

# **Reflections on Leadership Practice: Projects Reports 2010**



**The Alberta Teachers' Association**

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# Contributors

All contributors to this project are with Edmonton Public Schools.

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# Foreword

## Reflections on Practice

Reflections on Practice is a professional development program for school administrators offered by the Alberta Teachers' Association. It supports principals' ongoing development as educational leaders through a blend of instruction, collaboration and dialogue with peers and self-reflection, and is designed to give school administrators the opportunity to engage in a meaningful learning experience focussed on the provincial descriptors of Principal Quality Practice. Principals in the program develop a personal research question, undertake a literature review, and engage in collective inquiry and action research. As well, participation in this fulfills the requirements of the principal's annual professional growth plan.

During the two years of the program, participants reflect on their professional practice as principals, question their assumptions and practices, share with their colleagues and, above all, develop professionally. The development of leadership practice is a personal and professional journey whereby principals accumulate professional knowledge, skills and attributes and apply them in the context of the school community. It is a journey that continues throughout a school principal's career.

Participants in the program commit to engaging in a personal action research project that incorporates reflective practice. At the end of the two-year cycle, they are asked to complete a report on their specific project. The document that you are holding in your hands is a compilation of five project reports from the 2010 cohort of ten school principals from Edmonton Public Schools.

The project leaders, Jacqueline Skytt, Assistant Executive Secretary, and Dr Mark Yurick, Executive Staff Officer, Professional Development, wish to thank Dr Betty Tams, Assistant Superintendent, Edmonton Public Schools, for her encouragement and support of this project, and to congratulate the ten school principals who had the courage to conduct research into their practice and share the results of their work in this publication.

Gordon Thomas  
Executive Secretary  
Alberta Teachers' Association



# Project 1

## Strategic Collaborative Actions Taken by Principals to Influence Widespread Change

*Bev Crossman, Maureen MacDonald, Lorraine Ringrose*

### Focus Question

To what extent have our strategic actions as collaborative trio principals influenced a significant change in communicating and reporting student achievement?

### Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to explore how the trio principals from three diverse schools effected widespread change to align teaching and assessment practices. Implementing an innovative initiative entitled Communicating and Reporting Student Achievement Pilot, we took a risk and asked the superintendent's permission to implement a model for reporting student achievement that was incongruent with district regulations. Using surveys, a focus group forum, and formal and informal conversations, this action research uncovered strategic actions that led to the successful implementation of schoolwide change in each of our schools. The research showed that visionary leadership, collaboration, job-embedded professional learning, communication and relationships were pivotal to effecting widespread change.

### Introduction

This trio of diverse urban elementary schools is located in west Edmonton, Alberta. Two of the schools are smaller, with student populations of approximately 270 and a teaching staff of 17. The third school is larger, with more than 460 students and 24 teachers. Two schools are in higher socioeconomic communities with inclusive classrooms. The third is in a mid- to lower socioeconomic community; it is a district site for two special needs programs and has a higher percentage of English language learners and aboriginal students. The trio schools have been collaborating for the past four years on literacy strategies and assessment-for-learning practices.

Based on our background knowledge and experiences in implementing assessment for learning, it became evident that there was a disconnect between our district's practices and expectations related to communicating and reporting student achievement and what we knew we needed to do to engage our students in their learning. Recognizing that it was very challenging to fit the new research-based knowledge and practices on the traditional framework, it was important that we look beyond district parameters to realize how communicating and reporting student achievement *could* be done. As leaders, we had a vision of what should be done to align our practices and

craft coherence for students, parents and teachers. We needed to add richness and depth to the reporting process to further empower students to understand themselves as learners, thus helping to prepare them for the 21st century.

As trio principals, we ensured that processes were in place to make certain that students took ownership of their learning and discovered who they were as learners, how they learned best and how they could improve their learning. In addition, the processes also had to help students realize that parents, teachers and students must work together to maximize successes. We led the learning communities and cultivated an environment that fostered effective relationships, which are two guiding principles of Alberta's provincial Principal Quality Practice Guidelines (Alberta Education 2009).

The focus of this action research project was to examine the strategic actions that we took as collaborative trio principals. What were the strategic actions that promoted the successful implementation of a transformational and sustainable change in communicating and reporting student achievement in three diverse schools?

## **Literature Review**

Fostering change is not for the faint of heart. In his article "Cages of Their Own Design," Frederick Hess talks about the need for leaders to "look beyond the usual boundaries of what is permissible" (Hess 2009, 32). Essentially this is where our journey began. Knowing that the November reporting period, a district requirement, was not congruent with our assessment for learning practices, we had focused and deep conversations with our staffs about what purposeful communicating and reporting student achievement should look like. Sustainable change requires a reorientation of priorities and values. Leaders must identify what staff can stop doing and clearly communicate what will remain the same (Reeves 2009). Jackson and McDermitt (2009) believe that "even the most fearless teachers need support from fearless leaders. Such leadership requires openness to new ways of doing things, intense examination of one's belief systems, and development of critical skill" (p 34). Knowing that the change process is complex and rigorous, we created opportunities for collaboration within our own schools and between the trio schools to build lateral capacity. "We have to stop asking teachers to do one of the hardest jobs and do it alone. Every school needs good teachers. They don't become great until the teachers join forces. Collaboration needs to be built into their work" (Fine 2010). By modelling collaborative practices and joining forces as critical friends, the trio principals demonstrated the power of sharing and supporting one another and being accountable to each other while working together toward a common goal. "When teachers have many opportunities to collaborate, their energy, creative thinking, efficiency, and goodwill increase—and the cynicism and defensiveness that hamper change decrease" (Kohm and Nance 2009, 69). Understanding the rationale, teachers worked collaboratively and with purpose to problem solve, agree on strategies, and design processes and documents to support the pilot.

The literature consistently emphasizes the importance of relationships. Quality conversations and active listening are imperative to forge trusting and respectful relationships to ensure the success of the change implementation (Wagner et al 2006). Working with each other and with our staffs, we recognized that relationship building would be critical to ensuring teamwork to foster success. "The most effective principals operate from a value system that places a high priority on people and relationships" (Donaldson et al 2009, 13).

One of the key components of the successful implementation of the pilot was the focus on job-embedded professional learning. As trio principals leading the charge, we recognized that “the learning needed to be the work,” as captured in *The Six Secrets of Change* (Fullan 2008). During the implementation year, our professional development focused primarily on teacher-directed, job-embedded professional learning. Learning about learning was mandatory at the trio schools. Our job-embedded professional learning was anchored to sound instructional practices and ultimately resulted in improved teaching and learning for all.

## **Methodology**

Our research plan was to ascertain which of our strategic actions were most successful in supporting the implementation of the Communicating and Reporting Student Achievement Pilot. We did this through both qualitative and quantitative measures. Data was collected by means of parent and staff surveys, a focus group consisting of the trio schools’ instructional leadership teams, and formal and informal conversations, stories and anecdotes. These methods provided a range of information that gave us a clear understanding about how our strategic actions were perceived.

## **Results**

Several themes became apparent through data analysis. Visionary leadership, collaboration, job-embedded professional learning, communication and the importance of relationships were highlighted by respondents as being the most important to the successful implementation of this pilot. In addition, the findings indicated that the trio principals provided expertise and current research-based information, engaged in conversations with staff about what was best for students in their learning and provided a clear rationale for the pilot, while consistently seeking ongoing feedback.

Before we began the pilot, we made sure that we laid the groundwork, including candid conversations about the possibilities and the challenges of reframing our practices for communicating and reporting student achievement. “Share ownership and build understanding. When we articulate the destination together, we build the shared understandings we need to move forward” (Davies, Herbst and Reynolds 2008, 78). To make sure of a positive start, we began by meeting with the trio schools’ instructional leadership teams, which, in turn, helped us share information and gather feedback from colleagues. Findings from the data clearly indicated that staff appreciated that, as trio principals, we had a shared vision about how to move our schools forward and could clearly articulate the rationale behind it. We encouraged conversations and listened to the ideas and concerns of staff, helping them to craft coherence.

Collaborative opportunities were pivotal in creating a supportive environment and a schoolwide framework for change in the three schools. Through collaboration, teachers were empowered to plan, organize, design and implement strategies to assist them in their work, relative to the pilot. “The ultimate success of any improvement depends on the behavior of teachers, and when good teachers work together they support one another’s journey toward better instruction” (Kohm and Nance 2009, 67). This began by organizing time for trio grade level groups to identify practices and strategies that would help them implement the appropriate changes for their grade level. By

joining forces, teachers had a network in which to share ideas and expertise and develop processes and procedures suitable for their grade-level in order to successfully implement the change. These professional conversations were critical in assisting teachers to engage students in their own learning which, ultimately, was the reason for transforming our practices for communicating and reporting student achievement.

Within set parameters, we encouraged teachers to be flexible, use their professional judgment and align time and resources to meet the needs of their students. For example, in lieu of the first formal progress report, we asked that all teachers meet with all students and their parents for a minimum of 30 minutes for a goal-setting conference. We asked that these conferences be completed during the month of November. Teachers were free to choose when and how they would meet this requirement. Data proved that teachers appreciated the opportunity to arrange the conference schedules to meet their professional and personal needs. They were aware that we systematically cleared their regularly scheduled meetings and did not make any additional demands on their time for the entire month. The data also showed that parents highly valued the one-on-one time spent with their children and their teachers, which allowed them to start building positive relationships with their children's teachers early in the school year. Parents also indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to observe the relationship between their children and the teachers in an authentic setting. Teachers also noted that they found it interesting to observe the child/parent dynamic.

The data also highlighted the importance that teachers placed on the time we provided for them to meet one on one with students prior to the goal-setting conferences. The time was spent with each student focusing on strengths and areas for growth. This helped students and teachers to better understand the student as a learner. Many teachers reported *ah-ha!* moments during the one-on-ones when they learned something very important about a student that they might otherwise have missed. They also stressed that information gleaned from the one on one was important in laying the foundation for a successful goal-setting conference.

An important finding was that teachers were grateful to be able to set their own grade-level planning agendas to meet the needs of their group. They found that it reflected job-embedded professional learning that built rigour and relevance into their work. Roland Barth claims that "leaders ... must create a culture of rich teacher leadership that values and celebrates the craft knowledge of the practitioner" (Barth 2008). Teachers valued the time given during professional learning days to focus on assessment for learning, develop a trio-schoolwide vocabulary and share best practices related to the pilot. With support and encouragement, teachers were able to use or refine strategies as needed because we, as trio principals, believed that one size does *not* fit all.

Both teachers and parents recognized that communication about the pilot was important. Their feedback identified several scheduled events that occurred to support the work. Trio principals began communicating information about the pilot to inform the community well in advance of the implementation. Newsletters and school council meetings were used to inform parents about the upcoming changes to our processes for communicating and reporting student achievement. To launch the pilot early in September, all three schools hosted parent information sessions. The principal of each school led the presentation at her own school and answered questions. The trio principals' expectation was that, following the presentation, parents would meet with their children's classroom teachers to glean specific information about the process for each grade level and in each classroom. Each month, in school newsletters and at school council meetings, trio

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principals included detailed information about assessment for learning and the link to the pilot. In addition, we ensured that we provided a common message and key information to all three school communities. Links to educational research in the area of assessment for learning were made available to all parents. Trio principals engaged in ongoing formal and informal conversations regarding the rationale and the implementation of the process. Following each reporting period, trio principals surveyed teachers and parents as part of the ongoing feedback both for data collection and for informing our next steps.

