

**Optimum Learning for All Students**  
**Implementation of Alberta's 2018 Professional Practice Standards**  
**A Literature Synthesis**

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**Chapter Eight**

**WHAT IS QUALITY SYSTEM LEADERSHIP?**

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### **What is Quality System Leadership?**

Two overarching questions drove our review of the school district leadership literature: What quality school district leadership practices contribute to optimum student learning? How do those identified in the research compare and contrast with those outlined in the Alberta *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* (SLQS)? In contrast to the preceding teaching and school leadership sections, the sources of evidence considered here do not add up to a very large database. However, even though school districts are “largely invisible and of little interest to the public, at large” (Leithwood, 2013, p. 9), and “the nature of the link between districts and student achievement is difficult to delineate” (Anderson & Young, 2018, p. 1), there is a growing body of research that substantiates the important characteristics and associated leadership practices enacted in high quality school systems that contribute to the learning and well-being of all students. Evidence in this portion of literature review is presented in two subsections. Building on the short history of research on school district contributions to student learning, in the first subsection we trace the emergence of four similar sets of quality school district characteristics and leadership practices since the late 1980s. In the second subsection, the focus is on studies of quality system leadership in Alberta. Themes from the bodies of district leadership knowledge are compared to and contrasted with the seven competencies and key indicators outlined in the Alberta SLQS.

#### **Quality District Leadership’s Contributions to Student Learning**

While England diminished the powers of Local Educational Authorities in the 1980s and other English speaking countries, such as New Zealand and Australia, turned to school based management; Canada and the U.S. began to view districts as “key agents in the chains of accountability for student learning between governments and classrooms” (Leithwood, 2013, p. 10). For this reason, the district leadership literature included in our review is entirely from North America. In the three decades since the publication of the first major

studies of district effectiveness by Murphy and Hallinger (1988) and LaRoque and Coleman (1990), hundreds of journal articles have provided insight into school district leadership practice. Given the significant “reliability among key findings related to the characteristics of district structures and practices” (Anderson & Young , 2018, p. 2) in this literature, we rely on three benchmark reviews (Anderson & Young, 2018; Leithwood, 2010; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988) and the sole comprehensive meta-analysis in the field (Waters & Marzano, 2006) to explore of the pattern of key findings.

### **Instructionally Effective School Districts (1988)**

In their exploratory study, “Characteristics of Instructionally Effective School Districts”, Murphy and Hallinger (1988) interviewed superintendents and reviewed documents 12 high performing California school districts. Effectiveness in these instructionally effective school districts (IESD) was determined to have the following characteristics:

1. strong instructionally-focused leadership from the superintendent and administrative team,
2. an emphasis on student achievement and improvement in teaching and learning,
3. the establishment and enforcement of district goals for improvement,
4. district-wide curriculum and textbook adoption
5. district advocacy and support for use of specific instructional strategies,
6. deliberate selection of principals with curriculum knowledge and interpersonal skills,
7. systematic monitoring of the consistency between district goals and expectations and school goals
8. implementation through principal accountability processes.

9. direct, personal, involvement of superintendents in monitoring performance through school visits and meetings with principals,
10. alignment of district resources for professional development with district goals for curriculum and instruction,
11. systematic use of student testing and other data for district planning, goal setting, and tracking school performance, and
12. generally positive relations between the central office, the school board, and local communities.

LaRoque and Coleman's (1990) study of ten British Columbia school districts reported similar findings. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom's (2004) review of the school and district leadership literature found "that other studies from this time period suggested that strong district influence on instructional decisions and practices in the classroom was not typical in most districts" (p. 38).

### **Setting and Keeping Districts Focused on Teaching and Learning Goals (2006)**

Waters and Marzano's (2006) meta-analysis of school district leadership provided substantive evidence that district leadership matters and "that when district leaders are carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected" (p. 5). Key among their findings was the overall statistically significant relationship (a positive correlation of .24) between district leadership and student achievement. Listed below are the five strategies identified as the having "a statistically significant correlation with average student academic achievement. All four of these responsibilities relate to setting and keeping districts focused on teaching and learning goals" (p. 3).

