



The Institute for Education Leadership  
L'Institut de leadership en éducation

# **STRONG DISTRICTS & THEIR LEADERSHIP**

A Paper Commissioned by  
*The Council of Ontario Directors of Education*  
and *The Institute for Education Leadership*

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# CONTENTS

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary 5

Recommendations 7

## STRONG DISTRICTS AND THEIR LEADERSHIP

Introduction 9

Nine Critical Features of Strong Districts 11

Strong District Leadership Practices 23

Two Especially Useful Personal Leadership Resources 27

A Vision of Future District Leadership 30

The Contribution of Strong Districts and Their Leaders to Student Achievement 31

Conclusion 34

## REFERENCES AND APPENDIX

References 37

Appendix 41

# **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**



## SUMMARY

Commissioned by *Ontario's Institute for Education Leadership* and *Council of Ontario Directors of Education*, this paper summarizes evidence about:

- the characteristics of school systems, boards or districts that are successful at improving the learning of their students (“strong districts”);
- the leadership practices needed to develop and sustain such districts on the part of those in director and superintendent positions (“senior district leaders”);
- the personal leadership resources especially valuable for those in director and superintendent positions;
- a possible vision of strong future districts;
- the value strong districts add, over and above school and classroom contributions, to the achievement of their students.

Districts contribute to their students’ learning, evidence suggests, to the extent that they develop nine key characteristics or conditions. These characteristics encompass districts’ purposes, the coherence 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 need to be developed by senior leaders, how to develop those characteristics has been captured in the paper by unpacking evidence about the practices and personal leadership resources of strong district leaders. It is important to acknowledge, however, the much broader array of tasks for which district leaders are responsible. While the nine district characteristics and associated leadership practices outlined in the paper are critical for purposes of improving student learning and well-being, they are by no means “all there is”. For example, the average district in Ontario serves about 30,000 students, employs about 1800 professional staff members and has a budget of about \$235 million. By almost any standard, this is a huge organization and the operational issues facing district leaders are both complex and extensive; they are also very poorly understood by most stakeholders not actually responsible for managing the day-to-day challenges they

present. But unless these operational issues are managed both effectively and efficiently there will be little time and few resources for building those district characteristics that add value to the learning and well-being of students.

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Each district characteristic develops in response to a handful of specific leadership practices.

While the total number of practices identified is relatively large, it reflects both the extent and complexity of the work done by strong district leaders.

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Each district characteristic, as the paper indicates, 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 done by strong district leaders. A shorter list of practices could only be created by offering a more abstract and less practical account of what strong district leaders do.

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* (OLF) as attributes, traits or dispositions of effective leaders at all “levels”. This paper adds two personal leadership resources, to those already included in the OLF, because of their importance for senior district leaders, in particular. The sheer size of district organizations, as compared with schools, for example, means that district leaders are potentially even more vulnerable than school leaders to being distracted from their improvement efforts and so need a strong predisposition toward “proactivity” (a psychological resource in OLF terms). The complexity of district organizations, in combination with the relatively longer time frames over which improvement work must be planned places a premium on senior leaders’ “systems thinking” (a cognitive resource in OLF terms).

What does the future hold for our expectations of senior district leadership? One promising potential answer to this question is 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. Greater local district control over the wider policy agenda also has been advocated on the grounds that large-scale reform strategies must change over time if progress is to be sustained. Central control strategies, for example, are useful to initiate change but as progress is made on a large scale, future improvements increasingly depend on responding productively to differentiated challenges in districts and schools. Sustaining progress (“moving from good to great”, for example) depends on a devolution of authority from the centre.

How much value do strong districts add to the learning of their students over and above the contributions of schools and classrooms? This is a technically complicated question to answer; the paper addressed this question by reviewing the results of a relatively large set of studies that report qualitative data about the work of exceptionally performing districts and several large studies conducted in the U.S. and Ontario using more rigorous mixed-methods research designs.

This evidence indicates that when senior leaders develop the characteristics and conditions of strong districts described in this paper, 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. Strong districts do add significant value to the learning of students beyond the contribution of schools and classrooms.

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Sustaining progress, “moving from good to great”, for example, depends on a devolution of authority from the centre.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

Seven recommendations arise from the evidence reviewed in the paper. These recommendations are organized in relation to each of the paper's main sections.

## Characteristics of Strong Districts

1. For district senior leadership teams, developing the nine characteristics of strong districts in their organizations should be the proximal or immediate goals for their work, with student learning and well-being as the distal or long-term goals. These nine characteristics enable a district's schools and classrooms to do their improvement work effectively.

Very few districts will have fully developed all nine characteristics of strong districts while almost all districts will have at least partially developed all of them. The detailed description of each characteristic provided by the paper should be used as part of each district's regular review of progress and the development of priorities to be included in board improvement plans.

## Leadership Practices

2. A relatively comprehensive set of district leadership practices aimed at developing the characteristics of strong districts has been identified in the paper. This account of leadership practices is more detailed, more explicit, and more attuned to the provincial policy context than most previous accounts of what senior leaders in Ontario do in order to improve student achievement and well-being in their districts. Identification of strong district leadership practices provides an opportunity to assess how well aligned to the capacities that evidence indicates senior leaders need to do their jobs are the development opportunities available to aspiring, new and experienced senior leaders in the province. Evidence of misalignment or gaps in the opportunities now available should lead to revisions or additions in development opportunities for aspiring, newly appointed and experienced senior leaders.

## Personal Leadership Resources

3. The full set of personal leadership resources should be included as key criteria in the process of selecting directors and superintendents, with special attention to both Proactivity and

System Thinking capacities, but also including those already part of the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (OLF).

4. While there is not much dispute about the importance of these personal resources to the work of senior leaders, most districts do not have access to reliable and valid methods of determining the extent to which those being considered for senior leadership positions possess these resources. Work should be undertaken aimed at assisting districts with guidelines and/or tools to be used in assessing candidates' personal leadership resources.

## A Vision of Future District Leadership

The vision of future district leadership developed in this paper includes a significant role for district leaders in the development of provincial policy. Three implications for senior leader selection and development arise, should this vision become widely accepted in the province:

5. Criteria for selecting future district leaders, directors in particular, would need to include a willingness, interest and evidence of potential capacity (e.g., a track record of working successfully on professional issues beyond one's own immediate responsibilities) to work on improvement efforts for both their districts and the provincial school system, as a whole.
6. The dual (district and provincial) roles envisioned for future directors has important "trailing" consequences for superintendent roles - greater responsibility, often as part of the senior leadership team, for district-wide administration and improvement efforts and likely a closer relationship with boards of trustees. Candidates for new superintendent positions should be selected, in part, based on their readiness and/or potential to take on these additional responsibilities.
7. An expanded role for superintendents confronts those newly appointed to such positions with a learning curve even steeper than the very steep one they face at present. This steeper learning curve likely requires upgrading the nature of the training now provided to superintendent aspirants, a task likely requiring the combined efforts of the Ministry, senior leaders' professional associations and individual districts.

# **STRONG DISTRICTS AND THEIR LEADERSHIP**





# 1. Introduction

Commissioned by Ontario's *Institute for Education Leadership* and *Council of Ontario Directors of Education*, this paper summarizes evidence about the characteristics of school systems, boards or districts<sup>1</sup> that are successful at improving the learning of their students, as well as the leadership needed to develop and sustain such districts on the part of those in director and superintendent positions. The paper offers recommendations for senior leader succession planning and points to factors that have an influence on potential candidates' decisions to apply.

District organizations are largely invisible and of little interest to the public, at large, except when conflicts among trustees, or between trustees and community groups, generate media attention. School closings, student busing policies and teacher professional development days are examples of issues that predictably attract such attention. While some of these high profile issues do affect students, the primary work of district leaders aimed at improving the learning and well-being of students is a mystery to most members of the community, it's just not something they think to think about. Consistent with Kahneman's discovery that most peoples' beliefs are based almost exclusively on the WYSIATI principle (What You See Is All There Is), most members of the public attribute what students learn exclusively to the very visible schools, teachers and principals with whom they have direct contact<sup>2</sup>. While this lack of visibility should not be equated with lack of contribution, as this paper will attest, it does substantially increase the vulnerability of districts in times of change, especially when such change entails reduction of resources. So the case for districts needs to be made explicitly; it will not make itself.

The term "strong" used in the title of the paper acknowledges that not all districts are successful at either improving overall student achievement and well-being, or closing gaps in achievement and well-being<sup>3</sup>. Such uneven success is hardly surprising since not all classrooms, schools or home environments are especially effective at accomplishing these goals either. But some proportion of all of these organizational entities is very effective. The remainder of the paper refers to districts that are successful at improving student achievement and well-being<sup>4</sup> - and at closing gaps in both of these outcomes - as "strong" districts<sup>5</sup>.

The functions or purposes of school districts, then, are the basis on which their strength is judged. But expectations about district functions or purposes have evolved considerably since the inception of school districts in North America more than a century ago. Districts were initially created as a response to the challenges of growing populations of students to be educated and the administrative tasks associated with large numbers. Districts were also viewed, in some parts of North America, as an antidote to municipal corruption and the adverse effects of local politics. They were not invented to improve student achievement<sup>6</sup>. That was the job of schools.

Expectations for districts changed over time, however, as the communities they served continued to evolve. Districts grew in size and their numbers diminished often through amalgamations in response to calls for realizing "economies of scale". And with such growth came increasing bureaucratization. Senior district leaders often were compared to CEOs of large private organizations and encouraged to behave accordingly. In the process, these leaders lost any visible connection to teaching and learning that had been created in, or salvaged from, earlier periods.

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<sup>1</sup>For the sake of brevity and convenience, the term "district" will be used throughout the paper.

<sup>2</sup>Recent events in Ontario have also have made very visible to the public the role of government and teacher unions.

<sup>3</sup>Tymms et al (2008) study of England's LEAs found very small effects on student achievement but left open methodological features of the study as an explanation.

<sup>4</sup>"Well-being" is included in the province's goals for education but the evidence reviewed in this paper is almost entirely about what districts do to improve student achievement.

<sup>5</sup>Of course strength is not a dichotomous condition; it varies along a continuum from very weak to very strong. The features of districts described here are common among districts close to the very strong end of this continuum, although not all nine features need to be fully developed for a district to achieve remarkable outcomes for its students.