Another significant finding of the research was that fostering powerful relationships was essential to the success of the pilot. As trio principals, we made certain that we met at least once a month and communicated regularly with each other to ensure that we were aligned in our vision. In addition, we made certain that our actions clearly reflected our beliefs and commitment to authentic communicating and reporting student achievement. We provided ample opportunities to build relationships among all stakeholders: students, teachers and parents. Giving trio school teachers time to network in a variety of settings and meetings built bridges between schools and forged meaningful and strong relationships. While the data demonstrated that teachers valued relationships, it was the parents who identified relationships as the most important factor in the success of the pilot.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this action research have led us to conclude that it is important to have a sound vision based on current research and best practices, and a staff who are confident in their abilities to successfully implement schoolwide change. You cannot start without a solid foundation. Moreover, the findings revealed that it was essential to take risks, and to ask and answer hard questions about our practices specific to the changes we were making. Modelling of the fearlessness must begin with the principal: actions speak louder than words. It must be said at this point, however, that taking a risk to implement the pilot was less daunting for us because it was done with a trio of like-minded administrators.

“Principals who need to raise achievement are driving with the brakes on unless they build cultural norms that support faculty working together” (Kohm and Nance 2009, 68). Collaboration is paramount. When we are working toward the same goal and sharing our expertise, listening with an open mind and supporting one another, the sky is the limit. Collaboration results in creating a positive culture where everyone is working as a team, developing strategies for actions, continuously learning, and fostering the skills they need to be more accountable to each other and for student learning. “Organizations that engage in ongoing dialogue around goals, priorities, and professional standards for individual and group performance intentionally foster the skills and norms that require everyone in the system to work more collaboratively and to be more accountable to one another. Everyone’s work becomes more visible” (Wagner et al 2006, 16).

Once teachers have a clear rationale, are on board and see the work as self-directed, purposeful and job-embedded, teachers can craft coherence to enhance teaching and learning. Teachers must understand and believe that the change is not an add-on but a better way of doing their work. Fundamental to this is the belief that what we are doing is in the best interest of students.

Transparent communication by trio principals with teachers and parents, throughout the change process, was vital. It was also necessary to seek ongoing feedback from formal and informal sources to problem solve in order to guarantee purposeful and positive next steps. It was important to make ourselves available to answer questions, clarify issues or be a sounding board for everyone involved, including each other. Over time, we became “a leadership practice community—leaders committed to helping one another solve problems of practice related to the district’s teaching and learning challenges together” (Wagner et al 2006, 17).

Finally, relationships are the basis on which change can begin. By fostering close relationships we built trust, nurtured engagement and promoted accountability among students, teachers and parents. This allowed us to hold high expectations for communicating and reporting student achievement.

## **Research Limitations**

As this action research took place in three schools, we did not encounter many limitations. We had a captive audience, all of whom were invested in the pilot. All staff offered feedback when asked and all three schools reported that they received a surprisingly high and very positive response from parents. Clearly, parents wanted to offer feedback on the many surveys sent home during the various steps of the communicating and reporting timelines and believed that we valued their input. As the instructional leadership teams from the trio schools were very familiar with working together through a variety of processes, very similar to a focus group forum, they were comfortable in offering direct and honest feedback. The many formal and informal conversations between all stakeholders that occurred during the year of implementation at the three schools also offered a wealth of information and data.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

Widespread change is possible. You need not be satisfied with the status quo. By fostering visionary leadership, collaboration, job-embedded professional learning, communication and powerful relationships, leaders can encourage a change in practice that is sustainable.

In order to cultivate widespread change, it is critical to pause and reflect to ensure a strong vision. “True vision is far-reaching. It goes beyond what one individual can accomplish. And if it has real value, it does more than just include others; it adds value to them” (Maxwell 2008). There has to be a consensus that the change is in the best interest of children. Regular meetings and ongoing communication allow time to examine practices, and to become critical friends who can talk candidly about the need for change and the processes that could be used to make change happen. Furthermore, ongoing communication and feedback with and between all stakeholders, throughout the change process, is essential to determine subsequent steps.

You cannot expect your staff to implement change if they do not have the background knowledge and necessary skill set. Having networked as school communities for four years, we had a well-established foundation in assessment for learning. The staff at all three schools knew each other and professional relationships had developed. The time was ripe to embark on the change process.

Fundamental to the success of the pilot was the collaborative culture that was established. Collaboration and the excellent work that resulted from those interactions supported the pilot. Within the spirit of collaboration, teachers were given the flexibility and autonomy to implement the change at the classroom level. The work was job embedded and teacher directed, and it underscored the three Rs: rigor, relevance and relationships. This propelled positive changes. Furthermore, powerful collaboration reinforced a sustainable momentum. One teacher involved in the pilot sums up her experiences and insights in the following way:

It wasn't until these three fearless, passionate principals came together to offer up some real change. How did they pave the way so we could journey forward? They taught us. They read to us. They gave us books to read together. We were given time to plan together. We were given time to talk together about our practices ... They helped us celebrate together. They inspired us and gave us a common language. They carved out time for us to participate in professional development together—not just any professional development, though: PD that *we* planned and that *we* wanted; PD that was insightful and practical to get us moving in our classrooms. We felt emboldened as we came together to share viewpoints and real stories about children ... When I look back on our years together, forging toward “The Pilot,” it's as if it had been a grand scheme, well planned, years prior, by the trio principals. Indeed, it was well planned and strategic, but it began and was built as they watched and listened to the students in their schools and teachers on their staffs. It was a process—a strategic process connected to continual observation, listening, asking questions; reflecting on their part, to know what would be just right for their students and their teachers.

As the success of this pilot became known, other administrators in the district have approached the trio principals to garner information about the strategic actions taken in our implementation process. With the permission of the superintendent, three additional district schools are confident about launching a similar model for the upcoming year. The result? Systemic change is beginning to take shape.

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# Project 2

## **A Mentor for Every Beginning Teacher: Putting Theory into Practice**

*Sandi Sawchuk*

### **Focus Question**

What can we do to improve the experience of beginning teachers and keep them in the profession?

### **Abstract**

This study explores the challenges beginning teachers face in their first year of teaching as described by the participants of a focus group of teachers who have been in the profession for between eight and ten years.

### **Overview**

The literature on the experiences of beginning teachers shows that the challenges such teachers face have not changed significantly over time (Ganser 2002; Huling-Austin 1992; Sawchuk 2002). This prompts us to ask whether we do not know how to respond to these challenges or are unable, as a profession, to bridge the gap between knowledge and our collective response to that knowledge.

Studies have consistently shown that new teachers benefit from support (Cherian 2007; Scott 2001). Numerous school districts have responded with programs to assist beginning teachers in a variety of ways. Formal effective and popular mentorship programs exist in many parts of North America and, indeed, worldwide (Lee and Feng 2007; Shank 2005; Le Cornu 2005), although success stories intermingle with stories of concern for the professional and personal well-being of beginning teachers.

### **Formal Mentorship Programs**

The literature on mentorship programs contains many examples of programs that attempt to meet the needs of beginning teachers (Scott 2001; Sawchuk 2002; Arnold-Rogers, Arnett and Harris 2008). Organized mentorship programs that respond to the initial and emerging needs of teachers new to the profession have the greatest potential to assist these teachers in a timely way. Long (2009) indicates that in most states in Australia and in many counties in the United States, school governance systems mandate formalized teacher induction programs for beginning teachers. Lee and Feng (2007) report that China has a longstanding tradition of experienced teachers helping beginning teachers.

## **Building Capacity in Beginning Teachers**

Some school districts respond to the professional development needs of beginning teachers in ways that benefit all teachers in the district. Le Cornu (2005) describes a peer-mentoring education initiative in South Australia that involves preservice teachers mentoring one another. The model is built on the premise that new teachers who learn to collaborate and coach each other at the beginning of their career are more likely to continue this practice when they are hired by school districts. This type of mentoring has the potential to create and sustain learning communities in schools when preservice teachers enter the teaching profession and apply what they have learned about collaboration. Hence, mentorship programs can lead to more collaborative practices within teaching, thereby transforming teaching in the process.

Many forms of mentoring exist. Mentoring can be tailored to subject areas, such as science, in order to enable new teachers to master content and effective teaching strategies more readily (Oliver 2009). Mentoring can also be a schoolwide effort encompassing a collaborative community of learners through extended mentoring experiences. Long (2009) describes efforts in Australia that focus on making mentoring a whole school approach with a goal of retaining beginning teachers in the profession. Educators at the University of South Florida describe a mentoring initiative geared toward the teaching skills needed in a low-income school that uses collaborative action research and transformative pedagogy (Morton 2005). The use of mentor teacher study groups in a study at Western Washington University demonstrates the advantage of mentors meeting regularly to refine mentoring skills. They share ideas about the benefits of fostering the concept of “critical collegueship” amongst experienced teachers in order to promote professional learning within their schools and in the mentorship program (Carroll 2002). Still other forms of mentorship involve using recently retired educators. Trubowitz (2004) describes the benefits of a mutually enriching relationship for new teachers and experienced retired mentors. Excellent retired mentors can help take the pressure off experienced teachers, who may not always have enough time to devote to mentoring.

## **Research Methodology**

Data for this study was based on a focus group conducted for the purpose of capturing the reflections of a group of teachers about their experiences in their first year of teaching. The teachers participating in the focus group were in their first decade of teaching, except for one who was in the twelfth year of teaching. There were four participants. They had teaching experiences that ranged in grades from elementary through to high school. Each participant was informed of the questions and key ideas that would be explored during the focus group prior to participating. The researcher conducted the focus group over the course of half a school day. Participants had opportunities to share their reflections during structured conversations and informal conversations.

The data gathered in the focus group was analyzed to determine the key ideas. These ideas were grouped to form the conceptual and contextual aspects of the participants’ reflections on their first year of teaching. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were also given the opportunity to validate the authenticity of their comments prior to reporting the results.

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## Sharing the Stories

Most new teachers experience a roller coaster of success and failure (Davis and Metzger 2006).

The participants in the focus group shared stories about their first year of teaching that mirrored the research in many ways. Their comments revealed that teachers remember their first year of teaching in great detail. The conversations during the focus group were animated, spontaneous and punctuated by raw emotion. Each of the participants related their experiences and recalled the classroom incidents that had the greatest effect on their teaching and their lives during that first year. None of the teachers in this focus group were part of a formal mentorship program in their first year of teaching.

One participant said that the support of a department chair and fellow teachers was instrumental in making his first year of teaching a manageable and pleasant experience. The support of subject-area colleagues in curriculum planning and organization also provided this beginning teacher with important lessons in teacher collaboration as an exemplary practice in teaching. The assistance of these informal mentors was appreciated, reduced the anxiety inherent in the first year of teaching and helped make teaching enjoyable: "My experience was good. But it shouldn't be by happenstance. A mentor should be assigned to beginning teachers ... we shouldn't have to ask for one."

Another participant reported experiences that were essentially the exact opposite: "No one quite tells you how hard it is in university. They give you the peaches-and-cream story." Beginning with an interview in which a principal made negative comments about the prospective teaching job, this participant reported feeling very alone and isolated during the first year of teaching. An experienced teacher took an interest in this beginning teacher and offered assistance with advice and materials. The informal assistance of this veteran teacher resulted in making the first year of teaching more bearable for this focus group participant.

A similar experience was reported by the third participant. This participant said that, whereas the school staff was generally friendly, no one went out of their way to offer substantial assistance. The first year for this participant was difficult and lonely, and the participant nearly left teaching at the end of that year: "In the first year there is so much pain ... Mondays would be the worst. I cried and didn't want to get out of bed ... the first year was trial by fire ... I asked so many beginning teachers if it was that bad ... one hundred per cent said it was bad ... about 40 per cent hated their first year of teaching."