1. Collaborative goal-setting
2. Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction

3. Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction
4. Broad alignment and support of district goals

Based on this meta-analysis, Marzano and Waters (2009) combined findings on district effects on student achievement with their analysis of “research and theory on high reliability organizations and the research regarding the highest-performing school systems in the world” (p. 22) in what they believed to be “a new view of district leadership—one that assumes district leadership can be a critical component of effective schooling” (p. 13). Their new conception was comprised of four components. First, nonnegotiable instructional goals are established at the district level. Second, leadership at every level of the district supports these goals. Third, resources are dedicated to professional development that ensures high-quality instruction, strong and knowledgeable instructional leadership, ongoing monitoring of instructional quality, and the impact of instruction on learning. Fourth, despite this tight coupling, there is sufficient autonomy and flexibility at the school level to respond quickly and effectively to early indications of error and individual student failure (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 21).

### **Strong Districts Exceptionally Effective at Closing the Achievement Gap (2010)**

Leithwood’s (2010) extensive review developed a similar set of characteristics as Murphy and Hallinger (1988). These characteristics were (a) having a district-wide focus on student achievement; (b) using proven approaches to curriculum and instruction; (c) using evidence for planning, organizational learning, and accountability; (d) fostering a district-wide sense of efficacy; (e) building and maintaining good communications and relations, learning communities, and district culture; (f) investing in instructional leadership; (g) targeting and phasing in an orientation to school improvement beginning with interventions on low-performing schools and students; and (h) facilitating infrastructure alignment. In

addition to (i) implementing district-wide, job-embedded professional development; and (j) engaging strategically with the government's agenda.

From his knowledge mobilization efforts supporting district improvement initiatives and developing leadership frameworks in Alberta (2008) and Ontario (2012) in combination with further analysis of findings from an extensive longitudinal study with colleagues (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis, Leithwood, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2010), Leithwood (2013) generated nine research-informed critical features of strong districts. Leadership practices in such districts are guided by:

1. a broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person;
2. a coherent instructional guidance system;
3. deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions;
4. learning-oriented organizational improvement processes;
5. job-embedded professional development for all members;
6. budgets, structures, personnel policies and procedures, and uses of time aligned with the district's mission, vision and goals;
7. a comprehensive approach to leadership development;
8. a policy-oriented board of trustees;
9. productive working relationships with staff and other stakeholders.

Translating the nine district characteristics into more specific senior leadership practices is the paper's second major contribution. Emphasizing the importance of proactivity and "System Two Thinking" (Kahneman, 2013) provided additional pathways for district leaders to better navigate the high levels of complexity and uncertainty that characterize their professional worlds. The benefits of Senge's (1990) constructs of system thinking and team leadership are underlined in the following manner:

Members of the district leadership team acting together potentially have much greater systems thinking capacity than do any one of its members acting alone. Improving the systems thinking capacity of district leaders is a function of improving both individual and collective capacity. (Leithwood, 2013, p. 29)

### **A Research-Based Framework for District Effectiveness (2018)**

The stated intention of the final and most recent review included in this section, Anderson and Young (2018), was “to examine the body of research on effective district practices published over the last 30 years and develop a framework for district effectiveness that reflects that research” (p. 2). Their review of 97 sources, including 55 peer-reviewed journal articles, 32 reports, and 7 books, was anchored by and drew upon several common themes from “two seminal pieces of research: Murphy and Hallinger (1988) and Leithwood (2010)” (Anderson & Young, 2018, p. 3). The review identified three additional district effectiveness themes with significant empirical evidence: (a) focusing the district on equity, (b) placing importance on the individual, and (c) having an openness and capacity to change (Anderson & Young, 2018, p. 3-4). The 13 district practices were categorized within three domains. This review indicated that the more closely aligned a district’s practices are with the Framework for District Effectiveness, the more likely the district is to have effective schools and strong student learning outcomes (Anderson & Young. 2018, p. 7).