<sup>6</sup>Honig (2012)

From about the end of the second world war to the important study of district effects in British Columbia by Coleman and La Roque in 1990, Canadian districts were routinely viewed primarily as instruments for helping Ministries and Departments of Education administer provincial policies; as in U.S. districts, they were “intermediary administrative units between [provincial] governments and schools”<sup>7</sup>. By the 1970s, this work began much more explicitly to include the implementation of provincial curriculum guidelines, a development which began to forge a meaningful connection between districts and the learning of their students. However, it was not until provincial governments, along with governments in most developed countries, began to view significantly improving their educational systems as a key response to global economic competition that districts appeared in their crosshairs. And when they did, what emerged were two radically different courses of action.

One course of action was to greatly diminish the role of districts. In England, for example, the powers and responsibilities of Local Education Authorities were radically reduced in scope and authority in order to eliminate what was widely perceived to be excessive bureaucracy standing in the way of schools doing the right things. Persuaded by advocates of “school-based management”, Australia and New Zealand largely eliminated districts altogether.

Both Canada and the U.S. adopted a second course of action with their districts, a gradual repositioning of them as key agents in the chains of accountability for student learning between governments and classrooms. As conceptions of North American district purposes shifted from primarily the efficient administration of schools to include, as critically, guidance, stimulation and accountability for school improvement, the meaning associated with the term “strong” districts has had to change accordingly. Similarly, as conceptions of district directors of education and their immediate colleagues has shifted from central managers of large bureaucracies to transformational leaders of a continuously improving menu of instructional services for students, the capacities and personal leadership resources required of strong district leaders has undergone a major shift. This paper describes the empirical evidence that has accumulated, to this point, about these two changes.

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<sup>7</sup>Lee et al (2012, page 134)

## 2. Nine Critical Features of Strong Districts

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A “system-wide focus on achievement” is one of the most salient aspects of what districts do to support district-wide improvement efforts in the context of the values held by the communities they serve.

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Two sources of evidence are used to identify and describe nine characteristics or critical features of strong districts. One source of evidence is the exemplary district research used to develop the *District Effectiveness Framework* (DEF) now included as part of the *Ontario Leadership Framework*. Studies providing this evidence are listed in Appendix A; this first source of evidence also includes studies undertaken in Ontario<sup>8</sup> and Alberta<sup>9</sup> (subsequently referred to simply as the Ontario study and the Alberta study) to test and further contextualize what had been learned from research largely conducted in U.S. districts. Point-form summaries of strong district characteristics in this section (2) of the paper are largely based on this first source evidence.

The second source of evidence used to help describe critical features of strong districts comes from additional empirical research and synoptic reports of relevant evidence, much of it published after development of the DEF<sup>10</sup>. This second source of evidence is used to extend, further explain, or exemplify the point-form summaries of strong district characteristics.

The nine characteristics described in some detail in this section of the paper are as follows:

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.

### **1. A broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person**

Evidence used to develop the DEF indicated that strong districts have widely-shared beliefs and visions about student learning and well-being that have been transparently developed with the engagement of multiple school and system stakeholders. These direction-setting features of strong districts fall within the parameters set by the province. In these districts the beliefs and visions held by members include a focus on raising the achievement bar, closing the achievement gap, and nurturing student engagement and well-being. These beliefs and visions for students, understood and shared by all staff, provide strong districts with a moral purpose<sup>11</sup>. A “system-wide focus on achievement” is one of the most salient aspects of what districts do to support district-wide improvement efforts<sup>12</sup> in the context of the values held by the communities they serve<sup>13</sup>.

Strong districts in the Ontario study had developed a vision, mission and set of shorter-term goals that was widely endorsed by trustees, as well as by district and school-level leaders. Few members of these districts had any doubts about the importance of these directions and just about everyone had a firm understanding of what their district was attempting to accomplish.

The processes through which such wide-spread knowledge, agreement and commitment were developed typically began

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<sup>8</sup>Leithwood (2011)

<sup>9</sup>Bédard and Mombourquette (2013)

<sup>10</sup>A notable exception is the Campbell and Fullan (2006) study reported in 2006. The features associated with 8 effective Ontario districts in this study share much in common with the 9 characteristics described in this paper.

<sup>11</sup>See Campbell & Fullan (2006)

<sup>12</sup>Johnson & Chrispeels (2010)

<sup>13</sup>Ontario policy stipulates that the mission of Francophone districts also includes protecting and enhancing the French language culture by preparing their students for participation in the development of a strong French-language community (see, for example, Ontario’s Aménagement linguistique Policy (2004); Table nationale sur l’éducation. (October 2011). *École communautaire citoyenne : document de fondement*. Maintaining and increasing student enrolment is also central to the mission of Francophone districts). The mission of Catholic districts includes ensuring that the Catholic faith is present in all of their work.

in some formal goal-setting process associated with strategic planning. Two of the strong districts in the Ontario study had adopted a “policy governance” or “corporate” model to guide trustee work, along with a strategic planning process that was largely responsible for both the clarity of district directions and for the development and maintenance of both trustee and staff commitments to those directions. The outcomes of such direction setting actions increased in importance among district members as steps were taken to embed the directions in annual improvement plans, monthly principals’ meetings and leadership-initiated interactions in schools. The mission, vision and goals were “brought alive” and sustained through their consistent use as decision-making tools and as beacons for the future.

## 2. A coherent instructional guidance system

When a district’s curriculum standards and frameworks, instructional practices, professional development emphases and assessment tools are all focused on achieving the district’s mission, vision and goals, the district is providing “coherent instructional guidance” to its schools, an important part of what strong districts do<sup>14</sup>. Within such a coherent system, strong districts encourage their staffs to be innovative and support to schools is differentiated in response to variability in student performance<sup>15</sup>. The coherent system is intended to establish some legitimate boundaries around what can be done without stifling the innovative efforts of staffs to improve their practices and the achievement of students. This feature of strong districts reflects evidence about the importance of focusing “on the core function of the organization as the primary driver of success”<sup>16</sup>.

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Strong districts encourage their staffs to be innovative and support to schools is differentiated in response to variability in student performance.

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Evidence used to develop the DEF indicated that strong districts:

- support schools’ efforts to implement curricula that foster students’ deep understandings about “big ideas”, as well as to develop the basic skills students need to acquire such understandings.
- work together with their school staffs to help provide all students with engaging forms of instruction.

- work together, district and school staff, to help establish ambitious but realistic student performance standards.
- include teachers in instructional improvement work, and assist them in developing sophisticated understandings of powerful instruction for students; collaboration for this work is extensive, ongoing and involves all key stakeholders.
- demonstrate “in-classroom” leadership. District and school level leaders are frequently in classrooms acting as instructional leaders and providing “just-in-time” or job-embedded professional development.

A coherent instructional guidance system most often emerges from district and school improvement planning processes and their implementation. For example, over the five-year period of interest in the Ontario study, approaches to improving curriculum and instruction by the strong districts in this study changed quite significantly. These changes included greater collaboration across the system for school improvement purposes, greater consistency in priorities and expectations and significant increases in support by system leaders for improvement work in schools - all clear indications of the development of coherent instructional guidance. These changes also included much greater use of systematically-collected evidence for decision making and more precise targets for school improvement.

One of the strong Ontario districts, for example, used student achievement trends evident in multiple data sources, along with Ministry priorities, to aggressively develop a board improvement plan which included “SMART” goals. Principals and their staffs were expected to explicitly acknowledge and build on district plans as they created their individual school improvement plans, an example of how reasonable boundaries are established by a coherent instructional guidance system. Increasingly, as well, schools were encouraged to focus their improvement efforts on the needs of individual students, not only whole school initiatives. Schools in this district made considerable efforts to break down the isolation in which teachers often found themselves with more collaboration and collective effort. This collective effort, furthermore, was more focused on the types of instruction that would be useful to achieve the targets specified in the schools’ improvement plans.

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<sup>14</sup>Bowers (2008), Elmore et al (1997)

<sup>15</sup>Louis et al (2010)

<sup>16</sup>Murphy & Hallinger (1988)

“Coherence”, however, is not the only key feature of an instructional guidance system. The content of the curriculum and the nature of the instruction included in the system are easily as important. The Ontario provincial curriculum increasingly stresses the importance of higher level, more complex goals or “big ideas”<sup>17</sup>, as mentioned above<sup>18</sup>. So strong districts in Ontario have an obligation to reflect this focus in their instructional guidance systems, an obligation justified by policy<sup>19</sup>.

A district’s instructional guidance system should also be aimed at influencing the use of instructional practices supported by the best available evidence and considerable work has been done by the Ministry to highlight those practices for districts and schools. Both “differentiated instruction” and “pedagogical content knowledge” are examples of concepts that suggest wide variation in approaches to instruction depending on individual student capacities and the unique nature of the disciplinary content to be learned. Nonetheless, there is now an emerging, evidence-based consensus about the central features of most forms of powerful instruction, no matter the student or the content. It is these central features that strong districts capture in their instructional guidance systems. “Focused Instruction”, the term used here to capture those features, reflects both direct and constructive approaches to teaching, including very active engagement of the teacher with whatever more specific teaching techniques are used in the classroom. A teacher engaged in focused instruction is the antithesis of the “guide on the side”.

Focused approaches to instruction are explicitly goal-directed and transparent about what students are intended to accomplish. There is constant monitoring by the teacher of what students are doing and direct interventions by the teacher to help ensure that students are actively engaged in meaningful learning as much as possible, including careful control over the timing and pace of instruction. As much time as possible in the classroom is academically engaged time and this often depends on the use of effective classroom management strategies by the teacher. Hattie’s (2009) conclusions, from his synthesis of research on instruction, extend this conception of focused instruction:

*The major messages [from this research] are the importance of learning intentions, success criteria, a classroom environment that not only tolerates but*

*welcomes errors, attention to the challenge of the task, the presence of feedback to reduce the gaps, and a sense of satisfaction and further engagement and perseverance to succeed in the task of learning (p. 199).*

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Focused approaches to instruction are explicitly goal-directed and transparent about what students are intended to accomplish. There is constant monitoring by the teacher of what students are doing and direct interventions by the teacher to help ensure that students are actively engaged in meaningful learning as much as possible, including careful control over the timing and pace of instruction.

