The Role of the Superintendent and the Teaching Profession

The Alberta Teachers' Association

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Preface

This publication represents the culmination of a two-year effort initiated by the Committee on Superintendents in the Teaching Profession, an ad hoc committee created by Provincial Executive Council in 2014. To contextualize this research study, a review of the committee's terms of reference is necessary. The committee's duties were

1. to research the role of superintendents in Alberta school jurisdictions;

2. to identify the concerns of teachers in their relationship with superintendents;

3. to consult with the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) and individual superintendents;

4. to consult with other education partners as may be appropriate;

5. to consider approaches that maximize collegial relations;

6. to review Association policy on school system leadership;

7. to propose policy, directions and other measures that would clarify and improve the relationship between superintendents and the Association; and

8. to report to Provincial Executive Council at its June 2015 meeting.

With these duties in mind, the committee directed Association staff to begin a research project aimed at clarifying and enhancing the relationship between superintendents and teachers in Alberta. The first phase of the study—informed by leadership experts from the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, as well as CASS representatives—included an extensive literature review of the critical influences affecting the work of the superintendent. This review prompted the committee to proceed with a pilot study that included interviews with four superintendents, representing urban and rural jurisdictions.

The interviews and the literature review were used to identify successes and challenges regarding three key domains that relate to the relationship between teachers and superintendents in Alberta: inclusion and classroom complexity, the role of technology, and teacher workload and efficacy. The results from this preliminary research were reported to Council at its June 2015 meeting, and resulted in a request for support from the Annual Representative Assembly (ARA) for a comprehensive study that would include additional focus group interviews and involve national and international experts in the data analysis.

When staff began undertaking the next phase of the study on the superintendency in late 2015, the CASS executive withdrew its support for the project and encouraged each superintendent to make an individual decision whether to participate in the interviews. Despite this setback, the committee continued to endorse the research project, particularly as the work had received overwhelming

support at the 2015 ARA. With this in mind, the committee revised its research project framework to center on the work of an expanded team of national and international researchers, as well as Alberta-based experts who understand the provincial context.

The work of the panel focused on the following goals: (1) to review the findings of the first phase of the study; (2) to identify the historical and current critical influences that have shaped the work of the superintendent; (3) to identify emerging provincial, national and international influences that have a significant impact on the work of the superintendent; and (4) to identify strategic opportunities for the Association to move forward with CASS in an effort to develop a better understanding of the role of the superintendent as a leader as this relates to building the capacity of the teaching profession.

Given the two years needed to bring this report to fruition, the commitment of the panel members and the committee members cannot be understated. The panel was comprised of Jim Brandon, Julius Buski, Carol Campbell, J-C Couture, Randy Hetherington, Allan Luke, Stephen Murgatroyd, Laura Servage and Shirley Stiles (the panelists' biographies are included at the end of the report). Providing valuable input on the project were the members of the Committee on Superintendents in the Teaching Profession: Brian Andrais, Brenton J Baum, J-C Couture, Randy Hetherington, Alexandra Jurisic, Fred Kreiner, Mark Ramsankar, Jason Schilling, Robert Twerdoclib and Elaine Willette-Larsen. Observers Jim Brandon (Werklund School of Education), Karl Germann (CASS) and Barry Litun (CASS) also contributed to the direction of the pilot study that came to inform the final research. Association staff Jordan Kardosh and Lindsay Yakimyshyn managed the preparation of the research publication, while J-C Couture provided coordination of the overall project.

I want to reiterate the Association's gratitude to the panel members who contributed their precious time and expertise to this work. Given the somewhat contentious issues raised by this study, their willingness to offer their credibility and commitment to this work is recognized by Alberta's teachers. Further, it is my hope that their contributions will help us achieve the overarching goals of this publication—to clarify the role of the superintendent as a leader in the teaching profession and to enrich the relationship between superintendents and teachers to better meet the needs of Alberta students.

As Alberta's education sector turns a page with the introduction of teacher, leader and superintendent professional practice standards, this publication will offer important perspective in the work ahead.

Gordon R Thomas
Executive Secretary

Introduction

This report, an examination of superintendency, is divided into four sections.

The first section sets the context and documents the limitations of this paper. Further, it outlines the report's aims to establish the basis for future analysis of the role of the superintendent in Alberta—specifically as it relates to the teaching force—and to document the issues faced by those in this position, those who work for and with superintendents and those whose task it is to hire and partner with superintendents in the governance process.

The second section focuses on the relevant Canadian literature on the superintendent role, its challenges and its future. This is a comprehensive literature review, examining new work on the codification of leadership and on the rubrics for evaluating superintendents.

The third section examines the way in which the superintendency is currently practised and the role challenges associated with this work. The report looks at this both from a governance perspective (ie, the impact on a system of schools) and from a professional perspective (ie, the impact of the work of the superintendent on teaching and learning), especially in relation to key issues. Issues considered here are inclusion, equity and the role of educational technology, each of which come from the consensus panel's understanding of the pinch points in Alberta's school systems, as identified in a recent review of the current state of education in the province (ATA 2015b).

In the final section, the consensus panel suggests avenues for further research and development. The section aims to create a collaborative agenda for the development of practitioners' understanding of the governance and leadership roles for Alberta's emerging school system. As part of this section, the panel focuses on what work is needed, rather than on who should do it. Supporting continued collaboration, the panel proposes, though, that future work would best be done by stakeholders agreeing to a research agenda over the next three to five years. Canada needs to explore the future of leadership, governance and the management of change and development for the school systems it imagines are needed for the future of learning.

Our guiding principles for this work reflect the thinking behind *A Great School for All—Transforming Education in Alberta* (ATA 2012): all school systems are seeking to achieve outstanding outcomes for all students and all students require supports through effective teaching; investments in social and health supports, in psychological supports and in appropriate technologies; and focused policy and practices aimed at ensuring success for all students in Alberta's school system.

This document is timely. The Government of Alberta, through the ministry of education, is in the midst of significant developments with respect to defining leadership and leadership roles within the Alberta school system. At the time of this report's composition, there are three draft standards statements conceptualizing professional practice of leadership for superintendents, principals and teacher-leaders as the following:[1]

Quality **teaching** occurs when the teacher's ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher's decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply, result in optimum learning for all students.

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

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.

The draft statements tie professional practice to the professional's reading of the context and the application of the professional's judgement about the knowledge and skills that will most likely lead to optimum learning for *all* students. Each of the draft standard documents is structured in the same manner: one standard, six to nine required competencies and several optional indicators. For the first time in Alberta, there will be quite a strong "through line" in the professional practice expectations for teachers, principals and superintendents. Yet each of the school districts in Alberta faces different challenges, and has startlingly different demographics and historiographies: one framework will not comfortably fit all. Therefore, each district will have to interpret the standards and competencies to attain its goals in its own distinctive ways.

The strategic opportunity for focused research, as outlined in the last section of this document, is related to Alberta Education's plan for the implementation of the professional practice standards for educators over a two-year period between the signing of the professional practice standards as a Ministerial Order (expected late 2016) and their coming into force (expected to be September 1, 2018). Available ministry of education documents reveal opportunities for studies of interconnections between the practice, standards and interprofessional relationships that may help teachers and the teaching profession better understand the capacity-building responsibilities and practices of the superintendency, the principalship and others who occupy teacher-leadership positions. This report stems from the need for such studies.

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1   These standards statements are from the July 4, 2016 version of the draft quality standards. As these are drafts, changes may be made in the final versions of these standards.

Literature Review

CONTEXTUALIZING THIS WORK

The link between the superintendent, principals and teachers is not simply one of line management and bureaucratic leadership that can be addressed through training in leadership styles and management techniques. Rather it represents a complex relationship that must not overlook the formal connection between teachers and superintendents.

In an age where there is increasingly a push for education systems to either adopt or become marketized enterprises—competing for students, resources and recognition—Alberta school superintendents *must* be certificated experienced teachers. According to the Alberta *School Act* (178-2003) a superintendent requires "a certificate of qualification as a teacher issued under the Act or an equivalent certificate issued by another province or a territory." This hallmark of the Canadian and Albertan systems cannot be taken for granted and any future iteration of the role needs to maintain this focus. This is particularly important as some American school boards have begun targeting people with business experience for superintendent positions as part of a broader reconceptualization of the role of superintendent as a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). In addition, several high-profile attempts at reform in the United States, United Kingdom and Mexico have included the introduction of leading business or political figures into CEO/superintendent-level positions, often as deliberate strategic attacks on teacher autonomy and professionalism, unions and working conditions, and as a way of rectifying what are viewed as dysfunctional state curriculum and governance structures (Abrams 2016).

Superintendents face multilayered accountabilities: to the community via elected school board members and community parents and lobbying groups; to the provincial ministry and bureaucracy; and to their teaching, administrative and support unions and workforces.

The later sections of this paper highlight the very difficult environment of public policy, institutional reform and practice in Alberta. What is clear is that superintendents are facing a combination of new challenges and perennial issues that include (1) major population/demographic shifts and unprecedented diversity of student bodies and communities; (2) increased pressure for demonstrable improvement in "outcomes" in the context of narrowing measures of performativity; and (3) funding limits, with resources stretched to capacity and human resource challenges. At the same

time, superintendents face multilayered accountabilities: to the community via elected school board members and community parents and lobbying groups; to the provincial ministry and bureaucracy; and to their teaching, administrative and support unions and workforces.

While the issues of work intensification, burnout and overbureaucratization are well documented in the Canadian teaching workforce, there are few complementary studies on how superintendents are addressing these issues and how they experience comparable work-related stresses and demands.

The proliferation of demands tends to result in increasing systems of auditing, accountability and bureaucracy. What began as an ethos of public accountability has been transformed in practice to the business of corporate audit and risk management. The effect for all engaged in school systems has been the intensification of preparation of strategic planning documents and review reports, record keeping, reporting, monitoring and auditing. The real risk is that this paradigm diminishes the overall capacity of the system to undertake the core business of teaching and learning.

Given this context, what does the Canadian research on the work and challenges of superintendents tell us?

The Literature on Leadership

This literature review aims to identify Canadian studies pertaining to the role of district leadership in shaping the working conditions of Alberta school principals and teachers. The impetus for this review is an Alberta-wide initiative on the part of school districts, through the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS), to strengthen the leadership roles of superintendents and increase organizational effectiveness at the district level. More broadly, the impetus is a consensus on the part of policy-makers that the education system requires major reforms to prepare students for a complex, uncertain and rapidly changing world. In turn, this requires new behaviours, capacities and professional knowledge for educators.

The CASS initiative is shaped in part by the current focus on "whole system reform" which, states Fullan, "means that every vital part of the system—school community, district, and government—contributes individually and in concert to forward movement and success" (2010, 25). This context has the potential to reinvigorate the leadership roles of school districts, the value of which have been called into question in the past (Campbell and Murillo 2005; Sheppard et al 2013). Consolidation and increasing centralization of decision making at the provincial level, along with devolutions toward site-based management, have weakened the power of school boards and district administrators (Barber, Whelan and Clark 2010; Sheppard et al 2013). In addition, consolidation of boards has presented new challenges for school authorities as they seek to develop and implement coherent visions and policies across sometimes large geographic territories with diverse populations and interests (Sheppard et al 2013).

> **Leadership, moreover, is notoriously difficult to define, and subject more to aspirations and prescriptions than to empirical scrutiny.**

However, school districts continue to serve a number of important functions. Some are pragmatic (eg, coordinating resources for services) and justifiable on this basis alone (Campbell and Murillo 2005). Extending the role of school districts into leadership, however, is complex, primarily because leadership roles must be negotiated and exercised in relation to leadership at other levels in the system. Although CASS advocates for a distributed model of leadership, achieving the model depends a great deal on local contexts.

Leadership, moreover, is notoriously difficult to define, and subject more to aspirations and prescriptions than to empirical scrutiny. The problem is compounded in that so few studies of leadership are grounded in an articulate theory of leadership, institutional behaviour or policy.

METHOD

The review pursued empirical studies documenting roles and outcomes in Canadian school districts participating in "whole system reform." Sources consulted were relevant academic databases and search engines, including EBSCO Education Research Complete, ERIC, ProQuest Education Journals, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, as well as Google. Only Canadian studies completed after 2000 were considered. An expanded literature review could certainly include American and international studies, with care taken to consider their relevance to Canadian and provincial policy contexts.

One of the challenges of conducting a literature review on this topic is that little Canadian literature exists, and what does exist is fragmented by widely varying foci, methodologies, scopes of inquiry and units of analysis. Very few studies focus specifically on the "whole system reform" described by Fullan, and those that do largely reflect the perspectives of districts rather than principals and teachers. Other studies invoked some of the principles of system reform or systems analysis, but were focused on some specific aspect of leadership (eg, implementing a class size initiative (Flessa 2012) or describing a professional development model (Edge 2005)). Consequently, the studies reviewed here were selected for the extent to which they could highlight leadership dynamics, with the district and/or superintendent being the unit of analysis.

