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SUPPORTING PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP IN AREA III

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This case study examined district efforts to strengthen instructional leadership practices in Area III of the Calgary Board of Education during three years. Building on research informed conceptions of teaching, instructional leadership, professional learning, and district leadership our research focused on the development of pedagogical leadership that requires school leaders to be leaders of teacher learning. Data included individual and focus group interviews, provincial achievement tests, student engagement surveys, documents, field notes and participant observations. Our findings indicate that district leaders and consultants have effectively mobilized evidence-based professional learning to strengthen instructional leadership, teaching, and student learning.

INTRODUCTION

During the last three years the Area III in the Calgary Board of Education has implemented an initiative to deepen student learning and to more fully engage students in worthwhile work and discipline-based inquiry. As one component of a larger study examining ways in which school leadership practices are

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improving teaching, student engagement and student achievement in the Area III, this paper identifies more specific district leadership efforts that have guided this initiative. The purpose of this portion of the study was to identify practices that school district leaders have employed with the expectation of achieving better outcomes for students in the 42 schools in this diverse and economically disadvantaged section of this large urban school district.

DISTRICT LEADERSHIP THAT STRENGTHENS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Building on research informed conceptions of teaching (Friesen, 2009), instructional leadership (Robinson, 2011; Wahlstrom, 2012), professional learning (Timperley, 2011), and district leadership (Brandon, Hanna, Morrow, Rhyason, & Schmold, 2013; Leithwood, 2008, 2011; Louis & Leithwood, 2012; Louis, Leithwood, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2010a; Marzano & Waters, 2009) our ongoing research is focusing on aspects of pedagogical leadership which require school leaders to be leaders of teacher learning rather than mere facilitators or collegial discussants. The literature on educational leadership is substantial, but only a small part of it focuses on the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes. An even smaller part of the literature considers the impact of school district leadership.

This case study portion of our larger inquiry is framed by the research literature on district leadership practices that strengthen the instructional leadership capabilities of school leaders. Several recent studies point district leadership practices in this direction (Brandon, et al. 2013; Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2012; Louis, et al., 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Wahlstrom, et al. 2010a). Key aspects from two reports from one of the larger studies (Louis, et al.) are highlighted here. Anderson and Louis (2012) found that “district policies and practices around instruction are sufficiently powerful that they can be felt, indirectly, by teachers as stronger and more directed leadership behaviors by principals” (p. 181). Through analysis of surveys, interviews, and class observations in 180 schools in 43 districts, the

researches identified five key aspects of district leadership practice linked to higher student learning results. First, district leaders communicate a strong belief in the capacity of teachers and principals to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and in the district's capacity to develop the organizational conditions needed for that to happen (high collective efficacy). Second, they build consensus about core expectations for professional teaching and leadership practice. Third, they differentiate support to schools in relation to evidence of compliance and skill in implementing the expectations, with flexibility for school-based innovation. Fourth, clear expectations are set and support is provided for school leadership practices consistent with district expectations. Fifth, organized opportunities are provided for teachers and principals to engage in school-to-school communication, focusing on the challenges of improving student learning (p. 181-182). Based on the same data set, Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010b) derived similar conclusions to guide district leadership practice.

While the systematic analyses of data collected from multiple sources in a variety of district contexts over an extended period of time in the above cited studies address earlier critiques based on limited research designs (Leithwood, 2008; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich. 2008), there is much more to be learned about district leadership practices that impact educator and student learning. Findings from this portion of our study illuminate school district leadership practices that have contributed to improved outcomes in a diverse and economically disadvantaged section of a large urban school district.

CASE STUDY RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed an exploratory case study research design. A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2012). "*Bounded* means that the case is separated for research in terms of time, place or some physical boundaries" (Creswell, 2012, p. 465). The issue under investigation within the bounded system of the Area III sector of the Calgary Board of Education from 2011 to 2014 is "participant

perceptions of school system level instructional leadership”. Such inquiry calls for a range of research methods to do justice to the complexity of the case and to facilitate synthesis and explanation (Yin, 2009).

Data were collected from individual and focus group interviews of district leaders and GENA consultants, provincial achievement tests, student engagement surveys, documents, artifacts from professional learning sessions, field notes and participant observations. Systematic data coding has been utilized to extract themes and critical elements that have been synthesized in relation to the following research question: *What district instructional leadership practices have contributed to improved outcomes in Area III?*

The Calgary Board of Education’s Sustained Focus on Teaching and Learning

Though this paper specifically focuses on district leadership practices that have led to improvements in leading, teaching and learning in one area of the Calgary Board of Education (CBE), it is important to note that the district as a whole is one of the highest provincial performers on the Alberta provincial accountability measures. Moreover, the CBE is making concerted efforts to build educator capacity to respond to the learning needs of all students in the rapidly changing context. Despite a myriad of distractions at the political level, the superintendent and her district leadership team continue to work methodically toward this aim through multiple approaches. Professional learning similar to the Area III focus on pedagogical leadership is evident in each of the other CBE Areas and an ongoing inquiry-oriented program for high school learning leaders from across the city was started in the fall of 2013. Significantly, Area and Learning Directors in the system learn with and from one another on an ongoing basis. They share challenges and successes within a school system professional community that is clearly focused on enhancing teaching and learning.