### **Literature Undergirding the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard**

In carrying out their dual professional roles of chief executive officer of the board and chief education officer of the school authority, school superintendents play vitally important roles in the success of the provincial school system. Though the challenges and complexities associated with the role of the Canadian superintendent have been quite well documented (e.g. ATA, 2016; Hetherington, 2014; Leithwood, 2013; Parsons, 2015; Parsons & Brandon,



2017), it is also recognized that “quality leadership occurs best when superintendents collaborate with teachers, principals, school councils, and parents in enabling all students to achieve their potential” and that “superintendents must be informed by current, relevant educational research, with a focus on career-long improvement” (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 3). Research from a variety of sources, (Brandon, Hanna, Morrow, Rhyason, & Schmold, 2013; Brandon, Hanna, & Negropontes, 2015; Leithwood, 2008, 2010, Leithwood & McCullough, 2016; Louis, Leithwood, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Ottmann, 2017) provide evidence that undergird district leadership practices in relation to the *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard*:

Quality superintendent leadership occurs when the superintendent’s ongoing analysis of the context, and the superintendent’s decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality school leadership, quality teaching and optimum learning for all students in the school authority. (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 3)

These seven professional practice competencies required of Alberta school superintendents within the SLQS are used to frame this section of the review: (a) building effective relationships, (b) modelling commitment to professional learning, (c) visionary leadership, (d) leading learning, (e) ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for all students, (f) school authority operations and resources, and (g) supporting effective governance.

Following an overview of the provincial context, these key competencies are addressed in separate sections to illustrate ways that superintendents strive to overcome the challenges and complexities inherent in their unique and significant roles within the education system. By no means is it suggested that these seven competencies should be thought of as separate and distinct areas of endeavour. In fact, professionals generally practice in more integrated and fluid ways (Brandon, McKinnon, & Bischoff, 2014; Kahneman, 2013; Schoen, 1983).

However, it is helpful to mindfully think one's way forward through the guidance of research informed images of coherent and impactful practice.

Each of the seven subsections begins with the competency description along with selected indicators of practice as stated in the *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* document (Alberta Education, 2018b). Evidence informed approaches to overcoming related challenges faced by superintendents in the demanding and complex area of practice are then described. Though not offered as magic bullets, these *best evidence practices* enable superintendents to more consistently overcome the legions of challenges encountered in their complex contemporary contexts.

### **Competency One: Building Effective Relationships**

*A superintendent establishes a welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environment by building positive and productive relationships with members of the school community and the local community.* (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 4)

Of the six optional indicators which describe superintendent practice under this competency, the following three are well supported by the research evidence.

- Modeling ethical leadership practices, based on integrity, and objectivity.
- Establishing constructive relationships with students, staff, school councils, parents/guardians, employee organizations, the education ministry, and other stakeholder organizations.
- Facilitating the meaningful participation of members of the school community and local community in decision-making.

**Related research.** Those who rise to top of the school district leadership hierarchy are generally good at working with people. While connections among the superintendent, principals, and teachers form one complex web of relationships (ATA, 2016, p. 4), the ability to build relationships with a wide array of stakeholder groups is a key challenge for leaders in

this role (Hetherington, 2014, p. 2). Living in the middle is a new experience for superintendents. They are pulled upward by government officials, and the board of trustees. They feel morally responsible downward to the needs of teachers and students; while at the same time they are often pulled sideways by pressure from parents, the broader community, and the media (ATA, 2016; Hetherington, 2014; Parsons, 2015). Despite a vast array of relational interactions in a typical workday, superintendents frequently report a sense of isolation and vulnerability (Parsons & Brandon, 2017).