The review highlights the difficulty of analyzing existing literature on the dynamics of leadership at the district level without some attention to practice. Examples of system practices include curriculum implementation, formal leadership development programs, inclusion strategies, community engagement strategies, and data and knowledge management—all of which emerge strongly in school improvement literature. While future studies of the impacts of district leadership on the practices of teachers and principals should similarly be grounded in system-level practice, their ultimate aim should be an analysis of the leadership dynamics that either facilitate or hinder those practices.

THE LITERATURE: SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

The studies considered in the literature represent a broad range of practices and concerns. At the same time, taken together, they affirm the value of the intentions of the CASS Leadership Dimensions (CASS 2014) and the Framework for School District Success (CASS 2009). The studies also, as noted later, provide some useful directions for the design of further research.

A theme that emerged in more than one study was the limited autonomy of school districts. In particular, this appeared in a 2013 study of school board governance by Sheppard, Galway, Wiens and Brown. This study indicates that district boards and superintendents experience "middle management" tensions given increased centralization of policies under provincial ministries. Respondents, overall, were "gravely concerned" that top-down mandates were eroding the capacities of school authorities to represent their communities effectively and that districts were less able to be responsive because they had less flexibility.

Similarly, Flessa's (2012) study highlighted the dilemmas of "middle management," specifically for principals. For the study, Flessa surveyed 24 principals from eight Ontario school districts about implementing the province's Primary Class Size (PCS) initiative. Notably, the article does not directly mention district leadership, which is telling in itself. The study concludes that the rigid cap of 20 students per class from a "top down" perspective nudged school administrators toward managerialism rather than leadership. It also proposes that leadership development might help school leaders to implement such initiatives in ways that still promote distributed leadership at the site level. This study affirms the limited autonomy of districts by presenting a case of a provincial mandate that directly affected site management with no opportunities for flexible implementation at the district or site levels. It also encourages district initiatives in making the best of mandates by promoting as much decentralized decision making as possible through good leadership practices.

Also probing the issue of centralization, Davis, Sumara and D'Amour (2012) examined three Alberta school districts' patterns of organizational learning via the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). The researchers used data from prior cycles of the AISI project and conducted site visits—which included interviews and focus groups with multiple stakeholders—to three districts. The study aimed to identify an "ethos" in each district and to classify its characteristics as a "learning organization" according to networks that were "centralized, distributed, decentralized or fragmented." Comparisons between the three districts showed that a decentralized network most effectively fostered stronger applications of research to practice and widespread ownership of initiatives in the district. The authors conclude that, for districts to promote learning, a "proscriptive rather than prescriptive" approach must be taken: "Dynamic learning systems cannot be forced or legislated into existence. The best one can do is create the conditions that will permit their emergence" (p 398). Highly centralized networks do not appear to foster organizational learning; on the other hand, fragmented systems can have pockets of strength that are never shared or leveraged outside of their own networks.

A study by Volante, Cherubini and Drake (2008) examined principals' responses to large-scale assessment expectations. This study explicitly invoked factors at the school, district and provincial levels. The study consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine school administrators in an Ontario school district. The study highlights the very different contexts of elementary and secondary administrators. The administrators lacked formal training in the use of data, and found the district lacking in terms of providing needed professional development and release time for themselves and their teachers. Administrators, particularly at the secondary level, struggled with teacher resistance. The district in this study, according to participants, lacked a clearly communicated policy about how data was to be integrated into improvement efforts. A similar lack of vision, as well as "initiative overload" by the province's education ministry, was noted at the provincial level. The findings from this study closely match the concerns expressed by respondents in *The Future of the Principalship in Canada* (ATA 2014c), but also show that weak communication and unclear priorities are transferred from provinces to districts to schools. This study also highlights

the very distinctive leadership contexts faced by elementary and secondary administrators, underscoring context as an important consideration in sampling for a district-based analysis.

Kwarteng (2006), in a study focused on northern and remote districts serving large Aboriginal populations, considered the implementation of a compulsory school attendance policy in Nunavut. The author, a Northern school administrator, critiqued the rigidity of this policy, as well as its insensitivity to cultural contexts. Kwarteng notes that a "top-down" policy may also be "top down" in its definition of the problem it is trying to address. In the Nunavut context, a non-consultative process led to Type III errors (ie, the right answer to the wrong question) and the pathologizing of cultural practices. Like Flessa (2012), Kwarteng foregrounds the need for sites and boards to have flexibility in the implementation of policies. This article also highlights some of the unique and extreme conditions faced by remote schools serving Aboriginal and Inuit learners.

In a very different context, Edge (2005) discusses the effective knowledge management practices of the Toronto District School Board in its support of the Early Years Literacy Project (1999–2004). The study consisted of document analyses and individual interviews with 34 participants who had various roles in the project. Success factors for this project appear to have been intensive professional development for literacy coordinators and the effective management of a complex "nested" system of committees through which project progress and goals were communicated, as well as knowledge mobilization. Participants perceived opportunities to make decisions and share knowledge as significant. Wide involvement of practitioners encouraged accountability, knowledge mobilization, and shared sense of ownership for the project's successes and outcomes. This study focuses on knowledge management, but also emphasizes that the district resourced the project well and allowed practitioners to take the lead in implementation.

The literature reviewed demonstrates the complexity of analyzing the "middle layers" of the systemic perspective on schools—namely school jurisdictions and schools themselves, which both must negotiate both "top down" and "bottom up" pressures emanating from other levels of the system.

In the only example that refers specifically to the personal leadership actions of the superintendent, Lewthwaite (2006) used a case study methodology and ecological model of school districts to study the implementation of science curriculum. The researcher, also the subject of the inquiry, used a validated survey instrument in his district to assess the factors impacting science teaching in the district's K–8 schools. The quantitative data was supplemented by focus group data. The study's results link the success of the leadership to the superintendent's previously acquired social capital in the district as a technology lead, as well as his expertise in the curricular area. However, the study also discusses district success factors overall: (1) readiness for change before launching the initiative, (2) a clear focus, (3) district implementation support that still allowed for flexible implementation at

the site level, (4) collaboration at the district level and (5) district and administrative responsiveness to teachers' concerns.

Although the contexts and foci of the above studies differ, they all highlight some form of district-level leadership or management practices that directly impact the work of schools. A common theme, in keeping with existing literature related to system reform, is the imperative for districts to balance enough structure to provide consistent support and vision with enough flexibility to allow schools to work effectively in their own communities and for school staff to have a sense of ownership over their learning and improvement undertakings. The literature reviewed demonstrates the complexity of analyzing the "middle layers" of the systemic perspective on schools—namely school jurisdictions and schools themselves, which both must negotiate both "top down" and "bottom up" pressures emanating from other levels of the system. The literature also confirms the importance of districts in not only articulating but also acting on a "vision." In the studies discussed, success occurred when district priorities were supported by reliable professional development models that networked school professionals and provided sufficient resources for ongoing collaborative learning.

Absent from the literature reviewed are cases that might inform the following compelling question from the ATA's (2014c) national study on the principalship: what does a systemwide leadership model look like? In other words, given simultaneous imperatives to exercise district leadership, principal leadership and distributed leadership—each of which are qualitatively distinct—how can these interact to leverage leadership strengths at each level of the system and not create power struggles?

Keeping a "systems perspective in mind" that can address the need for a synthesized and systemic understanding of leadership, future research should take into account the following study design considerations.

First, the case study appears to be an effective method because it allows for the exploration of a common phenomenon in a school or district from multiple stakeholder perspectives, increasing its reliability (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Recently, for example, Parsons and Beauchamp (2011) offered thickly descriptive, appreciative inquiry cases of five successful instances of elementary school leadership in which both principal and staff voices were well represented.

Second, network analysis—employed in various ways in several studies reviewed (Daly et al 2014; Davis, Sumara and D'Amour 2012; Hill and Martin 2014)—has the potential to empirically document power and communication flows within a school jurisdiction, involving stakeholders at all levels within the system. Network analysis also offers the potential to document informal flows of power and pockets of social capital, as well as informal sources of information and learning (Hill and Martin 2014; Daly et al 2014), such that the rhetoric of leadership does not mask political and micro-political tensions that might undermine reform efforts (Flessa 2012).

Third, ecological modelling (Lewthwaite 2006; Stevens 2007) encourages simultaneous analysis of multiple levels of a school system, similar to that advocated by Fullan's call for "systems thinking"

and recognition of "tripartite" framing of reform at school, district and provincial levels (2009). An ecological model examines influences on a phenomenon from macro-, meso- and micro-perspectives, and may be used to develop context-sensitive accounts of leadership that do not reduce actors to a collection of leadership traits (Bredeson, Klar and Johansson 2011). This situated understanding of leadership deserves attention, as competency frameworks for leadership (Alberta Education 2009; CASS 2014) can easily be read as collections of individual traits rather than emergent and relational properties of a system within which a leader works.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT IN ALBERTA

This review of Canadian literature related to "whole system reform" intends to offer further context for the analysis of present and anticipated impacts of the CASS *Moving and Improving* initiative, which explicitly calls for enhanced leadership at the district level and the cultivation of specific leadership attributes or "dimensions" in the superintendent. As noted above, the *Moving and Improving* initiative raises many questions about how leadership capacity can and should be distributed within a complex system of interests.

Consideration of *Moving and Improving*, in light of the findings of the national study of the principalship, raises contradictions, tensions and unanswered questions that, if addressed, may foster the breadth of participation and cooperation required within a district to facilitate large-scale reform (ATA 2014b).

The following key focus areas may be used to consider leadership dynamics, as they are shaped by, and emerge from, contemporary practice concerns. This report recommends that studies of leadership dynamics be applied to inform policies and strategies, while at the same time serving as data for inductive theorizing toward systemwide understandings of leadership in the contexts of whole-system reform.

Key focus areas

- *Instructional Leadership: What is instructional leadership and where does it reside?*
  Given the incorporation of "instructional leadership" in the Leadership Dimensions for Superintendents, how does the superintendent role align with, conflict with, or complement the instructional leadership role of school principals at the site level? Leithwood and Seashore Louis (2012) are critical of the term "instructional leadership": while it is widely aspired to, its meaning is not well understood and there is little evidence that it is well executed. The term implies "a focus on classroom practice" but "the specific leadership practices required to establish and maintain that focus are poorly defined" (ibid, 6). Further study may clarify the respective roles of districts, administrators and teacher leaders in "instructional leadership." Clarification has

important implications for the formative assessment and growth of both teachers and school principals, particularly as these become subject to greater accountability and oversight.

- *Evidence and Evidence-Based Practice: How will the validity and usefulness of the evidence be determined, and how will the "uses of evidence" impact the daily practices of administrators and teachers?*
Given the inclusion of "uses of evidence" in the CASS *Twelve Dimensions of a Successful School System*, how can the priorities for the professional development of school leaders and teachers for this mandate be reconciled with the ATA's (2014c) findings that teaching to diversity and improving teaching with technology are the most urgent professional development needs? Moreover, how can the drift to data overload be contained, given that many respondents in *The Future of the Principalship in Canada* stated that they are overwhelmed by data and accountability reporting requirements?

  Further study may clarify how evidence-based practice can be cultivated over time without compromising or competing with other important professional development needs. The uses and reporting of evidence also have important implications for teacher and administrator efficacy and workloads, as well as morale and professional autonomy.

- *Communicating Vision: What makes for a compelling and credible vision on the part of a school district?* What strategies facilitate a compelling district-wide vision that—without succumbing to mission drift—achieves (1) a sense of community across potentially dispersed and disparate communities within a district and (2) sufficient focus to prioritize and systematically implement a small number of meaningful goals (CASS 2009; Fullan 2009). The latter point is especially important, given that respondents in the ATA's (2014c) national study of principalship often commented that too many initiatives and a lack of clear vision made their work in schools more difficult.

  Research might focus on concrete strategies used at the division level to articulate, promote and align actions with a compelling vision. In the literature, most of the discussions around "vision" remain vague, and thus offer little practical assistance to school and district leaders.

- *Leadership Development: How will distributed leadership be cultivated and reported?* *Moving and Improving* documents state that distributed leadership is a valued outcome; yet, there are almost no references to the pivotal role of school principals in facilitating a healthy system of distributed leadership. How will districts support principals' leadership development to encourage robust, sustained distributed leadership?

  Barber, Whelan and Clark emphasize the importance of intentional leadership development with a "clear formalized development track" along with "standardized training and development systems" (2010, 10). However, *The Future of the Principalship in Canada* (ATA 2014c) suggests that many school administrators feel isolated and unsupported by their district leadership. Further, administrators in this study also stated that they wanted more leadership development, specifically hoping to improve in their capacities as instructional leaders.

Formal and informal recruitment, training and ongoing development of school leadership, as well as the cultivation of distributed/teacher leadership, do not fall into the purview of this review, and each has its own body of associated research. However, re-examination of this literature, as well as new studies, would be useful given the emergence of standards for leadership competencies against which professional development efforts might be evaluated.

Research can continue to investigate district conditions and strategies that foster leadership at all levels—this mandate is clearly articulated by all Alberta stakeholder organizations.

The Work of the Superintendent in Alberta

The expectations school boards, many principals and other stakeholders place on the superintendent are substantial. At the same time, the superintendent's role is highly constrained and rarely supported by adequate resources, especially in small rural school districts. Given the context in which students operate, role expectations are seldom realistic.

