

## Leading in an Age of Embedded Professional Learning

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### Abstract

This study examined the impact of leadership and embedded professional learning on teaching and learning in a typical Middle School. The paper begins with a description of a shift from a traditional, training-influenced model of professional development, to an adult learning-influenced model of professional learning. Themes of leadership – formal school-based leadership; teacher leadership; and leadership provided by university researchers – are explored. A case study is then presented outlining the process followed and the results achieved. The results show that collaborative teacher practice, blended with distributed leadership and implemented in harmony with current theories of professional learning, can have a positive impact on student engagement and achievement.

### Introduction

By the time the 2010-2011 school year began, student enrolment in Wilson Middle School exceeded 500. Approximately 150 students were coded in the mild to severe range, 80 were from a First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI) background, and another 50 were identified as English Language Learners (ELL). The Grade 6 Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) results from June 2010 had just been shared with the staff. Most were well below provincial average and the grade 6 teachers were somewhat demoralized. Table 1 provides a comparison of the performance of Grade 6 students in Wilson Middle School to the achievement of students province wide.

**Table 1**

*School/Province Grade 6 Language Arts Comparison – Percent of All Students Writing Achieving Acceptable Standard*

	<b>2005 - 2006</b>	<b>2006 - 2007</b>	<b>2007 - 2008</b>	<b>2008 - 2009</b>	<b>2009 - 2010</b>	<b>5-year Average</b>
<b>School</b>	76.1	76.4	81.6	82.9	79.7	<b>79.3%</b>
<b>Province</b>	87.6	89.6	90.6	90.9	91.8	<b>90.1%</b>

Data in Table 1 reveal that school results were consistently below provincial results over a five-year period. Data from the other test areas (Science, Math, and Social Studies) presented similar evidence of below average achievement.

Fortunately, for the students in this school, this principal didn't simply say, "Our students are different to those found throughout the Province. These are the results that we should have expected." Instead, he affirmed his belief in the students and their teachers, and sought their help in finding a better way to deal with the achievement issue. That better way forms the backdrop to this Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) success story.

## Teacher Professional Learning

AISI data from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3 demonstrated that school change occurs when teachers are actively involved in setting the direction for their own learning. Table 2 summarizes changes that are required to produce a shift from a traditional, training-influenced model of professional development (PD), to an adult learning-influenced model of professional learning (PL), according to related research.

**Table 2**

*The Shift from a Training Model of Professional Development to an Adult Learning Model of Professional Learning<sup>1</sup>*

<b>Development Model – Training Influenced</b> <i>Shift from....</i>	<b>Learning Model – Adult Learning Influenced</b> <i>Shift to....</i>	<b>References to Support Change</b>
<p><b>Episodic</b> One shot affair, “sit and get”, traditional PD given to the participants.</p>	<p><b>Sustained/Cyclical</b> Movement toward learning that blends with goals for education that have been collaboratively developed and affirmed. Learning that occurs over a long period of time while allowing for practice, reflection, and entrenchment.</p>	<p>Darling-Hammond 2005; Deshler et al. 2001; Hadden &amp; Pianta, 2006; Klingner 2004; Lieberman &amp; Wilkins, 2006</p>
<p><b>External Accountability</b> Usually associated with PD that is imposed for reasons associated with forcing a change in teaching practice.</p>	<p><b>Shared Responsibility</b> Learning that is willingly accepted by the participants as they collectively see and understand the merit of the change. With understanding and acceptance comes responsibility.</p>	<p>Thibodeau 2008; Vernon-Dotson &amp; Floyd, 2008; Vernon-Dotson, et al., 2009; Warren &amp; Peel, 2005</p>
<p><b>Offsite</b> Workshops, meeting at the “Board Office”, going to receive and then return with the knowledge – which the teachers usually ignore once the busyness of the class returns.</p>	<p><b>Site-Embedded</b> Learning that occurs at the school where the teachers work. Teachers share in the development of school goals, improvement targets, and the requisite learning to make the change happen. The activities take place during the normal scope of daily practice.</p>	<p>Elmore, 2004; Hayes et al., 2006; Hoban, 2002; Hord, 2004; Garet et al., 2001; Sparks &amp; Hirsch, 2000</p>

<sup>1</sup> The conceptual idea for understanding the shift associated with professional learning was presented by Dr. Pamela Adams, Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge, at the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement Conference 2012.

