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Building Leadership Capacity Through High-Quality Professional Learning

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Leadership Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to synthesize the body of work that can inform leadership development through high-quality collaborative professional learning. In this literature review the authors draw on a combination of literature gathered by the Battle River School Division as well as literature gathered by researchers. The literature review is organized with an overview and followed by these sections: (1) capacity building, (2) leadership development, (3) professional learning, (4) assessing growth. At the end of the literature review a synthesis is provided along with recommendations for system leaders interested in designing professional learning for leaders in their districts.

Keywords: leadership development, professional learning, leadership quality standard, collaborative learning

Overview

Purpose: The purpose of the literature review is to synthesize literature that can inform the articulation of **high quality collaborative professional learning** in a district interested in addressing the new Alberta Education's *Leadership Quality Standard (2018)* (LQS).

The **Division** has recognized the link between leadership effectiveness and student learning and the role that both district and school leadership play in this. In particular, Battle River School Division (BRSD) is aware of the need to increase coherence of district and school efforts and are using the LQS to bring focus to their work with district and school leaders.

Guiding question for the literature review:

The overarching question guiding the literature review:

How does the current literature inform the articulation of high quality professional learning for leadership development?

Introduction

Professional learning is distinguished from traditional forms of professional development and is recognized as a means for educators to engage in ongoing inquiry focused on improving student learning (Timperley, 2011). Leaders at all levels are recommended to engage in this ongoing inquiry to improve teaching and learning (Kaser & Halbert, 2017). School district leadership plays an important role in developing leaders at various levels in the system and activating their leadership potential.

Currently in Alberta, school jurisdictions are in the process of implementing the new LQS and BRSD is interested in developing leadership in relation to this standard through high quality professional learning. The LQS states "Quality leadership occurs when a leader's ongoing analysis of the context, and the leader's decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all students in school" (Alberta Government, 2018, p. 3). Professional learning for leaders to engage in ongoing inquiry and analysis aligns to both the LQS and effective professional learning. Further, the need for ongoing experiences aimed at leadership development and quality preparation is identified in the literature (Davis, Darling-Hammond, Lapointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014). Prior to the implementation of the new LQS, BRSD focused their efforts on preparing for these changes and recognized a key strategy was to build leadership capacity within their division and for addressing both provincial and divisional priorities.

In this literature review, several themes are discussed to articulate what professional learning for leadership development encompasses. The themes include: (1) capacity building, (2) leadership development, (3) professional learning for leaders, (4) assessing growth. The ongoing inquiry and interconnectedness of these themes is illustrated in Figure 1.

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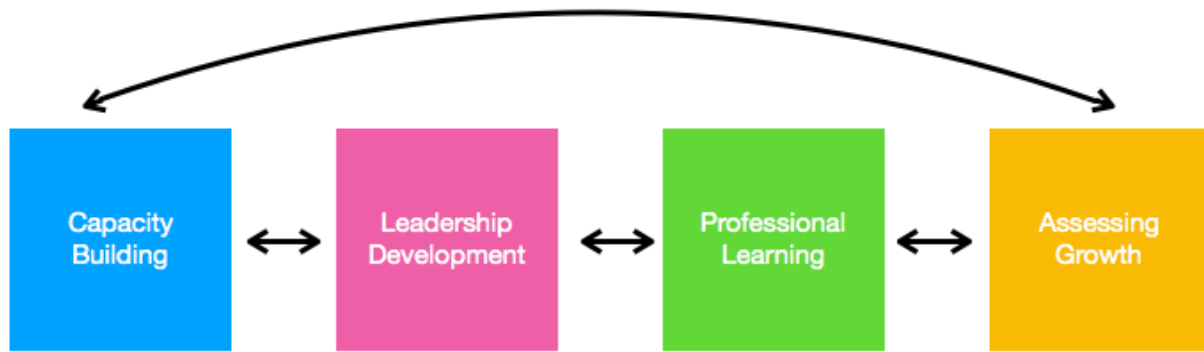


Figure 1. Building leadership capacity through professional learning.