The interpersonal skills and collaborative orientations of effective superintendents are foundational contributors to their success and, more significantly, to the success of their school systems. Relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Honig 2003, 2006, &2008), ethical conduct, and integrity contribute to a productive, safe, and secure school system culture. The importance of paying attention to the cultivation of professional relationships within schools and within communities is well established in the district leadership literature (Gordon & Louis, 2012; Leithwood; 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2016; Robinson, 2011; Ryan, 2006; Steele, 2010; Timperley, 2011, Whelan, 2009).

Bryk and Schneider (2002) claimed that trust, in particular *relational trust* (as distinct from *contractual* trust), should be considered foundational to the building of productive relationships. Relational trust is formed when “each party in a role relationship maintains an understanding of his or her obligations and holds some expectations around the role obligations of the other” (p. 20).

The significance of the senior leadership group working as a team in their collective efforts to lead educator and student learning was identified as highly significant by Brandon et al. (2015). These superintendency leadership teams had a strong, shared faith in the importance of team leadership and team learning grounded in the literature by Senge (1990). In addition to what school principal and middle level jurisdiction leader participants shared

about the team-oriented ways in which their senior leadership groups worked together, the researchers observed a number of characteristics that ran across the cases.

These focus group conversations were consistently free flowing and dynamic.

Members supported each other's comments, added examples to illuminate points introduced by another colleague and enthusiastically engaged in the dialogue. Their pride and passion for their work together was readily apparent. Participation of non-educator members of the five leadership teams was extensive. Their contributions to our learning focused conversations were articulate and well informed. It was readily evident that they both understood and supported the learning agendas undertaken by educator colleagues. (Brandon et al., 2015, pp. 81-82)

### **Competency Two: Modelling Commitment to Professional Learning**

*A superintendent engages in career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection, identifying and acting on research-informed opportunities for enhancing leadership, teaching, and learning.* (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 4)

Four of the six optional indicators of Modelling Commitment to Professional Learning are clearly rooted in the research evidence. The four research informed indicators are as follows:

- collaborating with teachers, principals and other superintendents to build professional capacities and expertise;
- actively seeking out feedback and information from a variety of sources to enhance leadership practice;
- seeking and critically-reviewing educational research and applying it to decisions and practices, as appropriate;
- engaging the members of the school authority to establish a shared understanding of current trends and priorities in the education system.

**Related research.** A major theme of this review is that the contemporary school superintendent's role is increasingly complex and incredibly demanding (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2016; Hetherington, 2014; Leithwood, 2010; Parsons, 2015, Parsons & Brandon, 2017). It is not uncommon for senior leaders to be pulled in multiple directions at any one time. What is distinct about the practices of superintendents who maintain their focus on their moral imperatives and educative purposes as they work through the myriad daily demands, distractions, and steady parade of external and internal pressures, is that they consistently convey that their work as part of a leadership team that leads learning in an action oriented and research informed manner. They purposefully model their commitment to professional learning. The jurisdiction leaders in recent Alberta study "did more than just read and conceptualize research – they thoughtfully utilized what they were learning to implement change and to lead learning" (Brandon et. al, 2015, p. 82).

There is considerable evidence that superintendents and principals in highly successful districts convey a strong belief in their own and their colleague's capacities to accomplish good things for all students. Educational leaders "who see themselves as working collaboratively towards clear, common goals with district personnel, other principals, and teachers are more confident in their leadership" (Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood and Anderson, 2010, p. 30). The study further indicated that district leadership provided extensive opportunities for educators to develop expertise relevant to achieving the district's goals and created organizational structures and settings that supported and enhanced staff's work and learning.

Anderson and Louis (2012) observed, "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). Among the most import

findings, were the benefits of focusing central office efforts on teaching and learning through practices such as these:

- Communicating 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).
- Building consensus about core expectations for professional practice (curriculum, teaching, leadership).
- Differentiating support to schools in relation to evidence of implementing these core expectations, with flexibility for school-based innovation.
- Setting clear expectations for school leadership practices and establishing leadership-development systems to select, train, and assist principals and teacher leaders consistent with district expectations.
- Providing organized opportunities for teachers and principals to engage in school-to-school communication, focusing on the challenges of improving student learning and program implementation.
- Coordinating district support for school improvement across organizational units in relation to district priorities, expectations for professional practice, and a shared understanding of the goals and needs of specific schools. (p. 181-182)