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### **3. Deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions**

Encouraging the use of systematically-collected evidence in district and school-level decision making has been at the centre of all accountability-oriented policies introduced in Ontario and elsewhere over the past 15 years. But this widespread enthusiasm for district promotion of more evidence use in districts and schools should be tempered by two caveats. First, the vast majority of existing research about evidence use inquires about how to encourage more of it in schools. Very little of this research examines the effects of more or different forms of evidence use on student learning. Furthermore, what little research there is about this key issue reports mixed and not particularly compelling results<sup>20</sup>. So the strength of the advocacy for evidence use has as much to do with the ideologies giving rise to educational accountability policies in the first place, as it does with results of available research.

The second caveat about promoting evidence use in schools is the typically singular focus on evidence about one thing - student achievement. Even researchers who are deeply engaged in issues of evidence use in schools and districts seem only to think about this focus for evidence<sup>21</sup>. While such evidence, used well, helps diagnose strengths and weaknesses in student learning, it provides no direct clues about what to do about

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<sup>17</sup>Originating in the Ministry’s Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) and the work of its student achievement officers, these goals also have become a priority for the *Leading Student Achievement: Networks for Learning* (LSA) project.

<sup>18</sup>Also see Michael Fullan’s (2013) proposal for the future goals of education in Ontario.

<sup>19</sup>Ontario’s Francophone districts also have an obligation to ensure high levels of bilingualism among their students as well as a strong cultural identity and sense of belonging.

<sup>20</sup>A sample of this evidence can be found in Mehrens (1998), McNeil (2000) & Carlson et al (2011).

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, Wayman et al (2012).



those strengths and weaknesses. District and school staffs often spend considerable time and effort on disaggregating and parsing this type of data for diagnostic purposes and then rely almost solely on the professional judgments of those “at the table” about what to do.

While professional judgment is a necessary ingredient in deciding what to do, it is by no means sufficient. Relying only on existing professional judgment about what to do almost completely ignores the vast amount of evidence about best practices that has accumulated over the past 30 years. That such evidence about what to do had been largely ignored by significant numbers of Ontario educators, at least until quite recently, was nowhere more obvious than in the reaction of many teachers, principals and district leaders to John Hattie’s (2009) synthesis of this evidence when it was introduced into provincial conversations several years ago; Surprise! Shock! Dismay! Regret!

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Relying only on existing professional judgment about what to do almost completely ignores the vast amount of evidence about best practices that has accumulated over the past 30 years.

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*Why didn’t we know this sooner?*

*Why are we working so hard to individualize instruction when our students would benefit much more from improving the feedback we give them?*

Evidence used in the DEF to describe what strong districts do to encourage effective data use in schools suggests, in sum, that they:

- provide schools with relevant and accessible evidence about their performance in a timely manner;
- make effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning; insist on a careful reading of relevant research evidence as the starting point for decisions about what to do to improve student performance;
- assist schools in using evidence to improve their performance, including frequent, job-embedded opportunities to learn about productive evidence use and the provision of time to interpret and act on what is learned through those opportunities;

- create collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation and use of evidence in schools;
- call on expertise from outside the school system for help with data interpretation when needed;
- implement computerized information management systems that are easily used by school and district staffs and that allow for the integration of all or most of the information available within the district;
- use appropriate evidence for accounting to stakeholders.

One recent, methodologically sophisticated study of district effects on student achievement<sup>22</sup> provides additional justification for the actions outlined above. Results of this study argue for a “balanced approach” to evidence use, one which acknowledges its value only under quite specific conditions. One condition (listed above) is the use of multiple sources of data about student achievement, not just the evidence provided by provincial test results. A second condition, related to the importance of collaboration (also listed above), is the development of networks for learning<sup>23</sup> across district schools that focus on improvements in curriculum understanding and teaching. A third condition is collaborative work among teachers in learning communities within schools (PLCs) for the purpose of improving instruction.

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Collaborative district cultures nourished by networks and PLCs stimulate the learning of new forms of instruction and support staff members as they struggle to implement what they learn.

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Collaborative district cultures nourished by networks and PLCs, according to this study, stimulate the learning of new forms of instruction and support staff members as they struggle to implement what they learn. Finally, this study found that a focus on setting targets for improving learning and uses of evidence for monitoring progress toward those targets, in the absence of such collaborative district cultures, actually had negative effects on student achievement.

So careful data use for diagnosing weaknesses, setting targets, and monitoring progress? Absolutely! Multiple sources of data about both achievement and improvement strategies? Very important! But in a collaborative and supportive district context? Essential!

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<sup>22</sup>Lee et al (2012)

<sup>23</sup>LSA’s Principal Learning Teams is an Ontario example of such networks.

For a host of reasons, no district in Ontario at this time can avoid using some forms of systematically collected data in its decisions, especially provincial test data. But as successful as a district might be in establishing effective data use as standard practice within the district and across its schools, by itself this is likely to be only one of the many actions required to improve student achievement; it is a “building block” not a “silver bullet”. So struggling with the meaning and possible uses of data should not be allowed to overwhelm the time and energies of those engaged in improvement efforts.

#### **4. Learning-oriented organizational improvement processes**

Improvement processes at the district level typically begin with some formal planning activities – strategic planning and, in Ontario, board improvement planning. Almost all Ontario schools base their improvement efforts on school improvement plans developed in a wide variety of ways. Ikemoto and her colleagues<sup>24</sup> also found that strategic planning was a key characteristic of strong districts across the U.S. Such planning identifies goals and strategies for their achievement at the district and school level and aligns structures, staff and fiscal resources in support of such achievement.

Evidence about organizational improvement processes used to develop the DEF indicated that strong districts:

- have a coherent approach to improvement which usually includes a small number of key improvement goals consistently pursued over sustained periods of time;
- proceed in manageable stages using the early stages as learning opportunities;
- do not overload schools with excessive numbers of initiatives;
- make considerable effort to build the capacities needed by school staffs for successful school improvement;
- encourage improvement efforts in schools guided by explicit and well-tested frameworks, policies and practices, as well as widely shared goals that permit local adaptation. All stakeholders have clearly defined roles to play in this approach to school improvement;
- integrate new initiatives into existing routines and practices. Established structures and procedures are maintained and built. Care is taken to ensure continuity and extension of core values.

Strong districts in the Ontario study made the most of well-designed externally-developed procedures for stimulating carefully targeted improvements (e.g., TLCs, SEF, SIM). They also developed their own improvement procedures or guidelines to supplement those which had been externally developed.

Evidence from both the Ontario and Alberta studies indicated that the ongoing monitoring and refining of school improvement processes was enabled by monthly meetings of school and system leaders, meetings largely devoted to assessing and refining improvement plans, along with relevant professional development<sup>25</sup>. All schools in these studies had created leadership teams intended to act as “professional learning communities” on behalf of their schools. Superintendents were a significant presence in most schools, a finding consistent with other evidence<sup>26</sup> and their focus was invariably on the schools’ improvement plans, the improvement of instruction and evidence that would help illuminate the challenges and progress being made with such improvement. Lack of progress was detected and acted on quickly.

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Superintendents were a significant presence in most schools, a finding consistent with other evidence and their focus was invariably on the schools’ improvement plans, the improvement of instruction and evidence that would help illuminate the challenges and progress being made with such improvement. Lack of progress was detected and acted on quickly.

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As this evidence suggests, approaches to district and school improvement which encourage communication between and among districts and their schools and which provide generous opportunities for networking are a powerful source of job-embedded, strategically directed professional learning. These approaches aim to accomplish the tasks for which staffs are held accountable and provide significant opportunities for staff to shape both the improvement efforts and the learning that accrues from such efforts. As a consequence, both the means and ends of district and school improvement processes stand a much-increased chance of reflecting the organization’s collective capacities.

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<sup>24</sup>Ikemoto (in press)

<sup>25</sup>Campbell and Fullan (2006) also found evidence of this approach among their 8 effective districts.

<sup>26</sup>See Honig (2012), and Honig et al (2010)

## 5. Job-embedded professional development for all members

Evidence used to develop the DEF indicated that strong districts:

- devote very little time to routine administrative matters in meetings of teachers and principals. Meeting time formerly used for such matters is now devoted almost entirely to professional development.
- most professional development is carefully aligned with board and school improvement initiatives.
- differentiated professional development opportunities are provided in response to the needs of individual schools, administrators and teachers.
- extensive opportunities are provided for both teachers and administrators to further develop their expertise.
- almost all schools provide time for collaborative work on instructional improvement initiatives. Schools are provided with the resources they need to provide this time and leaders are provided with training in how best to facilitate such work.
- all system-sponsored professional development is closely aligned with the best evidence about how people learn.

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Extensive professional development was provided for teachers and school leaders by strong districts in the Ontario and Alberta studies. This included a wide variety of opportunities, both in and out of school, but with the greatest proportion of PD resources devoted to school-embedded opportunities usually provided in the context of some form of “learning community”.

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Extensive professional development was provided for teachers and school leaders by strong districts in the Ontario and Alberta studies. This included a wide variety of opportunities, both in and out of school, but with the greatest proportion of PD resources devoted to school-embedded opportunities usually provided in the context of some form of “learning community”.

One of the strong Ontario districts, for example, had made two significant changes over about a five year period in its approach to professional development, changes in content and changes in delivery of PD. The change in content was from some combination of centrally-determined and/or preference-

based PD content to content aligned with the capacities needed to achieve district and school priorities. Identification of the capacities to be developed usually arose from examinations of evidence about what was working and not working, with PD initiatives aimed at remediating what was not working.

The PD delivery change was from the provision of PD, particularly for teachers, primarily in locations outside of schools, to a much larger proportion of PD being “job-embedded – undertaken in school or school-like contexts where newly acquired capacities had to be implemented if PD was to make much difference. All formally assigned PD days were school based, for example, and schools controlled most of the agenda for those days. Schools’ professional learning communities were frequently cited as key locations for teacher PD and school coordinators were expected to be important PD resources for each school.

All of the strong districts included in the Ontario and Alberta studies, as alluded to earlier in the paper, treated monthly meetings of principals as significant forms of job-embedded PD for those who attended. These meetings aimed not only to provide PD aligned with system and school priorities but also to further the improvement plans of schools and the system. Authentic engagement by participants in solving the district’s improvement problems was the mechanism for accomplishing both of these purposes. As well, the close partnership-like relationship that principals enjoyed with their superintendents in their school improvement efforts provided principals with an “at-the-elbow” form of coaching in the exercise of instructional leadership, a relationship cited as important in other studies, as well<sup>27</sup>.

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Strong districts approach professional development as a key function of their improvement efforts and craft forms of professional development for both teachers and administrators consistent with the best available evidence about effective professional development. The close monitoring of progress toward improvement goals by strong districts creates an indirect but powerful means of holding staff accountable for actually applying the capacities acquired through PD; this goes some distance toward solving arguably the thorniest challenge facing professional development – transferring learning into practice.

