

LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

The Experience of Administrators in Alberta Schools



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AN ATA RESEARCH UPDATE: JUNE 2009

"In life, the issue is not control but dynamic connectedness."

—Margaret Wheatley, 1982



The Alberta Teachers' Association

ISBN 978-1-897196-76-2

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Preface

The research study summarized in this publication is an important contribution to the Association’s ongoing research program, which includes an effort to develop a comprehensive picture of the internal and external factors affecting the ability of Alberta’s teaching profession to meet the learning needs of students. As such, it complements the findings of numerous other Association research initiatives, including the annual member opinion, professional development and beginning teachers surveys, as well as Success for All, a study that the Association undertook in 2008/09 to identify the conditions that must be in place in special education classrooms to enable the profession to realize its goal of ensuring that all students succeed.

The study reported here, which took place in 2008, was prompted by the Association’s concern about the increasing workload of administrators in Alberta schools. Its completion is particularly timely, coming, as it does, as education partners begin implementing Alberta Education’s newly approved *Principal Quality Practice Guideline*.

Part of the strength of Alberta’s public education system is the collegial, professional relationship that exists between classroom teachers and school administrators. Time and again, research has demonstrated that such collaboration is a crucial factor in empowering teachers to exercise their professional judgment in a way that enhances student learning.

Unfortunately, as this study illustrates, school administrators, despite their best intentions, often face significant challenges in exercising the kind of leadership that today’s complex and diverse schools demand. It is all too easy to dismiss “school leadership” as just another glib catch-phrase appropriated by those looking to impose a simple solution on a complex reality. Yet, an exemplary school leader—one who has a deep understanding of curriculum and instruction as well as a wide range of managerial skills—can play an enormous role in creating the kind of learning environment that brings out the best in both teachers and students.

As with any complex research undertaking, a number of individuals made important contributions. Special thanks to Dr Ann Sherman, vice-dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary, and Paul Stevenson, a retired deputy superintendent, for their role as the lead researchers in this study. Jacqueline Skytt, ATA assistant executive secretary, managed the project with the assistance of Dr J-C Couture, who coordinates the Association’s research programs. Finally, thanks also to ATA administrative officer Harlan James, who prepared this summary.

Gordon R Thomas
Executive Secretary
The Alberta Teachers’ Association

“The role of the principal has long been established as an integral and pivotal leadership position in the Alberta education system. A position that is able to influence and impact the social fabric of our society through excellence in student outcomes and community engagement.”

*—Excerpt from
The Role of the School
Administrator in Alberta*

Introduction

Dr Ann Sherman, vice-dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary, and Paul Stevenson, a retired deputy superintendent, began their research in 2008. Data for this study of the real-life experiences of school administrators in Alberta came from four sources. The first was an online survey that invited administrators in Alberta to describe, in narrative form, their work-life experiences. The second was the discussion at two focus groups that the researchers organized in February and March 2008. Participants in these focus groups were selected randomly from a stratified sample of administrators. The third was a set of individual interviews (some face-to-face, some by telephone) that the researchers conducted in the spring of 2008. The fourth was a written survey answered by administrators attending the Council on School Administration's Banff Leadership Conference in April 2008.

In total, 101 principals and vice-principals participated in the study. Although the response rate was somewhat lower than anticipated, the ideas expressed were remarkably consistent, leading the researchers to conclude that what they had heard was indeed representative of the experiences of administrators throughout the province.

Whether they answered the online survey, attended a focus group, took part in an interview or replied to the written survey, participants were asked to consider four main questions. Following is a synopsis of the responses received to each question.

“Participants represent rural, urban and suburban schools. While there are, no doubt, differences depending on which particular jurisdiction the administrators work within, we have included the most common patterns described to us during the collection of data.”

—Ann Sherman,
coauthor of the report
The Role of the School
Administrator in Alberta



What is the best thing about being an administrator?

The study suggests that administrators, though sometimes overwhelmed by the expectations placed on them, are generally satisfied with their jobs. Among the most frequently cited sources of satisfaction were these:

- *Working with students.* Virtually all respondents mentioned the enjoyment they get from spending time with students and seeing them succeed.
- *Having an opportunity to make school-based decisions.* What attracts many administrators to the job initially is the prospect of being a change agent. Respondents stressed that they enjoy the opportunity to introduce changes that empower teachers to teach and students to learn more effectively.
- *Improving the school culture.* A source of satisfaction for many administrators is the chance to support teachers by welcoming their input and making them feel valued. A number of respondents described how they had attempted to change the culture of their school by explicitly acknowledging the work of teachers and their contribution to student learning.
- *Helping to improve classroom instruction.* In their capacity as instructional leaders, administrators value the chance to visit classrooms to observe teachers interacting with students. Such visits give them insight into what works best—knowledge that they are eager to share with their colleagues.
- *Working with parents.* Administrators enjoy the challenge of working with parents and getting them engaged in school councils.
- *Making a difference.* Many respondents reported that they aspired to administrative positions because they believe that education is a fundamental benefit to society.