The fourth participant was fortunate to have had a colleague who spent part of a weekend assisting with start-up ideas and materials before the beginning teacher left for a teaching position in another city. The participant used this experienced teacher as a confidante throughout the first year of teaching. However, the beginning teacher and the confidante lived in different cities, so help was not always readily available. The beginning teacher did find the staff at the school friendly and helpful, and over the course of the year, the assistance of a few colleagues grew in frequency and quality. As a result, this participant's first year of teaching was enjoyable. A drawback was that the teacher could not verbalize his frustrations with a trusted colleague in a timely way because the informal mentor lived too far away: "You can't show your vulnerability in the first year ... you can't tell other teachers how you feel ... my heart was always racing when the principal walked in ... knowing your potential contract is hanging over your head is scary."

## **Common Themes in the Focus Group**

Comments made during the focus group pointed to the need for beginning teachers to have a colleague that they could trust when they encountered difficult situations in teaching. Each participant felt that they were supported most during that first year of teaching when an experienced teacher provided nonjudgmental, one-on-one time to debrief difficult situations the teacher had experienced in the classroom or school setting. They stated that it would have been helpful if such a person already existed, preferably in their school, through a mentorship program. Although they all eventually found experienced colleagues with whom they could discuss the challenges of teaching, that support was not there when they started teaching. A mentorship program would have provided an instant mentor to whom they could have gone for reassurance and support. Later, as time went on, they would have gravitated to some teachers whom they came to admire, or other experienced teachers could have come forward to offer assistance. The problem with this scenario is that the participants felt they needed someone in the first few days. They indicated that without a formal program it takes time to develop a supportive network a beginning teacher can access to talk about a troubling situation. One of the participants said that several beginning teachers at the school tried to provide each other with support: "Four of us brand new teachers would meet in the supply closet after school ... sometimes we cried because it was hard and we felt alone."

Mentorship programs have the potential to provide the relationship building that is a key ingredient in a successful entry into teaching. Mentorship programs set the tone for discussion, and allow teachers to meet over time with their mentor. Each focus group participant agreed that the mentorship programs that they heard about from other beginning teachers made them wish they had been part of such a program. Overall, they felt that the first year of teaching would not have been as hard and lonely if they had been part of a group experiencing similar challenges. Each of the participants cited examples of experienced teachers who had helped them in their first year of teaching and said that they wished it had not been so difficult to establish those supportive relationships.

Principals were considered key players in the mentorship process. All focus group participants felt that the support of principals in organizing formal and informal assistance at the school level was necessary for a mentorship program to be successful. Principals are able to ensure that the strongest teachers become mentors. They can provide leadership in facilitating practices within the school that have the potential to help beginning teachers become strong teachers: "Principals need to be responsible to make it happen ... new teachers should have a mentor within a school."

## **Roadblocks to Mentorship**

Although mentorship programs exist in many school jurisdictions, we need to create mentorship programs for all beginning teachers. The experiences of the focus group participants described in this study point to the fact that mentorship is still a hit-or-miss opportunity for beginning teachers. Depending on priorities and funding, mentorship programs exist, but they are by no means something a beginning teacher can expect when hired by a school district. Until mentorship programs are mandated, the situation is unlikely to change.

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Ensuring that mentors are selected carefully and are prepared for their role is a factor identified by Long (2009) as contributing to the quality of mentoring in a mentorship program. It is possible that some mentorship programs are valued in direct proportion to the quality of service they provide to beginning teachers. Whether these programs are deemed effective and valuable is contingent upon the planning, organization and monitoring that is included in the delivery of the programs. Thus ensuring there is quality control in mentoring is an important consideration in offering a mentorship program. Carefully identifying the essential elements necessary for having a successful mentorship program is integral to establishing mentorship programs.

## **Compelling Questions for Further Research**

Notwithstanding the many mentorship programs available to beginning teachers, some districts are unable to meet the needs of a vast number of beginning teachers. At best, many mentorship programs provide much needed support to new teachers. At worst, the first year of teaching for some teachers is a Darwinian world of the survival of the fittest.

What is not clear in the literature is what happens to these first-year teachers if they are not part of an organized district mentorship program. Their voices cannot be heard unless they are asked about their experiences. Are those voices like the voices of the focus group participants in this paper who were not part of an organized mentorship program during their first year of teaching? Are they an example of the unpredictable nature of mentorship that exists across school districts?

Examining district practices in relation to mentorship programs might be one way to tackle the problem of how some beginning teachers are completely at the whim of fate. What happens from the time a beginning teacher signs a contract to the time this teacher sets foot in a classroom would make for a fascinating study. What measures do school districts take to make the experience of a beginning teacher more positive? Current practices suggest a lack of mechanisms to deal with last-minute district hiring or mentorship programs that are full and cannot accommodate more participants. Unfortunately, there is a two-tiered system—some beginning teachers receive support through well-designed and effective mentorship programs; others are almost entirely on their own.

## **Conclusion**

The data gathered in this focus group suggests that the experiences of beginning teachers in their first year of teaching can be negative. The data shows that appropriate mentoring supports for beginning teachers are an exception not the rule. Given this, educational institutions need to organize mentoring programs that truly address the needs of teachers in their first year of teaching. In fact, the research on beginning teachers indicates that such support should be continued during the first few years of teaching not just in the first year (Long 2009).

The comments made by the participants in this study provide educators with a new opportunity to improve mentoring practices and initiate beginning teachers into the teaching profession. Their ideas are applicable to various levels of institutions, including schools, school districts, universities, provincial governments and teacher professional organizations, and could be seen as blueprints for further action. Their voices deserve to be heard and their ideas reflect some of the

best practices described in research. Indeed the words of these participants should be heeded so that we do not continue to inadvertently sabotage new teachers and discourage them from staying in the teaching profession. When we create adverse conditions due to our lack of action on the mentorship front, we renege on our commitment to beginning teachers.

The poignant stories shared by the focus group participants can serve as a springboard for a call to action. Beginning teachers benefit from working with experienced peers who provide an important anchor and who model how to become an effective teacher. Providing opportunities for beginning teachers to learn from a pool of teachers with expertise is an important investment in both the teaching profession and students. Beginning teachers need mentorship programs, and the research overwhelmingly supports the need to nurture novice teachers. The findings in this study highlight the need for such programs to be available to all beginning teachers, not just those fortunate enough to be in a district that offers such a program the year they happen to start their teaching career.

Ultimately, all research has the potential to improve practice. A significant message from this research could be that principals have the power to take the first step. They can ensure that every beginning teacher has a suitable mentor in their school. The next step is for school districts to put programs into place that focus on the needs of beginning teachers. Postsecondary institutions, provincial governments and teacher organizations need to be on board. All stakeholders in the educational landscape have a role to play. Putting theory into practice can be logical if we have the will to do the right thing. One step at a time; everyone leading by example.

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## Project 3

### Principal as Mentor, Coach and Leadership Developer: “We First Change Ourselves before Others Change”

*Don Blackwell, Karen Brown, Phillip Grehan and Henry Madsen*  
(with Katharine Weinmann, Coaching Consultant)

#### Focus Question

How can I effectively improve my ability to identify, utilize and differentiate mentoring practices to improve leadership capacity in my school?

#### Abstract

How do we build the capacity of our leaders to build leadership capacity in others? The Cognitive Coaching model, developed by Art Costa and Bob Garmston, emphasizes “thinking about thinking” and self-directed learning. Using the coaching practices of questioning, paraphrasing, listening and silence, leaders can foster reflective thinking in their protégés and provide them with tools to move forward as professionals. Over the last two years, our group of school principals, with help from a coaching consultant, enhanced our ability to develop our own leadership both through the practices derived from Cognitive Coaching and in our focused conversations about mentoring teacher leaders. A facilitated focus group helped us identify six key results, and reinforced that learning is social and that change begins with us.

#### Introduction

*“Teaching someone to recognize and nurture leadership rather than teaching someone to budget or schedule . . .”*

—Henry Madsen

We are a group of school principals with a shared purpose: to improve the leadership capacity of the staff in our schools. This goal was developed in response to Principal Quality Practice Guidelines, Leadership Dimension: “Developing and Facilitating Leadership” (Alberta Education 2008). We represent a broad range of teaching environments (elementary, elementary/junior high, junior high and senior high schools); have a diverse range of leadership staff structures in our schools; and are enthusiastic about improving our ability to identify, use and differentiate mentoring practices to improve the leadership capacity of our staff.

It is our shared belief that as instructional leaders we can become more skilled at supporting the leadership growth of our staff. In our earliest conversations, we used the game of golf as an analogy to help us define and clarify our shared purpose and to frame our focus question (see

Appendix 1 for elaboration). We are intent on moving away from being identified as the leader who issues instructions or provides *the* answer to staff queries; instead, we want to encourage staff to apply their own skills and ingenuity, both in supporting the shared vision of the school and in the myriad opportunities present every day in our schools. We determined that we could best provide this support through mentoring practices grounded in the Cognitive Coaching model developed by Art Costa and Bob Garmston.

*“Creating an environment, setting the tone, modelling and seeing opportunities for people to build skills in leadership capacity . . . .”*

—Karen Brown

The Cognitive Coaching model is a metacognitive coaching approach that guides leaders to think deeply about their leadership practices, thereby building their capacity and confidence as effective instructional leaders. Working from the presupposition that our staff members have leadership qualities and abilities that can be made explicit, nurtured, and used intentionally and contextually, we sought to immerse ourselves in aspects of Cognitive Coaching to learn how to apply and adapt this orientation to our mentoring practices.

## **Literature Review**

The Cognitive Coaching model has evolved significantly from its inception in the mid-1980s to include a broad spectrum of disciplines, theoretical frameworks, applications and environments. Thus, our literature review evolved to include works on other coaching orientations: peer coaching (Showers and Joyce 1996; Downey et al 2004; Robbins 1991); mentorship; critical friends; and leadership capacity building (Lambert 1998). We also looked at the leadership implications of change (Fullan 2008; Gardner 2008; Wagner and Kegan 2006); complexity (Westley, Zimmerman and Patton 2006; Wagner and Kegan 2006); and neuroscience (Rock and Schwartz 2006).

Our communities are placing greater demands on schools and holding them increasingly accountable for performance. The literature consistently states that high-performing schools are managed by effective, high-performing principals. With increased change and complexity within and across systems (Fullan 2008; Wagner and Kegan 2006), principals also need to adapt to this increasing uncertainty, fluidity and complexity.

While our challenge as school leaders is how to support our staff to improve their leadership capacity, Lambert (1987) questions how principals are supported so that they can become more effective in their work as instructional leaders who build leadership capacity in these complex times. She suggests that while most principal tasks occur through communication with others, “reflection and self-critique are the foundation, as well as the backdrop, for principal learning” (p 59). Principal learning opportunities are self-initiated, timely, reflective conversations wherein principals have an opportunity to discuss new ideas in consideration of their “own experience and knowledge” (p 59). These conversations can occur with “colleagues asking questions, . . . principals networking together, or staff members engaging in mutual discussions and exploration” (p 59).