<b>Development Model – Training Influenced</b> <i>Shift from....</i>	<b>Learning Model – Adult Learning Influenced</b> <i>Shift to....</i>	<b>References to Support Change</b>
<b>Industrial</b> The factory model of development. If we only “fix” the cog then improvement will occur. A one-size fits all approach is adopted where all teachers, at all levels of development, get the same treatment.	<b>Differentiated</b> Recognition of teacher differences is acknowledged. Built into the professional learning process is the understanding that all teachers will not be at the same place nor need the same level of learning.	Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006
<b>Didactic</b> PD that is based on the assumption that if it works somewhere else it must also work for our organization.	<b>Inquiry-based</b> Professional learning that grows out of school-developed questions surrounding needs, levels of practice, student achievement, and how to best help the organization grow.	Copland, 2003; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Lieberman & Miller, 1991
<b>Depersonalized</b> PD that is focused on the needs of the organization.	<b>Contextualized</b> Professional learning that is focused on the needs that have been identified by the people concerned. “It depends on the context.”	Van Horn 2006; Vernon-Dotson et al. 2009
<b>Privatized</b> PD focused on the individual. Teachers attend sessions, usually off-site, and return to try to create change by themselves.	<b>Shared</b> Within the organization a shared commitment to change is developed because teachers are part of the process rather than lone participants.	Lieberman & Wilkins, 2006

### Leadership Practices for Sustained Teacher Growth

Common to current school leadership research is the proposition that for sustained teacher growth to occur school leadership needs to be *distributed* (Gronn, 2000; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). A crucial element of the distributed model is that teachers accept responsibility for contributing to the professional learning of their colleagues (Mitchell, Riley, & Loughran, 2010). The blending of these two “big ideas” results in a culture in which increasing levels of teacher professionalism can produce gains in student learning. However, as Mitchell, Riley, and Loughran, (2010) caution, “While this literature recognizes the importance of the role of the principal in supporting a positive culture of professional learning, ... the specificities of distributed models of leadership in relation to teachers’ professional learning are not well documented” (p. 567). Hargreaves (2007) helps connect the dots of leadership and professional learning when he observes, “Student learning and development do not occur without teacher learning and development” (p. 37).

### ***The Principal's Role in Establishing Distributed Leadership Practices***

Mullen and Huting (2008) contend "To achieve the dual goals of quality professional learning for all teachers and academic achievement for all student groups principals are encouraged to incorporate practices inclusive of all faculty members" (p. 277). Principals can attend to distributing leadership, and ensuring that many faculty members become involved, by overseeing the organization of learning teams and guiding their implementation, providing for the analysis of student data, working with faculty to identify areas of teacher learning and student need, scheduling time for embedded meetings, and providing the resources necessary to support ideas that arise from meeting groups (Drago-Severson, 2004; Richardson, 2007). In addition, evidence from the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) reinforces the essential core leadership practices of direction setting, professional learning as encapsulated in the concept of developing people, and the importance of re-developing the organization so as to support student learning for all (Jacobson & Day, 2007).

### ***The Teacher's Role in Establishing Distributed Leadership for Professional Learning***

Teacher leadership can take many forms, and can be described in a myriad of ways. However, for the purposes of this paper, the following categories adopted by Schmerler, Mhatre, Stacy, Patrizio, Winkler, and Groves (2009) are useful: *mentoring* (teachers helping teachers), *transforming school culture* (making a difference in the environment immediately beyond the classroom), and *advocating for change* (using teacher voice to support and applaud interest in creating broader and more enduring change). In addition, Wood (2007) suggests that teacher leadership connected to successful learning community development requires teachers to take more control over their own work. The change in teacher control can help teachers realize their own expertise in teaching as well as subject matter. In addition, it can be seen when they develop the critical judgment required to assess program and outcomes while, at the same time, taking fuller responsibility for student learning.