Section 1: Capacity Building

School leaders are faced with ongoing changes and need to be able to adapt and strengthen their own leadership capabilities as well as focusing their efforts on developing collective leadership in schools and systems. Collective leadership capacity building is a necessary aim for educational leadership to promote high quality teaching and learning. Gurr and Drysdale (2015) point out that the issues related to teacher quality and leadership preparation are intertwined. In the Alberta context, with the LQS, system leaders face the challenge of targeting the growth and development of their district and school leaders in relation to the associated competencies. Breakspear (2017) argues that the core capability of learning leaders is building teaching capacity and collective capacity. Building capacity involves both individual and collective capacity and is an investment in the professional capital that exists within school systems and schools.

Building leadership capacity involves a number of principles to foster sustainable leadership and one of these principles is breadth (Fink, 2011) which emphasizes promoting distributing leadership or collective leadership. School district leadership plays an important role in building capacity by developing leaders at all levels for their systems. Breakspear (2017) argues for building leadership capacity beyond the principal and this includes activating leadership potential so that there are leaders at all levels leading learning and focused on individual and collective teacher capacity. “The ability to improve teacher capacity, both individually and collectively, is the core capability of a leader of learning, whether a school principal, a middle or teacher leader” (Breakspear, 2017, p. 5). District leaders also have a role as learning leaders and have the opportunity to focus on building teacher capacity. Similarly, Kaser and Halbert (2017) recommend leaders at all levels engage in inquiry to improve teaching and learning. Harris (2011) further posits collective capacity building as a way for system improvement and points to how system reforms require capacity building to support implementation. “Capacity building implies that people take the opportunity to do things differently, to learn new skills and to generate more effective practice” and “requires collective responsibility where professionals are working together to improve practice through mutual support, mutual accountability and mutual challenge”(Harris, 2011, p. 627). Figure 2 illustrates collective leadership capacity as inclusive of system, leadership, and teacher capacity all aimed at improving student learning.

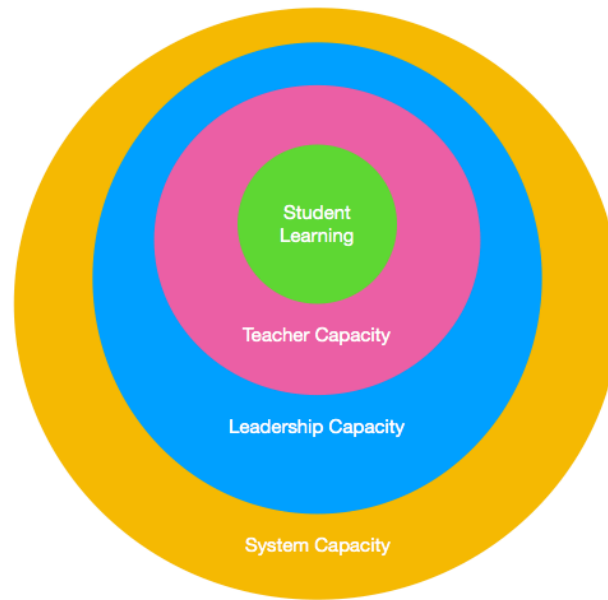


Figure 2. Collective leadership capacity.

Summary:

In this section, we discussed the importance of building both individual and collective leadership capacity focused on the core capability of building teacher capacity and improving student learning. Recognizing the links between leadership and student learning, it is imperative districts focus on leadership development to build leadership capacity.

Section 2: Leadership Development

“Teaching principals how to lead schools by giving them predigested ‘in-basket’ training hardly leads to new thinking about leadership, teaching, or learning” (Evans & Mohr, 1999). Leadership development must be viewed as a career-long process with ongoing and sustained opportunities for learning (Davis et al., 2005; Goldring, Preston & Huff, 2012). Leadership development should focus on supporting school leaders developing the skills and capacity for sustained school improvement focused on what is essential (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Alberta Education’s LQS (2018) presents a challenge for school leadership teams and their jurisdictions with respect to appropriate ongoing professional learning. Yet, the district-level focus on the school-level impacts on student achievement and the role of the principal as the connection between district and schools has been relatively untouched (Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014). There is an opportunity for knowledge building from a systemic approach in supporting sustainable change focused on teaching and student learning. The literature also highlights leadership development focused on building leadership capacity at the school level.

