

LEADERSHIP UPDATE

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International Survey of School and District Leaders

There is consensus among all levels of the educational system (policy makers, teachers' associations, boards, and school personnel) that principalship continues to evolve and affect school improvement efforts (Alberta's Commission on Learning, 2003; Alberta Teachers' Association, 2006; Barth, 2001; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Wallace, Foster and da Costa 2007). In addition to responsibilities for teaching and learning, the principal's role has continued to expand with complex administrative responsibilities and a multitude of school improvement reforms and innovations. Given this, *leadership* has become a popularized concept fraught with numerous and conflicting assumptions around its definition and roles. Most contemporary educational literature, although attempting to define the concept of leadership, acknowledges the fact that there is no commonly agreed-upon definition for *leadership* (Bass, 1990; Bennis and Nanus, 1985). Multiple perspectives of *leadership* for the purposes of practice, professional development or research

(that exist in the acceptance of definitional diversity) are problematic (Barth, 1986; Leithwood and Duke, 1999). These enigmatical understandings of leadership result in "a proliferation of competing theories" (Wallace, Foster and da Costa 2007, 185) that affects the identities of school principals. Definitional diversity still exists within educational leadership categories, making it difficult to assume the extent to which *leadership* means the same to those writing about it (Leithwood and Duke 1999). These conceptual theories of leadership both intersect and, at times, compete. In fact, principals may use different approaches, or combinations of approaches, when dealing with different leadership challenges. School administrators, despite their best intentions, often face significant challenges in exercising the kind of leadership that today's complex and diverse schools demand, often having to reconceptualize their identities as they negotiate dissonance among competing discourses and contradictory practices within the educational framework. Subsequently, it becomes all too easy to dismiss *school leadership* as just another glib catch-phrase for those who want to impose a simple solution on a complex reality. Alberta presents an ideal setting to study principalship and how current discourses of educational reform and school improvement may shape, promote, privilege and dictate the identities of school principals.

**If you're still
hanging onto
a dead dream
of yesterday,
laying
flowers on
its grave, you
cannot be
planting the
seeds for a
new dream to
grow today.**

—Joyce
Chapman



Over the next three months the National College for the Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, in England, will be undertaking a major review of leading practices in school leadership. The work will include an international survey of school leaders in ten of the world's top-performing school systems. The aim of the study is to understand more about what leaders in education do and believe, what motivates them, and what governments can do to support them better. Researchers Fenton Whelan, author of *Lessons Learned: How Good Policies Produce Better Schools* (2009), and Sir Michael Barber, expert partner in McKinsey's Global Education Practice, will be the lead researchers on this study. This study will nicely dovetail with the work of the Alberta Teachers' Association on developing the leadership capacity of current school administrators and future school leaders; with the 2008 ATA study conducted by researchers Dr Ann Sherman and Paul Stevenson, entitled *Leadership for Learning: The Experience of Administrators in Alberta Schools*; with the work undertaken by Alberta Education in its School Leadership Symposium in 2008 and its current work on the development of a framework for school leadership; and with CASS's leadership work on Moving and Improving: Towards a Framework for Success—all of which are focused on building leadership capacity with the goal of improving learning for all students in our province.

Whelan and Barber have invited representatives of what they believe are the top ten education systems in the world to participate in their comprehensive international study. Alberta, Ontario and eight countries have been invited to participate. The

study will consist of an online survey of principals and district leaders to better understand the following:

- What do highly effective school and district leaders do and believe? Who are they and what motivates them?
- What system supports and processes (training, powers and so forth) do school and district leaders find most support them or prevent them from being effective?
- How does school leadership vary across countries and what opportunities are there for different systems to learn from each other?

The survey will be delivered by the Survey Development Center (SDC) of McKinsey and Company of the United Kingdom, part of McKinsey's global data centre, which serves major corporations and governments, including two-thirds of the Fortune 100 companies. The surveys will be delivered to participants in May and June of this year, with follow-up telephone interviews of system leaders to take place in July and August. Approximately 15 per cent of Alberta's public school principals will be asked to participate in the survey, to be administered in Alberta in May. It is estimated that the survey will take about 15–20 minutes to complete. We have assurances that all members of both the team working in the Survey Development Center and the research team have signed confidentiality agreements that cover the information used in this project. No data collected in the study will be linked to any participant.

Alberta Education, CASS and your professional association have met to discuss the purpose, intent and benefits of participating in this study. We see this as an opportunity for Alberta

principals to participate in research that advances practical and theoretical knowledge about principalship that can translate into positive changes in educational practice and policies not only in Canadian schools, but schools worldwide. You may, in the course of the next month, be contacted by the ATA or by your superintendent of schools encouraging you to participate in this study.

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Q & A

GORDON THOMAS,
Executive Secretary

Q: I have been told that I have to reduce FTEs at my school for the fall. How do I handle this? Do I speak to my staff and ask them for suggestions? Do I suggest that they speak to other principals in the division and try and find another school? What about someone on maternity leave or on a probationary contract?