### ***The University's Role in Contributing to Distributed Leadership for Professional Learning***

School/University partnerships have a long history in education. Goodlad (1994) advocated, "There must be a continuous process of educational renewal in which colleges and universities, the traditional producers of teachers, join schools, the recipients of the products, as equal partners in the simultaneous renewal of schooling and the education of educators" (pp. 1-2). Shroyer, Yahnke, Bennett and Dunn (2007) provide a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of partnerships in the transformation of schools and teaching practice. They highlight the influence of partnerships or gains in student achievement resulting from changes in teaching practice. Bullough and Baugh (2008) give practical voice to the research connected to methods employed by various university programs working in collaboration with schools. They report on the power of university partnership "activities that invite investment and inspire commitment" (p. 292).

## **Leadership Practices Supporting the Change Process**

The Principal of Wilson Middle School set in motion a series of actions that led to school wide improvement, evidence for which comes from the changes that occurred in teacher attitudes towards student academic achievement, student performance on the grade 6 PATs, and changes in teacher professional practice. Leadership was provided by all the partners in the change process. A key structure supporting the change featured regular meetings with grade 6 teachers, school administrators, and university researchers.

### ***Formal Leaders***

The Principal and/or Assistant Principal were present at all of the Grade 6 Team meetings offering advice, insight, guidance, and encouragement. They were vigorous contributors to the process. In particular, they offered tangible support for teachers and students as they struggled to make change a reality. At times, they were kind and empathic, and always realistic in their expectations for growth. In short, they were partners in the process, sharing the work with their teachers.

The Principal's most important task, as he saw it, was to keep the process focused on the larger picture he was trying to create for the whole school. He foresaw the processes being developed by the Grade 6 Team would become the model for future school growth and change. Throughout the project, the Principal regularly disseminated information about the work the Team was doing, highlighting their successes. He made sure the Grade 6 Team had what they needed to do the job by dedicating school-based dollars and AISI funds to support their efforts. As well, he was in teachers' classrooms on a regular basis because he wanted to see teachers and students in action, wanted to see the changes as they were occurring.

The Assistant Principal attended every Grade 6 Team meeting. As a testament to her competence, she was able to match her leadership style with the needs of the group. She did not force herself, or her way of doing things, onto the group. She drew ideas from the teachers, fostered their commitment to the work of the Team, and acted as a cheerleader when difficulties associated with major change were encountered. She never wavered in her support of the group, nor in her belief that they were doing something truly amazing for the grade 6 students in this school.

The Assistant Principal became the main contact person between the Grade 6 Team and parents. She developed a newsletter that kept the parents informed of changes being made in instructional practices. She phoned parents, spoke to them in hallways, and invited them into the school. As a result of her efforts, and those of the teachers, the parents knew the teachers and school leaders were readily available to them. In greater numbers than ever before, parents visited the individual teacher webpages to see what students were doing on a daily basis. They contacted teachers to see how they could be of assistance. Parents entered into conversations about student learning in ways few had ever done. More parents saw how student learning was directly tied to the world of curriculum, and the program of studies. Over time, many of them came to a clearer understanding of what PATs were all about and the roles the tests played in measuring the overall success of the school.

The Assistant Principal did not report any one "breakthrough" moment in bringing the parents into the conversation about student learning. Rather, she described how the process evolved, growing out of her determination to keep parents informed about all aspects of their students' learning.