There is widespread agreement among educational researchers and educational leaders that the primary role of the principal is to align all aspects of schooling to focus on the improvement of teaching in order to impact the effects on student achievement (Davis et al., 2005; Hallinger, 2011; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). A large body of research has shown that effective school leadership can have a direct influence on teaching practice and, is, second only to classroom instruction on its impact on student learning and achievement (Davis et al., 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). This research clearly indicates that effective school principals play a critical role in developing teachers’ teaching practices (Elmore, 2000; Robinson, 2010; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2000; Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003). Within this research, it is important to consider the support being offered principals and other school-based leaders in supporting teaching and student success.

Engaging in quality preparation and ongoing learning experiences over time, both prior to assuming the principal position and once in the role, can have a positive impact on the effectiveness of the school leader’s ability to influence teaching and have significant impact on student learning (Davis et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014). Yet, much of the literature on leadership development focuses on preservice programs that are connected to district requirements for certification (McCarthy, M., 2015). This certification process emphasizes an institutional approach to leadership preparation. These leadership program approaches vary, with some emphasizing leadership and management skills while, others support the cultivation of teachers (Davis et al., 2005).

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Preparation programs for principals have indicated an emphasis on a “collection of courses treating general management principles, school laws, administrative requirements, and procedures—with little emphasis on knowledge about student learning, effective teaching, professional development, curriculum, and organizational change” (Young & Crow, 2017, p. 6). Much of this research focused on program components and consists of “self-reported candidate perceptions and experiences and there is virtually no evidence for how graduates of different kinds of programs perform on the job” (Davis et al., 2005, p.8). In short, “much of the literature about leadership development programs describes program features believed to be productive, but evidence about what graduates of these programs can actually do as a result of their training has been sparse” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p.5).

Summary:

In this section, we discussed the necessity of providing ongoing and sustained opportunities for leadership development and the challenge for districts in linking these efforts to improvements in teaching and student learning. Leadership preparation program approaches vary with little evidence linking to the impact of these programs and measures of leadership growth.

Section 3: Professional Learning

While leadership preparation programs contribute to the development of the knowledge and skills of school leaders, the challenge is in providing ongoing professional development (Goldring et al., 2012; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). Research has demonstrated that leadership development through ongoing professional development can provide support in maximizing the impact on teaching and ultimately on student learning (Davis et al., 2005; Knapp et al., 2010). Grissom and Harrington, (2010) found that principals perceived the ongoing support as helpful in refining their practice and applying knowledge with structures, tools, and protocols learned through the professional development provided. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) stated that “exemplary in-service programs offered a well-connected set of learning opportunities that were informed by a coherent view of teaching and learning, grounded in both theory and practice” (p. 7). These exemplary in-service programs are organized around continuous learning and informed by specific professional practices that included developing “shared schoolwide goals and directions, observing and providing feedback to teachers, planning professional development and other learning experiences for teachers, using data to guide school improvement, and managing a change process” (p. 7).

However, there are limited studies focused on the design of professional learning frameworks centered on developing effective leaders (Barnes, Camburn, Sanders, & Sebastian, 2010; Davis et al., 2005; Grissom and Harrington, 2010). What research has indicated is the important role that school districts play in designing and establishing the appropriate support structures (Barnes et al., 2010). An effective leadership development framework requires significance resources, especially human resources, to support learning embedded in practice. These resources needs to centered on policy and procedural development that need to be addressed by the school districts in order to create a balanced approach to leadership development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Further, a recent study on professional learning in Canada noted an important aspect related to support and sustainability for professional learning was having supportive and engaged leadership which has implications for system leaders in supporting professional learning for school leaders (Campbell et al., 2016).

Professional Learning and Development

Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) recommend professional learning and development (PLD) aimed at both the individual and collective within organizations as a way to cultivate a “system culture of collaborative professionalism that cultivates individual and collective efficacy” (p. 2). Timperley (2011) distinguishes between professional learning and traditional forms of professional development and argues for professional learning where educators are engaged in ongoing inquiry focused on improving student learning. Professional learning (PL) contrasts with typical professional development (PD) where educators attend one-off or short-term with limited experiential opportunities, difficulties in transferring ideas to back to their unique contexts, and designs that pay little attention to the needs of adult learners.

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School districts can work towards creating a system culture of collaborative professionalism and focus professional learning for leaders toward the core capability of building individual and collective capacity. “The essence of system success is a culture of daily interaction, engaging pedagogy, mutual trust and development, and regular, quality feedback related to improvement” (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016, p. 8).