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<sup>27</sup>Honig (2012)



As this description makes clear, strong districts approach professional development as a key function of their improvement efforts and craft forms of professional development for both teachers and administrators consistent with the best available evidence about effective professional development. PD is an integral part of both school and system improvement problem-solving processes. The close monitoring of progress toward improvement goals by strong districts creates an indirect but powerful means of holding staff accountable for actually applying the capacities acquired through PD; this goes some distance toward solving arguably the thorniest challenge facing professional development – transferring learning into practice.

## **6. Budgets, structures, personnel policies and procedures, and uses of time aligned with the district’s mission, vision and goals**

Evidence used to develop the DEF indicated that strong districts have:

- systematic and ongoing process to continuously align their budgets with goals for students;
- explicit procedures for continuously aligning personnel policies and procedures with goals for students;
- systematic and ongoing processes to continuously align organizational structures with staffs’ instructional improvement work;
- adequate amounts of both the time and money to allocate for the professional development of both leaders and teachers.

Several recent reports and studies support and modestly expand the meaning of alignment beyond these four important sets of actions. One of the four strands of district conditions nurturing the capacities of principals in the Ikemoto report was “alignment among the goals, strategies, structures and resources of both district and schools”. Beginning with their strategic plans, strong districts set a small number of ambitious goals for students and used each goal to “develop aligned and specific school and department level goals”<sup>28</sup>, along with strategies for their achievement. These districts allocated resources to schools in support of their strategies for goal achievement and schools allocated those resources where they would have the greatest leverage.

This same report claimed that strong districts “enable principals to effectively manage talent at the school level”<sup>29</sup>. This means allowing principals the relatively rare autonomy to hire, evaluate, promote and reallocate staff best suited to achieving the goals and strategies included in their school improvement plans. Such autonomy seems likely to increase the alignment of staff capacities and dispositions with the school’s improvement challenges.

Allocation of resources within all the strong districts in the Ontario study was impressively aligned with the districts’ focus on improving instruction and student achievement. Almost all principals in those districts believed that their systems provided them with as much support as they requested. In almost all cases, principals’ requests for additional resources were not only approved but provided very quickly. These districts also aligned their personnel resources around their main priorities as, for example, the assignment of itinerant teachers to all schools to build instructional capacities in math and literacy.

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Finally, a recent review of intra-district resource allocation<sup>30</sup> research examined alignment from an equity perspective. While studies examined in this review were all conducted in U.S. districts, the results of the review shed light on issues faced by Ontario districts attempting to align their resources to help close gaps in student achievement. Equitable, in this context, means that disadvantaged students who typically underperform at school should have access to the benefits of greater-than-average educational resources. Strong districts use the alignment of resources to help close achievement gaps by ensuring that those students struggling the most have disproportionate access not only to financial supports but also high quality teachers, and successful peer models, all of which make a demonstrable contribution to student achievement.

District alignment, along the lines recommended here, demands the coordinated work of all members of the district’s senior leadership team including those responsible for finance,

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<sup>28</sup>Ikemoto (in press, page 14)

<sup>29</sup>Ikemoto (page 17)

<sup>30</sup>Houck, 2011.

personnel, operations and academic programs<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, the knowledge of those senior leaders responsible for finance is pivotal to the success of district alignment efforts.

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## 7. A comprehensive approach to leadership development

Recent research has pointed especially to the important contribution to student learning made by the development of effective school-level leadership.<sup>32</sup> This emphasis is justified on several closely related grounds: the relatively modest number of school leaders in a district makes them a more manageable focus for direct influence and support than the much larger number of teachers and other education professionals; school leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning<sup>33</sup>; school leader development is a “high-leverage” strategy since small numbers of school leaders can potentially influence large numbers of teachers and; school leaders are clearly part of district “management”, not typically unionized, with unambiguous responsibilities for achieving district goals.

Evidence on which the DEF was based indicated that strong districts:

- have well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting and appraising school-level leaders;
- implement procedures for transferring school-level leaders that does no harm and, whenever possible, adds value to improvement efforts underway in schools.
- ensure that the most skilled leaders in the system are placed where they are most needed.
- encourage school-level leaders, when useful, to supplement their own capacities with system-level expertise;
- expect school-level leaders to be knowledgeable about the quality of their teachers’ instruction, a central criterion for

- selecting school leaders and for their performance appraisal.
- have well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting, and appraising system-level leaders;
- keep both the community and the central office staff focused on learning and support principals and teachers in their efforts to improve instruction and ensure high levels of learning for all students. These districts assume responsibility for significantly improving instructional leadership in schools;
- expect the behavior of both district- and school-level leaders to reflect the leadership practices and personal leadership resources identified in the *Ontario Leadership Framework*, as well as such other practices considered critical for local board purposes;
- encourage coordinated forms of leadership distribution throughout the board and its schools.

Considerable support for such efforts to improve leadership at the school level is provided by two recent reports which draw on the findings of a large corpus of evidence, most of it developed with the support of the Wallace Foundation. These recent U.S. reports<sup>34</sup> conclude that strong districts have effective performance management systems for school leaders based on clear and explicit conceptions of effective school leadership practices, along the lines of the OLF. The performance management systems for school leaders in strong districts also reflect most of the qualities initially captured in the DEF; they create large pools of well-qualified potential school leaders and provided on-the-job support for them once they had been selected and appointed to school leadership positions.

The performance management systems of strong districts include effective pre-service and in-service training and the matching of leaders and schools based primarily on the needs or challenges faced by the schools. Strong districts typically assign their most skilled leaders to the schools most in need of improvement. Strong districts support their school leaders with well-developed and implemented performance appraisal procedures, provide them with mentoring, and encourage them to focus their efforts on instructional improvement.

Strong districts avoid excessive school leader turnover and plan for orderly leadership succession, in part, by encouraging the distribution of leadership for improvement efforts within

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<sup>31</sup>See Campbell & Fullan (2006)

<sup>32</sup>Coffin & Leithwood (2006), Leithwood, Strauss & Anderson (2007); Orr and Orphanus (2011)

<sup>33</sup>Leithwood et al (2004)

<sup>34</sup>Mitgang (2013) and Ikemoto (in press)

schools<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, encouraging the development of leadership teams in schools, with substantial responsibilities for data interpretation, school improvement planning, and other key functions, is widely advocated as a means of developing future leadership, fostering collective learning, reducing excessive demands on those in formal leadership roles and allowing for seamless leadership succession.

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Those directly supervising principals in strong districts, superintendents of schools, for example, develop partnerships with their principals toward the improvement of student outcomes and provided regular feedback to principals about how they might improve their practice. This information is used by districts, as well, to adjust professional learning opportunities for principals. Those responsible for supervising principals in strong districts have relevant, well-developed knowledge and skill, along with the time needed to select, develop and provide feedback to school leaders.

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Evidence from the Ontario and Alberta studies of strong districts<sup>36</sup> parallel most of the findings described in the two

U.S. reports. In addition to the importance attached to a comprehensive description of school leaders' capacities and dispositions, such as the OLF provides, these strong districts gave priority to sub-sets of those capacities and dispositions based on local circumstances at particular times as, for example:

- the ability to communicate the system's vision for students;
- the ability to help craft the directions for improvement work and a capacity for, and disposition toward, helping others with this work;
- the need to be an exemplary teacher able to model good instruction to others;
- the willingness to participate in inter-school collaboration;
- transparency in one's decision making (a norm embedded in the district's culture).

## 8. A policy-oriented board of trustees

Evidence from one of the only comprehensive reviews of research on trustees<sup>37</sup>, along with several recent original studies conducted in the U.S.<sup>38</sup> and Ontario, associate strong district performance with elected boards of trustees whose patterns of practice adhere closely to a "policy governance" model - a model now captured in Ontario's Bill 177. Growth in student achievement and well-being is encouraged when elected boards of trustees focus most of their attention on board policy and concern themselves with ensuring the district mission and vision drive the district's improvement efforts. More specifically, as the DEF indicated, the board of trustees contribute most to district goals when they:

- participate with its senior staff in assessing community values and interests and incorporate them into the school system's mission and vision for students;
- help create a climate which engages teachers, administrators, parents and the wider community in developing and supporting the vision;
- help create a climate of excellence that makes achieving the vision possible;
- use the district's beliefs and vision for student learning and well-being as the foundation for strategic planning and ongoing system evaluation;
- focus most policy making on the improvement of student learning and well-being consistent with the system's mission and vision;

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<sup>35</sup>Mascall & Leithwood (2010).

<sup>36</sup>Leithwood (2011); Bédard & Mombourquette (2013).

<sup>37</sup>Land (2002)

<sup>38</sup>Saatcioglu et al (2011) and Leithwood (2011)

- develop policies and support staff decisions aimed at providing rich curricula and engaging forms of instruction for all students and eliminating those that do not.
- contribute to the development of productive relationships with and among senior staff, school staffs, community stakeholders and provincial education officials;
- provide systematic orientation opportunities for new members and ongoing training for existing members;
- develop and sustain productive working relationships<sup>39</sup> among members of the elected board;
- respect the role of director and senior staff in their responsibilities for school system administration;
- hold the director accountable for improving teaching and learning in the school system;
- hold its individual members accountable for supporting decisions of the board, as a whole, once those decisions have been made.

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Growth in student achievement and well-being is encouraged when elected boards of trustees focus most of their attention on board policy and concern themselves with ensuring the district mission and vision drive the district's improvement efforts.

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## 9. Productive working relationships with staff and other stakeholders

The relationships that matter most and that are the focus of development in strong districts lie within the central office and between the central office and its schools, parents, local community groups and the Ministry of Education. Communication throughout the system and within schools is nurtured by structures which encourage collaborative work<sup>40</sup>. The school system encourages its schools to engage with parents in both the home and school and helps staffs become more skilled in parent engagement; schools are held accountable for developing productive working relationships with parents (Gordon & Louis, in press). Local community groups are routinely consulted and recognized for their contribution and support. The school system is in regular and two-way communication with the ministry and encourages ministry collaboration in achieving board goals and directions.

### *Internal District Relationships*

Evidence on which the DEF was based indicated that in strong districts:

- Central office roles are interconnected; work is undertaken collaboratively in the service of a widely shared set of purposes. Communication among staff is frequent and cordial.
- School staffs often participate in system decisions, are in frequent contact with central office staff for support and assistance. Central office staff is in schools frequently and know most school staff members by name.
- Networks and PLCs are well established at both school and system levels and have become the established way of solving problems and taking care of other business.

