



# SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

## BEST PRACTICES LITERATURE REVIEW

Prepared for the College of Alberta School Superintendents by  
the Research Unit, Research and Innovation for Student Learning

 **CASS** College of  
Alberta School  
Superintendents

 EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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# Introduction

## Background and Overview

Studies on the school superintendent typically focus on the competencies needed to be successful in that role. As such, analysis tends to focus on the “political realities and professional responsibilities” of the superintendent.<sup>1</sup> In line with Alberta Education’s Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS), these discussions often include consideration of the competencies needed to respond to a range of challenges that an individual superintendent can expect to encounter both internally and externally in the community.<sup>2</sup>

Our approach is slightly different. Instead of delving into the substantial literature on “the role” that superintendents play in the broader educational context, *our main research questions (see below) are oriented around the intentional leadership development of “system leaders.”* This is a way to discuss the systematic conditions that are needed for senior leadership to impact student learning and achievement. Ultimately, the primary aim of this study is to support the identification and implementation of successful superintendent leadership development standards to improve student learning outcomes.

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- 1 See: Kowalski, T. J. (2013). The school superintendent: Theory, practice, and cases. Educational Leadership Faculty Publications. Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8a7d/5f4bc1675493ef90568255870a0330064b92.pdf>
  - 2 Alberta (2018). Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard. Alberta Education, February 7. Retrieved from [https://education.alberta.ca/media/3739619/standardsdoc-sqs\\_fa-web-2018-02-02.pdf](https://education.alberta.ca/media/3739619/standardsdoc-sqs_fa-web-2018-02-02.pdf)
  - 3 MLA Annie McKittrick on November 30th, 2017 in Alberta Hansard (2017), p. 2169. See: [http://www.assembly.ab.ca/ISYS/LADDAR\\_files/docs/hansards/han/legislature\\_29/session\\_3/20171130\\_1330\\_01\\_han.pdf#page=21](http://www.assembly.ab.ca/ISYS/LADDAR_files/docs/hansards/han/legislature_29/session_3/20171130_1330_01_han.pdf#page=21)
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## Bill 28: The School Amendment Act (2017)

Amongst other broad shifts in education related to leadership development, the immediate context for this research is the passing of the third and final reading of Bill 28, the *School Amendment Act*, on November 30, 2017 (which subsequently received Royal Assent on December 15th, 2017).

The *School Amendment Act* introduces a number of what government described as “small changes” to the School Act “to ensure that it remains relevant with other existing legislation as well as paves the way for important changes in standards to come into effect in coming years.”<sup>3</sup> Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Education, MLA Annie McKittrick, summarized that the bill will establish:

A certification process for principals and superintendents that are similar to those of teachers now and ensuring that the leaders of our education system are well equipped and held accountable as they work to ensure that every student is prepared for success (Ibid.).

The School Act Section 113 is amended to add the following subsections:

(1.1) Unless otherwise authorized under this Act, a board shall appoint as a superintendent of schools only a teacher who holds a superintendent leadership certificate prescribed by the regulations and issued under this Act.

(1.2) A teacher who is appointed as an acting superintendent must hold a superintendent leadership certificate prescribed by the regulations and issued under this Act.<sup>4</sup>

## It's a question of impact

It may seem intuitive to assume that superintendents are too far removed from the classroom to have a meaningful impact on students' day-to-day learning. Indeed, researchers, such as Leithwood and Azah (2017), who examine the quantitative effects of district leaders in Ontario, have found that district leadership has almost no direct effect on student achievement.<sup>5</sup> This work indicates that the effects of school-level leadership are “now widely understood to be largely mediated by school and classroom conditions” (p. 37), and, as such, the effects of leadership on student achievement are “mediated by variables much closer to schools, classrooms, and students” (p. 50). From this perspective, the effect that superintendents and other system leaders have on student achievement is indirect.

The empirical research on leadership development demonstrates that district leaders do have a considerable influence on a number of elements that previous empirical research studies have suggested “influence” student achievement: guiding a district’s mission and goals, using multiple forms of evidence to inform decision making, and ensuring readily available job-embedded professional development for teachers and principals, to name only a few (p. 29).<sup>6</sup> The leadership development of superintendents, as they come to understand the effects of these system level activities, clearly has far-reaching implications for the achievement of every single student via the influence that senior leadership has over school and classroom conditions. In this respect, we might say that when superintendents succeed as system leaders, so do students.

<sup>4</sup> See: [http://www.assembly.ab.ca/ISYS/LADDAR\\_files/docs/bills/bill/legislature\\_29/session\\_3/20170302\\_bill-028.pdf](http://www.assembly.ab.ca/ISYS/LADDAR_files/docs/bills/bill/legislature_29/session_3/20170302_bill-028.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The authors proceed to point out that “expecting direct effects is neither reasonable nor consistent with relevant leadership theory and evidence,” 37. See: Leithwood, K., & Azah, V. N. (2017). Characteristics of High-Performing School Districts. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(1), 27–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1197282>

<sup>6</sup> In order of significance, the article found the strongest effects in terms of Learning-Oriented Improvement Processes (strategic planning processes described as “instructional leadership”), Mission, Vision, and Goals, and Use of Evidence. Weaker but still statistically significant effects were found in Coherent Instructional Guidance, Job-Embedded PD for all staff, Internal District and School Relationships, and Relationships with Parents (37).

As Spanneut, Tobin, and Ayers (2011) have identified, professional development for superintendents and other system leaders should be “derived from their self-identified needs” to “enhance the likelihood for superintendents to more successfully accomplish what they do and enhance how they behave as leaders” (p. 3). They contend that:

using recognized leadership standards as a framework from which to identify superintendents’ needs serves two purposes. First, the standards help clarify the needs because they are succinctly worded in terms of common leadership knowledge and skill areas that can be assessed. Second, because the standards are written in common leadership terms, superintendents can seek colleagues with similar needs who may be interested in sharing professional development activities (p. 3).