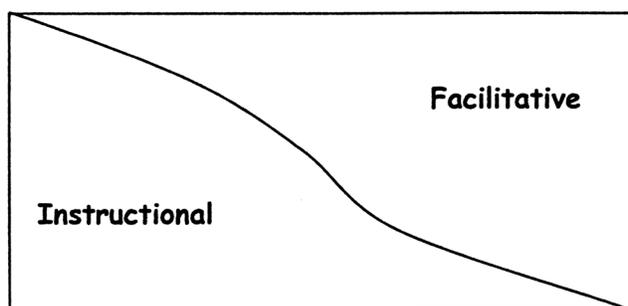
Costa and Garmston (2002) maintain that Cognitive Coaching has been used effectively to improve the performance of classroom teachers. The model’s assumptions, underlying values, practices and skills are fundamental to creating the relationship conditions necessary for effective interpersonal

communication and respectful planning, reflection and action. Based on the success of this program with teachers, and the benefits of principal reflective practice as outlined by Lambert (1987), we concluded that a professional learning model grounded in Cognitive Coaching principles and practices would assist principals in considering the fast-paced complexity of their own leadership and in developing the leadership capacity of the staff in their high-performing schools.

Of significance was the comprehension and application of the coaching continuum (see Figure 1). The continuum is based on the support functions of Cognitive Coaching: coaching, collaborating, consulting and evaluating (Costa and Garmston 2002; Lipton and Wellman 2009). This continuum clarifies the coach's roles and responsibilities, and emphasizes that a coach needs to know when and how to move from a facilitative orientation to one of giving instruction and being directive, in response to the needs, abilities and working context of those who are being coached.

**Figure 1**

### **The Coaching Continuum**



Calibrating/Evaluating ↔ Consulting ↔ Collaborating ↔ Cognitive Coaching

*Adapted by Katharine Weinmann from Costa and Garmston (2002) and Lipton and Wellman (2009)*

### **Methodology**

The original methodology for our action research project included the following:

- Collecting baseline data by surveying our staff using a leadership capacity survey adapted from Lambert (1998), and by using principal one-to-one conversations with individual staff members to identify leadership development goals and areas of growth
- Collecting data to determine the effectiveness of our application of coaching skills in our mentoring conversations, by again administering the leadership capacity survey and using our subsequent principal one-to-one conversations for reflecting on individual staff progress
- Attending monthly research meetings with our coaching consultant, where we would individually present and collectively debrief our mentoring conversations for deepened learning
- Engaging in professional reading

- Journaling individually to plan and reflect on our mentoring conversations, highlighting areas of development and focus. Journal entries would be specific to the monthly discussions with leadership staff, and would include an analysis of how effectively we were addressing and making progress toward our focus question
- Developing a standardized template for planning and reflecting on our mentoring conversations
- Attending coaching training as a cohort
- Sharing our learning with other principal colleagues on an ongoing basis
- Holding a focus group with our school leadership teams to collect their impressions

We anticipated that we each would differentiate our approach, in establishing our staff groupings and the means and measures for data collection.

However, our research plan evolved as our emphasis organically shifted from mentoring our staff to build their leadership capacity toward mentoring ourselves to build our own capacity, including the following:

- Our view of the leader's purpose and function
- The means by which we lead
- The value we place on relationship and how we create it
- The significance of being intentional in how we design and engage in meaningful conversations

This commitment to our own growth as the foundation of our efforts to "grow" our staff resulted in a significant trimming of our research methodology, which now included the following:

- Regular and rigorous self-reflection and occasional journaling, referring to the standardized reflection template
- Professional reading and viewing of learning videos
- Episodic conversations with staff in which coaching skills were practised and reflected upon
- Monthly research meetings that included substantial collegial conversations, in which honest disclosure illuminated challenges and competencies, and real-time embedded coaching
- Fifteen hours of coaching training with three-quarters of our cohort

At the end of the project we used a facilitated focus group to identify the results of these collaborative activities. The focus group was designed around the following reflective questions:

- What were we hoping to get out of working together, individually and collectively? Why this particular constellation of school leaders? What was intentional and what was serendipitous about our group composition?
- What did we learn, individually and collectively? Beyond the focus question, what did we learn?
- What were our unanticipated learnings, individually and collectively?
- Based on what we learned, how might we extend this work next year, individually and collectively?
- If we were to start again, how and what would we do differently, and why?
- Question of coaching consultant: What would we need to do to get somewhere deeper next year?

Our final debriefing conversations, in which some of our more pertinent remarks were transcribed and conversations videotaped, produced additional data on which to reflect on the outcomes of this project.

## Results and Conclusions

The following results were identified through our participation in the focus group. They are rank ordered by the number of responses (the number of cards).

- *Conversation and listening skills are foundational to mentoring (16 cards)*. This confirmed what we already knew—that allowing time for conversation and earnestly applying both active listening skills (using paraphrasing, silence, questioning) and committed listening skills (described by Sparks [2007] as listening deeply and silently to another) are the basis of mentoring.
- *Collegial support and accountability: “Nobody stands alone” (15 cards)*. Our commitment to and preparation for our monthly meetings, with minimal distraction, allowed us to share our stories and to offer each other support through questioning, observations, impressions and focused next-step commitments.
- *Being committed to shared leadership fosters agency, empowerment and efficacy (8 cards)*. We all came into this project with an explicit commitment to the principles of shared leadership, intent on learning how to build that capacity with our staff through applying a mentoring-coaching process. This empowered us in clarifying and developing our own skills, and as we extend this work more fully with our staff, we anticipate similar opportunities for them to develop agency, empowerment and efficacy.
- *Dissonance, uncertainty and risk are part of change (8 cards)*. Our change—in understanding and practising coaching skills with each other and with our staff, in clarifying our understanding of effective instructional leadership, and in staying open to different points of view—came about as a result of our “hanging in,” despite our individual and collective uncertainty, dissonance and risking with each other.
- *Appropriate application of coaching skills (7 cards)*. Applying coaching skills requires intentionality and discernment as to when, how, why and with whom. It involves having essential skills (including those discussed above and the ability to compose compelling, or “wicked,” questions) and understanding the coaching continuum, conversation protocols, and how to attend to filters of perception and “states of mind” (Costa and Garmston 2002).
- *Effective processes take time (5 cards)*. Participating in this project, learning about coaching and planning effective mentoring conversations all took time.

Two final results emerged:

- *All learning is social*. For this action research to be successful, we needed what we each brought, questioned, valued and risked.
- *We changed ourselves first*. As we each consolidated and integrated this deep and personal learning experience, we gained clarity as to how to adapt and refine the process and design structures in which we will deepen our own learning and extend those to our staff.

## Research Limitations

Our greatest limitation was that we did not collect any data from the people we initially wanted to be the focus of our action research: our staff. As the inquiry evolved, we realized that *we* were our subjects, that our efforts were influencing and changing our practice in critical ways. We came away with this profound realization, but we now wonder if our staff have noticed any change.

Consultation with our research project coordinator assured us that our project's integrity would be maintained even with this organic shift in perspective. As outlined above, our methodology shifted in response and garnered valid, reliable and meaningful personal results that we will deliberately apply when we direct our efforts toward our staff next year.

## Implications and Recommendations

In our final debriefing conversation after the focus group meeting, we wrote down some of our comments, which indicate our lessons learned.

### Our View of the Leader's Purpose and Function

- "Leadership is about taking responsibility and ownership, enrolling, and then helping staff share that responsibility as contributing members of the team, who understand the importance of their work as it relates to the whole of the organization."
- "Building leadership capacity, at its pinnacle, is helping leaders to recognize, develop and nurture leadership capacity in others and thereby build a chain of leaders: 'leaders who build leaders.'"

### The Means by Which We Lead

- "I have learned that I have to be more supportive of leadership development in my school, that I have to be clear about my intentions with staff."
- "A challenge or question for staff at my school: 'What have you done or are doing that demonstrates your ability to build up or recognize and develop leadership (ownership, efficacy, capacity, responsibility) in others?'"
- "Next year we'll have our conversations about how we're each doing this with our own staff."
- "Not a recipe, answer, formulaic or blueprint of how to work with people. It's the culture we build in a school."
- "I don't have to be a guru ... more of a facilitator who has faith in my leadership team to build it ... liberating, a relief for me."

### The Value We Place on Relationship and How We Create It

- "This can help to reframe leadership: leadership is about building capacity of others in the context of social learning; that is, grounded in our relationships with each other."
- "Commitment and giving freely of your time to be a leader versus a commander or director of people."

- “I changed the job descriptions for recent postings to emphasize my intention to further develop a coaching–mentoring culture.”
- “Maybe I can use a coach to strategically plan for my goals with my leadership team?”

### **The Significance of Being Intentional in How We Design and Engage in Meaningful Conversations**

- “As leaders we can be better prepared for one-on-one conversations with team leaders, specific to cognitive coaching (collaboration, self-directed, directive).”
- “Using good questions (modelling) in our discussions with staff.”
- “While not a formula, skills are key.”
- “Role of the consultant coach to provide support, focus, clarity, skill training and modelling.”
- “What PD could we all attend next year to further support our growth?”

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Sparks (2007) reminds us that “leaders begin by changing their own habits, and they are more successful in acquiring new habits when they anticipate and persevere through an ‘implementation dip’ during which performance may temporarily diminish as new skills are acquired.” Even as we gathered to edit this research paper and prepare for our presentation, evidence of our own deep learning continued to emerge. In acquiring new mentoring habits to improve the leadership capacity in our schools, we each have become aware of our own particular knowing–doing gap. This compels us to continue our own learning together, and to move forward to collaboratively design the supports and processes by which our staff will learn—hence, “leaders building leaders.”

## Appendix 1

### Mentoring for Leadership and Golf: An Analogy

In our earliest conversations, we used the game of golf as an analogy to help us define and clarify our shared purpose and to frame our focus question.

- Mentorship is similar to the game of golf. Discerning the appropriate mentoring approach is like choosing the right golf clubs to effectively play the course or a specific hole. Many variables need to be assessed, including one's own playing style.
- As leaders, we must discern whether our staff requires *consultation* in choosing the appropriate club ("You're relatively new to this course. Let me help you! There is a water trap around this dog leg, and I would recommend that you use your seven iron and lay up to the left of the trees."). Or *collaboration* ("You've played golf before. Maybe on this course or not. What are your thoughts? What would be the most effective club or play?"). Or *facilitative coaching* (for example, inviting our players to analyze their game, and to look for ways to improve that analysis based on their own experiences and interpretations).
- Tiger Woods, an expert in the game of golf, is known to have deconstructed his game into its component parts to analyze each aspect, look for improvements and then reconstruct it in an integrated and effective way. We deconstructed the coaching model into its grounding values, principles, assumptions, skill sets and practices, and then reconstructed the model responsive to our own particular style, needs and context.
- Keeping in mind the principles of complexity and social innovation as outlined in *Getting to Maybe* (Westley, Zimmerman and Patton 2006), we need to pay attention to the constantly changing golf course. For example, water levels and sand traps shift in response to players, weather and wind. Leaders may also discover that colleagues are on a different course and experiencing different challenges or interpretations of approaches.
- Ultimately, as mentors we want to support our staff in choosing the appropriate approach and club for the course they are playing, taking into account change, complexity, and their experience and ingenuity.

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# Project 4

## The Myth of “Business as Usual” for a Small School Faced with Closure

*Katherine Toogood*

### Focus Question

To what extent can transformational leadership enhance staff efficacy and resilience in a small school undergoing a sustainability review that could result in closure?

### Abstract

Providing quality leadership that optimizes the learning opportunities and development of all students in a school with 110 students, reduced staff and an uncertain future poses unique challenges. This report describes the strategic actions (such as communicating vision, prioritizing teaching and learning, lightening the extracurricular load for staff, nurturing a caring community, and providing practical help with the job hunt) taken by a principal to sustain staff through a sustainability review and eventual school closure. This report also describes the impact on staff going through the process and identifies practical supports that helped staff maintain quality teaching and learning while preparing for transition.

