

Superintendents as Lead Learners: The Next Frontier in Whole System Improvement

Foreword for set of three reports on Leadership Development and Learning in Alberta

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These are exciting times in Alberta's education sector. Over the past couple years, we've partnered with the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) to lead professional learning for and engage in consultation with school authorities across the province. In our multiple interactions with division teams we have noticed that CASS members are focused on the learning agenda like never before – with clearly articulated strategies, nuanced and collaborative approaches to leadership, and a relentless focus on improving student learning. Not only are we seeing the province of Alberta displaying some of the most powerful system leadership we've encountered, but also, we see school jurisdictions in the province moving the work of whole system improvement towards a new frontier. We summarize this next frontier in the expression: 'superintendent as lead learner'.

In his now classic 'Visible Learning,' John Hattie's demonstrated that the most effective teachers create conditions for students to learn while learning alongside them. A few years later, Viviane Robinson found that the most effective principals participate as learners as they support teachers to collectively examine and improve their practice. In other words, the most effective teachers and school leaders learn alongside those they lead about what's working and what isn't.

It is becoming increasingly evident that this same principle applies to system leaders. The recent work by Susan Moore Johnson and her colleagues at Harvard (Johnson et.al, 2015), as well as our own case studies of leading districts in California and Ontario suggest that the most effective system leaders engage with the field as lead learners. We see CASS members moving in this direction full-on, and with a degree of explicitness that we have not seen elsewhere. The recently launched Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard, which explicitly positions superintendents and their teams as lead learners, represent a great opportunity to fully embrace the new role that superintendents ought to take if education systems are to become the force for societal change that humanity and our planet as a whole urgently required.

Before you is a trilogy of research reports commissioned by CASS to inform the advancement of system leadership development in the province.

- A Literature Review on the Best Practices in Leadership Development
- A Review of District Leadership Development Programs, and
- A Report on Leadership Learning through University-School Authority Partnerships

Taken together, these three reports capture some great examples of system leadership development programs and practices, both within Alberta and beyond. The literature review presents a selected set of existing practices in school and system leadership development in 2 Canadian provinces, 3 states in the United States, and New Zealand. The first thing that stands out from this review is the relative scarcity of organizations and programs intentionally created to prepare education system leaders for their work. This places Alberta in a pioneering position as a province deliberately invested in preparing its system leaders for the future. The literature review also distills five key takeaways that offer important guidance to CASS's efforts to nurture its next-generation system leaders. These five takeaways highlight the importance of: focusing on high impact strategies (e.g. instructional leadership), grounding decision-making on evidence and research, maintaining a diversity in approaches and resources to respond to the context and needs of each leader and school authority, attending to cultural needs for student success, and treating the SLQS competencies as interwoven and interdependent.

The review of district leadership development programs represents an impressive catalogue of existing programs of school and leadership development available in over fifty school authorities in Alberta. While most of these programs are focusing on preparing new and current school leaders (principals and assistant principals), some school authorities are already leading the way in creating development programs for system leaders. As the authors of the review point out, school authorities in Alberta are open to sharing their leadership development work with others and have a strong desire to hear and learn from what others are doing. In contexts like Alberta where there is already tremendous exemplary practices and programs underway, networks other school authorities problem-solving together, communicating and connecting with each other promise to create a powerful force for system transformation. The catalogue of existing programs is an invaluable resource to facilitate these connections.

Finally, the leadership learning report offers a glimpse into University and school authorities partnerships. The report highlights and examines a selected set of three-year partnerships established between seven school authorities and two universities (Calgary and Lethbridge). The partnerships showcased in the report are making an important contribution to the re-culturing of participating school authorities, by increasing trust and credibility between system leaders and schools, bridging theory and practice, providing system leaders with direct exposure to adult learning practices, and providing focused external expertise. The authors of the report identify four themes in common across all cases, which offer important lessons to CASS's efforts to effectively support the growth of system leaders in Alberta. The common themes highlight the importance of: joint determination and development of the partnership, attention to the competencies of the Superintendent Quality Leadership Standard, the development of leadership teams, and the opportunities of graduate degrees for school and system leaders that open up through the development of these partnerships. As in the case of existing leadership development programs in the province, there is strong expertise already available within Alberta on how to effectively nurture and develop University-school authority partnerships that positively transform the culture of the school authority and enhance student learning system-wide. We have no doubt that CASS and its members will benefit tremendously from connecting with and learning from the school authorities and universities that have already advanced their work through effective partnerships.

What we also see is CASS partnering with other key groups. The commissioning of the three research reports cited above have unveiled new sources of contribution from the research community in Alberta and signify what should become closer mutually productive relationships from here on with researchers in the province. The theme of superintendent as lead learner also brings system leadership closer to principals and teachers because such leadership requires two-way partnerships between and among teachers and administrators. This augurs well for the next phase of education development in the province.

What we see as crucial next step for Alberta is to deliberately cultivate Leadership from the Middle, that is, a force for system transformation created when leaders liberate and support those they lead, collaborate and connect laterally with other leaders to learn from and support each other, and leverage and influence the system above them. There is tremendous work already underway, and we have no doubt that Alberta will be one of the top ed systems to learn from as we head towards the future.

We look forward to seeing the next stage in the evolution of Alberta's education system unfold.