Our study outlines leadership development programs for system leaders that are contributing to their professional success. Under the guidance of CASS, our approach recognizes that professional development is as important for superintendents and system leaders as any other school leaders since “superintendents are in unique positions to underscore and to support through their actions the importance of professional leadership development for other district-level and building-level leaders.”<sup>7</sup>

## Research on Educational Leadership

### Transformational leadership

Empirical research on educational leadership generally focuses on two different types of leadership: transformational and instructional. Transformational leadership, also known as visionary leadership, originates in the work of James McGregor Burns. Published in 1978, McGregor analyzed how some organizational leaders were able to inspire their staff and increase levels of energy, commitment, and moral purpose.<sup>8</sup> McGregor defined a transformational leader as one who “looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower” (qtd. In Denmark, 2012).

Since this early theory development, discussion of the transformational leadership revolves around the establishment of a shared vision amongst staff and emphasizes a leader’s “soft” skills such as motivation, collaboration, and interpersonal abilities. Those who advocate for a transformational leadership style tend to believe that this shared vision develops an organization’s capacity to work synergistically to overcome issues and reach goals.<sup>9</sup>

7 Spanneut, G., Tobin, J., & Ayers, S. (2011). Identifying the Professional Development Needs of School Superintendents. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 6(3), 12-13. See: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ974243.pdf>

8 Robinson, V. M., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The Impact of Leadership on Student Outcomes: An Analysis of Differential Effects of Leadership Types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(5), 635-674. Retrieved from <http://donnaelder.wiki.westga.edu/file/view/The+impact+of+leadership+on+student+outcomes+an+analysis+of+the+differential+effects+of+leadership+types.pdf>

9 Denmark, V. (2012). Transformational Leadership: A Matter of Perspective. eProve, Spring. <http://www.advanc-ed.org/source/transformational-leadership-matter-perspective>

Denmark writes that:

Transformational leadership is not limited to the building principal or the school system superintendent; all educators in a building or school system must contribute to the evolution from an underperforming school or system to an effective school or system.

Under the heading of “Visionary Leadership,” the draft Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (2016) states that “a superintendent engages with the school community in implementing a vision of a preferred future for student success, based on common values and beliefs” (Alberta, 2016).

### Instructional leadership

The theory of instructional leadership, also known as pedagogical leadership, originates in empirical studies of schools in poor, urban neighbourhoods from the 1970s and 80s, and demonstrated that schools in which students succeeded despite their low socioeconomic backgrounds usually have several characteristics in common. These studies show that high quality schools have undisrupted learning environments, clear teaching objectives, and high expectations of students. Instructional leadership, then, is the deliberate cultivation of these characteristics by school leaders.

Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) conducted a meta-analysis to compare of the impact of instructional and transformational leadership.<sup>10</sup> The researchers found that, on average, the effect size of instructional leadership on student outcomes is three to four times greater than that of transformational leadership. They point out that it is the transformational leader’s attention to the relationships between leaders and followers that explains this difference, since the strength of these relationships is not predictive of student achievement outcomes.

Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe also identified 5 common leadership practices (which they call “leadership dimensions”) that they believe vary in terms of their educational significance. These practices are as follows:

- **Practice 1:** *Establishing goals and expectations.* This practice focuses and unites the work of teachers, and has a large but indirect effect on students. Goals establish priorities and purpose while empowering individuals and groups to evaluate and adjust their actions.
- **Practice 2:** *Resourcing strategically* involves the judicious procurement and allocation of resources that are aligned with instructional goals. This practice has a small, indirect impact on student outcomes, and these authors call for further study into the relationship between strategic resourcing and student achievement.
- **Practice 3:** *Planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum* was found to have a moderate impact on student outcomes.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, V. M., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The Impact of Leadership on Student Outcomes: An Analysis of Differential Effects of Leadership Types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(5), 635–674. Retrieved from <http://donnaelder.wiki.westga.edu/file/view/The+impact+of+leadership+on+student+outcomes+an+analysis+of+the+differential+effects+of+leadership+types.pdf>

In particular, there are four related sub-practices that are associated with high performing schools: active involvement of leaders in agreeable and productive discussions around instruction, involvement in the coordination of instructional strategies and materials, regular classroom observations tied to clear performance standards for teachers, and methodical monitoring of student progress

- **Practice 4:** Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development, which they describe as the leader participating in formal and informal learning along with other staff. This practice has a large effect on student outcomes.
- **Practice 5:** Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment in which teachers and students can focus on teaching and learning. To obtain something approaching this ideal teaching environment, school leaders establish and communicate clear expectations for student behaviour and for addressing staff conflicts. While the effect size of this practice was small in terms of student outcomes, it is also judged to be successful by teachers.

Under the heading of “Leading Learning,” the draft Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (2016) states that “a superintendent establishes and sustains a learning culture in the school community that promotes ongoing critical reflection on practice, shared responsibility for student success and continuous improvement.”

## Research objectives and questions

In the context of the research literature, it’s clear that CASS has an important opportunity to engage in conversations needed to ensure that meaningful and cooperative consultation is achieved as government supports superintendent and principal certification.

This report explores the leadership development of superintendents and system leaders in jurisdictions outside of Alberta. It seeks to inform the role that CASS can play in supporting the leadership competencies of superintendents across Alberta.

Outlining an intentional process for this work is crucial. By soliciting input from its members about what they require in the evolution underway regarding certification and leadership development training, we’re confident that CASS will be well situated to respond to present realities. Developing a “working warehouse” of professional practice and leadership learning programs is a key first step in the efforts of facilitating discussion about common measures of success for leadership development of system leaders.