### Introduction

The school of which I was principal had been living with the possibility of a sustainability review for many years. This review was undertaken in the year our large urban district reviewed four schools in the immediate vicinity. We anticipated a difficult year because of declining enrolment, a smaller staff, a tight budget year and a student body of only 110. Given this situation, my leadership priorities were to build teacher capacity to engage in learning and commit to broader organizational goals, address the emotional climate in the school and focus staff and student vision on having a successful year and bright future. I also embarked on a project to discover how I could help the staff and students facing a sustainability review and school closure.

This project has broader relevance because our district has many more spaces than children, and new schools will be opening in the next few years. This project enquires into two dimensions of the Principal Quality Practice Guideline, Leadership Dimensions: (1) Embodying Visionary Leadership and (2) Leading a Learning Community. My vision was to create a culture that supported “the best year ever” despite the difficulties we faced. This vision was fostered by communication, encouragement, teamwork and the easing of teacher workload through the elimination of low-value activities.

## Literature Review

According to Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006), leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most effectively by addressing staff motivation, commitment and working conditions in a manner that takes the context into consideration. In a series of studies on the conditions fostering organizational learning in schools, researchers confirmed the importance of transformational leadership practices to organizational learning (Leithwood, Leonard and Sharratt 1998). Marks and Printy (2003) identify transformational functions clustered around a focus on mission, performance and school culture. Practices associated with transformational leadership include identifying and articulating a vision, developing consensus around collective goals, establishing trusting relationships, promoting collaboration, providing intellectual stimulation, communicating high performance expectations and providing individualized support (Leithwood et al 2006; Leithwood et al 1998; Marks and Printy 2003; Mulford 2008). Transformational leadership is considered more effective than instructional leadership because it considers all the workplace conditions that contribute to outcomes, not just instructional strategies (Mulford 2008). Transformational leaders are able to integrate the functional and interpersonal aspects of leadership. They prioritize understanding and personal development, and recognize that emotional understanding is instrumental in influencing commitment, staff efficacy, morale, job satisfaction and stress (Leithwood et al 2006).

In their study of school leadership, Ross and Gray (2006) confirmed that principals who adopt a transformational leadership style are likely to have a positive impact on teacher beliefs about their collective efficacy and on organizational citizenship. In turn, collective teacher efficacy—the collaborative efforts of a staff as a whole—increases student success. Principals contribute to teacher beliefs through giving inspirational messages, affirming teachers, including them in decision making and reducing teacher stress.

Sergiovanni (2006) describes leadership as a moral craft that includes three essential elements: head, heart and hands. The heart of leadership involves leaders' beliefs, dreams, vision and commitment. Committed leaders feel strongly about their work. Sugrue (2005) talks about passion as an intense emotion that, when focused, can incite action and sustain commitment, a quality essential to the principalship. Crawford (2009) sees emotion as inherent to the work of school leadership. She considers leadership to be a social process, with emotion at the heart of the relationships that are essential to an effective school community, and she identifies three emotional textures that influence the work of educational leaders: emotional regulation, emotion-weighted decision making and emotional context.

Emotional intelligence is a quality that has been recognized as essential for effective leadership in many fields including education (Goleman 2004, 2006). In his work, Goleman identified five characteristics that distinguish the most effective leaders: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skill. When a principal engages in positive social interactions, he or she creates a climate that helps teachers teach better and students learn better. Sociological research has shown that the strongest emotions tend to flow outward from the most powerful person in the room. Thus, a leader who wants to raise a staff's level of motivation and hope must demonstrate those qualities when interacting with staff. The leader must be "emotionally grounded and skilled in personal interaction, both as a model, and as the source of an emotional ripple effect" (2006, 77).

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Kouzes and Posner (2002) identified and described the following five key leadership practices:

1. Model the way.
2. Inspire a shared vision.
3. Challenge the process.
4. Enable others to act.
5. Encourage the heart.

Indeed, Kouzes and Posner went on to write a book, published in 2003, about the fifth practice identified above because they felt it was so important (*Encouraging the Heart: A Leader's Guide to Rewarding and Recognizing Others*). They too stress the importance of relationships in the workplace for getting extraordinary results. Their program for encouraging the heart includes many essential practices already identified under transformational leadership:

- Set clear standards.
- Expect the best.
- Pay attention.
- Personalize recognition.
- Tell the story.
- Celebrate together.
- Set the example.

## **Methodology**

Based on the above-delineated notion of transformational leadership, I planned strategic action in four areas.

1. First, I participated in a year-long session on transformational leadership that taught me how to shape my leadership.
2. Second, I communicated with staff in three key areas: (1) promoting and expecting professional learning and high-quality teaching, (2) keeping staff informed about the review process, and (3) repeatedly talking about having the best day, best week and best year ever.
3. Third, though I emphasized teaching and learning, I reduced the number of low-value activities, such as committee work and some extracurricular activities and supervisions. I was careful to respond to individual needs and preferences.
4. Fourth, we established a collaborative community of support through such things as monthly lunches and practical support with job hunting.

Because I was engaged in action research, I had to be especially attentive to what was happening. I collected data from a variety of sources and groups. I kept a journal throughout the year, in which I reflected on the difficulties I faced, the values and principles that guided my decisions and actions, and how these values and principles were connected to the review and to the ultimate

closure of the school. In seeking to understand the lived experiences of our school community, I wanted to collect primarily qualitative data from those who were willing to give it. I also included district survey data in order to triangulate the data and hear from a broader audience. I met with cross-graded groups of students throughout the year to talk about their learning and school experiences. Some general trends from these conversations were also included. Achievement results were also considered as an indicator of our ability as a staff to stay focused on the teaching and learning.

Staff were informed of this action research project and were invited, but not compelled, to participate in focus group discussions or respond in writing to the following three questions:

- What was difficult about this process?
- What strengthened and sustained you?
- What advice do you have for the district? Principals? Colleagues going through the same process?

Staff members were assured of the anonymity of their responses, and their rights not to participate and to withdraw at any time.

## **Results and Conclusion**

### **1. Staff Responses: What was difficult about this process?**

The impending closure of our school had a physical and emotional effect on staff throughout the year. Staff experienced anxiety over the loss of their positions, grief over the loss of a valued work family and worry about the transition for children, especially the ones who were vulnerable because of medical, emotional and learning needs. There was an overall sense of fatigue: first, from waiting to hear what would happen and then from all the additional work that had to be done to prepare for transition. Many staff also had to deal with health and family stressors that challenged their resiliency even more because the stressors compounded the uncertainty and instability they were experiencing at work.

### **Timing and Nature of Staffing Processes**

We had two visits from Human Resources and union representatives: one visit after the recommendation in February and the other in April, after the final decision to close our school was made. At the second visit, we received new and different information specific to our school and to the people in each position. Though the new information was mostly good, it was frustrating for those who had already secured positions, and much anxiety would have been relieved if that information had been communicated earlier.

Staff were also conscious of the differences between people in different staff groups, and for those with temporary rather than permanent contracts. For support and custodial staff, the positions posted up until May were for jobs starting right away. This put people in the difficult position of choosing between applying for a job they needed and wanted and providing continuity by finishing the year at our school. We ended up losing our custodial assistant in May and had to hire a supply staff member to fill in. The impact could have been more serious if we had lost the head

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custodian, the administrative assistant or the educational assistants assigned to medically fragile children.

Each person handled the job search differently. Some people shared the details of their job search, while others kept their search private. Some people secured a dream job they were excited about; others didn't. Some people were placed and then pursued other positions. It was hard to celebrate with those who got jobs, because there were still people waiting to get positions until the end of June, and there were people with temporary placements who finished the year without a position to go to.

### **Public Nature of the Process**

In this process, everyone in the community knew what was going on and felt free to comment, ask questions and express opinions. Parents pressed for information on what jobs people were applying for. Together we discussed and established boundaries for our conversations with parents. Throughout the year we were confronted with rumours that we tried to dispel. Despite extensive communication efforts on the part of the district and the consulting firm facilitating the public engagement, many conversations included incomplete or inaccurate information. Former staff and students showed up at the school asking for tours or wanting to talk to staff. These intrusions were not always welcome, and we all found attending public meetings where the fate of the school was discussed and responding to queries from friends, community members and colleagues for months emotionally draining.

## **2. Staff Responses: What strengthened and sustained you?**

### **Permission to Do Things Differently**

Staff realized that this year would be different. From the beginning we recognized that our context should influence what we decided to do: we had fewer staff overall, most teachers had new teaching assignments, and there would be additional meetings and an emotional undercurrent stemming from the process and results of the review. As we began the year we articulated a priority on teaching and learning, then kept it simple with the extras, investing time and energy in high-value activities only. We scaled back on things like committee work, bulletin boards and intramurals. If there was no one willing to run a particular event or activity, it didn't happen.

Instead of taking time to plan staff social events, we had a monthly potluck, with four contributors each month. Staff found that these strategies helped them focus energy on teaching and learning, and on creating a positive experience for the students.

### **Professional Development**

Staff appreciated how our year began—a session on transition at the principal's home. We attended one large district session on technology that was interesting but not pertinent to our needs. From then on we did targeted professional development with consultants who came to our school and tailored the learning to our needs and interests. Focusing on using technology to engage students helped staff build confidence in a skill that is relevant in a broader district context. We decided not to engage in cohort learning with other schools this year because of the additional

meetings and tasks caused by the review and closure process and our desire for professional time to be immediately pertinent and useful. Though teachers appreciated the lessened expectations, they missed the professional conversations with other colleagues. Individual requests for professional learning opportunities or collaboration were granted. We did maintain our professional learning community, but in ways that respected the context we were living with.

### **Practical Help with the Job Hunt**

Many staff had not looked for work in a long time and appreciated the many supports that were put in place to help them prepare to do so. Supports included conversations, coaching and advice about defining their dream job, creating a resume and preparing for interviews. Possible positions were flagged and the principal advocated for staff on positions of interest. The administrative assistant helped type and format resumes. Staff supported and encouraged each other throughout the postings, transfers and placements. The staffing process was difficult, especially since everyone was going through it, and it lasted until the end of June. However, staff greatly appreciated the supports and said that they helped them develop confidence and find good positions. All permanent staff had positions for the following year by the end of June.

### **Creating a Supportive Community**

The staff survey responses showed that staff felt our school was a good place to work and that we worked well as a team. In the focus group people said that they felt that the situation brought out the best in us—most of the time! We learned to work smarter, not just harder. Staff appreciated the supportive community that was nurtured by our monthly lunches and by opportunities to talk about their feelings. Staff appreciated having a stash of chocolate on hand that often complemented impromptu gatherings and conversation. One mantra I shared from Baldwin's *The Seven Whispers: A Spiritual Practise for Times Like These* was to "Ask for what you need and offer what you can" (2002, 65), and it seemed that we did that for each other. People responded differently to the situation at different times; when one person was down, someone else would offer encouragement and hope. We made taking care of each other a priority, and the rest of the work got done.

## **3. Student Satisfaction and Achievement**

The ultimate goal was to support staff so that they could maintain a quality teaching and learning environment for the students, and staff should be commended for work that yielded the following results on the district satisfaction survey.

- 96 per cent of students liked being in school.
- 98 per cent felt that their teachers expected them to do their best and that they got the help they needed from teachers.
- 98 per cent felt safe in school and thought that other students followed the school rules.

It is to be noted that there were increases from the responses a year ago on 11 out of 14 questions, the percentages indicated a five-year high on 11 out of 14 questions and all but one question had a satisfaction rate between 91 and 98 per cent.