“I sometimes get fed up with all the politics, but I love the kids and I love teaching and working with staff and parents.”

—Respondent

What is the most challenging aspect of being an administrator?

Most responses to this question focused, in one way or another, on the considerable pressure that administrators experience in carrying out an extremely complex role. Among the most frequently cited challenges were these:

“Expectations! Being all things to all people! This is a steep learning curve initially because everyone expects you to know the answers to all of the questions. Should this student get special funding? These parents are in divorce proceeding. Should dad or mom be able to pick the child up after school?”

— Respondent

- *Lack of time.* Virtually all respondents expressed frustration at not having enough time to perform the many tasks associated with being both an instructional leader and a manager. Most respondents reported that, faced with a time crunch, they find themselves giving more attention to the managerial aspects of their job than to the educational ones, a situation that they regret but consider inevitable.
- *Inadequate preparation.* Many respondents noted that their background in teaching, while indispensable in preparing them for their role as instructional leader, did little to help them develop the diverse skills necessary to carry out such managerial tasks as budgeting, timetabling, writing reports, school planning, recruiting staff, maintaining school facilities and managing conflicts.
- *Dealing with difficult parents.* One of the greatest challenges facing administrators is having to work with parents who have either unrealistic or no expectations with respect to their child’s education.
- *Coping with paperwork.* Many administrators believe that the inordinate amount of time that they spend filling out forms, reports and other paperwork required by school jurisdictions and Alberta Education could be better spent on educational tasks.
- *Inadequate funding.* Even though most respondents did not mention funding directly, their concerns about such matters as managing expectations and juggling competing priorities are rooted in a shortage of provincial funding. Several respondents deplored the amount of time that they are compelled to spend organizing fundraising activities. Others mentioned that their salaries do not adequately compensate them for the long hours and the complex tasks they perform.



- *Strained relationships with central office.* Although some administrators enjoy a positive relationship with their school boards, others report that they receive little support from their boards in the way of mentoring, professional development and interpreting policy. Many administrators also feel that they have very little input into decision making at the district level, which they describe as “top down.” Still others complained that their board takes an “old boys club” approach to hiring and promoting administrators rather than basing decisions on applicants’ suitability for the position.



- *Inadequate support from Alberta Education.* Many respondents view Alberta Education as an institution more likely to generate work for administrators than to offer support. One of the most frequently voiced complaints is the inadequacy of the support that Alberta Education provides to schools in their attempts to adapt to a seemingly endless stream of curriculum changes. Another concern is Alberta Education’s Accountability Pillar, which many respondents described as burdensome and fraught with an implied lack of trust in the way that principals do their jobs.
- *Difficult staff relations.* As instructional leaders, administrators are ultimately responsible for ensuring that staff are performing effectively and functioning as a team. Two challenges that administrators mentioned in this regard are motivating staff who seem to lack commitment and mediating conflicts among teachers.
- *Maintaining community relations.* In addition to fostering an environment conducive to learning within the school, administrators are expected to develop and maintain positive relations with a wide range of community organizations and other agencies that play a role in students’ lives. Some administrators mentioned that they feel inadequately equipped to carry out such public relations functions. Others noted that, as the student population becomes more diverse, schools must foster relationships with an increasing number of cultural, religious and ethnic organizations.
- *Balancing professional demands and family life.* Because their jobs are so time and energy intensive, many administrators report feeling pulled between the demands of their job and the needs of their families. Many expressed a concern about their personal wellness.

“I am still a teacher and want to talk about teaching with my colleagues. I want to go into classrooms. I want to talk about the best way to teach, but all the other stuff I have to do gets in the way. I enjoy many of the other aspects but the paperwork is overwhelming.”

—Respondent

What helped you most in preparing to become and improving your practice as an administrator, and what gaps exist in the preparation process?

“My master’s was done recently and highly relevant. Time well spent but at a cost to the rest of my life. The program was through [a university] that offers an Educational Leadership Master’s Program. [It] worked the best with my schedule and provided high-quality face-to-face instruction. The 22 members of the cohort became friends, and I remain in contact with them.”