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The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. What are boards, governments, and/or voluntary organizations doing to prepare superintendents and principals to become leaders in their districts/communities?
  - a. What resources are available to inform and assist with the career-long improvement and development of superintendents (with particular emphasis on supporting effective systems governance)?
2. What are common measures of success in leadership development in the education sector?
3. What resources are available to establish and support the conditions under which the learning aspirations and the potential of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students (or, globally, indigenous peoples) are realized?

# Best Practices

While there are many examples of successful leadership development practices across the globe, we have found the following examples particularly applicable for informing the Alberta context. In this section, we briefly describe the leadership approaches of school districts in Canada, the US, and New Zealand, and then offer lessons learned from these examples.

## Case Studies

### LEADS

**The League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents** (LEADS) is a Saskatchewan-based organization that came into existence in 1969 and was first recognized in legislation in 1984. In 1991, a statute was passed by the Saskatchewan government that gave the organization for senior education administrators full disciplinary power over its membership.<sup>11</sup> Members must register with LEADS prior to employment with a provincial school division.<sup>12</sup> As Richard Nieman wrote, “Membership requirements include successful graduate studies, professional teaching certificate, success as a teacher, and evidence of good character.” The Board may also include a non-LEAD member, Saskatchewan resident who is appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

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LEADS exists today as a corporation and its main objectives as defined by the statute are as follows:

- a. To promote the cause of education in Saskatchewan and to cooperate with other educational agencies, including the Minister of Education, the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, The Saskatchewan School Trustees’ Association, the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina and the Association of School Business Officials of Saskatchewan in all matters related to education;
- b. To promote and safeguard the interests of its members and to secure conditions which will make it possible for its members to provide the best professional service;

<sup>11</sup> Saskatchewan, G. of. The League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents Act, 1991 (1991). Retrieved from <http://www.publications.gov.sk.ca/freelaw/documents/English/Statutes/Statutes/L9-02.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Nieman, R. (n.d.). League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents (LEADS).

- c. To raise the status of the profession of educational administration and to develop the highest standards of professionalism, skills and knowledge in all matters relating to the profession of educational administration
- d. To foster ethical behaviour and professional conduct of the membership and to discipline any member guilty of professional misconduct or professional incompetence in the performance of his or her duties;
- e. To influence the direction of education and to make any representations that it considers requisite to promote a high quality education;
- f. To promote collegiality within the membership and to safeguard the welfare of its members; and
- g. To afford advice, assistance and legal protection to members in their professional duties and relationships. (p. 4-5).

The leadership paper written by consultant Dr. Keith Walker in 2007 outlines the basic leadership aspirations of the organization.<sup>13</sup> Walker's position paper defines "six fundamental commitments" that include the following:

1. The LEADS member's voice of personal conscience;
2. Professional convictions;
3. Professional constraints;
4. Common ethical principles;
5. Moral imagination; and
6. Relational reciprocity (p. 1).

In terms of standards, "LEADS has a social contract between its members and the people of Saskatchewan to promote the cause of education, safeguard the interests and welfare of its colleague members, raise the status and developing standards of educational administration, foster ethical behaviour and professional conduct, and influence the direction and quality of education" (p. 2). In the conclusion it states, "Leadership is ideally expressed as context dependent set of roles and activities rooted in seminal value-commitments. Educational leaders function to influence communities and systems such that the highest possible quality of education is advocated, supported and delivered to the people of Saskatchewan" (p. 10).

The "Dimensions of Professional Leadership" paper includes eight Dimensions of Professional Leadership.<sup>14</sup> These dimensions are understood as "offering descriptors that provide a focus for personal and professional growth planning as LEADS members evolve in their School Division leadership roles."

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<sup>13</sup> Walker, K. D. (2007). Shorter Version of 2007 L.E.A.D.S. Leadership Paper. LEADS. Retrieved from <https://saskleads.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/leadership-paper-short-version.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> LEAD. (2012). Dimensions of Professional Leadership. Retrieved from <https://saskleads.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/dimensions-of-professional-leadership.pdf>

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These include:

1. Leadership and School Division Culture
  - “LEADS members are leaders in developing and shaping school division climate and culture.”
2. Policy and Governance
  - “LEADS members work with boards of education in developing school division policy.”
3. Communications and Community Relations
  - “LEADS members communicate school division purpose and priorities to the community.”
4. Organizational Management
  - “LEADS members display an understanding of the school division as a system within the larger community context.”
5. Curriculum Actualization
  - “LEADS members provide leadership in all phases of curriculum actualization - design, evaluation, implementation and renewal.”
6. Instructional Leadership and Accountability
  - “LEADS members demonstrate knowledge of instructional processes by using strategies that include research findings in all areas that impact on the classroom and student learning.”
7. Human Resources and Management
  - “LEADS members recognize the importance of the human resource component of school divisions. They affect staff development, supervision and evaluation programs to improve the performance of all staff.”
8. Values and Ethics of Leadership
  - “LEADS members, as school division leaders, understand and model appropriate value systems, ethics, and moral leadership”

This document is only one part of a larger handbook that is available on the Sask LEADS website, which includes a wide range of topics including committees, policies, bylaws, discussion papers and other helpful resources for members and the public online.

## KASA

The Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA), in partnership with six superintendents, designed innovative learning modules for superintendents using the model of the Leader-Scholar community (LSC).<sup>15</sup> Amongst other services, KASA also offers supports to help school boards select superintendents.<sup>16</sup>

We were able to locate part of the innovative dissertation on the topic of KASA's work on superintendent leadership development written by the superintendents who partnered with KASA. The superintendents teamed up to design and write an unconventional dissertation as a cohort and pitch a web-based LSC that consists of "thematic modules, electronic resources, and bibliographic references."<sup>17</sup> As they write,

Much like the style and philosophy of Wikipedia, our LSC encourages participants to collaborate with us on the development of the site modules as the modules, in turn, grow organically from the expertise and contributions of participants who, in effect, become fellow learning associates. It then ceases to become an expert-driven model, giving way to a participant-driven one (p. 2-3).