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District leaders in the Ontario study described relationships among themselves as “very strong” (or dense). All of these district leaders believed their relationships with principals were open and collaborative (or reciprocal); they aimed to be very accessible to principals and most principals agreed that they were. School leaders in these strong districts portrayed their relationships with district leaders as “phenomenal”, “very close”, “very good”, “excellent”, “great, and “very open”, for example. District leaders adopted a service orientation to their schools aiming to quickly provide whatever reasonable supports and resource requested by their schools. Principals described their relationship with their district colleagues as supportive, professional and collaborative.

These types of relationships are also associated with strong districts in another recent report<sup>41</sup>. Strong districts described in that report developed a “culture of joint responsibility” for goal achievement. Similar to the results reported in

<sup>39</sup>In particular, see Saatcioglu et al (2011) for evidence that the internal “bonding” of board members contributes much more to a district’s student achievement than efforts by the board to develop relationships with agencies and groups outside the board (“bridging”).

<sup>40</sup>See McLaughlin & Talbert (2003) for example.

<sup>41</sup>Ikemoto (in press, page 14)

the Ontario study, “Central office staff work in service of schools and are responsible for providing quality services and developing the capacities of school leaders to implement their improvement plans”. Schools reciprocate with their districts so communication flows freely between schools and districts, creating the essential conditions needed for organizational learning. Continuous learning in the interests of improving the success of all students becomes a foundational premise of the organization’s culture.

Another recent study provides quantitative evidence about the effects of these collaborative district cultures on student achievement; developed through networks and PLCs, such cultures have significant indirect effects on student learning mediated by their direct effects on the quality of classroom instruction, the “focused instruction” described in an earlier section of this paper<sup>42</sup>.

### ***Relationships with Local Community Groups***

In strong districts, community groups are routinely recognized for their contribution and support and are consulted on almost all decisions affecting the community. School and district staff is regularly members of these groups themselves. In the Ontario study, examples of these community groups included Children’s Aid, the police, the Catholic Women’s League, local service clubs, several different health agencies and children’s services.

Strong districts in the Ontario study often opened up their schools for community use through formal community agreements, the work of the board communication officers and the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC). Strong and vibrant community relations were the corner stone for many programs and initiatives, especially in francophone districts which depended on them for maintenance of the French language and culture.

These community connections are common in many districts no matter their strength. More unique to strong Ontario districts, however, was the sense of importance both district and school leaders attached to their relationship with these local community groups as part of their efforts to accomplish the district’s mission and vision. The label “community schools” was widely used in these strong Ontario districts in reference to their organizations. Access to schools by such community groups as scouts, ladies volleyball, square dancing

groups and the like was expected. There was much less social and psychological distance and more reciprocity between these districts, their schools and the communities they served than was the case in weaker districts. As with parent engagement, however, the Ontario study suggests that the school rather than the system may be the most productive locus for engaging external groups for most purposes.

### ***Relationships with Parents***

Evidence on which the DEF was based indicated that strong districts:

- Provide school staffs with helpful opportunities to acquire the capacities needed to productively engage parents in schools;
- Provide school staffs with helpful opportunities to acquire the capacities they need to assist parents in creating conditions in the home which support the success of their children at school;
- Have a formal policy on parent engagement and conduct periodic audits across schools about the extent to which that policy is being implemented. School staffs and parents are asked for evidence as part of these audits.

All school and district leaders on the Ontario study believed strongly in the importance of engaging parents in the education of their children. Leaders in all of these strong districts encouraged such engagement through their schools, as well as through district-wide initiatives directed toward parent engagement. For example, one Ontario district held parent workshops with a focus on character development in three sites around the district with a speaker at each event and established a parent engagement grant that schools could apply for to use on their own parent engagement efforts.

Whether or not district efforts such as these were successful in the short term, they did have a longer term influence on principals’ beliefs about the priority awarded to parent engagement by their district leaders and their high expectations for parent engagement initiatives by schools. These beliefs are crucial, for example, to the cultural and linguistic aims of Ontario’s francophone districts which are strongly encouraged, through provincial policy, to “expand and enrich the Francophone environment through solid partnerships among the school, the family and the community as a whole”<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup>Lee et al (2012)

<sup>43</sup>Ontario’s Aménagement linguistique Policy (2004)



Evidence about the relative value for student growth of different forms of parent engagement has rarely taken districts into account. A compelling source of advice for districts aiming to close achievement gaps, however, this evidence indicates that forms of parent engagement typically favored by schools make almost no contribution to student learning; these forms of engagement largely involve parents in the school in some role. In contrast, student learning is most influenced by the nature of parents' engagement with their children in the home<sup>44</sup>.

Considerable evidence suggests that family background accounts for a substantial proportion of variation in student achievement<sup>45</sup>. "Family background" is a multi-dimensional concept that includes some features which are largely unalterable in the short- to mid-term, such as family income and parental education. Other features associated with family background are malleable, however; together, these malleable features are often referred to as the family's "educational culture". The educational culture of the family consists, for example, of parental expectations for children's work at school, direct instructional support for school learning (e.g., parents reading with their children at home), active parent interest in the school's curriculum, and the monitoring of children's engagement with their schoolwork<sup>46</sup>. It is these features of a child's family environment that directly provide or fail to provide children with much of the social and intellectual capital they need to be successful at school.

A family's educational culture is often strongly associated with parental income, education and other relatively hard-to-change family features. While some families with low incomes and only modest parental education have managed to develop very strong educational cultures in their homes, this is difficult to do and is clearly the exception without some kind of help from others. School staffs, research now demonstrates<sup>47</sup>, are capable of being the "others" who assist those parents to build stronger educational cultures in their homes<sup>48</sup>. Indeed, initiatives by school staffs aimed at helping those families struggling to build productive educational cultures in their homes is one of the most promising strategies for closing achievement gaps evident between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Strong districts should encourage their schools to focus much more directly on helping improve the educational culture of the homes of those students who are disadvantaged by their existing home cultures.

### ***Relationships with the Ministry of Education***

Very little empirical evidence is available about this set of relationships. Summing up the results of that evidence, the DEF indicated that strong districts:

- communicate regularly with the Ministry, both formally and informally, about board goals and directions;
- clarify with the Ministry of Education how it can be of most help to the board;
- encourage Ministry collaboration in achieving board goals and directions;
- provide feedback to the Ministry about the relevance of its initiatives to board goals and directions.

Significantly shaped by provincial policies and structures, relationship between Ontario districts and the Ministry of Education are unique to the province, in many respects, and common across all districts in province. Evidence from both the Ontario and Alberta studies demonstrated, nevertheless, significant variation in the value districts attached to their relationship with the Ministry, ranging from very helpful to more problematic.

Ministry relationships added value to the work of strong districts when they: clarified and usefully limited the goals to be pursued by districts; yielded additional financial resources that could be used to support district priorities; supplemented the capacities needed by district staffs to achieve the district goals; and provided useful "outsider" perspectives and feedback on the districts' improvement work. Strong districts worked proactively to nurture relationships with the Ministry that result in such value-added consequences.

Relationships with the Ministry detracted from the improvement efforts of strong districts when they made it more difficult to keep the focus of improvement efforts on key district priorities by exerting pressure on the district to adopt excessive numbers of new initiatives or initiatives unrelated to the district priorities. Strong districts find ways of deflecting much of this pressure but not without squandering time and energy that would better be spent moving the district forward.

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<sup>44</sup>See, for example, Jeynes (2005) for a review of this evidence.

<sup>45</sup>Coleman et al (1990)

<sup>46</sup>Hattie (2010)

<sup>47</sup>Bolivar, J., Chrispeels, J. (2011)

<sup>48</sup>See, for example, Leithwood (2006)

### 3. Strong District Leadership Practices

Significantly improving student achievement and well-being is the “bottom line” criterion for anointing a district as “strong”. Strong district leaders, then, are those who are able to build and sustain characteristics or conditions in their organizations which enable other organizational members to achieve the bottom line, those nine characteristics outlined in section 2 above. This section of the paper summarizes leadership practices useful for developing the nine critical characteristics of strong districts.

Before turning to those leadership practices, however, it is important to acknowledge the much broader array of tasks for which district leaders are responsible. While the nine district characteristics described in the previous section and the leadership practices outlined in this section are critical for purposes of improving student learning and well being, they are by no means “all there is”. For example, the average district in Ontario serves about 30,000 students, employs about 1800 professional staff members and has a budget of about \$235 million. By almost any standard, this is a huge organization and the operational issues facing district leaders are both complex and extensive; as well, they are very poorly understood by most stakeholders not actually responsible for managing the day-to-day challenges they present. But unless these operational issues are managed both effectively and efficiently there will be little time and few resources for building those district characteristics that add value to the learning and well-being of students.

The current version of the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (OLF) includes two sets of leadership practices. One set, referred to as “core” practices because they are an important part of the repertoire of successful leaders no matter their formal positions, include specific behaviors or actions aimed at:

- Setting Directions;
- Building Relationships and Developing People;
- Developing the Organization to Support Desired Practices;
- Improving the Instructional Program; and
- Securing Accountability.

The specific behaviors or actions included in three of these categories or dimensions are productive across many different organizational levels, contexts and sectors. Practices included in the category *Improving the Instructional Program* are, of

course, unique to educational organizations. Behaviors and actions associated with *Securing Accountability* reflect the accountable policy contexts in which most educational leaders now work.

The OLF provides an extensive description of the five dimensions of leadership practices, so no further elaboration is provided here. It is important to acknowledge, however, that how district-level leaders enact those practices will often be quite different than how they are enacted by school-level leaders because of qualitative differences in district and school leaders’ organizational contexts; for example, trustees’ motives, preferences and interpersonal styles of communicating figure prominently in the working lives of district leaders (especially directors of education) but are much farther removed from the work of school-level leaders.

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This paper extends and refines district leadership practices described in the OLF to better reflect what it takes to develop and sustain those features of strong districts and their leadership.

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A second set of practices described in the OLF is intended as a source of guidance to directors and superintendents, in particular. Some of these practices are district-level enactments of OLF’s core practices, while others go beyond the core. In both cases the aim is to describe the unique practices associated with strong district leadership. This section of the paper extends and refines district leadership practices described in the OLF to better reflect what it takes to develop and sustain those features of strong districts described in section 2 (above).