This is as true for Alberta's 63 superintendents as it is for superintendents anywhere in North America, with some of the leading superintendents in the United States perceiving their position as a "role in crisis" (Education Writers Association 2003, p 4). While many superintendents are well remunerated,[2] their work can be very stressful, with ever-increasing demands. Indeed, it may *not be possible* for superintendents to meet all of the expectations others have for them.

With this in mind, this section of the report explores the context in which Alberta superintendents operate, the five major role challenges they experience, the critical skills they require to function effectively and the limitations of the role.

CONTEXT: SHIFTING SANDS AND GROWING EXPECTATIONS

A superintendent's basic role is to manage trade-offs in a climate of uncertainty—this is apparent across a variety of issues and contexts. To examine this aspect of superintendency, this report will consider six context conditions: accountability, austerity, demographic shifts, technology, equity and innovation in teaching and learning.

Accountability

Social and political expectations for schools and schooling change over time. For a long time, the expectation was for public schools to focus on character development, enabling learning for personal development, and to support a limited set of skills that would be useful in the world of work and in the service of community. Over time, this has been replaced by a much stronger emphasis on the learner as "human capital," on schools being transition points to postsecondary education and on accountability. Schools are now expected to "perform," to meet targets and to develop competencies—notions that would be alien to many school systems in the 1950s and 1960s.

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2   The salary range (including benefits and allowances) for Alberta superintendents for the year ending August 31, 2015 was $153,598–$405,544 (Province of Alberta 2016, 270).

Austerity

At the same time, public investment in education—as is the case in many jurisdictions—does not meet demands on the system. In 2015–16, operating funds for K–12 schools totalled $6.6 billion, representing an increase to school boards of between 1.3 per cent and 6 per cent over the previous year; overall, though, the operating funds grew modestly, just 1 per cent year on year.[3] Per capita funding for public, catholic and francophone school boards has dropped from $9,411 in 2011–12 to an estimated $9,166 in 2015–16. Factoring in inflation and base cost increases, such decreases in per capita funding pose a significant challenge for all school districts. Austerity is the hallmark of many districts across Alberta, as well as Canada as a whole.

Some provinces—notably British Columbia (BC)—are systematically reducing the funds available to school boards at levels below inflation. Over the period 2016–19, the BC government indicated its intention to reduce available budgets by $137 million, despite anticipated rises in healthcare premiums for staff and known BC Hydro rate increases. The BC government has also determined that pay increases for teachers now need to be linked to increases in student scores on standardized tests, despite compelling evidence that teachers make little difference to standardized test scores (Popham 1999).

Austerity creates problems related to the conditions of practice for teachers, the maintenance of schools as physical spaces, the support and education of students with special needs, and the education of off-reserve First Nations students. Superintendents have to justify class sizes, resource allocations and investments in supports for teachers and teaching. School trustees and their superintendents become the buffer between the challenges faced in schools each day and the ideologically driven policies of government. Not all school boards act as advocates for their teachers, schools and communities; some see their role as the vehicle by which government policy is implemented. Moreover, not all superintendents find their role as the bearer of austerity and policy comfortable.

Demographic Shifts

Demographic shifts—an aging population, significant growth in new immigrant arrivals, lower birth rates among Canadian families but growth in birth rates among First Nations families—also create challenges for superintendents, in terms of new demands for space and teaching capacity, as well as changes in the geographical location of such demands as urbanization continues.

In Edmonton and Calgary, for example, population growth has placed new stresses on space and capital resources, and teaching and support resources. Despite the economic climate, in 2015 Edmonton's overall population grew by 11,834 and Calgary's grew by 9,893 (Calgary Economic Development). Moreover, according to provincial projections, there will be 12,000 additional

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3   See the budget information at http://www.alberta.ca/budget.aspx.

students in Alberta in 2016 and approximately 36,000 over the next three years (Government of Alberta 2016a). These population increases present significant challenges for school boards. Such growth requires capital investment in new schools and refurbishment of existing schools—this has, to date, proven problematic due to the lack of an effective, systematic and reliable planning model, frequently resulting in construction delays.[4] Issues related to increased student population directly affect superintendents, who are responsible for capacity planning, staffing and resourcing learning for incoming students.

While the burden of increasingly large and complex classrooms first falls on principals operating in a site-based management context, the responsibility for resolution often falls to the superintendent, who has to negotiate human and capital resources to meet emerging and changing demands.

Growth in student numbers has other consequences: more students with special needs, more students with English language needs, more students with social and behavioural challenges, more gifted students, more demands for special support and services. This is not speculation. Data from the 2013 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Teaching and Learning International Study (TALIS), in specific relation to Alberta, indicate that

> Alberta teachers work in larger classes than the overall sample (26 versus 24 students). Teachers in Alberta also work in more complex settings than others in the sample, as a higher percentage of the Alberta sample work in schools with more than 10 per cent of students with a first language other than the teaching language (41 per cent versus 21 per cent) and with special needs (51 per cent versus 26 per cent). A slightly higher percentage of Alberta teachers work in schools in which at least 30 per cent of the student population is considered low socioeconomic status in comparison to the TALIS average (20.3 per cent versus 19.6 per cent). (ATA 2015b, 21)

While the burden of increasingly large and complex classrooms first falls on principals operating in a site-based management context, the responsibility for resolution often falls to the superintendent, who has to negotiate human and capital resources to meet emerging and changing demands.

In other parts of the world—notably the UK—such issues are leading teachers to more quickly change schools in search of better conditions, more frequently leave the profession or take more sick days. Estimates suggest that, in the UK, up to half of the current teachers will leave the profession within five years; 11 per cent of UK teachers left the profession in a single year in 2015 (Lightfoot 2016). The major reason: conditions of practice, especially class size and reporting requirements. As Alberta's classrooms become more complex and as teachers' workload increases (ATA 2015b), increased numbers of teachers leaving the profession could become a concern in Alberta.

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4   Forty-eight school districts' plans for delivering support and service are affected by delays of between three months and a year in promised construction. A list of delayed school projects in Alberta is available at http://www.scribd.com/doc/283853139/Delayed-School-Projects-Alberta-Infrastructure.

Technology

Technology holds great promise for learning. Significant developments in adaptive learning systems, machine and artificial intelligence, empathic computing, open education resources and faster hand-held devices make personalized learning and differentiated instruction possible. But at a cost. In addition to accounting for the direct capital costs of routers, devices, software and supports, school boards need to invest in professional development and training to leverage these technologies. Further, while there is pressure from a variety of sources (parents, some students and government) to ensure access to appropriate technologies for learning, there is a human cost to doing so.

A recent report from the ATA—part of a major study supported by the University of Alberta, Harvard University, Boston Children's Hospital and the Centre on Media and Child Health—finds the following:

> Overall, teachers report that digital technologies enhance their teaching and learning activities, with inquiry-based learning (71 per cent) being the area of greatest enrichment. The most common instructional uses of digital technologies on a weekly basis are to provide access to a variety of learning resources (79 per cent), to enable communication with parents (79 per cent), and to differentiate resources and materials to support students who have a variety of learning needs (69 per cent). However, when surveyed on issues related to health and well-being outcomes, Alberta teachers indicated that there has been a dramatic change in their student populations over the past 3 to 5 years. Of particular note is the "somewhat" and "significant" increase in the number of students who demonstrate the following exceptionalities: emotional challenges (90 per cent), social challenges (86 per cent), behaviour support (85 per cent) and cognitive challenges (77 per cent). This data clearly illustrates a dramatic change in the complexity of the student population in Alberta.
> In terms of media use, 43 per cent of teachers "frequently" and 33 per cent "very frequently" observe students multitasking with digital technologies. Of particular note is that a majority (67 per cent) of teachers from this stratified random sample believe that digital technologies are a growing distraction in the learning environment. Those who believe students are negatively distracted by technology state the degree as "very many" (48 per cent) and "almost all" (11 per cent) students. Further, when asked to reflect on their personal use of digital technologies, 62 per cent of teachers feel that they themselves are also "somewhat" (75 per cent) or to a "great extent" (14 per cent) negatively distracted (ATA 2015a).

Superintendents are challenged with promoting appropriate uses of technology, finding the ongoing resources and infrastructure to support a wide range of technologies, and investing in professional development for teachers and professional staff, while at the same time responding to the concerns raised regarding the effects of mobile and hand-held devices on children (Behesti and Large 2013). Balancing opportunity with consequences is key to this work.

Equity

Not all students do well in school. In Alberta, just 76.4 per cent of students in 2014 completed high school within three years of entering. Over five years, the percentage rises to 82.1 per cent (Alberta Education n.d.). This still leaves 17.9 per cent of high school students who do not complete high school. Superintendents, schools and researchers together are still looking for a route to learning that matters to these students.

Success in school is strongly linked to social and economic factors. Indeed, teachers make little difference to scores on standardized tests, which mainly reflect socio-economic status and cohort effects (Berliner 2011, 2012). This observation from Berliner (2012) underscores this point:

Schools make a difference, but not in the ways that the government measures

> Virtually every scholar of teaching and schooling knows that when the variance in student scores on achievement tests is examined along with the many potential factors that may have contributed to those test scores, school effects account for about 20% of the variation in achievement test scores, and teachers are only a part of that constellation of variables associated with "school." Other school variables such as peer group effects, quality of principal leadership, school finance, availability of counseling and special education services, number and variety of AP courses, turnover rates of teachers, and so forth, also play an important role in student achievement. Teachers only account for a portion of the "school" effect, and the school effect itself is only modest in its impact on achievement. (np)

Schools make a difference, but not in the ways that the government measures. They make a difference to the social and emotional well-being of students and to their adaptability and resilience.

This matters. Alberta has real challenges with equity and social well-being, as the following data (Public Interest Alberta 2016) suggest:

- The percentage of children living in low-income families in 2012 varied between 10.3 per cent in Wood Buffalo, 14–15 per cent in Edmonton and Calgary and 19 per cent in Lethbridge.
- First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students underperform on any measure (completion, acceptable Provincial Achievement Testing (PAT) scores, transition rates) when compared to the non-FNMI population.
- There has been a five-year decline in the financial support for students with special needs in Alberta.
- The number of English-language learner (ELL) students in Alberta has increased by 70,000 since 2008 and the percentage of students whose mother tongue is neither English nor French has doubled in this same time period.
- Learning outcomes vary by social class in significant ways throughout Alberta.

These inequalities have consequences. According to recent ATA survey data (ATA 2015b), 89 per cent of Alberta teachers are proud to be teachers, but only 60 per cent feel that they can teach in the way they aspire to teach because of the conditions of practice and equity issues suggested here.

Innovation in Teaching and Learning

In many districts, superintendents are expected to be engaged in innovation but in a way that secures the support of teachers, students, parents, communities and potential employers—in other words, *acceptable innovation*. Securing acceptance and managing risk constitute key work for the superintendent and their lead staff (especially principals) in initiating or supporting innovation that improves student learning.

Anyone who has been close to innovation as a process knows that it is both messy and uncertain. Not all innovations work and some turn out to be significant failures.

This work, which is strongly present in the quality standards that Alberta is about to introduce (Alberta Education 2009), has resulted in such innovations as dual credit programs, apprenticeship programs in high schools, new uses of technology, cooperative and international programs, the creation of multiple and flexible routes through high school, and support for new initiatives in essential skills. All of these (and other) initiatives represent both opportunity and risk for superintendents, principals and teacher-leaders. Some of the risk is connected to time and resource demands, as well as the need for investments in professional development.

Innovation in teaching and learning can involve significant cost. For example, securing appropriate facilities and resources for trades and skills education (culinary arts, cosmetology, fabrication, construction technologies, mechanics, etc) and managing the risks associated with work-placement and cooperative programs is a considerable administrative and resource challenge. In addition, leveraging technology for learning across a range of programs involves a significant cost and is linked to uncertainty about the life-cycle costs of technology investments, the future of the Alberta Supernet5 and the privacy of student and staff data.

Ministers and elected trustees like announcements and openings, ribbon cutting and naming ceremonies—newsworthy events that create expectations and showcase progressive thinking. This makes innovation attractive, but also results in occasional pressure on superintendents. Whether strong educational outcomes emerge from the innovation will often not be known until sometime later.

Anyone who has been close to innovation as a process knows that it is both messy and uncertain. Not all innovations work and some turn out to be significant failures. Managing this messiness and uncertainty is the job of the innovation team, teacher-leaders, the principal and the superintendent, who sometimes must handle public relations.

Examination of these contextual issues reveals a number of consistent themes. This report will now turn to consider these themes and their implications.

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5   The Alberta Supernet is a state-of-the-art, ultra-high speed network comprised of approximately 13,000 km of fibre and 2,000 km of wireless connections. It connects more than 4,700 government facilities, including government offices, hospitals, schools, libraries, municipal offices and provincial courts around Alberta.