The dissertation includes a vision "to develop an ever-expanding Continuum of Professional Learning for KY Superintendents that will meet the growth and developing needs of aspiring, new, and experienced school leaders." Interestingly, these include the following:

- The Minority Superintendent Internship Program
- An Aspiring Superintendents Program
- The Next-Gen New Superintendents Leadership series
- And the Next-Gen Superintendent Effectiveness Leader-Scholar Community (see: Floyd et al., p. 5-6).

When KASA began work on training and "testing" of new superintendents, the organization recognized "the need to more clearly define expectations for the performance of new superintendents" (Kentucky Association of School Administrators, 2012). The description of the process continues:

In response to a concerted effort across the nation to more clearly define teacher and principal effectiveness standards, KASA's Design Team for Onboarding New Superintendents asserted that a companion set of superintendent effectiveness standards focused on the emerging challenges of leading next-generation teaching and learning efforts are essential not only for new superintendents, but for experienced superintendents as well. (p. 1)

15 Kentucky Association of School Administrators. (2012). Next Generation Effectiveness Standards for Kentucky School Superintendents. KASA. Retrieved from [https://education.ky.gov/CommOfEd/web/Documents/NxGNLSL\\_Standards\\_Effectiveness\\_V2\\_120512.pdf](https://education.ky.gov/CommOfEd/web/Documents/NxGNLSL_Standards_Effectiveness_V2_120512.pdf)

16 See: [http://server.kasa.org/kasa/KASAMember/Resources/Superintendent\\_Selection\\_Services/KASAMember/Resources\\_and\\_Services/Superintendent\\_Selection\\_Services.aspx?hkey=41778dec-87dd-4e97-93cf-5f9c6c652760](http://server.kasa.org/kasa/KASAMember/Resources/Superintendent_Selection_Services/KASAMember/Resources_and_Services/Superintendent_Selection_Services.aspx?hkey=41778dec-87dd-4e97-93cf-5f9c6c652760)

17 Floyd, T., Flynn, J., Perkins, D., Poe, R., & Young, L. (2013). Next generation superintendent effectiveness standards: A leader-scholar community. Northern Kentucky University. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/openview/46cdb3cd993c4e506614fb2d9ca2601f/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

KASA then states that the Pilot Kentucky Next Gen Superintendent Effectiveness Standards are intended as follows:

- “A framework for understanding the many complex elements of a superintendent’s work to help them focus on the most important aspects of their job;
- A roadmap for the ongoing professional growth and effectiveness of Kentucky’s superintendents from career entry (required training for new superintendents) through career exit;
- A basis upon which support for new superintendents can be individualized based on demonstrated performance in particular standards and indicators; and
- The basis upon which the new superintendent’s support team can make a determination about successful completion of the state’s induction program.”

KASA structures its superintendent development efforts according to 7 standards. They are as follows:

1. Strategic leadership
2. Instructional leadership
3. Cultural leadership
4. Human resource leadership
5. Managerial leadership
6. External development leadership, and
7. Micropolitical leadership

KASA organizes and formats each of the 7 main standards into the following: summary, practices, artifacts, and competencies. It outlines detailed “effectiveness standards” that are arranged like modules and are aligned to a series of previous research studies and state resources.

Due to space limitations, we will only introduce “Strategic Leadership” an example of what appear to be engaging and thoughtful modules. The Standard 1 “Strategic Leadership” summary is issued as follows:

Superintendents create conditions that result in strategically reimagining the districts’ vision, mission, and goals to ensure every student graduates from high school; is globally competitive in post-secondary education and the workforce, and is prepared for a productive life in the 21st century. They create a community of inquiry that challenges itself to continually repurpose by building on the districts’ core values and beliefs about the preferred future, and then developing a vision that reflects that future (p. 3).

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## MASA

The [Minnesota Association of School Administrators](#) has issued a paper outlining the need for evidence-based practices that links “effective research with effective implementation” to produce improved outcomes for students.<sup>18</sup> The report points out that, while identifying evidence-based programs is the “first responsibility,” the second responsibility “is to implement and study the impact of that practice in the system.” The paper states that effective superintendents provide leadership in five key ways:

1. Lead an inclusive process for setting goals;
2. Define the non-negotiable goals that all staff must address;
3. Align the school board with those goals;
4. Set up a system to monitor work and progress on those goals; and
5. Align resource accordingly to provide the necessary resources of time, money, personnel and material (p. 11).

MASA provides a number of professional learning opportunities for its members.<sup>19</sup> These include various conferences, workshops, an aspiring superintendents’ academy, reading lists, and other workshops.

## AASA

The [American Association of School Administrators](#) (branded as the “School Superintendents Association”) acts as a national network in the United States; it has issued a number of helpful initiatives to inspire school leaders in thinking about improving student achievement through strategy, coherence, culture and capacity. It also has a particularly informative document for our concerns on “Systems Thinking for School System Leaders.”<sup>20</sup>

As Phillip Schlechty contends in that document, “If student performance in America’s public schools is to be improved in any significant way, school leaders must transform their organizations from bureaucracies into learning organizations.” Many of the short articles included were previously published in *The School Administrator*. Taken as a whole, these documents help system leaders recognize that many of the problems they see in schools are “system problems” that are “owned by education,” as Lee Jenkins writes in his article on how to identify problems within school systems (p. 19).