—Respondent

Most respondents stated that what had helped them most in preparing to become administrators was taking graduate-level courses and completing a master’s program. In many cases, respondents had completed their graduate work by availing themselves of the various flexible options (such as distance education and independent study) by which universities offer these courses. Once they had been appointed as an administrator, respondents reported that they had benefited from attending professional development events offered by the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA), the Council on School Administration, the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) and the school district. A few respondents also noted that they had participated in mentoring programs and on-the-job training offered by their school district.

A significant number of respondents reported that, when they were first appointed as an administrator, they did not feel adequately prepared to assume their new responsibilities.

Here are some of the gaps that they identified in the preparation process:

- Inadequate preparation for handling such administrative tasks as school budgeting, timetabling, fundraising and decision making
- Little preparation in dealing with difficult parents
- Insufficient training on building relationships with the numerous stakeholders that play a role in the school (such as teachers, parents, school councils, community groups, trustees, central office personnel and department officials)
- Lack of opportunities during the first year to job-shadow or work with a mentor
- Little preparation in understanding the full range of instructional methodologies
- Inadequate preparation for engaging in self-reflection
- Lack of graduate-level university courses for administrators who have completed their master’s degree but want more opportunities for professional growth

What has been your experience in working with education stakeholders, and what could they do to improve their support for administrators?

A general theme that emerged in response to this question was the need for greater collaboration among the various stakeholders who have a role to play in preparing and supporting administrators. Respondents also commented on Alberta Education, the ATA, school boards and universities, offering both kudos and criticisms.

Alberta Education

Here's how respondents perceive Alberta Education:

- Creates work for administrators and, as such, is more demanding than supportive
- Makes decisions on curriculum and other matters without seeking advice from front-line practitioners
- Appears to distrust administrators when it comes to matters of accountability

Here is what respondents would like to see more of from Alberta Education:

- More support for the implementation of new curricula, including information on how curriculum changes fit together, how administrators can help prepare teachers to deliver the new curriculum and how classrooms may need to be modified to facilitate the teaching of the new curriculum
- More opportunities for administrators and teachers to have input into decisions that affect student learning
- More information on how to analyze data from the Accountability Pillar

The ATA

Here's how respondents perceive the ATA:

- Helps administrators in dealing with difficult staffing situations
- Employs staff who are helpful, though some have a limited knowledge of issues affecting school administration
- Supports administrators by publishing professional journals, sponsoring specialist councils, offering inservice programs and publishing relevant information on its website
- Tends to be confrontational in its relations with other stakeholders

"I am very fortunate to have a wonderful mentor and great support system within my school division. I have an instant opportunity to have my questions answered or concerns addressed."

—Respondent

***“I have the best job
in the world.”***

—Respondent

Here is what administrators would like to see more of from the ATA:

- The development of structures that give administrators a stronger voice
- More professional development on a range of issues affecting administrators, including how to deal with difficult teachers and parents
- More opportunities for administrators to attend research symposia
- More access to professional readings

School Boards

Here is how administrators perceive school boards:

- Are very supportive of administrators in some cases and very unsupportive in others (depends on the board)
- Tend to take a top-down approach to decision making
- Sometimes employ inexperienced consultants
- Tend to discourage innovative ideas

Here is what administrators would like to see more of from school boards:

- More support in enabling teachers to teach the curriculum in a manner that is developmentally appropriate for all students
- More professional development for administrators with respect to such tasks as maintaining the school, addressing occupational health and safety issues, and developing programs for special needs students
- More emphasis on identifying and encouraging teachers who have the potential to become administrators

Alberta Universities

Here is how administrators perceive universities:

- Offer useful graduate programs for administrators
- Provide little ongoing support to administrators once they have completed their master’s degrees



Here is what administrators would like to see more of from universities:

- The inclusion in undergraduate courses of more information on such topics as instructional intelligence, classroom management, relationship building and the developmental learning needs of children
- More information on understanding Alberta Education’s *Principal Quality Practice Guideline*



This publication is part of an ongoing series of research updates published by the Alberta Teachers' Association. Further background information about the research studies cited in this publication is available from J-C Couture at the Alberta Teachers' Association, 11010 142 Street, Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1; phone 780-447-9400 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 (toll free in Alberta); e-mail jc.couture@ata.ab.ca.

ISBN 978-1-897196-76-2

PD-86-14 2009 05