FIVE MAJOR ROLE CHALLENGES FOR THE SUPERINTENDENT

The above review of the context in which school systems operate suggests five major aspects of the challenging role of superintendents:

1. Managing human and capital trade-offs

2. Living with uncertainty and vulnerability

3. Managing risk

4. Focusing on outcomes and accountability

5. Managing upward, downward, across and outward

These five aspects of superintendency sit over and above constant concerns with safety, finance, security of assets and governance. At different times, different aspects of a matrix of issues will be at play in a jurisdiction. The superintendent needs to both anticipate and manage this matrix of expectations and actions—this is not an easy task.

1. Managing human and capital trade-offs

Superintendents must manage increasingly scarce resources—people, time, physical plant, technology, transport—in the context of growing demands. There are also specific infrastructure challenges, including

- the difficulty of replacing or preserving aging school buildings;
- school board efforts to provide school facilities (and modular classrooms) to growing communities in a timely and proactive manner;
- the ad hoc nature of funding mechanisms and programs;
- the calculation and employment of utilization rates for schools;
- the effectiveness of the current long-term capital planning and approval process;
- the lack of funding for non-instructional space;
- the lack of flexibility to meet community needs with regard to school facilities;
- the lack of provincial funding for the facility and equipment costs associated with provincial initiatives, such as the new occupational health and safety requirements;
- site preparation and servicing costs, as well as issues with land use and zoning;
- developing, maintaining and resourcing student transportation systems and ensuring their efficient operation; and
- the school closure process.

These infrastructure issues affect parents, students and teachers, and the superintendent must manage the necessary trade-offs, often in a no-win situation. While trustees will often support the superintendent, they can quickly soften their support in the light of public backlash over closures, delays or the addition of more temporary facilities.

How the superintendent allocates resources to a specific school is also contentious. Allocations directly affect class size and support services (especially special needs, ELL, FNMI and other specialist programs), as well as superintendents' relationships with principals. For instance, a superintendent of a medium-large district in Alberta who chose to reallocate a portion of resources away from the most successful schools to underperforming and under-resourced schools faced severe backlash from parents, teachers and some trustees. While the reallocation increased teacher retention, staff satisfaction and high school completion rates across the district, it remained a controversy throughout the superintendent's tenure.

Trade-offs, which are key to business management, feature
- complex relations between the decisions and the corresponding outcomes,
- difficult assessments when negotiating between attainable goals,
- uncertainties and risks related to the decision-making situation,
- the need for supporting the transparency of the decision-making process and enhancing public understanding of problems and the considered solutions and
- rational governance of conflicting goals and uncertainties.

In relation to the superintendency, trade-offs require further study as there can be variance in how successfully they are managed, suggesting a potential link to personal or professional qualities that may enhance or detract from an individual's ability to assess and compare values and understand factors contributing to risk.

2. Living with uncertainty and vulnerability

An Alberta superintendent working the last ten years has had six ministers of education, three deputy ministers and five premiers. They may also have experienced a significant turnover in their trustees. While these changes may not affect all aspects of a superintendent's work, they certainty affect some, as the following examples suggest:
- Curriculum change and competency-based education was a major focus for one minister, but seems not to be a priority of the current minister.
- AISI was seen as a flagship program across Alberta and around the world and yet, despite announcements and contracting, a minister ended the program abruptly as part of his efforts to save money.[6]
- A premier committed to phasing out PATs, but a subsequent decision suggested no significant change, except in relation to Grade 3 assessments (*ATA News* 2015).

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6   AISI began in 2000 and allotted school jurisdictions approximately $121.00 per student to build programs, processes, structures or activities that would support growth and innovation in teaching and learning. Defined as "a bold approach to improving student learning by encouraging teachers, parents, and the community to work collaboratively to introduce innovative projects that address local needs," AISI continued until its termination in 2013. From 2000–13, AISI created an expansive provincial, national and international network of educators, researchers and critics who participated in various ways to examine issues of pedagogy, leadership, professional learning and organizational effectiveness.

- One minister introduced Grade 3 Student Learning Assessments (SLAs). While intended to help teachers identify learning needs of students entering Grade 3—something, according to Berliner (2011) teachers are quite capable of doing without any provincial

Superintendents live with and manage uncertainty.

- assessment—it is, in the way it is being administered and analyzed, serving a grossly similar purpose to the Grade 3 PAT it replaced. Further, the difficulties of administering the SLAs in several districts have been significant.

- The current minister is demanding action by districts regarding gay–straight student alliancesand the treatment of self-identifying transgender students. This—despite acknowledging the clear requirements of Bill 10 (*Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children*) and guidelines offered to districts to help in the development of policy on transgender students— creates real challenges for Catholic schools and for some other school district trustees. Caught in the middle (or sometimes taking sides) are superintendents.

- The historical inability of the Government of Alberta to plan, manage and deliver school capital projects on schedule is problematic, as promises made about dates and capacity are not met. The fact that elementary schools are not provided with playgrounds (funds have to be raised by districts), even though the literature of student improvement emphasizes the critical importance of play for emotional and social development, exacerbates the issue.

- Changes have been made to collective bargaining, reducing the role of local school districts from bargaining around key components of teacher contracts but leaving other matters entirely in their hands (referred to as the two-tier bargaining introduced by Bill 8, *Public Education Collective Bargaining Act*). What is to be bargained through the Teachers' Employer Bargaining Association (TEBA) and what is to be bargained at the district level is a matter for negotiation; however, it is clear that teachers' salary and benefits will be done through TEBA and that the Alberta Government will seek to shape and define this deal through negotiations with the ATA. What will be bargained locally remains to be seen.

- The weighting given to high school diploma final marks derived from teacher assessments shifted in November 2015 from 50 per cent teacher assessment and 50 per cent based on provincial examination (in place since 1984) to 70 per cent teacher assessment and 30 per cent based on provincial examination. While the change was eventually lauded by many stakeholders, significant uncertainty remained for some time about what changes would be made to the provincial assessment component of a student's high school diploma.

This list could be expanded considerably, but the point is clear: superintendents live with and manage uncertainty.

Uncertainty is not the same as vulnerability, but they can be connected. For instance, consider a superintendent who championed curriculum change and embraced the Alberta government-sponsored curriculum prototyping work in 2014—when this work ended and vague talk of the next steps emerged, the superintendent realized just what a calculated risk he had taken by supporting

an innovation across the district that was not yet proven to benefit students. Or a superintendent who supports a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) technology strategy for a school on the promise of Supernet infrastructure being in place for the start of the school year—she risks the possibility that the required technology infrastructure is delayed. They become vulnerable, particularly if they seek to promote an innovation or change.

Superintendents live with both uncertainty and vulnerability.

3. Managing Risk

Few school districts maintain and manage a comprehensive risk register. If they did it would be a substantial document. From child safety to teacher well-being to aging infrastructure, a complex human system of any kind—but especially systems involving so many young people—are full of risk.

Without insurance, safety measures, worker's compensation, vehicle coverage and property coverage, for instance, a district would not be able to function. More specifically, consider the need for automatic external defibrillators, fire and smoke drills, playground supervision, high school interscholastic athletic insurance claim procedures, vandalism claims process, insurance certificates, lock-down for threats (eg, guns, knives, stalking) and litigation management. More recently, the threat of international terrorism has resulted in some school boards imposing temporary stops on international travel based on a risk assessment.

Finances can also pose risks. All school systems are required to have financial plans that either balance their budgets or that, constructed in accordance with the Government of Alberta guidelines, may involve a temporary deficit that has been approved by the provincial government (eg, Grande Prairie and District Catholic Schools in 2012, Edmonton Public and Catholic districts in 2002). Changes in enrolment, growth of special demands on the system or new teacher agreements not fully funded by government can all cause financial problems for a district. Charter schools are especially vulnerable. The Global Learning Academy in Calgary, once the largest charter school in Alberta with 480 students, failed in 1998 due to mismanagement and financial problems. Also, Moberly Hall Charter School operated for a number of years in Fort McMurray before closing because of low student numbers.

But these are the obvious risks that must be managed. There are three other kinds of risk with which superintendents live, as well:

- *People risks:* When a teacher turns out to be a poor fit with the values and work of the district and then leaves, it can affect students, the staffing mix of schools and the ability of a school to deliver specialist programs. Hiring is an expensive process: the cost of a lost recruit requiring replacement is estimated at between $15,000 and $20,000 (Darling-Hammond and Sykes 2003). With the speed at which teachers are leaving the profession—one study suggests that by their fifth year teaching 20 per cent of teachers would change jobs if they could (ATA 2013, 17)—each teacher should be viewed as a significant investment and resource. At the same time, not all teachers meet

the expectations of the profession. Demonstrating this point, from 2006 to 2015, professional conduct complaints made to the Association resulted in 21 cancellations of teaching certificates.

- *Risk of reputation damage to the district:* Reputational damage can occur as result of inappropriate behaviour, poor performance of a school or group of schools in key measures of school performance, financial impropriety or inappropriate remarks by a system leader or trustee. The current challenge faced by Edmonton Catholic Schools relating to the conduct of trustees serves as an example of this risk, but there are others. The no-zeros dispute between a teacher and Edmonton Public Schools is another example. The failure of Northlands School District to secure performance gains for its students is another. District personnel, including the superintendent, may sometimes have a role in creating these issues, but they most certainly play a key part in remedying them.

- *Performance risk:* The 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (published in 2014) showed that Alberta's raw score in mathematics has declined by 6 per cent over the past 12 years, but performance has deteriorated slightly over all OECD countries during the same period. Among high-performing countries, only Macao-China, Poland and Germany have improved their mathematics scores over the past four PISA cycles. Overall, Canada performed well at the national level on the 2012 PISA in reading, math and science. At the provincial level, however, significant differences emerge. Some provinces, including Alberta and BC, managed to earn high grades, but several other provinces are performing significantly below the levels expected. Notably, a comprehensive analysis of educational outcomes by the Conference Board of Canada (2014) also shows Alberta to be high performing in a Canadian context, but suggests some specific areas in which the province could improve (eg, gender equity, essential skills and functional literacy). Alberta's relative success did not stop *The Edmonton Journal* from campaigning for a rethink of mathematics education and championing a petition (signed by 3,700 individuals) that was presented to the Alberta legislature (Mertz 2014). Specific schools and districts were singled out during this debate for "failing their students" because of the methods they used to teach mathematics. In a different case, and perhaps most dramatically, in 2010 the minister of education dismissed the school trustees of the Northlands School Division, stating,

> There is ample evidence indicating the board and the jurisdiction are not functioning at a satisfactory level and showing no signs of improvement in the near future. The bottom line is that the education of students is suffering and we can't risk losing a generation of young people. (Hanon 2010)

The key triggers for this action were poor student performance, abysmal high school completion rates and chronic student absenteeism. In the year that the minister fired the school trustees, the divisionwide student attendance rate was 79 per cent. It has improved since then, reaching 82 per cent in 2014–2015, a two per cent increase over the previous school year. About half of the district's students had a 90 per cent attendance rate last year. However, some schools still struggle. Two schools in the district had average attendance rates in the range of 65 per cent. The current minister intends to restore the board of trustees for the division by 2017.

Poor results, teacher turnover, teacher performance, reputational challenges and performance failures are all part of the day-to-day concerns of superintendents.

4. Focusing on outcomes and accountability

Trustees' performance expectations for their system and the role of the superintendent within it are not always clear. They appear to expect continuous improvement in student performance at the level of the school, effective management of people and capital assets and sound financial management—all without undue risk or public disquiet.

Effective superintendents must therefore be advocates for teachers, for decentralization coupled with collaboration and best practice sharing, for a different kind of accountability (different measures, locally determined), and for adaptive systems.

Central to these expectations is the performance of students and schools as organizations. Studies of school effectiveness and performance suggest that schools have an impact of about 20 per cent on performance of students (Berliner 2011, 2012), with most of the variation in performance connected to socio-economic status, the educational status of parents and cohort effects. Nonetheless, superintendents—working with principals and in-school leaders–seek to continuously create opportunities to make small gains in measurable performance.

Key measures that matter to trustees, as gleaned from a review of twenty district plans, are
- high school completion rates,
- transition rates (to postsecondary),
- the number of students in the district who perform at the acceptable and exceptional level on both PATs and high school diploma examinations,
- the drop-out rate,
- scholarships and awards,
- teacher recruitment and retention,
- class size,
- number of students with special needs,
- a variety of cost or value for money indicators,
- indicators of student mental health and
- teenage pregnancy, crime rates and vandalism.

Some superintendents view continuous improvement in these measures as a function of "top-down," superintendent-driven, systemwide management, innovation and change. Other superintendents see sustained improvement as more likely to be connected to other variables, such as support for collaborative

professional autonomy, localized innovation at the level of schools not systems (system adoption follows from successful practice), investments in leadership development and support for principals, improved conditions of practice and appropriate resources (Hargreaves, Boyle and Harris 2014). In short, *less* systems change and *more* focus on school-based innovation are likely to spur significant gains in student performance (Government of Victoria, Australia 2016). Teachers and principals are not delivery systems and do not practice "*deliverology*" (Barber 2010). They are professionals.

As Biesta (2016) notes, such professionals need to exercise three kinds of professional autonomy:
- The ability to shape learning and conditions of practice
- The ability to take framework statements and convert them into operational practice—to translate "policy" into action
- The ability to develop professional knowledge and professional learning

Effective superintendents must therefore be advocates for teachers, for decentralization coupled with collaboration and best practice sharing, for a different kind of accountability (different measures, locally determined), and for adaptive systems.