Students told me that despite the impending closure they still had a great school year that included many enjoyable special events: a Halloween parade, Christmas concert, cake walk, French winter carnival and our Culture Vulture talent show. They enjoyed field trips to Bennett Centre and Safety City. They also liked having guest artists, whose appearances were made possible by casino funds. They enjoyed theme days when they got to dress up, and special events like the Santa breakfast and sports day. When asked what they liked about the school, many said that they liked its small size; everyone knew everyone. They liked the teachers, who made learning interesting.

We were delighted that, with respect to achievement results, our children performed as expected on provincial achievement tests, with a few exceptions. A few students were just below the acceptable standard in Grade 3 ELA, while more students than predicted achieved the standard of excellence on the Grade 6 tests. Almost all students demonstrated excellent progress in their reading and writing, as evidenced by the Highest Level of Achievement Tests (HLATs) administered to all district students in Grades 1 to 9. The staff are to be commended for the excellent progress and high quality learning that were evident in the progress reports and Individual Program Plans at year end.

On many occasions students asked why the school was closing. They were sad about this, but they could see positive benefits of moving to a new school. Occasionally students were upset and expressed frustration or anxiety about the school closing. Teachers always reassured them that their parents would find a good school for them, and that they would meet new friends. Despite the angst that staff were feeling, the students remained engaged with their learning and enjoyed the special activities that were always part of our school culture. One student wrote in a goodbye card, "It really was the best year ever."

## Principal Perspective

Our future as a school community was on the line; we knew that something had to change. Our building was half empty, and enrolment was declining. It was getting harder for us to provide the kind of education we wanted with dwindling resources. Yet, we still hoped that perhaps our school might stay open. Though we knew it was ultimately an issue of demographics, it was hard not to feel that the decision to close reflected on our work. We remained committed to high-quality teaching and learning; however, it was anything but business as usual as we went through the process that led to our school closing. So many conversations started with, “Well if the school is going to close anyway ...” to which I would respond that we wouldn’t know for sure until April, and in the meantime, we had to do our best to ensure a positive and effective learning community. This process began to truly affect me in the spring of 2009 when all the parents of the seven students going into Grade 5 decided to enrol them in another school. As a result, I had to cut staff because of overall declining enrolment. In May, we decided that unless we had significant new enrolment, kindergarten would be offered in the afternoon and combined with the small Grade 1 class. Subsequently, we lost three students. In September, we worked hard to keep the students we had, for the September 30 count that determines funding. Throughout the fall, we focused on teaching and learning, as the public engagement process happened around us. I learned that despite all our cost cutting, we were still projecting a significant deficit. From January through April, discussions about the best use of district resources, and the future of five schools took place at board meetings and other public meetings. The media was often at our door. Parents circulated a petition to keep our school open. We had to wait until April 13, when the board of trustees made the final decision to close our school, to start making concrete plans for closure and transition.

Blackmore (2004), who studied principals in Australia during the 1990s when schools were being decentralized and 300 out of 1800 schools were closed or amalgamated within two years, argues that teaching and leading are passionate, emotional and political work. In times of educational turbulence, the leader’s work becomes as much about emotional and image management as it is about getting results. Blackmore describes the tendency for female principals in particular to act as emotional buffers during times of transition—they feel pressure to support initiatives from the district or government even as they feel the stress and hardship it creates for their staff. Our uncertain future caused anxiety and stress for staff, students and parents. As the leader, I certainly felt the need to maintain positive energy, even when I was feeling tired, frustrated and discouraged. As a district employee, I agreed with the need to reduce excess space; as a school leader, I was deeply aware of the emotional effect the process had on various members of the community. Though I was not worried for my personal future, I keenly felt all the emotions as I operated from an ethic of care (Noddings 2003), trying to help my community navigate the transition we would experience as a result of school closure. At times, I found it difficult to contain my emotions. Blackmore recognizes the gender scripts about emotional behaviour to which women are subject. While it is acceptable for women to express positive passion about their work, displays of anger are considered unfeminine, and crying is considered an indicator of weakness (Blackmore 1999, 2004). I admit that I cried a lot of tears, usually in safe places, and found that working through the emotion authentically allowed me to be strong for the community.

Blackmore (2004) also identifies the tension between caring for others and caring for oneself. In January, I replaced our usual administrative staff meeting with a circle meeting facilitated by a consultant. Our only purpose was to discuss how we were feeling about this process and

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the future. That became a turning point for us, and we gave ourselves permission to be honest with each other about the emotions we were feeling, so that we could support each other for the sake of the students and maintain high-quality teaching and learning. It was also a way for me to share my burden and helped me realize that the work of support could be shared. I also met regularly with a consultant who knew me and the district context and could help me process what was happening intellectually and emotionally, so that I could lead from the heart and yet do what needed to be done. My administrative assistant was a great support to me and the rest of the staff. She realized how the process was affecting people, and she worked with me to address the practical and perceived needs as they evolved through the year. The support of friends and principal colleagues who took time to listen and encourage me was greatly appreciated. I was fortunate to have the support of two principals who had also gone through a school closure. I also had to be careful to look after myself—physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. Making time to eat well, exercise, reflect, journal and spend time with friends and family was critical to my sense of well-being. Getting away for weekends and taking breaks nourished my well-being in the midst of tiring and stressful work.

I experienced the tensions of “image management,” as Blackmore (2004) calls it. As a result of our declining enrolment, we had no Grade 5 class and a kindergarten/Grade 1 combined class. We had to invest a lot of energy and time into convincing some parents that their children were not being short-changed by the combined class in the afternoon. Despite the leadership of skilled teachers, small incidents or changes became bigger problems. The complaints and concerns were especially frustrating because we had created such a positive, effective learning environment. I was grateful for the support of many other parents who were willing to contribute to enhance children’s educational experience. As the leader, I felt the tension of holding many opposing ideas together—lightening the load for teachers while trying to convince parents that they were getting everything they wanted. In district meetings, we were creating a vision for the future and discussing initiatives to support student success, yet in my own school we focused on what made sense at the time. Sometimes I felt both hope and discouragement, but in my communication I had to remain neutral. We believed that we were providing a high-quality learning experience for our children, yet we knew that it could be better for staff and students in a bigger school with more financial and human resources. I consistently communicated the idea that we would have the best year ever, and we worked together to create that. I also made a concerted effort throughout the year to focus attention on the excellent teaching and learning that were happening, and on the evidence that we were a strong resilient community that could and would withstand the changes that were coming.

## **Having a Good End**

After the decision to close the school came down in April, we were able to start making plans to have a good end. It was important to recognize and celebrate the heart of this school, which had served the community well for over 50 years. We had a special assembly and walk-through for the community. The parent council planned a family party the last week of school and an appreciation event for the staff. With the support of the parents, we created a legacy book that we gave to each family and staff member at the end. Each child contributed a piece of art on the following themes: our favourite things, and how we grow our hearts and show them to the world. All of these events and mementos helped bring healing and closure to our school community.

## **Research Limitations**

This study describes the experiences of staff and students from one small school that was threatened with closure for a number of years and finally was closed. Our school was located in a stable, upper-middle-class neighbourhood where families had strong ties to the school and community, as evidenced by the fact that several parents had attended the school themselves. Several staff had been at the school for more than ten years and lived in the community themselves. Parents were involved, supportive and had high expectations for their children's school experience. We were also a site for a special needs program for children with severe medical, cognitive and physical needs.

The school closure experience could be different for other staffs, depending on the length and the nature of the process, the size and culture of the school, the socioeconomic context of the community and the level of collaboration among the schools under review. Staff members and students at our school expressed a range of emotions regarding the closure, the effect it had on them and how they handled it. I have sought to faithfully represent the views of those who voluntarily participated in the research process. This research is offered in the hope that others involved in school closure might find something that helps them foster resilience and manage transition with health, strength and perspective. More research should be conducted among staff from closing schools in different situations to broaden understanding.

## **Implications and Recommendations: What advice do you have for the district? Principals? Colleagues going through the same process?**

Closing schools is a difficult, political process. It is also the best solution in some circumstances of declining enrolment and changing demographics (Thomas 1980). In an article describing the consolidation of districts (Appalachia Educational Lab and Tennessee Education Association 1988), the authors identified planning, communications and leadership as critical elements for a successful consolidation. I believe that in the case of my school the administration and the board of trustees acted with integrity and moral purpose. The administration continuously sought and used feedback from previous closures to improve their processes. Using an external facilitator for community engagement is an example of one practice that was implemented based on feedback. Nevertheless, closing a school is a difficult process for those involved and brings unique leadership challenges.

The sector review and closure process significantly affected our work and the emotional climate of our school throughout the year. For schools that are being closed, it is important that the principal recognize that it is not "business as usual," especially in a small school. There will be extra meetings and additional work. Thomas (1980) identified leadership qualities like the ability to listen, to remain positive and to be open and accepting of those opposed to the closure as contributing to effective school closures. My staff appreciated the actions I took: open communication, lightening the load, helping them find other jobs and nurturing a supportive community. Each situation will be different, though, so principals should be attentive to the context and responsive to the staff needs. Principals should be prepared for the significant work of managing their own and others' emotions through turbulent times (Blackmore 2004). Establishing

a support system and making time for self-care are important contributors to resiliency and effectiveness for leaders at the best of times and are even more important when they must lead in times of significant change.

Staff members were able to handle the reality of closure once they knew what was happening. Most difficult were the long wait with dwindling resources, both financial and human, and future uncertainty. Clear and consistent information about staffing as early as possible would help staff with their job hunt. Other studies have identified job security as a chief concern of staff going through closure (Appalachia Educational Lab and Tennessee Education Association 1988; Thomas 1980). Thus staff recommended that the closure decision be made earlier in the school year and that it be more attuned to the other district timelines and processes for planning for the following year. There was a lot of work to do to prepare for the closure. A shorter process and more time for transition would have helped.

Staff experienced grief, anxiety, sadness, fatigue and uncertainty throughout the closure process. I am happy to say, though, that they also said that they found courage, were empowered and had hope for the future. Staff had sage advice for others facing similar challenges:

- Take time to think and plan for your future.
- Have a clear vision of what matters most for you; then pursue your dream job.
- Know that you can make choices and that you have the power to control your destiny.
- Believe in yourself and your bright future.
- Enjoy your time with staff and students as much as possible.
- On the practical side: be organized and start packing early.

From this experience and the research project, I learned that leadership does make a difference. Leading with heart involves both the joy that comes from learning and helping others and the pain of not being able to protect people from change and the difficulties it can cause. As a leader, I cannot be a lone ranger; I need the support of others to do my best work. As Sharma (2007, July 22) wrote, "We really don't discover how powerful and resilient we are until we face some adversity that fills our minds with stress and our hearts with pain. Then we realize that we all have within us the courage and the capacity to handle even the greatest curves life may throw our way. Hard times do make us stronger."

I put it this way, in six short words: be real, claim courage, embrace community.

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# Project 5

## **One Program, Two Schools: A Principal Reflects on the Effectiveness of Her Strategic Actions in Creating a Multicampus Program**

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### **Focus Question**

To what extent have my strategic actions as a school principal been successful in the creation of an effective multicampus arts core program over the past three years?

### **Abstract**

This research project examined the strategic actions of a principal in the creation of a multicampus arts core program, specifically those actions that contributed to the successful expansion of one program to include two schools. The qualitative approach taken for this research involved ongoing reflection. Over a three-year time frame, five areas emerged as being critically important: purpose and vision, purposeful planning, communication, relationships and the creation of a collaborative culture. The findings suggest that a principal assigned to lead two schools must be willing and able to embrace confusion, to value and make meaning from creative tension, and to create mental models for change.