Leithwood, Anderson, and Louis (2012) found that the district contribution to school leaders' sense of efficacy is most powerful through five strategies: (a) unambiguously assigning priority to the improvement of student achievement and instruction; (b) investing in the development of instructional leadership; (c) ensuring that personnel policies support the selection and maintenance of the best people for each school; (d) emphasizing teamwork and professional community; and (e) providing worthwhile programs of professional learning, aimed at strengthening educator capacity to achieve shared purposes (p. 119).

### Competency Three: Visionary Leadership

*A superintendent engages with the school community in implementing a vision of a preferred future for student success, based on common values and beliefs. (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 5)*

Of the four indicators that describe superintendent practice related to the *Visionary Leadership* competency, the following three are well in the research literature that underlines the critical importance of the superintendent's attention to establishing a widely shared vision:

- ensuring that the vision is informed by research on effective learning, teaching and leadership:
- promoting innovation and continuous improvement by building structures and developing strategies to support staff in professional collaboration; and
- promoting in the school community a common understanding of and support for the school authority's goals, priorities, and strategic initiatives.

**Related research.** At least two challenges leap out from the research informed lesson that visionary leadership practices aimed at creating a widely shared sense of purpose that focuses jurisdiction energy and efforts on teaching and learning can have a significantly positive impact (Fullan, 2011; Leithwood; 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2016; Leithwood, Strauss, & Anderson, 2007; Louis et al., 2010; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Ryan, 2006; Schmold, 2008; Steele, 2010, Whelan, 2009). The first challenge is achieving a focused vision that is, in fact, widely shared and implemented. The four *significantly improving* Alberta systems examined by Maguire (2003) had vision statements “that were more sharply focused on student learning and more widely promulgated and internalized at all levels” than other jurisdictions (p. 10).

Focusing on a few clear, widely understood priorities on teaching and learning can lead to powerful results for the learning and welfare of all children. Focused school authorities have a limited number of defined priorities that are clearly articulated, collaboratively developed, and effectively communicated. Such jurisdictions avoid the “Christmas tree” glitter of numerous innovations and initiatives that invariably lead to “initiative fatigue” and lack of coherence (Fullan, 2001). Participants in all six settings recently studied by Brandon, Hanna, and Negropontes (2015) “articulated that their jurisdictions were highly focused on student success: learning, engagement, and well-being. Educators at every level indicated that their work was guided and, in many cases, inspired, by a clear learning vision that was understandable, attainable, and forward looking” (p. 66).

A third challenge is how to operationalize such a widely shared sense of educational purpose. An Alberta study conducted by Davis, Sumara, and D’Amour (2012) concluded that: “Dynamic learning systems cannot be forced or legislated into existence. The best one can do is to create the conditions that will permit their emergence” (p. 374). Highly centralized networks do not appear to foster organizational learning; on the other hand, fragmented systems can have pockets of strength that are never shared or leveraged outside of their own networks (ATA, 2016, p.12)

#### **Competency Four: Leading Learning**

*A superintendent establishes and sustains a learning culture in the school community that promotes ongoing critical reflection on practice, shared responsibility for student success and continuous improvement. (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 5)*

The three following indicators, which are particularly well established in the research literature, describe superintendent practice related to the Leading Learning competency.



- Providing learning opportunities, based on research-informed principles of effective teaching, learning and leadership, to build the capacity of all members of the school community to fulfill their educational roles;
- Ensuring that all instruction in the school authority addresses learning outcomes and goals outlined in provincial legislation and programs of study;
- Building principals' capacities and holding them accountable for providing instructional leadership through effective support, supervision and evaluation practices.