Designing Professional Learning for Adult Learners

When designing professional learning for leaders, it is vital to design with adult learners in mind. Merriam (1987) describes adult learning as having the following components: relationship of experiences to learning; reflection on own learning; action; and autonomy. Professional learning designs should be experiential with an emphasis on active rather than passive approaches (Bransford, Brown, Cocking, 1999; Fogarty & Pete, 2009). The focus on action is also imperative and recommended as a way to foster accountability (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Fogarty & Pete, 2009; Merriam, 1987; Ng, 2013; Wiliam, 2016). Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (1999) support learners engaging in action research to support an inquiry into their own practice and develop action plans to test ideas and evaluate the impact.

Experiential learning can also be accomplished by engaging adult learners through spirals of inquiry (Kaser & Halbert, 2017), systematic inquiry (Timperly, 2011), learning sprints and design thinking (Breakspear, Peterson, Alfadala, & Khair, 2017). Similarly, Ng (2013) in his study on leadership development for school leadership used a “continuous action-reflection loop” (p. 68). Participants engaged in a Creative Action Project where they were given an authentic leadership learning experience and their feedback on the experience showed this project helped them in learning how to navigate change, contextualize school reform, be flexible and adapt, and to collaborate and help others collaborate (Ng, 2013). Offering opportunities for leaders to engage in double loop learning and reflection links to the continuous action-reflection loop and supports adult learners in the relationship of their past experiences to learning and deep reflection. Problem based learning activities bridge theory and practice by presenting learners with real-world problems that enhance their conceptualization of leadership (Davis, et al., 2005).

These active or experiential opportunities offer a way for adult learners to challenge their assumptions, make new meaning (Timperley, 2011), and reflect on their learning. This reflection on learning is also essential for developing a leadership identity (Breakspear, 2017). Autonomy is another aspect of adult learning (Merriam, 1987) worth considering for professional learning design. Wiliam (2016) outlines principles for teacher learning including choice with constraints that can be applied to adult learners in general. The implication here is that autonomy and ownership is not without boundaries or expectations but is significant for adult learners. School leaders “still need guidance and direction on what they should learn and how” but this needs to be meaningful (Breakspear, 2017, p. 67).

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Structures for Professional Learning

Leadership professional learning should be tailored to adult learners and there are a variety of ways to foster collective responsibility and professionalism including but not limited to professional learning communities, coaching, and mentoring. To provide focus for professional learning, it is essential for leaders to begin by developing their own professional growth plan.

Focus for Professional Learning. With the various demands that are associated with school leadership, it is critical for school leaders to determine their own readiness for change before engaging in any form of professional growth. In order to aspire to the leadership qualities describe both by the district and Alberta Education's LQS (2018), school leaders need the opportunity to identify areas of growth by ascertaining professional learning goals. Part of this process is in identifying personal beliefs and values that may create cognitive biases with respect to defining individuals' problem-of-practice and impact their own potential for learning (Jones, 2013).

Central to this work is the development of a professional growth plan that clearly outlines a plan that focuses on well-defined and specific goals to be addressed. This is accompanied by the practical approach, steps, and strategies to ensure the process is focused on continuous improvement and attaining goals. To ensure the relevance of the self-assessment and the feedback focused on learning, a procedure to measure how well an individual is meeting the goals is essential. This will also ensure alignment with the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Rogers, Hauserman & Skytt, 2016).

The professional growth plan becomes central to any process being employed by the district. These plans encourage a level of conversation focused both on active planning and reflection. Opportunities are given to clarify goals, specify success indicators, anticipate approaches, construct new understandings, analyze casual factors, and reflect and refine the process itself (Rogers, Hauserman & Skytt, 2016).

Professional learning communities. Professional learning communities (PLC's) can be used to build capacity and provide an infrastructure for systemic change (Harris, 2011). Harris (2011) recommends PLC's remain focused on the students in order to see improvement, be long term, connect teachers within and between schools, and be provided with supportive and distributive leadership including the involvement of district leaders. Fogarty and Pete (2009) offer seven protocols for professional learning and in particular for more effective PLC's. The seven protocols are: sustained, job-embedded, collegial, interactive, integrative, practical, and results-oriented (Fogarty & Pete, 2009). Further recommendations can be found for leadership learning that link to these protocols. Leadership learning is noted as having three qualities: embedded, personal, and continuous (Breakspear et al., 2017). There are also some important insights to be gained into effectively building PLC's for adult learners that overlaps with professional learning and effective PLC's.