### **Introduction**

This research project came about as a result of my assignment to expand one arts core program to include two schools in a large urban school district. Its purpose was to allow me to reflect on the effectiveness of my work over three years in building a sense of team, developing shared leadership and creating a shared vision for the program. The project was intended to assist me in building my capacity as a change leader. I hope that my findings and professional reflections will help other principal leaders examine, question and reflect on the effectiveness of their own strategic actions.

This project also has broader relevance for our school district, which offers many alternative programs and has twinned a number of schools. It inquires into two dimensions of Principal Quality Practice Guideline: “Embodying Visionary Leadership” and “Developing and Facilitating Leadership” (Alberta Education 2008).

I had a clear vision: one program, two schools. This vision was fostered by the development of a strong arts core alternative program.

## **Context**

As a principal, I was given the assignment of twinning two schools that are approximately 10 blocks apart and are of different size and reputation.

At the outset, three unique challenges emerged. The first was building acceptance of the concept of one program for two campuses and embracing the possibilities while also ensuring the viability of the two small schools. The second challenge was to maintain each school's identity, and honour its traditions, history and school culture. The third challenge was to compel both school communities to act and to build momentum for change by designing a process that responded to the district's assessed needs, though no explicit transition model had been articulated. Thus, both school communities required the courage to embrace the unknown throughout this journey of change. Resistance to change varied within each school's parent community, and thus developing relationships was paramount.

The work of the first year was to increase awareness through sharing information and inviting both school communities to imagine the possibilities. Gathering support from others and being resilient in the face of the unknown and the inevitable resistance were critical strategies. The program theme for this first year, "Journey of the Sole," used the shoe as a metaphor for stepping out of our comfort zones on a quest for knowledge, experience and creative approaches, and also celebrated the beginning of our collective journey.

Insight from the first year guided the work of the second year, which involved deepening knowledge and understanding of arts core programming. The second year's theme, "Courage to Dream," evoked the spirit of looking beyond the horizon to the infinite possibilities of our school community—an arts core program in which imagination inspires the love of learning. This schoolwide theme gave both campuses a common direction in the second year.

With the appointment of one principal for both campuses, the twinning provided shared leadership, shared staff, shared professional learning, shared pedagogy and shared philosophy. In a state of renewal for both campuses, we committed to a common journey with two goals: to build upon the strengths of each school and each staff member's contributions, and to honour the unique culture and community that continued to define each campus. The process was supported by ongoing reflection and analysis, which would lead to the emergence of a new collective story as the two communities came together. The journey demanded support, trust, dialogue, observation, mentoring and coaching.

The third year required me to shift my role as leader to learn how to work through other leaders. Through a cascading leadership model, I would lead through my assistant principals, who in turn would lead through teacher leaders. Thus, I depended on my leadership team to know and communicate to me what was happening at each campus. An assistant principal was anchored at each campus, ensuring continuity for students, staff and parents, as well as for me as principal.

## **Literature Review**

Dewey viewed reflection as one of the aims of education, and much of the writing on reflective teaching derives from his work. In *How We Think* (1933), he discusses the two components of reflective thinking: process and content. Both must be considered simultaneously. The process of

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reflection focuses on how we make decisions, while the content emphasizes that which prompts the thinking. Beattie (1997) supports Dewey's idea that education is about both growth and inquiry, viewing educators as inquirers into their practice with the goal of continuous construction and reconstruction of their inquiry. Researchers are concerned with the process of combining reflection and action, leading to improved practice.

As a leader, I have always been interested in reflective practice. The ability to stand outside of ourselves and reflect critically on our work is an important part of our professional growth. Clarke (1995) discusses the ideas of Schön, who viewed reflective practice as artistry. Schön believed that the process of framing and reframing reflective practice, as opposed to repetitive practice, was the hallmark of a professional. He saw reflective practice as a critical process involving the thoughtful consideration of one's experience in applying knowledge to practice, and he was very interested in the knowledge practitioners bring to their problems (Schön 1983, 1987).

Educational leadership is a complex and dynamic practice requiring leaders to continually reflect on their practice, which empowers them to make effective decisions and plan strategic actions to guide school improvement. In my reading of the literature, researchers seem to agree that reflection is integral to professional growth, requiring the ongoing process of critically examining and refining practice. Schön (1983, 1987) refers to "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action." Being aware of what is happening and modifying actions instantaneously is what he calls reflection-in-action. Whereas reflection-in-action (or "knowing-in-action") takes place while an action is happening, reflection-on-action occurs after the fact; it involves exploring why we acted the way we did. The two are interdependent and not dissimilar to Dewey's (1933) distinction between routine practice and reflective practice. Both require judgments about improved practice. Reflective action is held together with thoughtful consideration of practice, knowledge, beliefs, and the attitudes of "open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility" (Dewey 1933).

In focusing on the strategic actions of a principal leader, an area for further exploration is transformational change. Reeves (2007/08) notes that principals must be clear that the strategic planning process is a tool to improve achievement, not an end in itself. Doyle (2004) suggests that implementing change requires patience and time, as well as a shift in thinking. Transformation within a school community requires a commitment from more than just the principal. Collins (2001) states that the process of transformation begins with having the right people in place. The right people are those who are interested in sharing and building on the vision.

Bringing two schools together is a community project, and trust begins with teachers learning together and developing common goals to meet diverse student needs. This is a critical and pivotal starting point for collaboration, according to Martin, Shafer and Kragler (2009). Creating a sense of team is essential to the success of any transformation. Through his study of teams from arts and business organizations, Hackman (2002) concluded that five conditions are required for sustained effectiveness: being a real team (as opposed to a team in name only), having a compelling direction, having an enabling structure, operating within a supportive organizational context, and providing coaching in teamwork.

Fullan (2001) emphasizes that a principal must be able to see the big picture and be a conceptual thinker who understands that a cultural shift happens through people and teams. True transformational change takes place when everyone works together. The change comes through

what the organization values and how its members become a team to accomplish sustainable change. Investing in the process of building relationships is key.

## **Methodology**

With this understanding of reflection and transformational leadership, I chose a qualitative approach for my research. This approach invited reflection, dialogue and interpretation as I made sense of my strategic actions that were successful in creating a multicampus program. My own weekly written reflections, the leadership team's written reflections and reflections from meetings over the three years provided rich data.

Staff reflections on the journey emerged from an interactive and engaging dialogue in a focus group with participants from both campuses. To gather reflective data, I electronically distributed an invitation to participate in the focus group and posed three questions:

- What six words would you use to tell the story of the creation of an arts core multicampus program?
- What evidence do you see of our school's sense of team and school improvement?
- What were the specific strategic actions, events or communications by the leadership team that were significant in contributing to, or got in the way of, the creation of an effective multicampus arts core program?

The focus group met in my home on June 3, 2010. With a principal colleague playing the role of facilitator, we engaged in a focused conversation, with talking circle, individual reflection and narrative built into the ORID (objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional) model for conversations.

The focus group identified effective strategies that I had employed as principal, outlined the preferred qualities of teachers and the leader, and provided recommendations for others taking on a challenge of this nature. Categories and themes emerged, which helped in interpreting the focus group data. The data was rich, providing great insight into the strategies and qualities of an effective team.

## **Results**

The nature of my research project allowed for ongoing reflection and the opportunity to respond and improve my practice as a principal along the journey. Weekly written reflections from the leadership team helped me be both proactive and responsive. The responses from the focus group discussion provided a reflective lens for exploring the effectiveness of my strategic actions in the creation of a multicampus arts core program. Five areas of critical importance emerged: purpose and vision, purposeful planning, communication, relationships, and the creation of a collaborative culture.

## **Purpose and Vision**

The responses from the focus group and the leadership team's reflective journals made evident the importance of clearly articulating a purpose and a vision. Why our two schools were being

twinned was the first question to be addressed. As a result of a sustainability review indicating a significant decrease in enrolment, the school board recommended that the two schools be twinned, with a program shift at one school. The parent community wanted to know the terms and conditions of a multicampus model. It was with this issue that my strategic actions began.

We needed to identify and understand the need for this transition to one program at two campuses, and to embrace the possibilities while ensuring the viability of both small schools. I thought that exploring the possible benefits to both schools and envisioning the positive outcomes of sharing a program, staff and resources might offer the incentive needed to involve all stakeholders. My challenge was to compel staff and the community to act and to build momentum for change.

A strong sense of mistrust and suspicion about the twinning came from the parent community. A meeting for parents and teachers to learn more about the project allowed parents to share their perspectives, apprehension and concerns. Staff from both schools discussed their positive experiences with collaborating with each other, which led to an engaged dialogue about the possibilities and benefits. The common ground was a collective understanding between staff and parents of the value of arts core learning, and as the meeting ended, the dreaming began. This strategy of meeting with parents and staff was effective in creating and sharing the vision needed to initiate the process of bringing the two schools together.

Throughout the transition, the staff at both schools managed to keep long-valued traditions while creating new ones. In an attempt to explore the bigger picture, revisiting each school's vision and mission became the focus of collaborative meetings with staff. A commitment to a common journey emerged, with two goals: to build upon the strengths of each school, and to honour the unique culture and community that defined each school. Arts core programming was new to one of the schools, and the other school had a 30-year history as an arts core school. This presented a significant leadership challenge: differentiating the pace and learning to accommodate two distinct school rhythms. District consultants helped provide professional development for both staff groups, and staff gained the confidence to embrace the possibilities of expanding one program to two schools. With this shift in perspective, staff committed to developing a common understanding of arts core teaching and learning.

The focus group participants cited various strategies that facilitated the cultural shift required for this multicampus program. Their reflections are discussed in the four sections that follow.

## **Purposeful Planning**

The focus group summarized my process in three words: *purposeful*, *strategic* and *transformational*.

A great deal of time and creativity went into the design of the initial staff meetings. The first meeting with both schools was held at the beginning of the school year in a neutral space located between the schools. The staff were strategically mixed within a circle. During the focus group, one participant recalled her anxiety about this meeting, but through imagery, play and communal art making, a sense of team began to emerge.

The schoolwide theme for the first year, "Journey of the Sole," united students, parents and staff; conveyed the concept of one program at two campuses; and used the shoe ("sole") as a metaphor

for travel. The staff prepared the welcome for students and ensured parallel routines and expectations at both campuses.

In the first year of the twinning, the campuses shared leadership, pedagogy, philosophy, professional learning and some staff. However, each campus held on to some key identifiers (including visual identity, newsletters, student agendas, websites and school council meetings). This attempt to move cautiously required the leadership team to be constantly present on both campuses. Trying to ensure that all three administrators were familiar with both school cultures doubled their commitment in terms of energy and time. In the following year, it became important to communicate alignment and to combine as much as possible.

## **Communication**

In the creation of the multicampus program, there was a great deal to communicate on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. The focus group participants identified not only the important messages that were communicated but also the many forms of communication used and the frequency of communication.

Developing a common language, providing a consistent message and presenting a positive tone were cited as the most effective communication strategies. Revisiting each school's vision and mission became the focus of collaborative meetings. Throughout the transition, staff managed to honour valued traditions while creating a new mission and vision. Communicating key messages that reflected a clear vision and clear expectations had a significant impact. My weekly principal's memo related to the schoolwide theme and was informative, celebratory and inspirational. The focus group felt that this significantly and consistently fostered a common culture for staff.