**Related research.** Two enduring obstacles to enacting effective instructional leadership are described as the *complexity challenge* and the *learning challenge* (Brandon, 2005, 2006, 2008; Brandon et al., 2015). Inadequate time to provide instructional leadership and supervision is a consistently identified impediment by school administrators (Brandon, 2006, 2008; Canadian Association of Principals & Alberta Teachers' Association, 2014; Fullan, 2014; Opfer, Pedder, & Lavicza, 2011; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2015; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Attending to such matters as budgeting, student and parent concerns, preparing reports, other bureaucratic requirements, and more immediate organizational tasks often take precedence over the more complex work to support instruction. Such management concerns are frequently cited as inhibitors to having sufficient time to adequately provide instructional leadership. Issues associated with the interpersonal politics of teacher supervision, expectation ambiguity for school administrators, along with the intellectual and interpersonal demands related to understanding and supporting quality teaching and teacher growth further contribute to this first enduring obstacle (Brandon, 2005, 2006, 2008; Brandon et al., 2015).

The absence of ongoing attention to the development of instructional leadership knowledge and skills has been a major obstacle to effective instructional leadership.

Insufficient attention has been devoted to the development of supervisory knowledge and skills in many schools and districts, creating *the learning challenge* (Brandon, 2005, 2006, 2008).

An increasing number of research studies illustrate how persistent senior leader commitment to the development of instructional leadership is impacting leadership and teaching quality (Anderson & Louis, 2012; Barber et al., 2010; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Wahlstrom, 2012). Effective superintendents are committed to ongoing and sustained educator learning – both their own learning and the learning of all members of the wider school authority community. Evidence supporting the importance of professional learning was claimed in 21 of the 33 studies reported in Leithwood's (2008, 2010b) review of high performing school districts. This was the largest number of studies reporting evidence about any of the 12 dimensions of high-performing districts. Several studies support the benefits of evidence based professional learning (Brandon et al., 2015; Campbell, Fullan, Glaze, 2006; Firestone & Riehl, 2005; Leithwood 2008, 2010; Pritchard & Marshall, 2002; Timperley, 2011; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). An important component of this research is the notion that when leaders publicly engage in ongoing learning with other educators, the impact is strengthened.

Brandon et al. (2015) found that 95% of the principals and middle level jurisdiction leaders surveyed indicated that senior leaders were both focused on instructional leadership and have similar expectations for school leaders. The expectation that principals must be knowledgeable about the quality of their teachers' instruction was universally understood and applied in all six of the study's jurisdictions. Many principals saw their work as part of instructional leadership teams within and beyond their schools. Vice-principals, learning coaches, and learning leaders were working together in distributed and shared forms of

leadership in many of the systems. The case-by-case qualitative data suggested that ongoing support of jurisdiction based instructional leaders added to this sense of team leadership.

A challenge reported by many principals and jurisdiction leaders was the desire for more ongoing and connected ways to develop instructional leadership capacity. Developing instructional leadership through sustained, job embedded, and evidence based approaches is considerably more impactful than attendance at conferences and one-shot presentations by headline speakers (Brandon et al. 2015).

### **Competency Five: Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for All Students**

*A superintendent establishes the structures and provides the resources necessary for the school community to acquire and apply foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students. (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 6)*

The five following indicators describe superintendent practice related to the Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for All Students competency.

- supporting staff in accessing the professional learning and capacity-building needed to meet the learning needs of First Nations, Métis, Inuit and all other students;
- engaging and collaborating with neighbouring First Nations and Métis leaders, organizations and communities to optimize learning success and development of First Nations, Métis, Inuit and all other students;
- understanding historical, social, economic, and political implications of:
  - treaties and agreements with First Nations;
  - agreements with Métis; and
  - residential schools and their legacy;

- aligning school authority resources and building organizational capacity to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit student achievement; and
- pursuing opportunities and engaging in practices to facilitate reconciliation within the school community.