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<sup>18</sup> Wolak, M. (2007). Advancing Professional Practice for School Superintendents: Linking Effective Research with Effective Implementation. *Minnesota Association of School Administrators*. Retrieved from [https://www.mnasa.org/cms/lib/MN07001305/Centricity/Domain/28/Wolak\\_Paper.pdf](https://www.mnasa.org/cms/lib/MN07001305/Centricity/Domain/28/Wolak_Paper.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> See: <https://www.mnasa.org/domain/154>

<sup>20</sup> See: American Association of School Administrators. (2008). Systems Thinking for School System Leaders. AASA. Retrieved from <https://www.aasa.org/privateAssets/0/76/380/05888f8b-88aa-4290-b260-5a36b7cc54b1.pdf>

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An article written by Claudia Mansfield Sutton (25) has identified “five institutes” for system leadership:

- “AASA Institute for Leadership Development and Systems Thinking: This institute provides programs based on a systems approach to transforming public education. These programs help school leaders frame problems and opportunities in systems terms; develop a new vision for redesigned school system; and build and sustain capacity for change. Specific programs include the Executive Consultants Program; the Superintendent Knowledge Series; and the Leadership Matters Virtual Seminar Series.
- AASA Institute for New and Aspiring Superintendents: Because we must continue to attract top quality professionals into the superintendency, the content of these programs is particularly relevant to new and aspiring superintendents. The annual *New Superintendents Journal* and the quarterly *New Superintendents e-Journal* provide insightful articles, information and resources for new superintendents. Five state affiliates worked with us in 2006-07 to develop innovative programs for superintendents in their second and third year in the chair through the Leading Learning Program.
- AASA Institute for Leadership Networks: The centre has become the hub for a network of learning organizations sharing core beliefs and convictions regarding public education. The institute facilitates regular meetings of the leaders of these organizations so they can learn from one another and leverage the strengths of each organization. This institute is creating new networks of superintendents and supporting existing networks at they work together to implement systems thinking.
- AASA Institute for Professional Advocacy: The mission of this institute is to stand up for public education by demonstrating that leadership matters, by advocating for the profession, and by promoting systems thinking in the transformation of public education. To achieve this mission, this institute shares research that supports the finding that superintendent leadership has a positive impact on school system leadership. The institute is also involved in developing and promoting rigorous standards for licensure of superintendents.
- AASA Institute for Leadership Research and Design: AASA leads and encourages inquiries into various public education designs that might be appropriate as vehicles to transform public education. Several highly successful initiatives have been created to support this work, such as the Research Roundtable program and the “AASA State of the American

School Superintendent: A Mid-Decade Study,” which produced a profile of the profession that will serve as a resource for those leading the nation’s schools as well as those charged with preparing and supporting current and aspiring school leaders (p. 26).”

The document also includes a number of suggestive “Action Tools” that challenge participants to approach issues or challenges systemically and to build-in time to reflect on the “big questions” (p. 41).

## New Zealand

Through the Ministry of Education, the New Zealand educational context has developed an innovative indigenous approach to leadership development. In particular, test results demonstrated that New Zealand’s Māori population was underserved by the national education system, with the majority of low-achieving students identifying as Māori. In response, New Zealand developed a nation-wide leadership model specifically tailored for Māori-medium education, aimed at contributing to educational outcomes for Indigenous students.<sup>21</sup> The model, called *Tu Rangatira*, is based on ideas, experiences, and practices from the Māori-medium education sector and also incorporates Māori worldviews and philosophies.

In 2010, this model was articulated in a document produced by the New Zealand Ministry of Education that is available online.<sup>22</sup> In *Tu Rangatira*, leadership is conceptualized as being made up of seven different roles:

### 1. Guardian

- “Protecting and nurturing a caring environment where people and ideas are valued, health, safety and well-being are enhanced and relationships are strong.”

### 2. Manager

- “Effective and efficient management of people, environments and education that transforms teaching and learning communities.”

### 3. Visionary

- “Innovative and visionary leadership to equip learners with the knowledge, skills and values to succeed in the 21st century as Māori and as citizens of the world.”

### 4. Teacher and Learner

- “Reciprocal learning and exemplary modelling of innovation that leads to the effective creation, development and delivery of high quality authentic learning contexts and practice.”

21 Santamaría, L. J., Santamaría, A. P., Webber, M., & Pearson, H. (2014). Indigenous Urban School Leadership: A Critical Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis of Educational Leaders in New Zealand and the United States. *Canadian and International Education/Education Canadienne et Internationale*, 43(1). Retrieved from <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1306&context=cie-eci>

22 Ministry of Education. (2010). *Tu Rangatira: Māori Medium Educational Leadership*. Retrieved from <http://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Key-leadership-documents/Turangatira-English>

**5. Worker**

- “Leading by doing’: upholding collegial practices to build capability in others in pursuit of the goals of the kura (school).”

**6. Networker**

- “Networking, brokering and facilitating relationships that contribute towards achieving kura (school) goals.”

**7. Advocate**

- “Promoting the development and implementation of strategies, plans and policies to realise learners’ potential and educational success as Māori.”

This model of educational leadership for Māori-medium schools is part of a larger leadership development program for New Zealand as a whole, which includes professional standards for principals, standardized resources for planning professional learning for principals and boards of trustees, and access to resources on principal succession planning (Ministry of Education, 2017).

There are few investigations into the direct effects of school leadership on student outcomes in New Zealand, but Hohepa and Robson’s (2008) meta-analysis has identified some leadership practices that are related to improvements in student outcomes. These practices include:

1. Establishing goals and expectations
2. Resourcing strategically
3. Planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum
4. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development
5. Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment
6. Creating educationally powerful connections
7. Engaging in constructive problem talk
8. Selecting, developing, and using smart tools

These practices are associated with improved self-esteem, sense of agency, and academic achievement in reading and math. More information about the studies that found these associations can be found in the School Leadership and Student Outcomes meta-analysis prepared by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009).