Communicating the creative culture of an arts core school required both campuses to look the part. The focus group participants reflected on the importance of aesthetics and the concerted emphasis on establishing a sense of pride at each campus. As an arts core school for 30 years, one school had long been a vibrant learning environment, but the newer campus needed to be transformed to reflect the arts. Bulletin boards and rooms were painted; displayed quotations from students and parents figuratively brought their voices to the walls; and descriptions of the purpose and benefits of arts core programming and the schoolwide theme were posted. Student art was valued through prominent display, casting the students as artists and inviting the creation of a working, reflective vocabulary for dialogue in response to art. Staff and volunteers began to consider how they might better value the artistic and creative work of students by communicating through text and images. This led to the creation of guidelines for displaying student work throughout the school.

A critical communication strategy was the design and creation of a new visual identity for both campuses. This led the way for the development of one newsletter, one website and one student handbook with shared content. This work helped to remind students, staff and parents at each campus that they were part of something larger. Having a shared newsletter, with both common and campus-specific articles, reinforced a sense of community and removed any negative sense of competition, while recognizing each campus as unique.

## **Relationships**

In the first year of this project, building relationships with the students, staff and parents of each school community was identified as an important strategy.

Spending time in dialogue during collaborative meetings helped staff get to know one another better. Weekly meetings were held for each campus's staff, and weekly collaborative meetings with both staff groups alternated between the campuses. The campus meetings allowed for campus-specific issues to be addressed, and the combined meetings allowed staff to share information, stories, hopes and dreams, and frustrations and disappointments, offering similar, but slightly different, perspectives and contexts.

Staff were encouraged to actively reflect, and they played a key role in designing the work of building one program for the two campuses. The focus group noted that staff were required to be active learners and open to coaching. They were invited to be risk takers in the process, willing to share leadership even as they were challenged to shift practice. Connections with one another were strongly supported, encouraged and facilitated. The more experienced staff mentored the new teachers, and authentic collaborative projects emerged between the campuses and individual classes.

Encouraged to think beyond their classrooms and their campuses, teachers were invited to share leadership and, by extension, ownership. The decision to provide time for collaboration between the math coaches from both campuses was cited by the focus group as an effective strategy. It mobilized teachers to improve practice, thereby having a positive impact on teaching and learning. It also served as a means for the teachers to learn what was taking place in the classrooms at each other's campus.

Ensuring that the principal and the two assistant principals were familiar with the cultures of both campuses was an important strategy in the first year, because it provided a 360-degree view. Staff at both campuses needed access to leadership staff at all times. However, the focus group noted that staff were never certain where members of the leadership team would be or for how long, which proved stressful for some staff. Finding the time to communicate with staff and providing timely follow-up proved increasingly difficult for the administrators. Staff became frustrated and reluctant to share their concerns, which was challenging for those teachers who needed more consistent support. Recognizing that there was no precedent for this model of leadership, we shifted the strategy in the second year. To ensure continuity, an assistant principal was anchored at each campus. This meant that only the principal would be moving between the campuses. In the final year of the project, the administration seemed more settled, which meant less tension and uncertainty at both campuses.

Building a team required considerable use of the existing strengths of staff, and as one focus group participant recalled, individual expertise was tapped effectively and creatively. Building a new team that spanned the two campuses was essential. In hiring new staff, examining how a candidate might contribute to the existing team was a critical strategy. With new staff came new possibilities. Some long-term staff found that they weren't committed to the new vision and chose to move on; others held institutional memory of their school's culture, yet their desire to continue to learn made them open to change. The key element identified by the focus group was a willingness to grow, to be challenged and to learn.

The focus group identified the characteristics of staff and the principal that were essential to the success of a multicampus model. The characteristics required of a leader were as follows:

- Belief in, trust in and commitment to the vision

- An emphasis on the value of professional relationships in collaborative work
- The ability to foster and encourage creative, critical and reflective practice

### **Creation of a Collaborative Culture**

The focus group identified as a critical strategy the creation of a committed professional learning community open to collaboration at every turn.

Shared meetings, professional development and collaboration time were scheduled weekly. The principal's spending time with the staff at both campuses over the lunch hour was cited as a positive strategy in developing a sense of team. Providing time for staff to share their teaching and learning with the principal was a need identified by staff. A weekly memo assisted in sharing campus-specific information across the two staff groups, and teachers created projects together. Staff and students shared projects, field experiences, and events and activities.

The focus group participants remembered the many times I, as principal, had shared research and information about arts education. Connecting to the arts community through arts events and guest artists helped create a network of support and opportunity for students and staff, and also raised awareness of the need to advocate for the power of the arts in education. Guests were invited to the school to share their expertise and their interests with students, and student work was shared outside of the school. These simple strategies nurtured students' pride in themselves and their school. Focus group participants recalled how collaboration brought teachers together to share professional learning and different perspectives. The most beneficial cross-campus collaborative work was the design, development, implementation and assessment of integrated arts core projects. Focusing on improving the quality of teaching and learning strengthened the commitment of the professional learning community.

The greatest challenge was moving the members of the two distinct school communities to work together. Educating parents about the importance of an arts core learning environment became a focus of the work at the newer campus. Parents began to notice the student artwork, which led to engaged conversation, increased ownership and a desire to get involved. Attendance at school events increased, as did awareness of the physical environment and interest in the changes that reflected the arts core program. Student enrolment at the newer campus also continually increased over the first three years.

Bringing the two school councils together was an important strategy, but it required sensitivity as to timing. In the second year, an initial joint meeting was scheduled out of necessity, as it was impossible to hold two separate meetings in that month. This meeting led to the decision for the two school council presidents to meet. They cochaired an initial joint meeting, and the response was positive: both parent groups requested that all school council meetings be joint monthly meetings, which supported the vision of two small schools with one large voice. This move allowed parents to collaborate on projects and share support in a way they hadn't before been able to, and resulted in a larger, more efficient and more effective network of support. Parents now hold monthly meetings (alternating campuses) and host school events for the families of both campuses.

Students should have been the first members of the learning community to work together; however, the logistics made that challenging. There have been grade groupings across campuses

and shared field trips. Using Skype has allowed students in classrooms at both campuses to share a common learning experience. This important collaborative tool is now accessible to all classrooms.

A multicampus event to celebrate community was planned for the end of the third school year. This intentional strategy for continuing to strengthen community was facilitated by the parent groups and staff. Many events are now scheduled for both campuses to share in as a community. Today, the heart of our school lies in the joy of play, the passion to create and the commitment to working as a team.

Together, these findings suggest that a principal assigned to lead two schools must be willing and able to embrace confusion, to value and make meaning from creative tension, and to create mental models for change.

## **Limitations**

A more detailed data-gathering system involving the parent community, the students and the staff at both campuses would have provided greater perspective on the strategic actions of the leadership throughout the process of creating a multicampus program. Implementing a reflective element with responses for data collection at key points along the journey may have provided more insight into the perspectives of the students, staff and parents on the effective strategies used. This would have offered further reflection-in-action and may have been useful in navigating through the uncertainty during the process of change.

Also, the data relates to two small schools and comes from the reflections of a few staff members. Thus, the findings may not extend to other settings, particularly where the purpose for twinning is unclear. However, by examining the context of this research, other leaders who have been challenged to shift their school culture to reflect a new program, or those who are facing the task of twinning two schools, may benefit from some of the insights.

There is a need for more research in the area of school improvement as it relates to shifting a school culture focused on programming. Leaders are often left with the task of shifting school programs to meet the needs of the community or the school district, with little support or direction. Creating a vision and designing an effective process require a great deal of professional dialogue and reflection, as well as a deep commitment to the program-specific values—in this case, the arts. Case studies and stories of schools that have undergone transformative journeys to ensure their viability should be encouraged in this time of sustainability and school improvement.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

The findings of this research project suggest that the school leader is critical to the success of a multicampus program. Focus group participants reported their observations and offered the following advice to principals embarking on a similar journey:

- Respond to the challenge through creating and articulating a vision for a successful cultural shift.

- Recognize the complexity implicit in a school culture shift, and appreciate both the philosophic nature and the practical nature of the desired culture.
- Create a strategic plan that is simultaneously target-specific and fluid and flexible.
- Remain open, reflective, reflexive and accessible to all stakeholder groups.
- Be willing to engage, play and model by investing in authentic professional relationships.

Reflecting on the process of twinning schools, focus group participants offered the following advice to school staff:

- Have the courage to embrace shared leadership.
- Commit to the growth opportunities as educators.
- Believe in the transformative power of the journey.

Through these lists, the focus group participants addressed the research question: To what extent have my strategic actions as a school principal been successful in the creation of an effective multicampus arts core program over the past three years? Identifying what a leader needs to do provides the *what* of the plan, and the strategic actions are the *how*. Leadership requires belief and commitment, and the leader communicates the passion that in turn motivates, engages and inspires others. Modelling change and finding the courage to face the unknown are critical throughout the process, as there is no map or template to follow. Building support in others and being resilient in the face of their fear and resistance are of value. The leader must remember that no journey must be taken alone, and building relationships that sustain, rejuvenate and provide a variety of perspectives is critical to success.

Our goal of fully engaging students and staff in learning and sharing what they know and what they can do will continue to build their creative capacity to think, question and imagine. The next phase of our journey will place a greater emphasis on bringing students from both campuses together and increasing their opportunities for shared learning experiences. The true purpose of any school improvement is to ensure that all students receive the best possible education. Our vision—one program, two schools—has helped us meet this goal. Through improving student achievement, increasing enrolment, fostering a culture of high expectations, and ensuring high-quality teaching and learning through meaningful parental involvement, we have created an environment that inspires the love of learning.

## **Principal Reflections**

The value of this research project lies in the power of reflection and learning about the need to remain positive in the face of the inevitable challenges along the journey of leadership. Remaining focused on the vision and moving forward with the changes, despite the discomfort of those who preferred the status quo, required sensitivity and firm commitment. This brought about a shift in attitudes toward change, from apprehension to flexibility and openness. It was essential for the leadership to convey a strong sense of confidence that all of the changes would have a positive impact on the school community. This confidence fostered a growing and changing sense of community; there is now mutual respect, and all members are valued for their unique contributions.

At the outset, I believed that this project would be targeted at arts core learning. Having been part of the journey, I knew the story, I knew the impact, and I knew the value of an arts core school. So what did I want to learn from this project? I wanted to know if my leadership might inspire others to believe in the power of arts education. As the project progressed, however, the arts core program took a back seat; I realized that the true focus was on building the infrastructure to merge two schools. Nevertheless, we continued to approach our work through the lens of an artist: while emphasizing the bricks and mortar that would cement our vision (one program, two schools), strategically the leadership remained committed to the heart and soul of an arts core program. The project was about connecting two great schools with a common goal, where imagination inspires the love of learning in students, parents and staff.

This project revealed that a number of strategic actions are involved in leadership, and it allowed me to see my intentional strategies and my practices as a change agent. I now realize that my values and the effectiveness of transformational change are embedded in every action. I realize that my desire to be everything to everyone on every day—multiplied by two—is unrealistic, and that a cascading leadership model requires a great deal of trust and support. I have also relearned the importance of an outside coach to assist in gaining valuable perspective. I've learned that this is hard, hard work and that every action taken and every word spoken by a leader has an impact. I've learned that leadership requires belief, commitment and the ability to communicate one's passion, which in turn motivates, engages and inspires others.

With my belief that reflection is important to the growth of my practice as an instructional leader, this project invited me to reflect on my professional practice and on my capacity as a school principal. It has challenged me to grow professionally. The greatest challenge for me as a leader was to acknowledge that though the vision is one program for two schools, I also need the capacity to invest in two cultures simultaneously. Leadership capacity in this model, then, requires twice as much balance. Through the process of personal and professional development, I have gained professional skills and knowledge, and have increased my capacity to lead. I hope my reflective learning will foster a desire in other principals to reflect on their own leadership journeys and challenges in order to better understand and improve their practice.

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