tier 1 Instructional Support Structures

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of high-quality classroom instruction as the foundation for student success. The findings suggest that strengthening Tier 1 instructional practices, classroom supports, and inclusive teaching approaches may reduce the need for intensive interventions while improving outcomes for a broader range of learners.



Dimensions of System Education Leadership

for Advancing Student Achievement
in Literacy & Numeracy



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Additional Resources

For more detailed information and references,
[please click here to view the full report](#)

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