Additionally, Hohepa (2013) identifies some of the tensions that must be considered in discussions and enactments of Indigenous educational leadership. Specifically, she notes that it is possible to conceptualize the educational contexts experienced by Indigenous peoples as colonial impositions, and that it is important to recognize and honour the features of particular Indigenous leadership without essentializing or stereotyping. This recognition hinges upon non-Indigenous teachers, principals, and system leaders becoming familiar with and acknowledging multiple worldviews, knowledge systems, and ways of life. The need to incorporate specific cultural concepts into the leadership of Indigenous educational contexts is echoed by other researchers as well (see, for example, Matthews, 2011).

## Government of Ontario

The school districts in Ontario follow the recommendations of Ministry of Education. Collectively, these recommendations fall under the umbrella of the [Ontario Leadership Strategy](#), a comprehensive plan of action designed to support “student achievement and wellbeing by attracting and developing skilled and passionate school and system leaders.”<sup>23</sup> The strategy is built around the several key components (this is a selected list):

- Board Leadership Development Strategy, which focuses on four key areas:
  - recruiting and selecting leaders through structured and innovative succession planning;
  - placing and transferring leaders in ways that sustain school and system improvement;
  - developing leaders through mentoring, performance appraisal, and differentiated learning opportunities that meet the needs of leaders in diverse contexts and at various stages of their careers;
  - coordinating support for leaders to buffer them from distractions, make information easily accessible, and assist them in building coherence across different initiatives
- Supports for system leaders
  - incorporates mentoring for system leaders, executive leadership programs, and orientation for newly appointed system leaders
- Ontario Leadership Congress
  - Engages leadership teams from districts, school authorities, and provincial schools about building leadership that fosters positive school climate and improves student achievement

<sup>23</sup> Ontario, G. of. (n.d.). Leadership Development: Ontario Leadership Strategy. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/actionPlan.html>

- Minister’s Principal Reference Group
  - Meets at least three times per year to provide advice on policy and programs that have led to successful implementation
- Institute for Education Leadership
  - Commissions research on succession planning, district effectiveness, transitions to leadership, and the role of the district leader
- Leadership publications
  - Publications that engage leaders on topical issues and shared research insights and political strategies

## Ontario Leadership Framework

Central to the Leadership Strategy is the [Ontario Leadership Framework \(OLF\)](#), which “describes a set of core leadership competencies and effective practices for principals, vice-principals and supervisory officers.” The framework allows leaders “with a clear leadership roadmap representing leading edge research and the best thinking and experience.”

[The Institute for Educational Leadership \(IEL\)](#) promotes and implements the Ontario Leadership Framework that supports “school and system leaders in all four sectors of education in Ontario.”<sup>24</sup> As outlined in the document, the OLF is designed to:

- Facilitate a shared vision of leadership in schools and districts
- Promote a common language that fosters an understanding of leadership and what it means to be a school or system leader
- Identify the practices, actions and traits or personal characteristics that describe effective leadership
- Guide the design and implementation of professional learning and development for school and system leaders
- Identify the characteristics of highly performing schools and systems - K-12 School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) and District Effectiveness Framework (DEF)
- Aid in the recruitment, development, selection and retention of school and system leaders.

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24 <https://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/en>

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The framework attempts to provide a clear picture of what effective leadership looks like at both the level of the individual leader and the organization: “The leadership framework provides aspiring leaders at both the school and district levels with important insights about what they need to learn to be successful.”

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The framework's concept of "instructional leadership" lies at the heart of what it seeks to accomplish:

As instructional leaders, principals and supervisory officers embed direct involvement in instruction in their daily work through teamwork with all staff focused on improved school and classroom practices. As leaders who are committed to equity of outcome, they help to create inclusive and instructionally effective learning environments that increase the likelihood that all students will be successful learners. School and system leaders carry out these specific aspects of their role using a growth-oriented and collaborative approach across all the domains of the framework. (p. 7)

The document continues: "Leaders' enactment of the practices will evolve as they move through various career stages, specialized assignments, and unique educational environments." (Ibid.) The five "Core Leadership Capacities" (CLCs) it outlines are as follows:

#### **1. Setting Goals**

"This capacity refers to working with others to help ensure that goals are strategic, specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound (SMART) and lead to improved teaching and learning."

#### **2. Aligning Resources with Priorities**

"This capacity focuses on ensuring that financial, capital, human resources, curriculum and teaching resources, professional learning resources and program allocations are tied to priorities, with student achievement and well-being as the central, unambiguous focus."

#### **3. Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures**

"This capacity is about enabling schools, school communities and districts to work together and to learn from each other with a central focus on improved teaching quality and student achievement and well-being."

#### **4. Using Data**

"This capacity is about leading and engaging school teams in gathering and analyzing provincial, district, school and classroom data to identify trends, strengths and weaknesses that will inform specific actions for improvement focused on teaching and learning."

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## 5. Engaging in Courageous Conversations

“This capacity relates to challenging current practices and fostering innovation through conversation, to listen and to act on feedback, and to provide feedback that will lead to improvements in student achievement and well-being.” (p. 8)

### SUNY Oswego

Since 1998, the New York State Superintendent Development program has been preparing aspiring superintendents through a structured program run in conjunction with SUNY Oswego, a post-secondary institution in central New York state. The program runs from January until November of every year, with weekly meetings for cohorts of 5-7 participants occurring throughout. In addition to these weekly meetings, participants attend five full-day sessions for aspiring superintendents throughout the state, three sessions on regional topics, and the New York State Council of School Superintendents Fall Leadership Institute, all while completing assignments. Classes and meetings are facilitated by program faculty, all of whom are practicing New York State superintendents.<sup>25</sup>

Topics covered in this program include school finance, labour relations, legal issues, instructional leadership, and boardsmanship, and allow participants to develop a district-wide understanding of K-12 education and school organization. Because of this district-wide focus, principals who wish to have district-level positions also attend the program.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the program, participants are presented with “authentic learning activities,” which are designed to mirror the day-to-day issues faced by superintendents, and are tasked with developing realistic solutions while considering the possible consequences of their plans.<sup>27</sup>

To be eligible for the program, participants must be current middle-level school administrators. That is, they should be individuals who are in charge of their building or administrative unit, respected by their current superintendents, colleagues, and community, and recognized by supervisors and colleagues as someone with the potential to be a superintendent. Additionally, they must be ethically and morally strong, prepared to be a leader, recognized as innovators with respect to school-related issues, and qualified for or in possession of the New York State School Administrator and Supervisor or School District Administrator certification.