### *University Researchers*

It was the Principal who first invited researchers from the local university to meet with the Grade 6 Team and provide ongoing support as the change process unfolded. The initial meetings between the university researchers and the Grade 6 Team took place in the fall of 2010. It must be said that, at first, the mood was a little tense. Teachers reacted as if they were being criticized, or unfairly judged. However, they remained open to the idea of continuing to meet and having discussions about new ideas they might try. Increasingly, they bought into the notion that we could all help in finding better ways to move forward. The Assistant Principal quickly assumed the role of in-school problem solver. The Principal and Assistant Principal committed themselves to finding the resources that teachers identified as being essential to the development of new classroom practices. The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) project for the school focused on student learning and assessment practices. Accordingly, some of money from this grant provided additional help.

The early meetings set the stage for the future of the project. The university researchers listened to the teachers and both affirmed and challenged ideas that they presented. They asked probing questions about teacher practice, student learning styles, assessment strategies, and the culture of the school whenever it was appropriate to do so. It was quickly evident that the teachers and school leaders were very collegial; they appeared to like and respect each other. It wasn't long before Team members accepted a suggestion that their work could be more successful if they used their established collegiality to develop greater professional collaboration. Over the course of the project, the quality of collaboration continued to increase.

Each time the group met, usually once a week, every team member had to report on his or her goal from the previous meeting. For example, a teacher who said that he would contact a neighboring school for copies of exemplary multiple-choice questions would then share the resources he acquired. Another teacher who set a personal goal to try a new questioning technique in her class would report on the type of strategy used and how it went. A third teacher who focused on providing students with objectives from the program of studies, written in student friendly language, would pass out examples of the objectives and how they supported student learning. As each individual reported, the other members of the team would reflect on ways they could benefit from and contribute to one another's initiatives.

The researchers would listen to the statements made by teachers and try to connect their practices to the most current literature and other projects. While the Assistant Principal participated in the discussions, she also prepared a list of things she needed to do in order to provide ongoing support for the teachers. At the end of every meeting, each person would commit to what he or she would do prior to the next meeting. Most meetings would then end with the Assistant Principal reminding everyone of what they could expect from her in the next several days.

The Grade 6 Team meetings were mostly held during instructional time. Often, substitute teachers were hired to cover classes so the teachers were free to participate. On occasion, the teachers would choose to meet during their preparation periods. Other times, it would be a combination of preparation period and substitute replacement or a re-structuring of dedicated PD days. However, on all occasions, the professional learning presented in these sessions was done during the school day.

### ***Teacher Leadership***

Teachers went from being friends and colleagues to professional collaborators. The Grade 6 Team developed a system of curriculum sharing that can only occur when teachers are fully open to accepting the ideas of others and being completely willing to share all that they have to offer.

A prime example of this collaboration occurred in the way some units of study were being developed. Individually, or in small groups, teachers accepted responsibility for creating specific components of a unit. They kept one another apprised of where they were in the process, worked collaboratively on the assessment pieces, and came together to compile the unit as a whole. Members of the team volunteered to pilot the unit and offer suggestions for improvement. The final result was a very detailed unit fully compliant with the GLOs and SLOs from the curriculum, built with cutting edge teaching strategies, differentiated to meet the needs of the diverse learners in their classes, and including assessment *of, for* and *as* learning strategies and products.

Teachers shared their expertise willingly with each other while also recognizing the roles they played as mentors to one other. At most Grade 6 Team meetings, teachers would acknowledge each other for the contributions that had been made to the team effort. Some teachers were stronger than others in curriculum design, so they took the lead in the unit development. Others, meanwhile, worked on effective ways to create and use groups. Still other teachers developed expertise in assessment for learning strategies that they shared with colleagues who were still exploring that paradigm.

The language the teachers used in the team meetings was powerful. They were careful to acknowledge and applaud the success and contributions made by others. They said things such as:

*“Excellent leadership of last week’s Friday sessions.”*

*“I really liked what you did with the assessment piece in the Social Studies unit on Ancient Greece. It added a new way for me to look at what students needed to do in order to show an understanding of the SLOs.”*

*“Thanks for coming into my class and sharing with my students the trick that the students in your class developed to remember the names of the Six Iroquois Nations.”*

In this professional collaboration teachers experienced a model of shared decision-making. Teacher professional learning principles guided the process. Students were most often at the center of the dialogue and the Alberta Program of Studies became a true working document. University researchers acted as guides, and school leaders were fully committed to instructional leadership. As a result of this complex collaboration, student academic achievement increased.