Coaching and mentoring. Coaching and mentoring are worthwhile investments in professional learning that can be made to support leaders (Killion & Hirsh, 2013). Coaching and

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mentoring provide opportunities for one-on-one inquiry and problem solving, developing new skills supported by a reciprocal relationship (Duncan & Stock, 2010; Goldring et al., 2012). These partnerships provide opportunities for differentiated support and development focused on job-embedded context. Coaches and mentors provide both feedback and modeling of leadership practices that supports the implementation of new ideas (Knapp et al., 2010). Robinson, Horan, and Nanavati's (2009) study of Ontario school leaders describe how coaching and mentoring contribute, not only to the growth of the individual, but, to the continual learning that benefits all levels of the school district.

Coaching and mentoring, although similar in nature, are distinguished by the role each person plays within the partnership. Coaching is used to describe a partnership focused on improved performance connected to a problem-of-practice and in collaboration with a colleague. Coaching tends to be associated with professional development (Goldring et al., 2012). Mentoring is associated with individuals who offer support and guidance to those who are beginning in a specific leadership role (Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014). Reeves (2009) further distinguishes the difference in that the person being coached must be committed to a change whereas mentoring is more of an offer for new learning.

For the role of both coach and mentor, the district has the ability to tap in to the local expertise. Support for these people is also required, on an ongoing basis, through a formal mentor and coach program (Robinson et al., 2009). District leaders need to focus on strategies to address readiness for the role and how to maintain momentum and sustain a culture of support for all participants throughout the process. The district also needs to work with coaches and mentors in making strategic choices about how much time to devote to the partnership, as compared with their own work, how to balance long and short term needs, and what leadership styles to exhibit (Leithwood & Azah, 2016). Districts play a role in sustaining coaching and mentoring programs and can tailor these programs to meet individual needs of their leaders (Klar, Lindle, Reese, Knoweppe, Campbell, & Buskey, 2013). More importantly, the nature of these roles need to center on both the formal and informal social construction of leadership knowledge and skills. Therefore, skill development would include a focus on the creation of an inquiry approach to the learning that incorporates active listening and questioning. This work should also ensure alignment with both the district's leadership goals and Alberta Education's LGS (2018).

Simply establishing a coaching and/or mentorship program is no guarantee that it will deliver the shared social capital expected of it and may, in fact, deteriorate rather than improve over time (Leithwood, & Azah, 2016). Current research has demonstrated the success of both coaching and mentoring is in the one-on-one nature of the interaction guided by an established protocol for how the partnership will work (Leithwood, & Azah, 2016; Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014; Reeves, 2009; Robinson et al., 2009). This protocol needs to be purposeful and intentional in providing supports for continuous improvement of both the individual and the school district.

Summary:

In this section, we discussed the importance of professional learning to promote the ongoing analysis and inquiry necessary to build leadership capacity. Recognizing the needs of adult learners is critical to designing for professional learning. Adult learners need reflective,

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experiential, and autonomous opportunities to help them make meaningful and relevant connections between theory and practice. Further, it is also valuable to consider the ways to foster professional learning for leadership development and this may include methods such as professional learning communities, coaching, and mentoring. Given that there is limited research on leadership development and ongoing opportunities for professional learning, this is a significant issue to address.

Section 4: Assessing Growth

Ongoing professional learning for leaders needs to be evaluated and assessed for growth. Linking professional learning to outcomes and using multiple sources of evidence to determine effectiveness is critical (Guskey, 2012). Moreover, different stakeholders will value different evidence (Guskey, 2012) and leadership needs to help individuals interpret evidence (Timperley, 2011) as well as determine what evidence best reflects meeting established goals. Killion (2018) offers a guiding framework for those embarking on designing professional learning and provides tools and methods for evaluating professional learning while emphasizing the necessity of identifying upfront how to assess the impacts of efforts. Professional learning for leadership development should be linked to outcomes and in the Alberta context, the leadership standard can be used to set goals, assess growth, create strategies for recruitment and transition, and framework design.

First, the development of a policy and procedures that reflects district goals and includes “the use of ‘a leadership’ standard to guide program design, change, and stimulate participation in professional learning” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). This focus on leadership standard provides an important tool for strengthening a program’s focus on instructional leadership and school improvement (Hallinger, 2003; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). The policy needs to include the crafting of the appropriate role and tools for using the leadership standard within the professional development for maximum effectiveness (Brown, Squires, Connors-Tadros, & Horowitz, 2014).