Table 1 is the result of synthesizing evidence about effective district leadership practices from multiple sources using a framework which maps backward from the nine characteristics of “strong” districts described earlier in the paper. Evidence used to identify the practices outlined in Table 1 privileges the results of the Ontario and Alberta studies; almost all other relevant district leadership research has been conducted in U.S. contexts. Results of these two studies were supplemented with four additional sources of evidence<sup>49</sup>:

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<sup>49</sup>This description is taken directly from the OLF.

- a meta-analysis of empirical research about successful system-level leadership, the only meta-analysis available<sup>50</sup>;
- a small handful of single, original studies of such leadership published after the meta-analysis;
- a recent study sponsored by the *Council of Ontario Directors of Education* (CODE) of the roles of Superintendents and Directors of Education<sup>51</sup>;
- system-level leadership standards developed by three Canadian provinces<sup>52</sup>, three Ontario school systems<sup>53</sup>, three U.S. national associations<sup>54</sup>, and four U.S. state departments of education<sup>55</sup>.

Leadership standards are an unusual source of “evidence” but have been included as a source in this paper because of the relatively modest amount of empirical research published about successful district leadership. Standards developers typically aim to reflect the results of whatever research is available to them, combining it with professional experience in a form easily accessible to their audiences. Such standards rarely conflict with, but sometimes extend beyond, the results of existing research.

**Table 1**  
**Practices of Strong District Leaders**

Dimensions	Specific Practices
1. Establish broadly shared mission, vision & goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensures that a transparent visioning/direction-setting process is carried out</li> <li>• Consults extensively about district directions as part of the process</li> <li>• Spends sufficient time to ensure that the mission, vision and goals (directions) of the system are widely known, understood and shared by all members of their organizations</li> <li>• Articulates, demonstrates and models the system’s goals, priorities, and values to staffs when visiting schools</li> <li>• Embeds district directions in improvement plans, principal meetings and other leader-initiated interactions</li> </ul>
2. Provide coherent instructional guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopts a service orientation toward schools</li> <li>• Align curricular goals, assessment instruments, instructional practices and teaching resources</li> <li>• Insists on ambitious goals for teaching and learning</li> <li>• Advocates for attention to the best available evidence to inform instructional improvement decisions</li> <li>• Expects schools to focus on needs of individual as well as groups of students</li> <li>• Encourages staff to be innovative within the boundaries created by the district’s instructional guidance system</li> </ul>
3. Build district and school staff’s capacities and commitments to seek out and use multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses data from all available sources to assist decision making in the central office</li> <li>• Insists on the use of the best available research and other systematically collected evidence to inform decisions wherever possible</li> <li>• Encourages collaboration in the interpretation and uses of data</li> <li>• Builds system’s capacity and disposition for using systematically-collected data to inform as many decisions as possible.</li> <li>• Provides training for principals and staff on the use of data and research literature to sustain decision-making;</li> <li>• Models evidence-informed decision making to school staffs</li> <li>• Grounds interactions with, and advice to, trustees in sound evidence</li> </ul>

<sup>50</sup>Waters & Marzano (2006)

<sup>51</sup>*Reach Every Student* (February 25, 2008), Final report for the Ontario Ministry of Education prepared by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education.

<sup>52</sup>British Columbia, Alberta (2 sets), and Saskatchewan

<sup>53</sup>Peel District School Board, Toronto District School Board, and Trillium Lakelands District School Board

<sup>54</sup>American Association of School Administrators, National Policy Board for Educational Administration, National Council of Professors of Educational Administration

<sup>55</sup>North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas.



Dimensions	Specific Practices
4. Create learning-oriented organizational improvement processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires improvement processes to be evidence-informed</li> <li>• Sets a manageable number of precise targets for district school improvement</li> <li>• Includes school-level leaders in decisions about district-wide improvement decisions</li> <li>• Creates structures and norms within the district to encourage regular, reciprocal and extended deliberations about improvement progress within and across schools, as well as across the system as a whole.</li> <li>• Develops and implements board and school improvement plans interactively and collaboratively with school leaders;</li> <li>• Creates structures to facilitate regular monitoring and refining of improvement processes</li> <li>• Acknowledges Provincial goals and priorities in district and school improvement initiatives</li> <li>• Allows for school-level variation in school improvement efforts</li> </ul>
5. Provide job-embedded professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides extensive PD opportunities for both teachers and school-level leaders, most of it through some form of learning community or on-the-job context.</li> <li>• Uses internal system networks as central mechanism for the professional development of school-level leaders.</li> <li>• Aligns the content of professional development with the capacities needed for district and school improvement</li> <li>• Requires individual staff growth plans to be aligned with district and school improvement priorities</li> <li>• Holds staff accountable for applying new capacities by monitoring the implementation of school improvement plans</li> </ul>
6. Align budgets, personnel policies/ procedures and uses of time with district mission, vision and goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligns the allocation of resources with district and school improvement goals</li> <li>• Aligns personnel policies and procedures with the district's improvement goals</li> <li>• Aligns organizational structures with the district's improvement goals</li> <li>• Provides principals with considerable autonomy in the hiring of teaching staff</li> <li>• Expects and assists schools to allocate instructional resources equitably</li> </ul>
7. Use a comprehensive performance management system for school and district leadership development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses the best available evidence about successful leadership (e.g. OLF) as a key source of criteria used for recruiting, selecting, developing and appraising school and district leaders;</li> <li>• Matches the capacities of leaders with the needs of schools</li> <li>• Provides prospective and existing leaders with extended opportunities to further develop their leadership capacities</li> <li>• Develops realistic plans for leadership succession</li> <li>• Promotes coordinated forms of leadership distribution in schools</li> </ul>
8. Advocate for and support a policy-governance approach to board of trustee practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages trustees to focus on district policy and the achievement of the district's goals and priorities (policy governance model of trustee practice)</li> <li>• Encourages participation of the elected board in setting broad goals for its use in fulfilling its policy-setting and policy-monitoring responsibilities.</li> <li>• Regularly reports to the board progress in achieving these broad goals;</li> </ul>
9. Nurture productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders	
<i>Internal district and school staffs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops communication systems and processes throughout the district to keep all members informed</li> <li>• Develops open, accessible and collaborative relationships with principals</li> <li>• Encourages reciprocal forms of communication with and among schools</li> <li>• Promotes high levels of interaction among school leaders. These interactions should include all school leaders and be driven by a shared sense of responsibility among school leaders for system improvement;</li> <li>• Creates structures to facilitate reciprocal forms of communication. These structures and norms should result in deeply interconnected networks of school and system leaders working together on achieving the system's directions.</li> <li>• Buffers schools from external distractions to the district's and schools' priorities and goals.</li> </ul>

Dimensions	Specific Practices
<i>Local community groups</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Routinely consults with community groups on decisions affecting the community</li> <li>• Encourages staff to participate directly in community groups</li> <li>• Demonstrates the importance the district attaches to its community connections</li> </ul>
<i>Parents</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holds schools accountable for developing productive working relationships with parents</li> <li>• Influences the work of schools toward fostering improved educational cultures in the home environments of their students</li> </ul>
<i>Ministry of Education</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops/maintains high levels of engagement with provincial department/ministry of education</li> <li>• Engagement with department/ministry is frequently proactive rather than only responsive</li> <li>• Makes flexible, adaptive use of provincial initiatives and frameworks, ensuring that they contribute to, rather than detract from, accomplishing system goals and priorities.</li> </ul>

Results of several recent studies provide additional clarity about the nature of several of the practices identified in Table 1. One recent study carried out in three U.S. districts inquired about the practices used by district leaders to help strengthen principals’ instructional leadership. These districts had moved away from “occasional professional development for principals to prioritizing ongoing, intensive, job-embedded support to school principals”<sup>56</sup>. The position of area superintendent in two of the districts had been rewritten “to focus on working with small groups of principals individually and in networks to develop their capacity for instructional leadership” (page 734). Results of this qualitative study indicated that the most effective of these district leaders engaged in five sets of practices for improving the instructional leadership of principals: they focused their efforts on working jointly with the principals in the principals’ own school context; they modeled what it meant to be an effective instructional leader (by demonstrating their own knowledge of good instruction, for example); they provided school leaders with “tools” (e.g., assessment tools, classroom observation tools) to further their instructional leadership; they also helped school leaders network with others from whom they might learn, and they remained engaged with their principals over extended periods of time.

Results of the Ontario and Alberta studies indicated that strong district leaders need to be adaptable and flexible, maintain multiple priorities at the same time and able to

collaborate productively with others. These leaders also benefit from broad experience, refined relationship skills, and the ability to add value to the conversations and decisions of the senior district leadership teams of which they are a part. Commitment to “Catholicity” is a very important quality for all leaders and prospective leaders in Catholic school systems; preservation of the French language and culture is an added priority for district leaders in francophone districts.

Strong district leaders kept both the community and the central office staff focused on learning and they supported principals and teachers in their efforts to improve instruction and stimulate high levels of learning among all students. These district leaders assumed responsibility for significantly improving instructional leadership in schools.

Research framed by sense making concepts indicates that the prior beliefs and knowledge of district leaders, along with the contexts in which they work, significantly influence the understandings they construct of the instructional and curriculum policy innovations proposed to them from external sources such as the Ministry of Education. For example, district leaders deeply knowledgeable about the theories and evidence underlying those policy innovations are likely to make quite different decisions about what is to be implemented in their schools and how support should be provided to those doing the implementing than those with more superficial knowledge about these matters.

<sup>56</sup> Honig (2012, p. 734)

## 4. Two Especially Useful Personal Leadership Resources

Early research about what the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (OLF) refers to as “personal leadership resources”<sup>57</sup> estimates that as much as half of the variance in organizational members’ attributions of leadership is accounted for by these resources, as distinct from overt leadership practices, for example<sup>58</sup>. More recent evidence also points to the greater salience of general traits (e.g., psychological resources) in organizational members’ perceptions of “distant” (e.g., directors and superintendents) as compared with “close” (e.g., principals, vice principals, lead teachers) leaders. Perceptions of “close” leaders, this evidence argues, are rooted in peoples’ direct experiences of their behaviors and practices. In the absence of such close contact, perceptions of distant leaders mostly rely on less behaviorally rooted qualities<sup>59</sup> or traits such as optimism, openness, integrity and the like.

