What Actually Supports Leaders? Insights from the Field and Research

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ACKNOWLEDGING AND HONOURING THE LAND



CASS College of Alberta School Superintendents

WELLNESS

Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard

Quality superintendent leadership occurs when the superintendent's ongoing analysis of the context, and the superintendent's decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality school leadership, quality teaching and optimum learning for all students in the school authority.

ALBERTA EDUCATION MINISTERIAL ORDER #003/2020

1. Building Effective Relationships
2. Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning
3. Visionary Leadership
4. Leading Learning
5. Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for All Students
6. School Authority Operations and Resources
7. Supporting Effective Governance

Leadership Quality Standard

Quality leadership occurs when the leader's ongoing analysis of the context, and decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all school students.

ALBERTA EDUCATION MINISTERIAL ORDER #002/2020

1. Fostering Effective Relationships
2. Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning
3. Embodying Visionary Leadership
4. Leading a Learning Community
5. Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit
6. Providing Instructional Leadership
7. Developing Leadership Capacity
8. Managing School Operations and Resources
9. Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context



WHERE THIS BEGAN

“I cannot breathe.”

Ten stairs left. An hour earlier I'd been fine at the gym. But here I am, a superintendent, walking up a flight of stairs and wondering if I can draw breath — and telling no one.

This is the origin story, and it's the reason I started asking these questions .

“Flourishing is mutual.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer

A leader's wellbeing and a community's wellbeing are not separate accounts. They rise — or fall — together.

Who Takes Care of the Leaders?

In your current role, what does it look like when you feel genuinely "well" as a leader at work —and how would others know it if you didn't tell them?

Healthy Relationships

Effective Collaboration

Effective Communication

Authentic Curiosity

Systemness

Lowlights - ATA

- Youth mental health challenges
- Complexity
- Exhaustion and overworked and overwhelmed
- Impact of technological changes
- ‘Ideal worker’ normalized
- Challenging parents
- Underliving professional lives
- Rural specific challenges (and urban?)
- Moral distress

THE WIDER ARC

It doesn't stop at the leader

Flourishing leadership

Well leaders who lead from within

→

Flourishing organization

Cultures and structures that hold people

→

Flourishing community

Education at the centre of a thriving place

This is the Flourish Forward arc — our 2026–2029 plan to place education at the centre of a flourishing community.



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• Who supports the people responsible for supporting everyone else?

School and system leaders are expected to:

- Lead learning and improvement
- Respond to complex student, staff, and community needs
- Make consequential decisions amid uncertainty
- Sustain relationships, momentum, and trust

Our starting point: Leader wellbeing is shaped by the conditions of leadership work and partly the responsibility of the system, not only by an individual's ability tc

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Why ask this now?

Leadership work is expanding in complexity

- Workload and competing demands are increasing.
- Leaders are responding to significant mental health and wellbeing needs in schools.
- Expectations for instructional leadership, collaboration, and system improvement continue.
- Individual wellness strategies cannot resolve organizational conditions that make leadership work difficult to sustain.

The question shifts from:

“How can leaders become more resilient?”

To:
“What conditions help leaders do demanding work with support, judgment, and connection?”

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A partnership-based inquiry: Listening with Foothills leaders

- Appreciative Inquiry sessions focused on leadership purpose and the path forward
- Interviews and reflective dialogue
- Collaborative consideration of what is working and what could be strengthened

Looking across the Canadian landscape

- Review of policy, standards, frameworks, and practice documents
- Attention to leader wellbeing, psychological safety, and leadership development

Appreciative Inquiry offered a strengths-focused starting point: identify what gives life to leadership practice, then consider what to protect, strengthen, and design next.

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What leaders saw as supportive

- Four connected conditions emerged
- Care and listening
  Leaders feel seen, heard, and taken seriously.
- Learning, feedback, and growth
  Leaders can learn with others, receive constructive feedback, and adjust practice.
- Collaborative leadership structures
  Voice, shared decision-making, responsibility, and accountability are built into how work happens.
- Relational and operational support
  Trust and peer connection are reinforced by clear processes, regular meetings, and practical resources.
- These conditions work together. A supportive relationship matters; so do the structures that make support available and dependable.

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Listening is part of the work

Listening communicates whether it is safe to contribute

- Leaders described care and listening as purposeful leadership practices—not simply personal qualities.
- They can help create conditions for:
- Speaking honestly about challenges
- Asking for help or feedback
- Taking considered professional risks
- Engaging in learning and change
- Field insight: People are more able to learn and contribute when they experience that their perspective matters.

Psychological safety is not the same as comfort

Leaders need room to work through difficulty

- Psychological safety can support leaders to:
- Raise concerns and ask questions
- Acknowledge uncertainty or mistakes
- Seek feedback and consider other perspectives
- Disagree while staying connected to shared responsibility

It does not require constant agreement, unrestricted disclosure, or avoiding hard conversations.

A useful distinction: Safety is the capacity to navigate uncertainty, vulnerability, and disagreement without losing access to judgment, support, learning, or shared purpose.

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Support is relational and operational

Relationships matter. So does how the system works.

- Leaders identified support in both everyday interactions and organizational arrangements:
- Trust to exercise professional judgment
- Clear administrative procedures and role expectations
- Regular meetings that sustain connection and momentum
- Access to peer support, mentoring, and useful feedback
- Practical resources and timely responses

“The administrative procedures that we have in place are extremely comforting to me… it protects me as a leader.”

Policy recognition does not guarantee lived support

- Across the materials reviewed, leader wellbeing appeared through ideas such as:
- Wellness, resilience, and work–life balance
- Leadership standards and professional learning
- Supportive workplace culture
- But the translation from policy language to dependable support varied.

A key question for systems:
How do formal expectations connect with the relationships, processes, and resources leaders encounter in their daily work?

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Leadership development needs to live within the work (not a one time event)

The partnership's next design question is how to make leadership learning:

- Connected to authentic problems of practice
- Supported by collegial advice and constructive feedback
- Possible to apply, revisit, and refine over time
- Informed by evidence leaders and system partners can use
- Sustainable within existing structures and local contexts

The aim: build conditions for ongoing learning and leadership capacity, not add another disconnected initiative.

Reflection: What should we protect, strengthen, and design next?

Protect	Strengthen	Design next
What is already working and should not be lost?	What is promising but variable or too dependent on individuals?	What is one practical change that could make support more dependable?

Discussion prompt:

Which condition—care and listening, learning and feedback, collaborative structures, or operational support—would make the greatest difference in your context?

What actually supports leaders?

Leaders are better supported when systems connect:

- Clarity about expectations, processes, and decision-making
- Connection through trust, listening, and peer relationships
- Learning through feedback, reflection, and shared inquiry
- Capacity through practical resources and structures that sustain the work
- Leader wellbeing is a system condition. It shapes whether leadership can remain thoughtful, relational, and sustainable over time.

Closing question:
What would leaders in your system experience differently if support were built into how leadership work is organized?

Questions & conversation

What is one thing you'll carry back to your system?

Stay connected

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