Second, the leadership standard should be used to assess the leadership preparation and development of both the individual and program design (University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership, 2016). Along with the standard, districts focusing on strengthening school leadership and to fully support their leaders, especially in their novice years, need to develop ways to assess principals against district goals to determine how to best support them (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013).

Third, policy and procedures need to include the creation of strategies that support recruitment and effective transition into the leadership role (Hallinger, 2003). The knowledge and skills of those who enter the program determine, to a great extent, what kind of curriculum can be effective for learning and the effectiveness of retention in leadership positions (Brown et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Fourth, is implication of policy and procedures with the respect to the design of the leadership development framework that creates an integrated approach of connecting professional development to practice, that also reflects the local context of the school (Brown et al., 2014; Hallinger, 2003). Leadership learning needs to be organized around a model of leadership and grounded in practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The design of the leadership development framework must allow the learning culture to evolve from a passive to an active learning environment, that is highly responsive to participant needs (Hallinger, 2003). Part of this work includes situational analysis, development of goals and milestones, and

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differentiated approaches to capacity building (Fullan, 2016). The challenge research presents is understanding the multiple pathways for leadership development that align with district goals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Summary:

In this section, we discussed how professional learning for leadership development needs to include a plan for evaluating the impact and to determine growth in relation to the leadership quality standard. The LQS provides focus for the district with specific goals that can be measured and assessed and aligned with professional learning activities and supports.

Section 5: Synthesis

In the first section of the review, we discussed the value of building individual and collective capacity focused on the building teacher capacity and improving student learning and recognizing the significant link between leadership and learning.

In the second section of the review, we discussed the importance of providing ongoing opportunities for leadership development and the need for system leaders to measure the impact of these programs.

In the third section of the review, we discussed the significance of promoting professional learning for leadership development where leaders engage in ongoing analysis and where professional learning activities attend to the needs of adult learners and offer a variety of methods that foster collaborative professionalism.

In the fourth section of the review, we discussed the need to evaluate professional learning for leadership development to assess the impact on leadership development and building capacity and showed how the LQS could be used as a measure for this evaluation.

Section 6: Recommendations

The following section outlines recommendations for school districts and system leaders interested in designing professional learning for leadership development.

1. Use the LQS to design and evaluate professional learning.
2. Have leaders establish their own readiness and identify goals for their professional growth plan.
3. Offer a variety of methods that foster professional learning rather than one off professional development experiences.
4. Coaching and mentoring partnerships should be guided by a protocol that is both purposeful and intentional in providing supports for continuous improvement (Appendix A)
5. Design for adult learners and engage leaders in active and experiential activities.
6. Regularly evaluate the impact of programs and activities.
7. Determine a way to assess leader's growth in relation to LQS.
8. Recognize that this is an iterative process and reflects the ongoing and embedded nature of professional learning.

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Appendix A. Coaching and Mentoring Partnership Protocol

The success of both coaching and mentoring is in the one-on-one nature of the interaction guided by an established protocol for how the partnership will work (Leithwood, & Azah, 2016;

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Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014; Reeves, 2009; Robinson et al., 2009). **The protocol should be marked by:**

- an explicit purpose or vision that challenges the status quo, that legitimizes the need for change,
- a focus on clear and shared learning goals for result driven professional development over an extended period of time,
- a commitment to meet on a regular basis to maximize the professional learning,
- a mechanism to monitor progress. This includes the use of data to ensure that the partnership is focused on continuous improvement and to determine the necessary resources and supports for growth,
- a focus on building individual learning capacity for the development of competencies and self-awareness,
- a commitment to change beyond the partnership,
- a focus on job embedded context to provide differentiation to meet the needs of the individual,
- a commitment to relevant, useful, and timely feedback, and
- district support through commitment to
 - a clear description of the structure of the coaching and mentoring program,
 - clear expectations linked to a small number of achievable goals to ensure consistency and alignment,
 - an effective communication network,
 - a collaborative environment,
 - a commitment to foster information propagation,
 - a commitment to sustainable resources including time, external expertise and facilitators,
 - addressing organizational challenges, and
 - the health of the program.