Three Iterative Knowledge Building Cycles in Area III

The design-based orientation of the Area III professional leadership learning initiative enables district leaders, GENA consultants and school based participants to adjust course in responsive and timely ways. School leaders are being provided with intensive professional learning that reflects the principles Friesen's (2009) *Teaching Effectiveness: A Framework and Rubric* and Robinson's (2011) conception of *Student-centred Leadership* to address the initiative's aims. On a continuing basis, researchers and participants are documenting changes in pedagogical leadership practices, ways in which the learning environments in area schools are reflecting the *Framework's* five principles, approaches to making student and teacher learning more visible, improvements in student engagement and achievement, and ways in which timely and constructive feedback is being generated to strengthen teaching and learning.

In addition to monthly iterative cycles of inquiry that connect session learning to leading and teaching practices in school settings and back to subsequent professional learning sessions, the Area III pedagogical leadership initiative has undergone three major adaptations. Through the three design phases, the inquiry focus has remained: *How can leadership practices improve teaching practices, student engagement and student achievement?* The learning outcomes for each session have been slightly adjusted over time. To *deepen understanding about the principal's role in leading teacher learning and development* and to *develop processes for providing teachers with timely, specific and constructive feedback about teaching and learning* are the most recent two leadership learning outcomes.

From the first session in the fall of 2011, a participant design team has been employed to help plan the ongoing program of professional learning within a knowledge-building learning community (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006; Timperley, 2011). The former Area III Director and her Area Assistant Director had taken the bold step of replacing half-day administrative meetings with learning sessions

on instructional leadership that they co-planned with teaching, leadership and professional learning experts from the University of Calgary's Galileo Educational Network (GENA). From the onset, the shift was well received. The basic format for the monthly principal sessions and the monthly assistant principal sessions has been maintained. Meetings typically begin at 8:30 am with short focusing comments from the Area Director and one of the GENA team members that lead directly into learning group conversations in which evidence connecting school practice to the learning outcomes is brought forward by each participant. Learning tasks for the remainder of the morning are based on responses from previous feedback loops and more detailed suggestions that emerge from the design team meetings, which take place immediately following the session. Routine administrative matters are dealt with from 11:30 a.m. till noon.

The role of the participant design team has been a vital contributor to the success of principal professional learning sessions from the beginning. Design team processes have implemented with positive results for the assistant principal group during the 2012-2013 school year, as the overall initiative gained momentum under the leadership of the current Area III Director. The central focus of the first year was on learning task design and the provision of worthwhile student work within Friesen's (2009) *Teaching Effectiveness: A Framework and Rubric* (TEF). As interest in this approach to teaching and learning heightened and understanding of it deepened, the Area Director strategically widened involvement. Focus on teaching and learning in the sessions and in a growing number of classrooms was widened through learning leader sessions and additional ongoing GENA support within five middle schools during the second year. At the same time Robinson's (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership* was introduced into the principal and assistant principal sessions, which helped participants to conceive of their instructional leadership work as *leaders of professional learning*.

The iterative cycles of inquiry and knowledge building around effective teaching and instructional leadership continued through the third year with each cohort group: principals, assistant principals and

learning leaders. Two main design-based adaptations were made in the transition from year two into year three. On the teaching and learning side of the initiative, attention shifted to the student assessment component of the TEF and more detailed sources on summative assessment (Cooper, 2011) to better respond to emerging district priorities. Attention to task design and the provision of worthwhile student work continued, as did the connections between leadership practice and Robinson's (2011) dimensions three (ensuring quality teaching) and four (leading teacher learning and development). Receiving greater emphasis through year two-three design based adaptations on the leadership side was the notion of *leadership team*. All members of each school's leadership team began working more deliberately on very similar, if not the same, inquiry cycles and evidence gathering in their schools and professional learning session.

Strengthening Leadership, Teaching and Student Learning

There is considerable evidence that the systematic focus on pedagogical leadership and effective teaching in Area III is impacting leading, teaching and learning. School leaders indicate they now see their work in less isolated ways as members of an open and supportive community of learners and through greater participation in shared and distributed leadership teams. More adaptive approaches to leadership have been observed. Increasing commitment to collaboratively improving leadership practice through evidence driven cycles of professional inquiry are also evident.

Improvements in teaching and student learning have also been documented. Widening use of the TEF is reported as is an increase in collaborative orientations to pedagogical improvement. A broader array of classroom evidence has been brought forward in professional learning community sessions to deepen reflection and spur further inquiry. Improvements in student learning and engagement are substantiated through three data sources: improved performance on provincial diploma and achievement examinations, indication of higher levels of engagement on annual *Tell Them from Me*

Surveys and a spectrum of school based observations and classroom derived artifacts of student learning.

DISTRICT LEADERS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

As one small portion of a much more extensive study of the impact of pedagogical leadership, this paper briefly outlines four practices that, according to the evidence gathered from the research participants, have contributed to strengthened school leadership, teaching and student learning in the 42 schools in a culturally diverse and economically challenging area of a large urban school district.

The four practices are framed as lessons for school district leaders striving to become stronger instructional leaders.

Lesson One: Build leadership capacity *with* rather than *for* school leadership teams. Incorporating the insights of and feedback from participants in the design of professional leadership learning enhances effectiveness.

Lesson Two: Convey and model an ongoing and adaptive focus on improving teaching and learning through multiple approaches.

Lesson Three: Support improvements in school leadership practice through iterative cycles of professional learning that focus on evidence of changes in teaching practice that better engage students in learning toward important learning outcomes.

Lesson Four: Hold school leadership teams accountable for improvements in teaching practice in their school through iterative cycles of professional learning that focus on evidence of enhanced student engagement and learning toward important learning outcomes.

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