**Related research.** This new competency presents a number of challenges to superintendency practice identified by Alberta School Superintendents in relation to this standard are outlined the CASS Needs Assessment Survey Findings report (March 26, 2017). They include:

1. Opportunities for quality professional development and training; building capacity, awareness, understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Knowledges and cultures.
2. Making connections, developing relationships and trust, engaging in meaningful dialogue, and collaborating with First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, leaders, and Elders to develop an inclusive vision and models of working relationships. Working together to discuss applicable knowledge systems, culturally appropriate/responsive resources and supports. Determining how to respectfully implement foundational Indigenous Knowledges, and outlining how this work aligns to other work.
3. Increasing the sharing of, and access to, resources, successful, promising and wise practices and strategies; online and otherwise.
4. Lack of prioritization, and/or competing priorities and initiatives.
5. Lack of time to engage in the complexity of this work. (p. 37)

This study also revealed number of helpful suggestions that superintendents are well advised to take into account. The Report noted that “time and prioritization should be given to the following prominent learning goals for the First Nations, Métis and Inuit competencies,

which includes the building of capacity, awareness, understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Knowledges and cultures” (p. 37):

- Learning programs should begin by making connections, developing trust and relationships, engaging in meaningful dialogue, and collaboration with First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, leaders, Elders to develop an inclusive vision of foundational knowledge and relationship, and models of working relationships. The survey respondents suggested that it was important to work together to discuss knowledge systems application, how to respectfully implement foundational Indigenous Knowledges, determine culturally appropriate/responsive resources and supports, and to outline how this work aligns with other work.
- Ensure that the learning include exemplars of resources, successful, promising and wise practices and strategies, which is accessible and shared online. (p. 37)

Finally, the Report recommended the following professional learning strategies, which would meet this competency’s intention:

- Draw from the leadership, wisdom, expertise, experience and knowledge of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, educators and Elders to create a learning program that is respectful of foundational Indigenous Knowledges, to determine culturally appropriate/responsive resources and supports, and to outline how this work aligns to other work – perhaps the other leadership competencies.
- Ensure that the leadership learning include exemplars of resources, successful, promising and wise practices and strategies, which is accessible and shared online. (p. 37)

The findings from this needs assessment survey, particularly in relation to the authentic inclusion of Indigenous people, is supported by Indigenous authors, research studies, and governing documents (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, Accord on Indigenous

Education, 2010; Battiste, 2013; Ottmann, 2017; Truth and Reconciliation, 2015; United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2008; Universities Canada, 2015).

The complexity is increased by the volume of knowledge that needs to be learned by superintendents if they are to achieve this competency. Becoming educated is only the beginning to gaining competency.

As this study, and others have shown (Ottmann, 2010), education is powerful if it informs, challenges and shifts misconceptions, stereotypes, and perhaps racist attitudes towards Indigenous peoples. Hence, the importance of leadership learning that covers the affective (i.e., individual and collective belief and value systems) and cognitive domains (i.e., knowledge and skills) – the heart and mind.

### **Competency Six: School Authority Operations and Resources**

*A superintendent directs school authority operations and strategically allocates resources in the interests of all students and in alignment with the school authority's goals and priorities. (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 6)*

The three following indicators describe superintendent practice related to the School Authority Operations and Resources competency. They are well supported by the research evidence, but are also areas of potential conflict, tension, and challenge in superintendent practice.

- Providing direction on fiscal and resource management in accordance with all statutory, regulatory, and school authority requirements.
- Delegating responsibility to staff, where appropriate, to enhance operational efficiency and effectiveness.
- Providing for the support, ongoing supervision and evaluation of all staff members in relation to their respective professional responsibilities.

**Related research.** Evidence from several studies suggests that highly successful school systems align their infrastructural and organizational practices in support of their student-focused missions (Brandon et al., 2013; Brandon et al., 2015; Leithwood, 2008, 2010; Louis et al., 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Despite this, the infrastructure in many school jurisdictions has evolved in response to the needs of staff rather than to support of improvements in teaching and learning. Though the evidence is quite clear and makes a great deal of common sense, the idea of aligning budgets, personnel policies, and procedures with the jurisdiction mission, vision, and values is not consistently enacted.