In order to have all of these qualities assessed, potential participants must complete an application form, write a letter of interest, include a resume, provide a list of professional references, and undergo an interview with program faculty.<sup>28</sup> Those who successfully complete the program receive 9 graduate credits from SUNY Oswego.

25 New York State Superintendent Development Program. (2016). Description of the Superintendent Development Program. Retrieved from <http://www.nyssuperintendentdevelopmentprogram.com/details.html>

26 State University of New York at Oswego. (n.d.). Superintendent Development Program Leadership. Retrieved from <https://www.oswego.edu/educational-administration/superintendent-development-program-leadership>

27 New York State Superintendent Development Program. (2016). The Program. Retrieved from <http://www.nyssuperintendentdevelopmentprogram.com/>

28 Merrins, J. M., and Silky, W. D. (2016). Preparing Principals for the Superintendency. Retrieved from [http://www.superintendentofschools.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/SDP\\_Preparing\\_Principals\\_for\\_the\\_Superintendency.pdf](http://www.superintendentofschools.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/SDP_Preparing_Principals_for_the_Superintendency.pdf)

Interviews with superintendents who have completed the SUNY Oswego program indicate that they found it productive, and one said that “... if I was a Board [of Education], I would be looking for somebody who went to some kind of program like that” (Dufour, 2016, p. 86).

In particular, interviewees found their courses on School Law and Community Building to be the most effective, and indicated that the course on budget and finance left something to be desired. Overall, the real-life problem solving aspect of the program was praised by former participants, and was specified as a key feature that contributed to the success of the program.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Dufour, Robert M. (2016). Study of Superintendents' Perceptions of Current Superintendent Certification Programs in New York State (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from Theses and Dissertations (All). (1418). See: <https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.ca/&httpsredir=1&article=2335&context=etd>

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# Lessons Learned

The research literature and cases outlined above provide guidance for the future activities of CASS. Below we present core learnings with clear roles for CASS to develop the competencies of its members and engage with Districts, government, and other stakeholder groups. While these principles and ideas are vital, they need to be targeted and specific in order to positively impact student achievement in a positive manner.

## 1. Focus on high impact strategies like instructional leadership

Research shows that instructional leadership has a better “bang for your buck” than transformational leadership. While we don’t believe this distinction should be seen as a strict opposition, current research demonstrates that instructional leadership is a more effective way to focus on improving student achievement. Ideally, CASS’s membership will recognize that these are important debates to be engaged in as individual School Authorities work in collaborative ways to respond to the unique pressures they face. But, as we mentioned above, significant clarity can be achieved by focusing on the collaborative leadership dimensions that lead to success for all students.

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## 2. Research-informed decision making matters

Based on our environmental scan, and highlighting LEADS and MASA in particular, all areas of impact require evidence-based decisions. Well-managed systems require effective research and implementation of programs and ideas. However, system leaders also need to consider what building an evidence-based decision making culture looks like, and will push to avoid top-down thinking. A focus on the research on implementation not only serves to understand whether programs are being instituted as intended; as Dhillon, Darrow & Meyers (2015) have discussed, it also generates important and complex conversations about modifications and innovations that emerge from practice and how these impact student outcomes.<sup>30</sup> The authors contend that one key benefit of focusing on how programs are implemented in health and education contexts is that key high level measures and “real-world” outcomes can be brought into conversation with one another.

<sup>30</sup> Dhillon, S., Darrow, C., & Meyers, C. V. (2015). Introduction to Implementation Fidelity. In *Implementation Fidelity in Education Research: Designer and Evaluator Considerations* (pp. 8–22). New York: Routledge. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ca/books/about/Implementation\\_Fidelity\\_in\\_%20Education\\_Res.html?id=prybBAAQBAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ca/books/about/Implementation_Fidelity_in_%20Education_Res.html?id=prybBAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y)

As Bond et al. (2000) write:

In addition to increased confidence in the study's internal validity, the fidelity measures provide a roadmap for replication. With significant findings, the research question shifts to asking what the critical ingredients of program success are. Fidelity measures provide the basis for more fine-grained inquiry (qtd., in Dhillon, Darrow & Meyers).

We recommend that School Authorities avoid perfectionism when it comes to developing these measures. Rather, it is important to develop baseline measures of implementation fidelity and then refine the measurements through time by using logic models, theories of action, strategic planning, and other critical process components. These strategies drive meaningful conversations related to data collection, encourage reflection that leads to deeper analysis, and lead to greater refinement of hypotheses over time.

In short, we recommend that School Authorities make commitments to engage in asking evaluative questions such as: what is the impact? How effective is this program? How will this innovation affect student achievement? What does a commitment to continuous improvement mean in the “real world”? To what extent has this program been implemented as intended? What are the short, medium, and longer term outcomes (both intended and unintended) of this initiative?<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Diversity in approaches and resources offers the most, widest-ranging support

Educators in Alberta have seen firsthand what an inclusive approach to learning looks like and can yield. As Alberta Education's Principles of Inclusive Education explain, anticipating, valuing, and supporting diversity is an important set of practices, as is reducing barriers in learning environments.<sup>32</sup> This is true in both K-12 education, and in adult learning: diversity in approaches and, more importantly, resources, offers the best support for learners across varied contexts.