A: As an administrator you should not ask teachers to become involved in the staff reduction process at the school or district level that targets individuals. Teachers who are on continuous contracts should expect that their contracts of

employment will be respected by their employer and know that the Association will protect their contractual rights. If you, as the principal, know that your probationary teacher(s) will not be offered a contract for the following school year, the sooner that you can advise them of this, the better, so that they can begin looking for a position with another school. If you have to further reduce teaching staff and you have to identify for transfer teachers who are on continuous contracts, you should discuss this with those staff members individually. Your recommendation to the superintendent must be professionally defensible. Should a teacher be identified for transfer, the following should be taken into consideration when making your recommendation to the superintendent/board:

1. What criteria were applied to determine that the teacher was “surplus”?
2. Were the same criteria applied to all teachers in the school?
3. What teaching positions were considered as potential choices for the teacher?
4. What positions were/are open at the school or school division?
5. Are there any specific programming needs that had to be taken into consideration?

Alternatively, some options that could be explored by the school board would be

- a. natural attrition (retirement, teachers leaving the board),
- b. job sharing,
- c. early retirement incentive plans (ERIPS),
- d. leaves of absence and/or
- e. voluntary transfers.

If teachers from your school are currently on maternity/parental leave, then you must NOT automatically surplus them. They have a right to return from their leave and, in some collective agreements, the right to their former positions. In any event, they must be considered as members of the school staff with the same rights and privileges as teachers currently working. At the same time, be very careful not to make assumptions about any teachers who may be contemplating maternity/parental leave. These teachers are required to provide only six weeks’ notice, including the summer, and while the expectation is that every pregnancy is successful, there are some that are not. To assume that a pregnant teacher will take a year off is contrary to human rights.

Asking a teacher to go from school to school, looking for a position for the following school year and interviewing for positions that are open, is demeaning and fails to recognize the teacher’s service or to show any commitment by the district to honour the teacher’s contract. It may constitute constructive dismissal or a significant change in working conditions and may be subject to appeal. Teachers are district employees, not school employees, and it is the responsibility of district-level administrators to formulate and implement staffing policies in a way that best utilizes the resources of the district as a whole.

Given the above information, if there are more teachers on continuous contract than there are continuous positions available, the superintendent needs to make some tough decisions. Should another position within the school district and within a reasonable distance from the school where the teacher is currently working not be found for a teacher on a continuous contract, the superintendent of schools must provide the teacher with reasons for a recommendation to terminate, allow the teacher ample time to prepare arguments for an appeal before the school district and provide official notice of intent to terminate.

In your role as principal, you may have an opportunity to raise questions with more senior administrators concerning the school board's budget and its implications for staffing. On March 22, 2010, Education Minister Dave Hancock advised school board chairs by e-mail that Treasury Board had allocated additional funds to cover the cost of the 5.99 per cent increase in teacher salaries, retroactive to September 1, 2009. As a result, for the 2009/10 school year, base and class size grants have been increased from 4.8 per cent to 5.99 per cent over 2008/09 levels. This means that the cost of teachers' salary increases for 2009/10 has been covered. At the same time, the minister acknowledged that the government had made no provision in its 2010/11 budget to fund the 2.92 per cent salary increase that teachers will be entitled to receive effective September 1, 2010. The minister stated that

“Long-term strategic requirements, a continuing commitment to class size guidelines and continued growth in the student population indicate that we must sustain employment in the teaching workforce, particularly in support of students in the classroom. It is also recognized that the new increased grant rates may not, in some cases, be sufficient to accommodate staff contractual obligations that are effective September 1, 2010. I expect jurisdictions will be rigorous in evaluating programs and initiatives to ensure there is value to students in the classroom.”

Furthermore, the minister encouraged school boards to run deficit budgets, drawing down their accumulated surpluses (or potentially increasing accumulated deficits), in order to preserve programs:

“We also acknowledge that in order to sustain student-focused services and supports, jurisdictions may have to draw on accumulated reserves and surpluses. As in previous years, prior ministerial approval is not required for deficit budgets. In fact, deficit budgets are the only means of drawing down accumulated operating surpluses. However, where a deficit budget is expected to result in (or increase) an accumulated operating deficit, ministerial approval will be required. ... I expect that approval will be granted where there is clear indication that programs, services and supports were rigorously evaluated, and expenditure plans are focused on sustaining classrooms and student-focused services.”

The minister has signalled that boards can expect government to adjust future grants to ensure adequate funding: “While expenditure pressures and revenue capacity may not be well matched in a particular year, it is my objective to match long-term revenue with long-term expenditures.”

While running deficits is not a sustainable solution over the long run, it does provide a mechanism to protect staffing and programs during the current economic situation and it is a solution endorsed by the government. Protecting student programs and ensuring the quality of teaching and learning conditions, including reasonable class sizes, are more important than balancing board budgets.

To find archived issues of *Leadership Update* go to www.teachers.ab.ca and click on Resources for School-Based Administrators.

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