This is particularly challenging when the demonstrated benefits of providing additional resources to schools in areas with lower socio-economic characteristics and more diverse student needs are taken into account. Politics and privilege are often obstacles to broadening instructional benefits to disadvantaged populations. As one superintendent in Brandon, Turner, Parsons, and Donlevy (2017) observed:

I have a strong belief in democracy, the important role of citizens, and the abilities of trustees to represent their communities. Though our processes of purposeful, collective inquiry are sometimes messy, we almost always come to a decision that is good for our kids. My role is to guide conversations and to help bring the views of the entire community – including under-represented minorities – to bear on matters of importance to student learning. (p. 1)

The management of increasingly scarce resources in the context of growing demands is often contentious and frequently laden with political risk for trustees and administrators. While trustees will often support the superintendent in such situations, their support can dissolve in the face of public resistance to school closures or bussing changes (ATA, 2016).

## Competency Seven: Supporting Effective Governance

*A superintendent of schools as referred to in the School Act, as chief executive officer of the board and chief education officer of the school authority, provides the board with information, advice and support required for the fulfillment of its governance role, and reports to the Minister on all matters required of the superintendent as identified in the School Act and other provincial legislation. (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 7)*

The five following research informed indicators describe superintendent practice related to the Supporting Effective Governance competency.

- Establishing and sustaining a productive working relationship with the board, based on mutual trust, respect and integrity.
- Ensuring that the board's plans, resource allocations, strategies and procedures lead to the achievement of its goals and priorities.
- Supporting the board in the fulfillment of its governance functions in the fiduciary, strategic and generative realms.
- Implementing board policies and supporting the regular review and evaluation of their impact.
- Promoting constructive relations between the board and staff, as well as provincial authorities, post-secondary institutions, and education stakeholder organizations.

**Related research.** Recent studies of educational governance in Canada (Brandon, 2016; Galway, Sheppard, Wiens, & Brown, 2013; Leithwood, 2010, 2013; Leithwood & McCullough, 2016; Seel & Gibbons, 2011; Sheppard, Brown, & Dibbon, 2009) remind us that governance by an elected board is not *corporate* governance. This literature informs us of the importance of adopting a policy governance model well suited to the local context. No governance model is the one size that fits all. Ongoing education for both elected board



members and jurisdiction leaders can foster collaboration, reciprocity, and interdependency among professionals, trustees, and the wider community. Effective governance models call for trustee participation in assessing community values and interests and incorporating these into the school authority's beliefs and vision for student learning and well-being. In effective board governance systems, trustees play a vital role in mobilizing parents and the wider community in supporting the vision and helping to create a culture of excellence that makes achieving the vision possible.

Effective school and school system leaders understand that school councils do important work and make a variety of significant contributions to school and division learning cultures. Through two-way connections – partnerships – school councils help educators and school trustees to better understand community contexts and, at the same time, take steps to help schools maintain

### **Section Summary: The Literature on Quality System Leadership**

This section of our systematic literature review addressed two questions: What quality school district leadership practices contribute to optimum student learning? How do those identified in the research compare and contrast with those outlined in the Alberta SLQS? We traced the evolution of district leadership research over the past three decades, identified key aspects of practice as determined by the best available evidence, and described tensions within this complex leadership field. Our appraisal and synthesis of the research evidence identified the following four dimensions of effective district leadership practice with strongest support across all the studies examined:

1. Establishing a widely shared, district-wide focus on the student achievement and well-being.

2. Facilitating infrastructure alignment so that budgets, structures, personnel policies and procedures, and uses of time aligned with the district's mission, vision and goals;
3. Building and maintaining good communications and relations, learning communities, and district culture; and
4. Using multiple forms of evidence for planning, organizational learning, and accountability.

This review illustrates how Alberta superintendents may conduct their professional practice within a single standard and seven competencies *framed through leadership research in action*. As “most fields informed by the social sciences have imperfect evidence available to inform their practices” and, as such, “judgments are rightly based on the best available evidence, along with the practical wisdom of those actually working in the field (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 9).