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Evidence suggests that personal leadership resources are increasingly important for leadership success as the contexts in which leadership is exercised become, as with districts, more complex and varied.

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The especially large impact of these more trait-like qualities on the attitudes organizational members hold about their “distant” leaders is quite important because such attitudes predict the extent of influence that district leaders are likely to be awarded by those on whom they depend to achieve district goals. Evidence suggests, as well, that personal leadership resources are increasingly important for leadership success as the contexts in which leadership is exercised become, as with districts, more complex and varied<sup>60</sup>.

The *Ontario Leadership Framework* includes three types of personal leadership resources:

- **cognitive resources:** domain-specific knowledge, problem-solving expertise;
- **social resources:** perceiving emotions, managing emotions and acting in emotionally appropriate ways;
- **psychological resources:** optimism, efficacy and resilience.

These resources underlie effective leadership practice at both the school and district levels although revisions (not undertaken in this paper) to the current description of several of these resources as, for example, domain specific knowledge, are likely needed to fully reflect the district leadership context.

Assertions about qualitative differences in what is required from top or distant- as compared with lower-level or close leaders are usually justified with reference to the consequences for leadership of larger organizational size, increased operational complexity, greater interaction with the wider environment in which the organization finds itself, and the need to anticipate future demands that might require significant organizational adaptation<sup>61</sup>. At least two personal leadership resources are especially productive in such contexts; one is a psychological resource (proactivity), the other a cognitive resource (systems thinking).

### Proactivity

Proactivity is a motivational state predisposing one toward initiating “future-oriented action to change and improve the situation”<sup>62</sup>.

*People who are proactive effect environmental change; they identify opportunities and act on them, show initiative, and persevere until they bring about meaningful change. They transform their organization’s mission, find and solve problems, and take it upon themselves to have an impact on the world around them. Less proactive people show little initiative, tending to passively adapt to their circumstances rather than change them<sup>63</sup>.*

Evidence about the effects of proactivity, especially on the part of senior leaders, demonstrates its contribution to the likelihood of being perceived as a leader, especially a charismatic leader, as well to the achievement of organizational goals<sup>64</sup>. While typically considered a “psychological trait”, its manifestation in overt behavior is at least partially under the conscious control of those providing exemplary leadership,

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<sup>57</sup> This research encompassed a wider array of such resources than included in the OLF.

<sup>58</sup> See Kenny & Zaccaro (1983).

<sup>59</sup> Popper (2013)

<sup>60</sup> Zaccaro et al, (2004).

<sup>61</sup> For example, see Hooijberg & Schneider (2001) and Howard (2001)

<sup>62</sup> Parker, Williams & Turner, (2006, p.636).

<sup>63</sup> Crant & Bateman (2000, page 65)

<sup>64</sup> Crant & Bateman (2000); Deluga (1998).

depending on their other dispositions and the contexts in which they work. Some evidence suggests that proactivity is stimulated or supported by several other “personal leadership resources” included in the OLF - psychological resources including self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience and cognitive resources including expert problem solving and domain-specific knowledge<sup>65</sup>.

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While proactivity is a valuable trait for all leaders to possess, its contributions to leader effectiveness increase as leaders’ discretion and autonomy increases. Justification for highlighting “proactivity” as a personal leadership resource for district-level leaders also rests on the need for those leaders to both stimulate and effectively manage change on a large scale under complex circumstances.

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Proactivity may assume the form of more or less assertive overt behaviors. While considerable evidence associates leaders’ proactivity with relatively assertive and dominant behavior in groups<sup>66</sup>, proactivity is also evident in quieter, less overtly assertive but still persistent, approaches to leadership; both manifestations of proactivity include the clearly positive tendencies toward friendliness, warmth, gregariousness and enjoyment of social interaction. So the form that proactivity takes (more or less assertive leadership behaviors) should be viewed as “contingent”. For example, assertive forms of proactive leadership are productive when those working with leaders are passive. When those working with leaders are themselves proactive, however, less assertive forms of proactivity seem to be most productive<sup>67</sup>. Assertive forms of leadership also seem to be most productive when there is little social support for those providing leadership, as is often the case in organizational turnaround contexts, for example. But less assertive forms of leader proactivity can be productive in more socially supportive contexts<sup>68</sup>.

While proactivity is a valuable trait for all leaders to possess, its contributions to leader effectiveness increase as leaders’ discretion and autonomy increases. Justification for highlighting “proactivity” as a personal leadership resource for district-level leaders also rests on the need for those leaders to both stimulate and effectively manage change on a large scale under complex

circumstances. Directors and superintendents in Ontario are accountable for continuously improving student achievement and well-being across the many schools in their organizations, along with a very small number of other goals related to graduation rates and public engagement, as well as unique goals and priorities established for and by their own districts.

The dynamic nature of this demand for improvement requires periodic realignment of districts’ fiscal, physical and personnel resources to be accomplished. While the broad goals for which Ontario districts are accountable are not likely to be much contested within district organizations, the realignment of resources to achieve those goals will often be highly contested. Some district members and stakeholders often will consider themselves to be either winners or losers as a result of resource realignment - as every district leader who has tried to close a school knows too well. Moving the organization forward in the face of resulting frictions and conflicts requires not only strong motivation to change but also the ability to make the case for realignment not just convincingly, but in a manner that does not alienate those who may consider themselves losers in the struggle for resources. The absence of a proactive motivational state on the part of district leaders allows the predictable torrent of everyday organizational maintenance problems to overwhelm their time, attention and energies.

## Systems Thinking

A cognitive resource, the term “systems thinking” was used by Peter Senge (1990) in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, a widely popular text in the management and organizational change fields during the 90s. Senge used the term systems thinking to argue that organizational leaders should understand and take account of the many, often dense, complex, and reciprocal connections among different elements of their organizations. Changing one organizational element typically has consequences for many others. These consequences may be positive or negative. So the threefold challenge for leaders engaged in improvement efforts is to:

- determine which other elements of their organizations are likely to be impacted by changes to the elements they select for planned intervention;
- using prior experience and relevant research from other contexts, anticipate what will be the most probable nature of that impact (positive or negative, for example);

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<sup>65</sup> Parker, Bindl & Strauss (2010); Fay & Frese (2001)

<sup>66</sup> Judge, Bono, Ilies & Gerhardt (2002)

<sup>67</sup> Grant, Gino & Hofman (2011).

<sup>68</sup> Bauer, Erdogan, Liden and Wayne (2006)

- as part of their planned interventions, at minimum develop means for improving undesirable impacts on those elements not selected for planned intervention; optimally, craft changes across most elements of the organization so that they are positively aligned with, support and add leverage to the changes made through the planned intervention.

This account of systems thinking, however, addresses just one of the two dimensions associated with the conception of systems thinking in this paper. Elliot Jacques' (1997) emphasis on the temporal aspects of executive leadership suggests that as leaders assume positions at "higher levels" or with greater responsibilities in their organizations, it becomes necessary for them to anticipate, plan and imagine over increasingly extended time horizons. The strategic plans and board improvement plans framing the work of many district leaders, for example, typically extend over three to five year periods, although much longer time horizons are associated with executive leadership in some other sectors<sup>69</sup>. The leadership capacity required to enact this dimension of systems thinking, referred to in some of the executive leadership literature as "foresight"<sup>70</sup>, also includes the ability to engage the entire organization in understanding likely futures and their consequences for organizational action.

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While direct empirical justification for the importance of district leaders' systems thinking is limited, justification of two other sorts is quite strong. One source of justification is simply deductive logic, primarily what has been used by organizational theorists<sup>71</sup> who claim that there are qualitative differences in the work of top- as compared with lower-level leaders. The larger the sizes of the organization the more "elements" (including people) interact in accounting for its outcomes, for example. School districts are obviously larger than the schools within them.

The second source of justification for highlighting systems thinking among the personal leadership resources of district leaders comes from the policy evaluation literature, - in

particular, what has been learned about the consequences of not engaging in systems thinking. Often referred to as "collateral damage", the policy evaluation literature is saturated with evidence about the unanticipated negative consequences of implementing well-meaning policies without anticipating how those policies are likely to interact over time with elements of the organization not directly associated with the policy, for example:

- Testing policies designed to improve achievement results have sometimes produced a dramatic narrowing of the taught curriculum;
- Establishing a priority for improving reading achievement sometimes has led to reduced performance in mathematics;
- Stipulating a performance standard (e.g., Level 3 on the EQAO tests as a performance standard) sometimes prompts disproportionate attention and resources to students just below the standard and the subsequent neglect of students with lower and higher performance;
- Introducing extrinsic rewards for students who perform better at school sometimes results in the loss of their intrinsic motivation to learn - shifting from a mastery to a performance orientation toward learning.

The key word in this brief litany of unanticipated consequences is "sometimes". Each one of these change efforts has been implemented without those negative consequences by leaders who have strong systems thinking capacities.

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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.

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Of course, members of the district leadership team acting together potentially have much greater systems thinking capacity than do any one of its members acting alone; for example, the allocation of financial resources is a key part of any district-wide improvement plan, so academic and business members of the senior team need to work closely together to address appropriate allocation of those resources. Improving the systems thinking capacity of district leaders is a function of improving both individual and collective capacity.

<sup>69</sup> See Hooijberg & Schneider (2001) for example.

<sup>70</sup> This aspect of systems thinking is closely related to "proactivity" as well.

<sup>71</sup> Examples include Hamel & Prahalad (1994) and Selznick (1957).



## 5. A Vision of Future District Leadership

To this point the paper has summarized evidence about best practices in the past, although many districts and their leaders not yet reflecting this evidence would increase the odds of becoming more effective by engaging with more of those practices in their future work.

What does the future hold for our expectations of strong district leadership? One promising potential answer to this question extends the work of district leaders considerably beyond what has been described to this point. This answer argues for an expansion of district purposes to include not only the learning and well-being of all students within their boundaries, but also a shared responsibility, with other districts and the provincial government, for the learning and well-being of students in the province, as a whole.

This conception of strong future districts means that consultation with districts by the provincial government around proposed government initiatives, as is often carried out now, counts as an unacceptably weak version of shared responsibility. Such approaches to consultation place districts, and their professional associations in a continuously reactive role. Combined with initiative overload from the government, this continuously reactive stance makes it extraordinarily difficult to benefit from the potential insights districts and their leaders are able to provide under different, less hurried circumstances. Furthermore, these reactive forms of consultation ensure the focus of provincial initiatives will almost always be determined by the centre. Strong districts and their leaders in the future would behave much more proactively in respect to provincial policy than this reactive position allows.