In some school districts, superintendents seek to act as system controllers, managers and shapers of in-school policy. Rather than standing up to what they perceive to be wrong-headed government policy, they accept and implement it. In doing so, they ignore the advice of Michael Fullan (2011):

> Replace the juggernaut of wrong drivers with lead drivers that work…Jettison blatant merit pay, reduce excessive testing, don't depend on teacher appraisal as the driver, and don't treat "world class standards" as a panacea. (p 18)

Unleashing innovation increases risk, uncertainty and vulnerability, and may at times make the management of subsequent trade-offs more difficult. To minimize threats and unexpected problems, superintendents support centralized authority. Given that few superintendents have managed significant organizations other than schools or groups of schools, this may not be surprising. While they may have transformational intentions, they end up bolstering the status quo.

Hallgarten, Hannon and Beresford's (2016) analysis of system-level innovation and the role of systems leaders suggests that transformation is the work of leaders who genuinely seek to offer educational leadership in their districts. The points below employ and expand upon their nine steps "to re-orient the role public system leaders might play" (ibid, 10):

1. Build a case for change—use evidence to show that schools in the district could do—and start a movement that supports the case for change. *Lead the need for change.*
2. Desist and resist waves of centrally-driven short-term reforms. *Lead the case for local is good.*
3. Develop outward as well as upward accountability, to learners, localities and school communities. *Lead the process of engagement.*
4. Create, protect and invest in genuine spaces in which local curriculum reform can occur. *Lead local innovation in pedagogy.*

5. Prioritize innovations that transform approaches to assessing student outcomes—focus on rich, formative assessment of knowledge, capabilities and skills rather than narrow assessments using standardized tests. *Lead the move away from standardized testing and toward comprehensive capability portfolios.*

6. Place a deliberate, rigorous focus on the development of teachers' innovation capabilities throughout their careers. *Enable teacher leadership.*

7. Create and adequately and sustainably resource innovation incubators within the district that are tasked with the work of demonstrating possibilities. *Lead for opportunities to demonstrate success.*

8. Build systems of collaborative peer learning to support the adaptive scaling of innovation. *Lead through networks and build adaptive capacity.*

9. Put systems entrepreneurship at the heart of systems leadership. *Lead for possibility.*

In short, superintendents should be creating platforms for collective agency among professionals. This work requires superintendents to be (1) facilitators; (2) brokers; (3) advocates for learners, teachers, principals and schools; (4) stewards of resources; and (5) forecasters of the future. All of this needs to come from authentic conviction that teachers and schools are the heart of the system.

Some superintendents in Alberta see a commitment to school-based innovation as their *modus operandi*, believing they can secure the support of their trustees; however, others do not, seeing themselves more as agents of change driven by the ministry of education, to which they are, in part, accountable (the Superintendent of Schools Regulation makes the initial appointment and subsequent renewal of appointment conditional on ministerial approval). They are managerially focused leaders seeking to ensure that schools are highly organized. Other leaders desire schools that are self-organizing, adaptive and resilient. The table below contrasts and compares these two approaches. There are clearly many levels between the two ends of this continuum.

HIGHLY ORGANIZED SCHOOLS	ADAPTIVE, RESILIENT AND SELF-ORGANIZING SCHOOLS
• Machine-like administration focused on predictability and reliability • Strong, centralized control • Substantial policy and procedures formally administered • Directive leadership • Safe • Highly organized and regimented	• Living organism that adapts to conditions daily, weekly, monthly • Teamwork that dominates the methods of working • Patterns recognized and responded to • Leadership distributed, engaged and situational • Risk taking occurs within a context of care for others • Interdependent, dynamic

At the heart of the work is managing complexity and ambiguity. In highly organized schools, policy and practice drive and shape behavior, while in self-organizing systems, nimble responses to emerging conditions drive and shape behaviour. Once again, superintendents encounter risk, uncertainty and vulnerability.

5. Managing Upward, Downward, Across and Outward

Managing in multiple ways speaks to relationships, especially in terms of how superintendents are seen by their trustees, the principals, unions and critical stakeholders. Effective superintendents manage upward (trustees, government), downward (principals, teachers, learners, parents), across (unions and other districts) and outward (media, public). Such relationship work is demanding. It requires consistency of message but differences in approach for each stakeholder group. It is also sophisticated work. It requires a subtle understanding of the explicit and tacit "rules" that operate within a complex organization (Mills and Murgatroyd 1991).

Managing Upward

What makes the work of managing upward difficult is the variation in the effectiveness and functional governance skills of trustees. Some boards are effective, focused and strategic. They understand that the superintendent has operational responsibilities and that their focus as trustees is on policy and strategic intentions. Where this is the case, superintendents can exercise their professional role effectively, knowing that they have the generalized level of support of their board. Sometimes (eg, school closure) work becomes a joint effort between trustees and superintendents, while at other times (eg, strategy for essential skills) the trustees focus on intended outcomes and impacts, and leave the operational matters to staff.

Other boards are less clear about the boundaries between their role in "steering and not rowing" in terms of the work of the district. In these cases, trustees want to micromanage aspects of the district's day-to-day operations. Others want to shape not only policy but also policy implementation at the level of the school or the classroom. Some trustees visit "*their* schools" in the area in which they secured election and offer guidance to principals. In such circumstances, the superintendent often functions as mediator, and must set the strategy straight. Notably, school trustees have, on occasion, been advised through legal authorities that they are no longer welcome in "*their*" schools because of these role boundary issues (Littleford 2015).

The relationship between the district and the government is also complex. For example, does the district always comply with the guidance from the ministry of education, or do they "call out" the ministry when it is clear that its actions are inappropriate for the district or the province as a whole? Some examples may underline this tension:

- The current requirement of the Alberta government for each district to develop clear LGBTQ policies aligned with the legal requirements of Bill 10. Some districts—Catholic boards in particular—do not align with the LGBTQ thinking of the government and have submitted policies that may make enforcement by the minister of education inevitable.
- The use of Grade 3 SLAs as indicators of student progress in some selected districts. Some districts (along with the ATA) pressured the government to make SLA participation voluntary, given the debacle of the first roll out of these provincewide assessments.

- The largest districts in Alberta, in March 2015, challenged the government over its education budget and demanded change.
- The Alberta School Boards Association backed the demand for a change in the ratio between teacher assessment and provincial examination for the high school diploma.

These are all examples of districts standing up for their constituents and seeking change in government thinking.

Boards are elected by the people to represent the interests of their district and deliver an education service that is appropriate for that community. Finding the balance between compliance and challenge, between innovation and being an agent for government is difficult.

But these are recent examples. Over a significant period of time, boards have been largely compliant and conforming, not creative and challenging. It is as if the trustees see their role as implementers of government policy or suggestions, as opposed to shapers of their own agenda for student learning. Government is providing the funds for school system, is able to replace boards (and has done so), is able to require boards to take actions, and has a role in the appointment and renewal of superintendents—this affects perceptions. But boards are elected by the people to represent the interests of their district and deliver an education service that is appropriate for that community. Finding the balance between compliance and challenge, between innovation and being an agent for government is difficult. Few boards consistently find this balance, though some achieve it more often than others. Superintendents sometimes feel caught between "a rock and a hard place" in relation to these issues.

Managing Downward

School leadership and the culture of performance and care they foster are the keys to school outcomes, at least according to over thirty years of research on school effectiveness (Reynolds and Teddlie 2016). The most critical decision a superintendent makes is who to appoint as a principal or member of a school leadership team in which school when. The subsequent decisions relate to how they leverage the assets of the district to support the leadership teams in each school and how to create an effective community of practice within and between schools.

This demand for collaborative leadership work requires a combination of instructional leadership, the creation of pockets of innovation resources or incubation capacity within the district, and the provision of an enabling framework in which principals and their teams can operate. As noted earlier, less centralization is more likely to produce more outcomes and innovation, provided strategic intentions for the system as a whole are clear.

To be effective once the strategic frame and performance requirements are set, the superintendent's role is to mentor, coach and guide rather than to control, manage and direct. Rather than instructing principals, they should enable them. This is not a universal understanding. Some superintendents see their role as directing local operations through the principal and will do so through directives, disciplinary action and resource allocation.

Managing Across

Superintendents and their own staff provide points of access for a range of stakeholders. These include (1) the teacher union in relation to district-level bargaining, specific issues with respect to district policy or concerns about a teacher; (2) other districts with respect to collaborative opportunities, resource sharing or teacher professional development; (3) other organizations with respect to a range of activities that relate directly to the work of schools (eg, sports bodies) and with respect to work placements and cooperative programs (eg, postsecondary institutions, community-based organizations). These relationships are usually functional and delegated, unless they are new or problematic, in which case the superintendent may get involved.

This work is demonstrated by the ongoing discussion between Edmonton Catholic and Edmonton Public with respect to shared transportation, as well as collaboration between a number of districts for the Alberta–Ontario–Norway partnership with respect to mathematics education (NORCAN).

Managing across challenges often relate to dealing with vendors. To better leverage available data about students and their performance, many districts across Canada have been persuaded by vendors to buy into data analytics systems, which permit extensive data mining, faster and more frequent reporting, and the use of dashboards for intervention, assessment and assurance. A systematic review of these developments was offered by the ATA (2014a), which found that 93 per cent of teachers were never consulted or engaged in any conversations about the adoption and use of these reporting tools, even though all concerned knew they would create significant and substantial workload implications for teachers (in fact, 66 per cent of the teachers surveyed suggest that these tools have significantly impacted their workload). Worse, few were given appropriate and adequate training in the use of these tools. It is not surprising given these data that the efficacy and efficiency in data analytics in use appears low. Superintendents and their information technology teams can at times see digital tools as valuable and, not unlike vendors, "sell" them. Balancing new opportunities with value and doing so through engagement with the profession are essential, yet not always done in the case of systemwide buys.

Relationships with some stakeholders can, from time to time, be strained. Tensions can emerge, for instance, between a district and its union local or between parent groups and the district, often over special needs education, technology, conditions of teaching or a specific aspect of the curriculum. To be most effective, superintendents have to have built strong relationships robust enough to withstand difficult and challenging conversations. Historically, most superintendents have understood this well, but occasionally challenges arise.

Managing Outward

Managing relationships with the media, and through it the public, is a significant challenge. There are several examples of how to do this well (eg, Edmonton Public school closures) and badly (eg, Edmonton Public's handling of the no-zeros issue). Much depends on the disciplined approach of the district—who can say what, when and to whom and with what freedoms of scope.

Practices vary between districts. Larger districts have both policy and dedicated staff who engage with the media on a regular basis and can use their contact networks to at least influence the "shape" of a story. Smaller districts, on the other hand, rely on the board chair and superintendent to react to a media request. Some districts simply create no-win situations in which the media hold all the cards (eg, a brawl between trustees during a 2011 trustee meeting in Everett (Washington, US), the unauthorized recording of school board activities, or the challenges faced by Edmonton Catholic over the last two to three years in terms of governance).

Superintendents normally seek to be proactive in relationships with the media, creating long-term links to local media so that when they are in the spotlight they can leverage that relationship to ensure a "fair hearing," depending on the issue. For example, when a teacher is charged under the laws related to predatory sexual behaviour, media will want to know the reaction of the district. Fairness in the media follows relationships.

This work is now made more difficult by the use of social media by trustees, district staff and students. While these can be useful platforms, they also increase the level of uncertainty and vulnerability for the district. Recently, one group of trustees agreed to suspend all of their social media activities related to their work as trustees for three months, given the way in which their postings had emerged in the media and caused unnecessary tensions and disputes.

Also with an eye to managing outward, in 2015, the larger school districts in Alberta (Edmonton Public and Catholic, Calgary Public and Catholic) came together as a "loose-tight" advocacy organization. The four chairs of these metro school boards regularly participate in video conference calls strategizing on joint issues of concern and brainstorming about new opportunities to advocate. They have published joint newsletters, held meetings with the minister of education, lobbied government and opposition MLAs, and shared best practices and collaborated on emergent issues. This can be seen as part of the movement to create a community of practice for trustees within Alberta, one independent of government. It is a response to the desire to retain Alberta's status as a leading, innovative jurisdiction in the world.

SUMMARY OF KEY ROLES

This review of key roles looks very different from other accounts in the available literature. For example, the table that follows is a role description linked to a statement of standards presented as part of a valuable Ontario review of the role of the superintendent in systems leadership and change.

The issues and roles outlined above factor into this table; however, the table seeks more to state an aspirational standard than to indicate the layers and depth of the superintendency.

Considering the table below (Lorenz 2008) in the light of the commentary above, it becomes clear that superintendency is not easy work in any school district and can be made more difficult if managing upward occupies more time than building engaged, professional communities focused on learning, adaptability and performance. The work depends on a trusting, boundary-based relationship between trustees and superintendents—something that is not always present.

