

De-mystifying Effective District Leadership

A Seven-year CODE, IEL, MOE Collaboration

By Kenneth Leithwood and Catherine McCullough

District leaders work in highly accountable contexts, largely without demonstrably powerful guidelines to assist them with their work – our meaning of the term “mystifying.” Between 2008 and 2015, a series of four closely-related, collaborative initiatives were carried out by The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), the Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) and the Ministry of Education (MOE), each of which is summarized in this report. As a whole, this data collection has produced an evidence-based understanding of the characteristics of school systems and their leadership that contribute significantly to improved student achievement and well-being; it has also assisted those in (or aspiring to) senior district leadership positions to use this improved understanding as a basis for refining their own leadership practices.

THE DIRECTORS' SEMINARS (2008–2012)

The de-mystifying process began in the early winter of 2008 with a series of six seminars for directors, initially proposed by and for the Southwest group and funded by IEL. This initial seminar series was followed by two additional rounds that engaged directors across the province. The detailed content of the seminars often differed by region because directors themselves had a very significant influence over determining the most useful focus for each of their seminars. Most seminars addressed a combination of issues suggested by the participants, as well as by the seminar leader(s)¹. In addition, the seminar leader was responsible for locating high quality research for participants to read and for guiding the discussion of those readings.

Considered highly successful by the directors who attended, the seminars became not only a professional development opportunity for participants, but also a springboard for two research projects, one aimed at clarifying expectations for district-level leadership in the province (described in the next section of this report) and one inquiring about strategies for nurturing productive educational cultures in the home².

All three seminar series aimed to assist directors in further refining their own district leadership capacities and selecting or developing initiatives in their districts with significant potential to improve their contributions to student learning and well-being. The seminars were also intended to help participants make systematic use of the leadership wisdom of their director colleagues both immediately (through face-to-face interactions)

and in the future (through the nurturing of networked relationships), as well as to build their own practices and district initiatives on the foundation of the best available research evidence. To accomplish these goals, each seminar series adhered to the same basic norms and expectations of the participants as follows:

- Readings were sent out in advance of each session, typically about two research-based papers. They were challenging to read but discussions during each seminar assumed a careful reading of this material.
- The seminars were not lectures or presentations. Each participant was responsible for advancing the group's collective understandings of whatever issue was on the table.
- It was assumed that each person's work was a potential source of insight for others, so each participant was expected to "de-privatize" their practice. This de-privatization was to include not only successes, but also mistakes and ongoing dilemmas.
- What each person learned was often expected to lead directly to some action in his or her district. So participants were expected to be asked about any action taken as an outgrowth of a seminar and "how that is going so far."
- Each seminar ended with some discussion of what the content of the next seminar should be. So each participant had an opportunity to shape the direction of the seminar series.

THE ONTARIO STUDY OF EFFECTIVE DISTRICTS AND DISTRICT LEADERSHIP (2010–2011)³

Prompted by the directors' seminar series, the general purpose of this IEL-funded study was to identify and describe characteristics of school systems and their leadership which contribute to significant growth in student achievement and well-being. The study was designed to accomplish this goal by collecting a robust body of quantitative evidence, in contrast to the very small body of existing evidence around effective districts, which was almost exclusively qualitative in nature, based on weak "outlier" research designs and collected in US districts.

The starting points for framing the Ontario study were three syntheses of evidence about school system conditions contributing to improved student learning⁴. Because all three syntheses were of research carried out mostly in US districts, developing the framework for the Ontario study entailed modifications and additions to these data bases specifically aimed at capturing the policy context and wider environments

in which our provincial school systems found themselves. These modifications were the outcome of a content analysis of relevant Ontario educational policy, as well as a series of "focus group" interviews undertaken during the director's seminars and an annual meeting of CODE. Ministry of Education staff also reviewed early drafts of the framework.

The quantitative portion of the study⁵ included survey data collected from 235 district leaders and 1,543 principals in 49 of the 72 districts in the province, along with average, district-level changes in grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 EQAO student math and language achievement over a five-year period. The direct contribution to growth in student achievement of each of the district characteristics measured through the surveys was reported as an "effect size" (ES). An effect size statistic aims to describe the practical significance of a relationship or effect unlike a correlation which might be very weak, but statistically significant by virtue, for example, of a large sample size. As "rule-of-thumb," interpretations suggest that an ES of less than .2 should be considered weak, .2 to .6 moderate and greater than .6 strong.

We will describe the specific characteristics of high performing districts measured in this study in the next section of this report. Suffice to say at this point, effect sizes on student achievement were significant and small to moderate in size for almost all measured district characteristics. For example:

- Broadly shared mission, vision and goals ES = .40
- A coherent instructional guidance system ES = .40
- Job-embedded professional development provided for all members ES = .30

For several reasons, these results offer considerable justification for claims about significant district effects:

- even variables with weak effect sizes may be practically consequential depending on costs
- multiple variables with weak effect sizes can add up to strong effects and
- these results are the direct effects of districts on students even though the effects of district characteristics are mediated by many other school and classroom conditions not measured in the study.

In addition to these estimates of district effects on students, the effects of both directors/supervisory officers (professional leadership) and trustees (elected leadership) on district characteristics were calculated. The results indicated that both sources of system leadership had moderate to strong effects on most district

FACT

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characteristics. Effect sizes for professional and elected leadership combined range, for example, from .29 (a coherent instructional guidance system) to .60 (learning-oriented improvement processes). Professional leadership had consistently larger effects than elected leadership on all but two identified district characteristics.

The main product of this study was the *District Effectiveness Framework* (DEF) now included as part of the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (OLF) replacing the former System Practices and Procedures. Intended as a complement to the province's *School Effectiveness Framework* (SEF), the DEF now serves as a guide for school system improvement.