In the realm of system leaders, ensuring breadth in resources means that individual superintendents can choose the materials that fit their circumstances: their Districts, their students, their teachers, their community, and their time. Having accessible resources that fit a variety of contexts means that both urban and rural system leaders, from the largest districts to the smallest, can benefit.

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<sup>31</sup> See: Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (4th Ed). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

<sup>32</sup> Alberta Education. (2017). *The Principles of Inclusion*. Retrieved from <https://education.alberta.ca/inclusive-education/what-is-inclusion/>

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The Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA)'s Leader-Scholar Community, discussed in greater detail above, is a telling example of how such an approach could take shape: a group of six superintendents collaborated to create a web-based Leader-Scholar Community that curated resources, references, and learning modules for system leaders. Importantly, much of the content was cultivated from participants, bringing the experience and knowledge of current superintendents to the forefront while being responsive to the needs of the community. This innovative approach is expansive - it can accommodate a variety of ideas and modes - and can be taken up by superintendents in a variety of ways.

An emphasis on diversity in resources can be thought of as an application of the principles of [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) to the world of adult education. Having multiple options for representing and expressing content can meet the needs of all learners, while having a participant-based approach to seeking out new content means that learning opportunities are engaging for all.<sup>33</sup> Importantly, input from participants ensures that perceived needs do not outweigh real ones.

Overall, a UDL-informed approach means that system leaders can access a wide range of relevant supports throughout their careers. This framework is applicable not only to online resources, but to workshops, conversations, and professional development courses. Indeed, attention to diversity in the representation and expression of content is a hallmark of excellence in any instructional program.

#### 4. Attending to cultural needs leads to student success

Just as Albertan system leaders can benefit from attention to a wide range of needs and interests, students in Alberta require consideration of their cultural needs in order to experience success. This is true for not only for Aboriginal students, but also newcomers. As Alberta Education explains, “creating a classroom atmosphere that reflects and respects Aboriginal perspectives will benefit all the students in the classroom.”<sup>34</sup>

Alberta superintendents can use New Zealand's Māori-specific leadership as a model for planning how to respond to the diverse needs of their students. Māori-specific leadership explicitly focuses on the educational achievement of Indigenous students, and incorporates Māori worldviews and philosophies. By honouring the Māori way of life, New Zealand is working to ensure success for every student. This represents important lessons in avoiding deficit thinking and being inclusive educators.

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<sup>33</sup> National Center on Universal Design for Learning. (2014). UDL Guidelines - Version 2.0. Retrieved from <http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines>

<sup>34</sup> Alberta Education. (2005). Our words, our ways: teaching First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners. Retrieved from <https://education.alberta.ca/media/3615876/our-words-our-ways.pdf>

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Of course, the particular approach taken up by individual superintendents depends on their contexts, and there is a need to build specific paths that respond to the particular needs of each community. To that end, we recommend that each School Authority consider their schools, students, and communities when planning, teaching, and learning. Additionally, any action taken towards leadership development should include specific considerations of Indigenous perspectives.

## 5. The competencies are interwoven

The [CASS Support for Implementation - Superintendent Professional Practice](#) document provides an excellent overview of the details and research basis associated with the draft Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard. The document demonstrates the importance of interweaving the competencies so that these competencies are not seen simply as discrete roles. As discussed above, we believe the move towards nurturing “system leader thinking” is important to emphasize. This perspective highlights not only the distinct parts of an organization, but also the interrelationships between the parts of any large-scale organizations such as School Authorities. Systems theory, in this respect, can be a useful way of exploring the interrelationships including analysis of the social and cultural attributes. While individuals and groups within an organization may have disagreements over particular issues, it is the commitment to and belief in the system itself that can be decisive in guiding the work and achieving conflict resolution. As discussed in the document, “the importance of paying attention to the cultivation of professional relationships within school and within communities is well established in the district leadership literature.”

# Where To Go From Here

The Government of Alberta recently has passed legislation that will require superintendents and principals to achieve leadership certification beyond the teaching certification and relevant experience in the education sector. In this context, CASS is uniquely situated to offer robust professional learning to build and support the capacity of system leaders over their careers. We are not aware of anywhere else in the world where there are standards of this nature for superintendents. But given all that has already been achieved in these efforts, we now have a road map to support standards that superintendents require during their career path.

The most basic finding of our research is that CASS's leadership focus should be on the factors and conditions under which system leaders positively influence student achievement, defined quite broadly. We firmly believe that, with a laser-like focus on the conditions that impact student learning, system leaders can impact the drivers that matter. Taking a cue from Fullan and Rincón-Gallardo (2017) in their recent study on California, “top down change doesn't work (wrong drivers don't foster intrinsic motivation) but neither does bottom up change add up (giving schools autonomy and leaving them alone is a recipe for greater inequity). *The key is in the middle -- defined as the layers between the top (government), and the bottom (individual schools).*”<sup>35</sup>

The core principles at play relate to what are generally understood as transformational and instructional leadership. This isn't an either/or distinction, but rather a dynamic that we believe is important for CASS members to discuss and debate as they make decisions about next steps. While it can be straightforward enough in theory, the question of how system leaders can have maximum impact on classroom conditions is an area that we'd recommend for further discussion, investigation, and empirical testing with an eye to implementation in “real world” contexts.

Finally, we believe that the case studies identified in this study will provide insight and stimulate engagement about the broad range of programs that exist globally in regards to the leadership development of system leaders.

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35 Fullan, M., & Rincón-Gallardo, S. (2017). California's Golden Opportunity: Taking Stock: Leadership from the Middle. Emphasis added, 2. Retrieved from [https://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/17\\_Californias-Golden-Opportunity-Taking-Stock-FinalAug31.pdf](https://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/17_Californias-Golden-Opportunity-Taking-Stock-FinalAug31.pdf)

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