LEADERSHIP DIMENSIONS	INDICATORS
Visionary Leadership	• The school system's culture is collaborative, innovative and supportive of efforts to improve student learning. • A collective vision of a preferred future, reflecting shared values and beliefs of the school system community, is clearly articulated. • High levels of student achievement and staff performance are promoted. • Each student has the opportunity to develop a strong foundation for citizenship, employment, and life-long learning. • School system planning is evidence-based.
Instructional Leadership	• Each student has access to appropriate programming based on his/her learning needs. • Each teacher consistently meets the Alberta Teaching Quality Standard. • Exemplary instructional practices are identified, implemented and supported. • Opportunities are provided for teachers to improve professional practice by engaging in reflective dialogue and collective inquiry about teaching and learning. • Teaching strategies and student assessment practices are aligned with the intended learner outcomes in the Program of Studies. • Student learning improves through the appropriate application of assessment strategies for, of and as learning. Reporting of student learning reflects progress toward achieving the intended outcomes in the Program of Studies. Multiple indicators and sources of evidence provide students with balanced opportunities to demonstrate their learning. • Student assessment informs and shapes instruction. • School administrators provide effective instructional leadership. • Student and staff accomplishments are recognized and celebrated.
Human Resource Leadership	• Recruitment strategies lead to the selection of qualified and effective staff. • All staff members are supervised and evaluated in accordance with school system requirements. • Staff development aligns with provincial, school system, and school education plans. • Leadership is developed throughout the school system. • Contractual obligations with staff are fulfilled. • Principles of natural justice prevail in resolving staff performance issues. • Staff accomplishments are recognized and celebrated.

Ethical Leadership	• Decisions align with the best interests of students and reflect exemplary moral and ethical wisdom. • Personal actions are consistent with the CASS Code of Professional Conduct.
Effective Relationships	• Board decisions and directions are communicated to the school system community in a timely and accurate manner. • Trust and respect characterize relationships among staff members, school councils, parents/guardians, board members, Alberta Education, and other stakeholders. • Parents/guardians and community members are meaningfully involved in the school system. • Conflict resolution results from effective processes. • Collaborative approaches to problem solving build consensus.
Organizational Leadership and Management	• System operations comply in a timely way with all statutory, regulatory and board requirements. • School plant, equipment and support systems operate safely, effectively and efficiently. • Human, material and financial resources are secured, allocated and managed in an effective, responsible and accountable manner. • Organizational structures and operational plans provide clear direction. • The financial management of the school system is in accordance with the terms and conditions of funding received under the *School Act* or any other applicable act or regulation. • Organizational performance is monitored and adjusted when necessary.
External Influences on Education	• Consideration is given to external political, economic, legal and cultural contexts affecting the school system. • Consideration is given to provincial, national and global issues and trends affecting the school system. • The school system demonstrates the benefits of public education. • Partnerships enhance public education.
Chief Executive and Chief Education Officer Leadership	• Each staff member is accountable to the board through the superintendent. • The board is provided with information, advice and support as necessary to fulfill its governance role. (Or the board is provided with the necessary information, advice and support to fulfill its governance role.) • The superintendent's relationship with the board is respectful, collegial and cooperative. • Appropriate processes are used to develop and review school system administrative procedures and educational initiatives. • Board policies are translated into administrative procedures as required. • Service delivery and other operations comply with board policies and school system administrative procedures. • Board policies and school system administrative procedures are congruent with provincial and federal requirements.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE

When we explore the modest literature on the role and role behaviours of the superintendent, five key barriers to effective performance of the role emerge. These are:

1. Community resistance
2. Equity and the challenge of differential resourcing
3. Practice over policy
4. Idea rich and resource poor
5. Accountability versus assurance

Let us explore each of these in turn.

1. Community resistance

Communities are generally more inclined to continuity than to change. That is, change is difficult for communities to accept. For example, shifting from a semester-based school system to year-round schooling causes all sorts of challenges for parents, daycare providers, police and social services, not to mention students and teachers.

Radical changes in the provision of schooling—school closures, changes to school boundaries—are also often controversial. So too are curriculum changes or innovations in what students are learning or how they are being taught (eg, the (albeit brief) exchanges in Ontario over sex education or the petition in Alberta about the teaching of mathematics).

Communities, when engaged in change and supportive, can be a major resource. However, superintendents need to carefully manage community expectations and experiences. When they do so, they can harness the skills of the community to support their strategic intentions and change process.

2. Equity and the challenge of differential resourcing

Equity is not just about access, it is also about outcomes. Therefore, to secure improved outcomes from those who have historically not performed well in school systems, there is need to both differentiate and customize teaching, learning and support. This, in turn, requires differential funding. Students with special needs, as well as gifted and FNMI learners, demonstrate this need.

Trade-offs to support differentiated provision of resources and pedagogy by need, to improve overall learning outcomes, have consequences especially for the able learner and for class size. Systems thinking outlines what generally happens: more resources go to those who are successful so as to sustain the success. Yet, to secure overall improvements for the system as a whole, reallocation of

resources from successful schools to those who are struggling (or from successful programs to new programs aimed to improve outcomes for those who need additional help) may be necessary.

This is challenging work, and is highly charged both operationally and politically. Though often done well, poor execution can create lasting systemwide difficulties, especially in the context of increasing austerity and challenge.

3. Practice over policy

Government and districts produce policy that finds its way into schools. What happens next is critical. Just as communities prefer continuity over change, so too do many of the staff of schools. If the policy requires a change in practices, then it will often take time for the new practice to become embedded into the day-to-day life of the school. Technology adoption provides an example: not all teachers embrace technology, even in districts that have policies enabling such developments. As well, the difference between policy as rhetoric and practice with respect to special needs or educational change and transformation indicates how policy and practice are often misaligned.

If one were to look at the day-to-day behaviours and practices within a school, could he or she discern the policy in place from this behaviour, as it relates to assessment, inclusion, technology use, personalized learning, differentiated instruction? The reality is that practice trumps policy.

Many schools are moving toward a competency-based curriculum for learners (Christensen and Lane 2016), albeit at different speeds and levels in different

Change management has to be done well for teachers to be successful; poorly managed change leads to both hesitancy and potential resistance, sometimes leading to, in effect, little change.

jurisdictions. The speed and level are determined by the need to embed what is in fact a substantive shift, as well as how students learn. As Christensen and Lane (2016) make clear, "the response [to the development of competencies across the curriculum] can be somewhat less positive for teachers who experience this new curriculum focus as something added onto an already full curriculum load" (p 10). Change management has to be done well for teachers to be successful; poorly managed change leads to both hesitancy and potential resistance, sometimes leading to, in effect, little change. Too often policy initiatives are launched without sufficient supports for the needed thinking and behavioural changes for practitioners—with no investment in professional development, supportive coaching and modeling of appropriate behaviours in communities of practice. When this occurs, resistance coupled with a reversion to former practice often occurs.

Superintendents who understand this potential barrier limit the number of changes to policy to ensure that changes made become embedded in practice. They also make related investments in professional supports and development to enable effective practice. Superintendents who ignore the reality of this barrier launch too many policy-driven initiatives, resulting in principals

and teachers suffering from change fatigue. Effective superintendents recognize that, in many situations, less is more.

4. Idea rich and resource poor

Some districts have significant funds and fiscal reserves, but no strategy for their use to improve performance in their schools and increase teacher engagement and professionalism. Others are resource poor, but achieving great results. Others have the resources they need to enable their strategy to move from ideas to action. Not all significant change requires new funds and new resources.

Inadequate funding becomes a notable barrier when a district leadership team has great ideas and can demonstrate, through incubators and small scale research and evaluation, that they can make a significant difference to learning outcomes and school performance but cannot scale across the district due to a lack of resources. It happens more often than one might think and will happen even more in the future, as austerity bites deeper into budgets.

Superintendents seek to use their ability to engage in resource trade-offs to enable more innovation, but there is a limit to the extent to which this can fuel sustainable change. At some point, baseline investments that can be maintained over time need to be made.

Accountability regimes can impede reflective practice, innovation and professional engagement.

5. Accountability versus assurance

One challenge in the English education system, now a rapidly devolving structure with schools reporting directly to the UK Government, is the substantial volume of reporting required to demonstrate performance. Indeed, the term "*performativity*" (Murray 2012; Visser 2016)—which refers to reporting, audit and analytics required of teachers and school administrators to justify expenditure and their sustainability as educational institutions—could have been created simply to describe the bureaucratic edifice that now confronts teachers in England. The focus on performance and reporting has increased non-negotiable workloads and costs while at the same time rendering invisible the real work of teachers and schools. As Stephen Ball (2012) has noted,

> the first-order effect of performativity is to reorient pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes and are a deflection of attention away from aspects of social, emotional or moral development that have no immediate performative value. (p 32)

The situation does not appear to be as critical in Canada, but is seen by some to be moving in this "performativity" direction (Canada Council on Learning 2011).

From a teacher perspective, almost all reporting is to meet the requirement of someone else— principals, parents, school district, ministry. Teachers can share their assessment of progress with their students and their parents at any time, and often do. Recording that performance for their own

use is helpful, especially when their assessments are increasingly valued as the needed assessments for diploma examinations, college/university admission, or co-op or work placements. It is all the other reports and filings that have to be made that teachers are finding increasingly burdensome. Indeed, English teachers cite this non-negotiable reporting, together with class size, as a primary reason for them considering leaving the profession (National Audit Office 2016; Hayes 2016).

Accountability regimes can impede reflective practice, innovation and professional engagement. They also disrupt the way in which schools function, as we can see from the Grade 3 SLAs and how PISA results begin to distort focus and functioning of schools (Pereyra et al 2011; *The Guardian* 2014). This has led some school systems to shift their focus away from accountability to public assurance, looking for rich forms of evaluation of the outcomes of schools based on the full range of the activities of schools and not just on academic performance. Public assurance requires each school to develop their school development plan and appropriate measures of their strategic intentions and then evaluate outcomes and impacts over time (Murgatroyd 2011). School boards can require key measures for each school, and superintendents enable this work and support it through making resources available for high quality, relevant assurance measures. Each school reports its outcomes against its own development plan and adjusts its planning so that continuous improvement can occur. This "bottom-up" process is enabling and supportive of the kind of effective educational leadership described above. In North America this practice is not widespread, but it is common throughout Scandinavia and is growing in Scotland and Wales.

PULLING THE ANALYSIS TOGETHER

Superintendents are often focused, strategic systems thinkers who see their role as "quarterbacking" professional teachers, enabling and encouraging innovation at the level of the school and ensuring that the available resources are managed intelligently in the service of students and teachers. There are others, however, who see themselves more like the CEO of a network organization in which they are responsible for controlling consistency and performance by their rules, trying to run the district as a highly organized system. Many more are simply trying to manage uncertainty and risk, including a declining resource base, while keeping their system going. It is not an easy job. It is also a job that is difficult to fill.

Making the role more demanding are the relationships that need to be both fostered and sustained with trustees, principals, stakeholders and government. These relationships involve explicit and implicit "rules" and tacit understandings of boundaries. In times of challenge, threat, crisis or uncertainty these rule-sets are thrown into sharp relief; at these times, superintendents demonstrate that they are highly capable and strategic leaders, or that they are not. A retired superintendent said, "If all is going well, then generally you can get on and do what needs to be done. It's when there is a problem or a crisis that you know who you need to deal with and who is against you…*sometimes it comes as a surprise to find out just how few supporters you have…*" (our emphasis).

The literature on the superintendency is substantial, but the literature related to the way in which this role is performed in (especially in Canada) is thin. There is little thoroughgoing analysis of what excellence looks like in terms of behaviours and what difference the superintendent can actually make on student achievement for all leaners. Some pieces (eg, Spillane and Regnier 1997), are more rhetoric than research. Where there has been an analysis of the effective behavioural practices of school superintendents (eg, Canales et al 2008), the work gives emphasis to uncertainty, persuasiveness, trade-offs, strategic clarity and futures thinking— precisely the foci of this paper.

FOUR INTERVIEWS –FLESHING OUT THE SUPERINTENDENCY

The previous section outlined a great many features, issues and challenges related to the role of the superintendent. It aimed to create a framework that would permit more detailed analysis, particularly of the interfaces between the superintendent and others with key leadership and governance roles in the system. But this is a skeleton—a frame—and it needs muscle and flesh to bring it alive. This was done through four in-depth interviews with superintendents working in Alberta. Insightful and incisive, these interviews give meaning to the analysis just offered.

The Big Messages

> "I think you have to be a strong facilitator….I think you have to be a strong coordinator. You have to be someone who is able to bring people together. And... and you have to be very politically astute."

> "I have to be very, very nimble in my leadership... to be very focused in terms of we're going forward... but I don't know exactly where that end path is going to be."

> "I'm going to repeat what I said at the very beginning about the importance of trying to ease off on teachers. But, God, we haven't eased off on ourselves yet."

> "One of the things that people may not understand... they think as a superintendent you've reached the pinnacle of all positions where you're now in charge of everything and you answer to nobody. Never in my education career have I realized that I am now in the position that answers to absolutely everybody."

These four statements—one from each of four respondents—show that the superintendent's role is one of balance, nimbleness, pressure and stress, and ambiguity. Moreover, they all reinforce the above analysis. The interviews explored the superintendent's work in general and then focused on some specific issues with respect to inclusion, educational technology and teacher workload—all issues of concern within the profession and across the system.