STRONG DISTRICTS AND THEIR LEADERSHIP⁶

Commissioned by CODE and IEL and supported by the Ministry, this position paper was prompted, in part, by expressions of doubt about the need for district organizations that surfaced during the 2012-13 provincial election. Directors believed they needed to provide an evidence-based account of district and district leadership effects to supplement their own collective experiences. Building directly on the results of *The Ontario Study of Effective Districts and District Leadership*, this paper describes the leadership practices needed to develop and sustain high performing (“strong”) districts, along with several personal leadership resources especially valuable for those in director and superintendent positions. The paper also outlines a possible vision of strong future districts and summarizes available evidence about the value strong districts add, over and above school and classroom contributions, to the achievement of their students.

Evidence suggests that districts contribute to their students’ learning to the extent that they develop nine key characteristics or conditions. These characteristics encompass districts’ purposes, coherent of instructional guidance systems, how and what evidence district staffs use for decision making, the nature of their improvement processes and approaches to capacity building. These key characteristics also include the extent to which elements of the organization are aligned around district purposes and priorities, approaches to leadership development, the nature of trustee governance and the quality of relationships throughout the district and beyond.

While the nine district characteristics are *what* needs to be developed by senior leaders, *how* to develop those characteristics is captured in the paper by unpacking evidence about the practices and personal leadership resources of strong district leaders. Each district characteristic develops in response to a

handful of specific leadership practices described in the paper. While the total number of practices identified in this way is relatively large, it reflects both the extent and complexity of the work carried out by strong district leaders. Underlying the choice and enactment of almost all strong senior leadership practices are a small number of personal leadership resources, most of which are described in the *Ontario Leadership Framework*. This paper adds two more especially relevant for senior district leaders – proactivity and systems thinking. The full report describes these personal resources and explains why they are part of strong district leadership.

What does the future hold for our expectations of senior district leadership? The report offers one promising answer to this question – an expansion of district leadership responsibilities to include not only the learning and well-being of all students within district boundaries, but also a shared responsibility, with other district leaders and the provincial government, for the learning and well-being of students in the province as a whole. District leaders in the future would behave much more proactively in respect to provincial policy than is presently the case, resulting in possibly different but certainly better implemented and fewer policy initiatives.

How much value do strong districts add to the learning of their students over and above the contributions of schools and classrooms? The small amount of evidence available to help answer this question, including results of the Ontario study described above, indicates that when senior leaders develop the characteristics and conditions of strong districts described in this report, their impact on student learning is likely to be substantial. Indeed, relatively small improvements in the status of strong district characteristics are associated with substantial increases in student achievement.

A PROGRAM FOR DEVELOPING STRONG DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

Considerable effort was made, after the publication of *Strong Districts and Their Leadership*, to introduce its contents to system leaders across the province. A significant minority of the province’s senior district leaders had begun to use the strong districts framework as a guide for assessing their own districts’ progress and planning for future improvements. If such uses of the research were to expand to a substantial majority of districts, a more programmatic opportunity would need to be developed. So CODE, IEL and the Ministry of Education endorsed a proposal to create and field test

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stand-alone professional development modules aligned with each of the nine characteristics of strong districts. The instructional approaches in these modules built directly on what had been learned from the quite successful directors' seminars.

Completed in the spring of 2015⁷, each of these modules typically includes at least an agenda, a set of slides summarizing relevant research and either two or three case studies written by, or under the direction of, an Ontario director of education. One exception to such authorship is a case written by the superintendent of the Surrey School District, the largest district in British Columbia. Each of the cases is preceded by a set of questions to guide group discussion of the case. While the original proposal called for one case study to be included with each module, a total of 23 cases were eventually prepared, and this unanticipated feature of the project added considerable interest and value to the modules. Many of the district cases include video interviews with senior leaders introducing their written cases or expanding considerably on those cases. In many instances, the cases represented the first time directors had been provided with an opportunity to share the nature of their work "warts and all" with their provincial counterparts.

A limited number of field tests were conducted with the modules: a half-day field test with the senior leadership team in one district, a two-day field test with senior leaders from about two dozen boards and a one-day field test of two modules with a group of about 60 senior leaders from across the province. Several modules were used as the foundation for invited presentations to two different groups of senior leaders in the province.

CONCLUSION

There was no master plan in 2008 to guide the unfolding of the four projects described in this report. Rather, "one thing led to another" for many of the same reasons Charles Lindblom⁸ cites in his justification for "muddling through" as the most appropriate approach to decision making under conditions of uncertainty. Reflection on what has been accomplished in this seven-year collaboration suggests three primary reasons for the success of the work.

These reasons reflect an approach to knowledge mobilization through the use of social ties⁹. First, valuable knowledge for improving practice was found in both the existing district leadership community and in the research community. Second, district leaders contributed to knowledge improvement by engaging their colleagues in the sharing of both failed and

successful practices and by remaining open to ideas from the research community. And finally, the research community contributed to knowledge building by applying robust research procedures to solving problems identified in collaboration with the district leadership community, as well as by bringing relevant results of research to the attention of district leaders, and participating with them in making sense of those results for improving their own practice. There are some important lessons here for future knowledge mobilization efforts. ▲

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FOOTNOTES

1. This was Ken Leithwood usually in collaboration with a director from the region in which the series was conducted.
2. Leithwood, (2014).
3. Leithwood, (2011).
4. Leithwood et al, 2004; Leithwood, 2010; Rorrer, Skrla & Scheurich, 2008).
5. Four in-depth case studies of exceptionally effective districts were also conducted but are not described here.
6. Leithwood, (2013).
7. Leithwood & McCullough, (2015).
8. Lindblom, (1959).
9. Fliaster & Spiess, (2008).

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