## The Results

Table 3 provides details of changes that occurred in student academic performance as evidenced by their results on the June 2011 administration of the PATs.

**Table 3**

*School PAT Results for June 2011 Compared to the Previous Four-Year Average*

	Science	LA	Social	Math
<b>Acceptable Standard</b>	6.3% increase	7.25% increase	3.3% increase	<b>9.6% decrease</b>
<b>Standard of Excellence</b>	2.4% increase	3.45% increase	8.1% increase	2.9% increase

Overall, 82.5% of the students wrote the test in 2011 as opposed to 75.5% the previous year. In addition to the academic increases experienced by students, other improvements were recorded. For example, the percent of students who were listed as *Absent*, and did not write the Language Arts test, fell from 19.1% the previous year to 10.4% in 2011.

More students wrote the PATs in 2011, more students achieved the Acceptable Standard, and more students achieved the Standard of Excellence. The increased academic performance in all subjects, except Mathematics, speaks to the impact of the change that occurred in the school through the efforts of the Grade 6 Team.

### **Other Results**

Throughout the year, other teachers in the school had wanted to join the Team as they witnessed a process that appealed to their sense of professionalism. A number of these teachers commented about the power of the collaborative efforts of the Team. Teachers said they appreciated the way the Team could express its increasing sense of professionalism and commitment to student learning. Some also related how impressed they were with the way the teachers from the Team were accepting greater leadership responsibilities, not only in the team meetings, but in the school itself.

Student attendance rates were also positively impacted by the process. Anecdotal evidence presented by the teachers spoke to the change in attendance that happened on the days set aside for most of the collaboratively-planned work of the Grade 6 Team, mostly Fridays. Historically, Fridays produced the highest absenteeism rates for the week. Yet, once the special Fridays were put in place, Fridays had the highest attendance rate of the week. Students clearly enjoyed the experience of these carefully designed sessions, especially because they had time to interact with other Grade 6 students who were not in their homeroom classes.

By the end of the year, Grade 6 Team members were no longer complaining about “something being done to them.” They recognized that they had the power to increase student learning. Team members’ attitude and language at committee meetings became increasingly positive as they focused on improving the ways they were teaching so, in turn, they could make an impact on student learning. Committee meetings were exciting to attend because they focused on new ideas, real challenges, and teachers’ passion.



## Conclusion

This study demonstrates the impact of collaborative teacher practice, blended with distributed leadership, and implemented in harmony with current theories of professional learning. Teachers on the Grade 6 Team at this school said they wanted to make a difference in the lives of students and, once they accepted the responsibility for doing that, they quickly evolved into an effective team for which student learning became the driving force. School cultural change is never an easy thing to actualize. However, this case study presents evidence about the essential elements required to promote change while improving the educational ethos of the school.

The case highlights the role that professional learning can play in the life of a school and the impact it can have on the ways teachers teach and students learn. Wilson Middle School Grade 6 Team experienced some of the joy of professional learning. Their learning needs were sustained, shared, site embedded, differentiated, inquiry-based, and contextualized. Without these elements in place, this project would probably have been just another thing the school tried and soon left behind. Instead, it has resulted in lasting change.

Leadership mattered. The Principal, Assistant Principal, teachers, and university researchers all played a role in helping to create a sustainable process for enhancing student learning. The Principal recognized the need for the change and put together a team that could make the change happen. He led by example. The Assistant Principal developed into an exceptional instructional leader, providing the Team with ongoing support, encouragement, and purpose. The university researchers provided legitimacy, and the organizational structure that helped keep the Team's focus on changing practices that would lead to increased student learning.

Finally, without AISI, and the funding it provided for innovation in teaching and learning, this project might never have been.

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