Though this report will not include the full interviews here, this section summarizes the key themes that emerged from them.

Workload

Reporting on workload findings was complicated by the different interpretations of the question by the four different interviewers. The interview protocol did not clarify for interviewers or the responding interviewees what aspects of workload were to be considered. Therefore, in two of the four interviews, the focus was on the workload of the *teacher* rather than the workload of the *superintendent*.

SUCCESSES

"Small wins." Small policy tweaks can yield big results.

Districts can leverage their capacity for centralized authority to improve workload antagonisms. Superintendent 1, for example, has become more flexible by videoconferencing to ease administrators' travel time. "Sometimes [changes] seem so tiny," he said, "But they could have substantial, positive impacts." In another example, Superintendent 1's district established policies limiting parents' demands on teachers, preventing parents from asking for many days' worth of individual lesson or homework plans for their children when they take family holidays, and limiting the time teachers are required to spend after school in a parent interview.

Superintendents want to empower their school leaders and teachers.

The decision-making processes of the superintendents in these interviews were consistently informed by the CASS mandate to empower staff. Citing flexible time-tabling and technology purchases as opportunities for staff to innovate and make the best decisions for their own students and communities, Superintendent 3 stated, "I'm building a little bit of autonomy in our own staff to do what maybe they think is… is the right way. Or a better way."

The superintendents also recognize that empowerment helps them to do their jobs better. They described the excellent team members with whom they worked. Superintendent 2 stated, "I have an amazing team that I get to work with on a daily basis that are all incredibly competent, but way more than just competent. I mean they excel in what they do and I could turn anything over to anybody at any time and they would do it as good or better and I know that." Superintendent 4 recognized that he was stronger when he "hired people who are smarter than I am" and gave them the tools and authority they need to do their jobs well.

Unclear from these interviews is the extent to which the ethos of empowerment trickles down to the school level. The clearest cases of shared power were at the district level; there were relatively few anecdotes about distributed leadership (and empowerment) at school leadership and classroom levels.

Superintendents are listening.

Superintendents have great empathy for teachers with respect to workload. The interviewees all described efforts to gather information about what their teachers needed through open-door policies, direct lines, school visits and district surveys. All were clear that teacher workload is a growing concern.

Could some of the issues with workload be addressed by "tweaking" culture and expectations? Superintendent 3 hoped that by setting firmer boundaries around his own work–life balance, he could model assertive boundary setting for staff. He explained, "If a staff member emails me, I'll email back on the… on the weekend, but typically… I'm not sending an email out to them because… because if… if I'm valuing that time, I need… I'm trying to model that I'm valuing that time and they need to model… and value that time as well."

Superintendent 1 suggested that hearing teachers sometimes required a conscious effort to empathize with them. It was important not to have a knee-jerk reaction that might cause one to dismiss complaints as small, or otherwise unwarranted. A recent teacher survey, he said, "forced me to say 'Okay be calm, look at this. What can we learn? What is it that's true about what they're saying?…Let's think this one over.' So it's… it's somewhat more minor, but in a sense it becomes important [when you] keep in mind that the workload is heavy and what is it that we can do?"

> **It is clear that superintendents are working under the same conditions of complexity and intensity as administrators and teachers, are subject to the same pressures, and are equally susceptible to the negative repercussions of overwork.**

CHALLENGES

Everyone is in the same boat.

With respect to their own workloads, the superintendents interviewed all described intense schedules with frequent evening meetings. Superintendent 3 wondered whether he would be able to keep up the pace of a 70-hour work week as he gets older. Superintendent 4 predicted that superintendents would not stay in their positions for more than five or six years because the position is simply too intense and demanding. It is clear that superintendents are working under the same conditions of complexity and intensity as administrators and teachers, are subject to the same pressures, and are equally susceptible to the negative repercussions of overwork. There ought to be great capacity for empathy under these shared conditions; this might be a meaningful avenue for further study.

Inclusion and Students with Special Needs

Because the question was not specific, most of the conversations here focused on students with medical conditions and learning disabilities—that is, students who are coded and thus considered and provided for in Central Office budgets. Absent from these discussions were the un-coded students that, according to administrators in *The Future of the Principalship in Canada* (ATA 2014*c*), are an increasing source of stress and an increasing challenge to teachers in the classroom. Newcomer families, for example, have very high needs, but, as Superintendent 1 noted, "There's not a nickel coming from the province to support us with those kids." Mental health and behavioural issues

among students were also frequently cited by *The Future of the Principalship in Canada* (ATA 2014c) respondents, but these are less likely to be assessed, coded and funded.

SUCCESSES

There is great potential in inclusive education.

Districts and their schools have strong ideals about inclusion, despite its ongoing challenges. Superintendent 1 reflected, "We… we have gone, as a society, as a province, a long way in including as many kids as we can." Superintendent 2 felt Catholic values contributed to inclusion: "in the past, where people have been…basically banished from society and, you know, to look at homosexual children, and understand that they're children of God. I mean they… they have different… for other people, they see them as different, but the reality is, we're all the same. So I see us as… when we're inclusive, when we talk about an inclusive community, it's everybody. And… and the beauty of Catholic education, again, is that you look at every child with the face of God." Superintendent 4 stressed that even when staff did not know how to support children with disabilities, their caring was never in question. Teachers are learning how to use pedagogy as an effective intervention.

CHALLENGES

Resources for inclusive education are not sufficient.

All of the superintendents in this sample stated that resources were not sufficient to meet demand. In a specific example, Superintendent 4 described how 30 per cent of his annual budget—the equivalent of three teachers' salaries—was devoted to the care of just two very high needs (Tier Four) students in one of his high schools. Superintendent 1 was wrestling with the upper limits of the effectiveness of inclusion, especially in the higher grades: "I've been a strong proponent for years and years. Then last spring, last summer, last fall, it's like it hit the wall for me and though I've never supported exclusive classrooms and so on, we now have five because I simply said it's, like, enough." Although full inclusion remains the ideal, he said, at some point "it's no longer pedagogical."

Superintendent 4 anticipated that, in the future, scarce resources would lead to greater inequities for students: "If you're rich you can afford tutoring, your own technologies, supports in different ways, great. If you can't—nope. So it's a social injustice as much as anything."

Pressure to move directly to high-level, high-cost interventions.

The need for aides is undeniable and all of the interviewees felt under-resourced in this area; however, the superintendents also described challenges in persuading both parents and teachers not to leap immediately to asking for an educational assistant. "Parents will even shop around," said Superintendent 1, "They'll go to public, Catholic, francophone schools and, you know, and they're looking for commitment. Will there be an aide and at what percentage? Then there's the quiet pressure on the part of teachers saying 'Oh my god, I'm going to have this many, or this type, you

know, I… I need an aide. I absolutely need an aide.'" Superintendent 3 stated, "Not only do we have not enough resources, but I don't think we've used the resources well enough." Persuading teachers and parents that improvements could be made given existing resources is, from the district perspective, very difficult and time consuming.

Technology

The technology issues that emerged in the interviews were complex and varied. The very diverse topics included teacher professional development, digital citizenship, classroom and school level policies, and the pressing need to ensure technology was integrated into learning. Pace of change and lack of consensus or certainty around future directions were overarching concerns. Ambivalence around technology echoes the findings in Canada from the national study on the principalship, in which educators saw great educational potential in technology, but felt there were many barriers to full and responsible implementation in classrooms (ATA 2014c).

SUCCESSES

Slow progress toward good infrastructure and reliable evergreening.
The superintendents felt progress had been made in terms of increasing the quantity and reliability of technology in their schools. Central offices have good technical support in place.

Putting technology and control in the hands of teachers and students.
Superintendent 3 and Superintendent 4 considered it a success that schools had more choices over how to purchase and use technology in the classroom. Superintendent 4 described this as a positive "culture shift from micromanagement to distributed decision making." He also believed his district had made progress in terms of thinking about technology for learning, instead of just as infrastructure for its own sake.

CHALLENGES

Big costs and big unpredictability.
The superintendents described the challenges of making informed decisions about very expensive purchases. Superintendent 1 explained, "Of course, you're pressured because you have sales people and you have others convincing you that, for example, Windows 360 is *the* product, and then of course, I'm looking at my techies who say 'Why would you spend all that money?' So but I've always… I've always watched this one carefully, very carefully, because it's a lot of money and you're trying to make the best call possible, knowing that you will be wrong occasionally."

… But decentralized purchasing has its own costs.
Some districts reduce the burden of centralized decisions around technology by devolving some of these responsibilities to schools although, as noted earlier, this can lead to its own challenges.

Superintendent 4, for example, who advocated generally for site-based decisions and "BYOD" (Bring Your Own Device) still noted that this created policy and discipline problems at the school-site level that remained unresolved.

Funding and prioritizing professional development is a challenge.

Superintendent 4 suggested that financial decisions around technology are also a constant matter of trade-offs between infrastructure and licensing on the one hand, and teacher professional development on the other. The issue is noteworthy, as principals in one study (ATA 2014c) cited better professional development related to technology as a very pressing need in their schools. "We have lots of technology," stated Superintendent 3, "I'm not sure whether we have done enough to make it work for us. You know I mean… think about all the millions of dollars that were put into the resource capital, but you [need] the professional development capital as well. Because if you don't have that professional development capital, you're not leveraging technology like you should."

Consensus about future directions is elusive.

The uncertainties and ambivalences that superintendents are feeling with respect to technology extend into the community. As Superintendent 4 described, things "change so fast we can't keep up…. As soon as I think we've got the right format or idea in place, something comes along and it's the next big thing, and teachers are like pulling their hair out and going 'what do I do with this?' So it's trying to create a culture where people understand that our students are pretty tech savvy and it's okay that they know more than us, and allow them to be the teachers." He also described deep divides in his communities over how much students should be accessing technology in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This section outlines a range of understanding, issues, opportunities and challenges all focused on the superintendent as a leader in a complex, networked system with varied forms of governance, resource and people challenges. There is much more to understand about the leadership dynamics of such a complex system which is full of complex problems and opportunities for progress, innovation and success.

None of the challenges should detract from a simple fact. Alberta has one of the world's highest performing educational systems. One reason for this is the quality of leadership, persistence and practice found throughout the system. To continue to be a leading system, we need to do much more to better understand leadership development needs and the investments necessary in leadership and change management supports.

Research Agenda

There is a strong case for a collaborative, focused research agenda on the nature of governance and leadership in the Alberta school system. Government, CASS, ATA and the faculties of education may wish to consider the opportunity for a range of studies which, taken together, advance our understanding of both what is happening and what might happen under a variety of scenarios. Alberta needs to think ahead so as to lead across the system and manage within its school districts.

The business case for this work has three components: the scientific case, the practical case and the principled case.

THE SCIENTIFIC CASE

The above sections provide a thorough review of the variable approaches to the superintendency in recent literature. Yet, caution is necessary in extrapolating generalizable claims about superintendents' roles across different systemic/institutional, governance/fiscal, and local political and cultural contexts. This is because the dynamics of regulation, governance and appointment vary by province, from state to state, and, indeed, from country to country. This is the shortcoming of the literature on school leadership more generally: the assumption of a "generic" school leader and principal, and the derivation of axioms about school reform and change across cultural and political economic contexts, even where there are visibly different traditions and resources in play (eg, the extrapolation of Finnish or Singaporean approaches to other cultural contexts; or, more typically, the generalization of American or Canadian educational research on specific local contexts and cases to "other" national, systemic and cultural institutions). This report has used examples and evidence from a number of European, US and other jurisdictions for comparison purposes, but recognizes that these each operate in very different socio-economic and cultural contexts. Alberta needs to understand educational leadership within its own context and be cognizant of developments elsewhere. This is particularly important in this province given that superintendents are holders of teaching certificates and are considered to be accomplished members of the teaching profession.

The extensive literature on policy-borrowing now indicates an increasing push toward grandiose national and regional comparisons and the search for universal, generalizable "solutions" and frameworks regardless of local and regional variance in educational context. Singapore, for example, has a highly centralized system with no local school boards or local school governance and, by Canadian standards, funding of school physical plant, professional development and teacher training at a substantially higher percentage of GDP. It also has a set of different cultural norms toward centralized authority and leadership than might be found in other high-performing school systems.

Canada in general and Alberta in particular need to resist the temptation to adopt wholesale systems and models that come from different cultures, contexts and traditions. Colonialization through the export of educational models is alive and well and being practiced globally, funded by both venture capital and public investment.

At best, claims about what works in educational governance need to be tempered by close empirical examination of specific local and regional cases. Local, regional and provincial systems of governance have histories; leadership/management and governance structures themselves constitute local cultures, with specific habituated patterns, precedents and conventions, taken-for-granted assumptions, and folk wisdom that dictate specific patterns of interaction, knowledge/power relations, hierarchies, and attitudes (Brandon et al 2015).

This is justification in and of itself for a study of superintendents, governance and leadership in Alberta's school systems. Such a study needs to explore what is to be done, by whom, in what roles, and with what supports. It needs to be built empirically from the ground up, rather than extrapolated from the Ontario or American school leadership literature. Alberta is different and should drive its own models and frameworks.

THE PRACTICAL CASE

In Alberta, there is a shared recognition that the contraction of the province's resource-based economy has meant that the Government of Alberta is unlikely to have the economic resources to drive significant educational reform and "transformation" with centralized projects or major provincewide interventions. Prior to the economic shift and change of government, the province was already struggling to fund and deliver sufficient basic infrastructure to handle increasing student numbers, deliver school building projects on time, and fund and support teacher-led innovation. Further, from a managerial governmental standpoint, radically declining tax and funding resources coupled with continued population growth and changing demography creates openings, needs and opportunities for substantive reform. At the same time, they tend to preclude centrally-driven and funded school, curriculum and assessment reform packages. Innovation, change and development are most likely to be local rather than provincial—and most likely led from a base in schools rather than from district offices (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Evers and Kneyber 2016)—each operating within a broad framework for district and provincial goals and assurance.

In this regard, there is both a window and an imperative to explore collaborative research and development, innovation and reform projects, activities and initiatives that might address specific areas of need. These include First Nations education, LGBTQ student needs, second language support, integrated support for students with special learning needs, the use and misuse of educational technology, and other areas of education reform (eg, addressing issues of ongoing support for teachers, principals and schools in supporting instructional leadership and school

reform, curriculum reform, and alternative assessment together with a new emphasis on skills and "work-ready" learning). All of these specific strategic areas cannot be addressed, however, without exploring the different leadership roles in the school system, most especially that of the superintendent. If the reforms are aimed at improved equity and a great school for all (ATA 2012), then what leadership and supports are needed to enable effective and efficient changes? The literature is clear: change is difficult.

Indeed, according to Zigarmi and Hoekstra (2008) around 70 per cent of change efforts do not achieve the results expected or fail altogether. In addition, a 2013 study by Willis Towers Watson consulting group, which involved 276 large and midsize organizations from North America, Europe and Asia, found:

- Leaders felt 55 per cent of change management initiatives met initial objectives, but only 25 per cent felt gains were sustained over time—a high failure rate.
- 87 per cent of respondents trained their colleagues to "manage change," but only (a dismal) 22 per cent felt the training was actually effective. It is difficult to enable change by modest investments in training and professional development.
- 68 per cent of leaders said they are "getting the message" about reasons for major organizational changes, but that figure falls to 53 per cent for middle managers and 40 per cent for those who work on the front line. It is not possible to just look at superintendents as leaders—it is essential to look up and down the school system if we wish change to be sustained.

The reasons change and development are difficult to deliver in any kind of organization are complex. To improve the chances of success, deepening our understanding of leadership roles, needed supports and the challenges which come with the task of change in our school system is vital.

THE PRINCIPLED CASE: EQUITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE NEW ALBERTA

Current initiatives across Alberta's school system focus on the imperatives for equity in Alberta schooling (Murgatroyd and Couture 2013). The 2016 CASS conference focused strongly on the challenges of cultural, linguistic and gender/sexual diversity facing school leaders. Alberta schools now have a substantial population of second and foreign language learners, increasing populations of migrant and refugee students, increasing numbers of students with special learning needs and a fast growing population of First Nations youth. First Nations students and communities continue to struggle to attain comparable levels of access and achievement. Given the contraction of the Alberta economy, an increasing number of students are growing up in conditions of financial and material hardship, with families struggling to make ends meet. In the face of these new population demographics, shared good faith and a consensual commitment to equity and social justice in education are but starting points. Rhetoric and strategic statements do not constitute action. There is clearly a need for shared mobilization and coordinated action on these fronts.

Given the push for equity, the lack of cultural diversity among the superintendents, the leadership of the profession, and the overall workforce of teachers and principals is surprising. The systems under study here are suffering from a kind of "time lag," with the workforce demographics struggling to keep pace with the change in the students and communities that the system has responsibility for educating.

Often educational leadership has what we might term a "half-life," where a particular generation of teachers moves through the teaching ranks to the role of principal and, for a select few, into superintendent positions. A key challenge here is to not treat the "teaching workforce" or the "superintendents" as a culturally, demographically unmarked, homogeneous, or "neutral" group, but rather rigorously document their training backgrounds, their cultural, biographical/historical resources and experiences, and examine how these interact with their decision making and leadership. This will be a sensitive task; however, proper social science research design simultaneously attempts to analyze how diversity and difference, cohort heterogeneity and homogeneity influence action and practice, while ethically protecting human subjects' and cohorts' anonymity and professionalism.

At the same time, the sheer complexity of the challenges, accountabilities and, indeed, constraints facing superintendents at this critical juncture in Alberta education requires rigorous empirical examination. This is why the consensus panel is proposing a research agenda.

What research is needed?

Given these arguments favouring a collaborative research agenda, what might this work focus on?

Clearly, there is a need to build on the extant research, given the shortage of work focused on the way in which Canadian superintendents perform their roles. But there is also a need to focus on some critical questions that, addressed sensitively but systematically, will help refine and develop Alberta's educational leadership and support change, development, performance and innovation.

A key suggestion, emerging from the literature review and the panel's analysis, is that it is as much the role of one leader (ie, the superintendent) as the varied interaction of different people in different leadership roles within a school authority that determines system performance and outcomes. In this context, we need to better understand the actual leadership practices and experiences of and for superintendents, principals and teachers working together to advance educational improvement. For example, in Ontario, the concept of "collaborative professionalism" has now been defined and enshrined in Policy/Program Memorandum No. 159. This requires leadership teams to outline a vision, shared understanding and commitment to collaborative working and professional respect. Rather than focusing on questions about the "role of the superintendency" only, further investigations should focus on the leadership practices of superintendents, principals and

teacher-leaders and the interrelationships between these professionals in supporting improvements in teaching, learning and equity. Coupled with this is a need to deepen understanding of the differences and commonalities in their professional workload, challenges, efficacy and successes. School systems are becoming less hierarchical and formal, and are more like the platforms and network organizations found in high performing organizations elsewhere (van Alstyne et al 2016).

Key focal points for future research include

- the variable concerns, issues and challenges facing superintendents, principals and other teacher-leaders in our school systems;
- the strengths and limitations of the experiential, professional and cultural resources that they bring to the task at hand;
- the systemic expectations, constraints and impediments in bureaucratic structures and relationships that they contend with, especially as they relate to accountability and governance;
- the challenges and possibilities of their relationships with the administrative and teaching workforces; and
- the outcomes and impacts of different leadership models on equity, inclusion and system performance.[7]

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The work could have several benefits, including increased mutual understandings of the educational tasks at hand and the challenges faced across the Alberta system by classroom teachers, principals, superintendents, school board officials and the ministry. The work has the potential to facilitate concurrence. Further, it might enable a prioritization and de-cluttering of some of the competing systemic demands and a reconceptualization of the overlapping levels and kinds of accountabilities.

The work is highly relevant to current concerns about the nature and competencies of educational leadership at all levels, and to issues about the turnover and scarcity of leadership candidates, with fewer individuals from traditional routes to leadership (principals for superintendents, provosts for university presidents) seeking these positions (Selingo 2016). As attitudes toward work and employment change, so does the nature of leadership (Balda and Mora 2011) and so do the complexities of managing a multigenerational workforce (Higginbottom 2016).

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7   This work would need to ensure that inclusion addresses all forms of exclusion, inequity, discrimination and disadvantage, and look at themes of accountability within and across the hierarchical role definitions and responsibilities of the professionals involved.

What methods would be productive?

Issues of leadership, networks of influence and innovation practices, and in-depth studies of specific leadership roles present challenges for the researcher. A combination of methods will be needed so as to enable some triangulation of findings and a comprehensive, grounded view of superintendent leadership as practice. This requires

- **Survey work** looking at leadership within school systems, building on past work and leveraging recent work, such as *The Future of the Principalship in Canada* (ATA 2014c) and *The Characteristics of High Performing School Districts* (Leithwood 2008).
- **Focus groups** with current and recently (the last 2–3 years) retired superintendents, principals and teacher-leaders exploring their roles, interrelationships, challenges and how they see the future.
- **Case studies** of leadership across a specific district and between districts, exploring not just specific leadership roles, but also the interfaces between them and tracking examples of innovation, change and development to illustrate leadership practices in action.
- **In-depth open interviews** with leaders, both present and recently retired, focused on the challenges of leadership and the nature of governance.
- **Open interviews and surveys with trustees** about their expectations of system leaders at the level of both the district and the school.
- **Focus groups and open interviews** with government leaders focused on their interactions with systems leaders, their expectations of the roles they play in enabling, empowering and supporting school-based and district-based change management.
- **Interviews** with representatives from each of the key professional bodies focused on what they understand from their members about the nature and challenges of leadership at the current time.

Clearly, various approaches are needed to understand the patterns and future of leadership.

Who should undertake this work?

The work reported here was supported by the Alberta Teachers' Association. Future work needs to have a broader coalition engaged in steering the work and enabling its components. Such a coalition for the future of leadership should include

- the Government of Alberta ministry of education team associated with the standards for leadership,
- the College of Alberta School Superintendents,
- the Alberta Teachers' Association,
- the Alberta School Boards Association,
- research universities that are engaged in the professional development of teachers and graduate studies and
- experts in leadership from a variety of leadership focused organizations.

These different organizations, working collectively and collaboratively, could design a research agenda in which each conducted research that was then aggregated to create an understanding of leadership in education in terms of present practice and future needs.

This collective group could be advised by a small group of individuals engaged in the development and evaluation of leaders, but not directly engaged in such work in Alberta. This independent group of 3–5 persons could act as an expert advisory panel and peer review group that could advise, support and encourage, while also offering a critical reflective capacity to the "on the ground" team.

The key to this work would be collaboration, sharing and transparency. No one is trying to win points or position—the task is to strengthen the adaptive capacity of Alberta's school system and its resilience through connected leadership. The evidence base for this work is desperately needed.

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Julius Buski has a 45-plus year history of involvement as a teacher at the provincial, national and international levels. He has served as a classroom teacher, school principal, district administrator, executive secretary and CEO of the Alberta Teachers' Association (1988–1998) and Secretary General of the Canadian Teachers' Federation (2001–2006). He has received honorary membership in the Association and the Edmonton Public School Local of the ATA and is also a recipient of the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal, the University of Alberta Alumni Award of Excellence and other awards.

Carol Campbell is associate professor of Leadership and Educational Change and director of the Knowledge Network for Applied Educational Research (KNAER) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. Campbell is an appointed education advisor to the premier and the minister of education in Ontario. Her current research includes a study of teachers' professional learning across Canada, a case study of Ontario and Canada for an international teacher policy study, research for Ontario's Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) and a study of the role of senior government officials in whole-system educational improvement. Campbell's previous roles include executive director of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) at Stanford University; senior executive officer and first chief research officer for the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in the Ontario ministry of education; and education, academic and policy roles in the UK.

J-C Couture is associate coordinator, research, at the Alberta Teachers' Association. In his work, he has represented the Association on the steering committee for the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, and led research projects and fostered working relationships with members of provincial, national and international research communities. Prior to joining the Association, Couture taught at Harry Collinge High School in Hinton, was a sessional instructor at two postsecondary institutions, and a curriculum consultant with Alberta Education. In addition to a PhD and MEd from the University of Alberta, Couture holds a BA from McGill University.

Randy Hetherington served as a successful school leader in Alberta for 17 years and is a recipient of the Distinguished Leadership Award of the Council on School Leadership. He teaches graduate courses on organizational structures in education and school leadership

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Allan Luke has made major contributions to language and literacy education, educational policy and sociology, school reform and applied linguistics, having authored over 250 articles and chapters, and authored and edited 15 books. Luke graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and did his masters and doctoral research at Simon Fraser University. He taught in elementary and secondary schools before becoming a lecturer at James Cook University of North Queensland and then professor and dean of education at the University of Queensland, Brisbane. From 2006–2013 he worked as research professor at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, where he is now emeritus professor. He has served as deputy director general of Education; chief advisor to the minister for the state of Queensland; and foundation dean of research at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is also currently an academic mentor to First Nations scholars at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

Stephen Murgatroyd is a writer, consultant and innovator. With over 40 books, more than 200 academic and popular articles, and many television and radio presentations behind him, Murgatroyd now works to build collaborative and adaptive capacity in organizations ranging from schools, health care networks and banks to forest product companies and biotechnology and ICT driven organizations. He was formerly professor of Applied Psychology and Management at Athabasca University and dean of the Faculty of Business.

Laura Servage has studied education in Alberta for almost 15 years, and has contributed to numerous Alberta Teachers' Association studies since 2005. Her research areas include school-to-work transitions, professions and professional learning for teachers in both K–12 and higher education, labour precarity and educational policy studies. She holds a postdoctoral fellowship at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Shirley Stiles was a teacher with the Edmonton Separate and Public School Boards. In 1988 she was appointed as a school administrator with Edmonton Public Schools and held positions as a high school principal and in central office. Since her retirement, Stiles has been active as a consultant and a coach of school principals and senior district staff in many school jurisdictions in Canada and the United States.

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