Greater local district control over the wider policy agenda also has been advocated on the grounds that large-scale reform strategies must change over time if progress is to be sustained<sup>72</sup>. Central control strategies, for example, are useful to initiate change but as progress is made on a large scale, future improvements increasingly depend on responding productively to differentiated challenges in districts and schools. Sustaining progress (“moving from good to great”, for example) depends on a devolution of authority from the centre.

It is probable that such a future role for strong districts and their leaders would result not only in different and better implemented policy, but also significantly fewer provincial policy initiatives, something much to be valued in the current context of “initiative overload”. When those responsible for policy development are not also responsible for policy implementation, the chances of initiative overload are guaranteed to be very high<sup>73</sup>. District leaders with dual responsibilities for both local and provincial policy development as well as policy implementation are likely to be more cautious about proposing new initiatives since the rewards for initiative overload are mostly negative for them and the challenges of policy implementation are theirs and only theirs to solve.

Realizing this vision for strong districts in the future would depend on more than the province’s willingness to carve out a mediating role for districts in a top-down process of policy development and implementation, something that has largely been accomplished; it would depend on:

- the ability and willingness of provincial governments to cede considerably more authority to districts and their leaders for the initial formation of province-wide policy and the shaping of how such policy is implemented;
- the willingness of district leaders, especially directors of education, to devote a significant minority of their energies to provincial policy formation and implementation ; and
- the ability of those district leaders to add value to provincial policy development and implementation, in part by responding productively to variations across districts in their local community contexts, staff capacities, student needs and the like.
- explicitly acknowledging the substantial influence that district leaders’ knowledge, beliefs and values have on shaping the nature of government policy as it is implemented in schools<sup>74</sup> ;
- strengthening the capacities of staff and stakeholders in both schools and district central offices<sup>75</sup>.
- This vision of the strong district of the future and the leadership it would require has important implications for the preparation, selection and assessment of future district leaders taken up in section 5 below.

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<sup>72</sup> This argument is more fully developed by Barber (2010).

<sup>73</sup> See Hale & Hollingworth (in press) for a vivid account of one state’s efforts to introduce a top down professional development initiative in all schools in the state and how “policy churn” at the state level blunted most implementation efforts in districts and schools.

<sup>74</sup> A vivid illustration of how district leaders’ “sensemaking” determines what happens to a government initiative to change reading instruction in schools can be found in Spillane (1998).

<sup>75</sup> Honig and her colleagues (2010) refer to this move as “district central office transformation for teaching and learning improvement” (p. 21)

## 6. The Contribution of Strong Districts and Their Leaders to Student Achievement

While quite consistent in its results, the amount of direct evidence about the contribution of strong districts to student learning is still modest. In this section we summarize several different sources of such evidence: evidence from “outlier” studies; results of the Ontario study; and evidence from one large, longitudinal U.S. study carried out by a research team from the universities of Toronto (OISE) and Minnesota. Evidence from one other study is also summarized.

### Outlier Studies

The majority of research about the nature and effects of strong districts has been based on case studies of one or several districts. Districts in which students are achieving significantly beyond expectation are identified using student test data and then researchers employ qualitative methods to unpack features of those districts most likely to have accounted for their success.

Recent reviews suggest that this corpus of evidence likely extends to about 35 studies and growing (Rorrer et al, 2008; Leithwood, 2010; College of Alberta School Superintendents, 2008). This evidence provides strong support for claims about the significant contribution to student learning that districts are able to make when they reflect the portrait of strong districts sketched out in the earlier section of this paper.

This evidence is difficult to quantify more precisely, however; it does not indicate how much of the variation in student achievement is accounted for by district level characteristics, for example, nor does it allow for estimating the relative contribution to student achievement of different district characteristics.

The main value of outlier studies, beyond the identification of critical characteristics, is the provision of “existence proof”. This evidence demonstrates that districts can make unique and significant contributions to the achievement of their students under conditions also described by this same research.

### The Ontario Study

One of the largest sets of quantitative evidence available about district effects on student achievement was provided by the same Ontario study that substantially shaped the description of strong district characteristics reported in section 2 of this paper. Using principal and district leader survey data combined with EQAO results, this study assessed the contribution of an earlier version of each of the nine characteristics of strong districts to changes in math and language achievement over five years, aggregated across grades 3, 6, 9 and 10, as well as to mean district achievement in math and language in 2010 - a total of four achievement measures. Forty-nine of the province’s 72 districts contributed useable evidence for the quantitative portion of this study.

**Overall results.** This study first assessed the effects of eight of the nine strong district characteristics on achievement. Effects of the ninth characteristic, Leadership Development, were assessed on the other eight characteristics based on assumptions about the indirect effects of leadership on student learning. An “effect size” (ES) statistic was used to report these results<sup>76</sup>.

Findings from this study were as follows:

- *Mission, vision and goals for students* had significant effects on four achievement measures, effect sizes ranging from .27 to .40;
- *Coherent Instructional guidance* had significant effects on three achievement measures, effect sizes ranging from .32 to .40;
- *Evidence Use* had significant effects on all four achievement measures, effect sizes ranging from .34 to .40;
- *Alignment* had significant effects on all measures of achievement except change in math, effect sizes ranging from .32 and .35;
- *Professional Development* had significant effects on the two language scores but neither of the math scores, effect sizes ranging from .29 to .30;

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<sup>76</sup> In the case of these results, effect sizes were calculated from correlations. So although the term “effect” is used, it is an association or relationship that is being reported.

- *Organizational Improvement Processes* made no significant contribution to either annual or change achievement scores;
- *Internal district and school relationships* had significant effects on both grade 9 academic math achievement and grade 10 literacy;
- *Local community relationships* were significantly related to the annual measure of grade 9 Academic and Applied Math achievement;
- *Relationships between parents and the school* had a significant effect on three of the four achievement measures, moderate effect sizes ranging from .26 to .29;
- *Relationship with the Ministry of Education* did not demonstrate significant effects.

Evidence from the study, as a whole, also confirmed the significant indirect effects of leadership development on the eight other district characteristics. For example:

- District leadership effects were especially large in relation to *organizational improvement processes (.65)*, *beliefs and*

*vision for students (.50)*, *alignment (.44)* and *relationships with the Ministry of Education (.58)*.

- Board of trustee leadership effects, while generally weaker than the leadership of district administrators, were relatively strong in relation to *beliefs and vision for students (.63)* and *organization improvement processes (.54)*.

**Case study quantitative results.** Three school districts in the province were selected for case study based on their exceptional gains in aggregate EQAO results over five years. While the main evidence collected in these three districts was qualitative, results of the survey data collected from all forty-nine districts were also available. Table 2 summarizes mean ratings of the nine characteristics of strong districts for the province as a whole (the 49 participating districts) and the three case study districts. As well, the table reports total increases in the percentage of students achieving level 3 or above across all EQAO tests (see above) over five years for the province and for each of the three districts.

**Table 2**  
**The Association between Strong District Characteristics and Student Achievement in Three High Performing Ontario Districts**

Nine Characteristics of Strong Districts	Province	NP	TL	CECC
Curriculum and Instruction	3.18	3.56	3.37	3.23
Beliefs Vision & Goals for Students	3.27	3.89	3.28	3.55
Uses of Evidence	3.04	3.17	3.08	3.28
Organizational Improvement Processes	2.89	3.13	3.25	2.63
Professional Development	2.83	3.11	2.96	3.10
Alignment	3.19	3.77	3.38	3.39
Professional System-level Leadership	3.14	3.61	3.22	3.10
Policy-oriented board of trustees	2.88	4.00	3.50	3.71
Relationships	2.95	3.23	2.94	2.85
<b>Average Rating of District Characteristics</b>	<b>3.04</b>	<b>3.50</b>	<b>3.22</b>	<b>3.20</b>
<b>Total Achievement Gains Five Years</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>92</b>

A comparison of province-wide and case study district results, using the evidence in Table 2, can be summed up as follows:

- *Province vs. NP (a small Catholic school district):* a difference of .46 in the ratings of strong district characteristics is associated with a difference of 59% of students achieving at level 3 or above on EQAO tests over five years.
- *Province vs. TL (a medium-sized public school district):* a difference of .18 in the ratings of strong district characteristics is associated with a difference of 25% of

students achieving at level 3 or above on EQAO tests over five years.

- *Provinces vs. CECC (a medium-sized francophone district):* a difference of .16 in the ratings of strong district characteristics is associated with a difference of 42% of students achieving at level 3 or above on EQAO tests over five years.
- *Averaging all three comparisons:* a difference of .26 in the ratings of strong district characteristics is associated with a difference of 42% of students achieving level 3 or above on EQAO tests over five years.



Keeping in mind the well-known limitations of associations or correlations as evidence of causation, this evidence indicates that relatively small improvements in the status of strong district characteristics is associated with substantial increases in student achievement.

### **The University of Toronto/University of Minnesota Study<sup>77</sup>**

At the time it was carried out (2004 to 2009) by a team of researchers from two universities, this was the largest study of educational leadership that had ever been conducted. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from teachers, school and district leaders, and community stakeholders in a representative sample of nine U.S. states, 45 districts and 122 schools. State test results were used to estimate student achievement results at the school and district levels in both English and Math.

Results of specific analyses conducted about district effects using this large data set indicated that:

- Well-developed networks created by districts to encourage collaborative professional learning and mediated by both focused instruction and teacher professional community accounted for 17% of the variation in student achievement across districts<sup>78</sup>.
- Strong district conditions and leadership together explained about 19% of the variation in student achievement across districts, when districts are effective at developing a sense of collective efficacy among

principals about their work<sup>79</sup>. This analysis also found that the combined effects of district leadership and district conditions explained almost as much of the variation in student achievement as did the four school-level conditions that were measured (school culture, decision making processes, supports for instruction, and professional learning community).

### **Other Evidence**

McLaughlin and Talbert's (2003) study of 3 "reforming" districts in California examined the relationship between state tests of student achievement and teacher and principal ratings of district characteristics similar to some of those characteristics described in section 2 of this report (behaving as a learning organization; exhibiting a coherent focus on teaching and learning; providing school staffs with instructional support; and encouraging data-based inquiry and accountability at both district and school levels). Correlations with student achievement varied between .1 to about .6. The authors described the overall pattern of relationships as substantial.

While the four sources of evidence reviewed here do not add up to a large database by most social science standards, the results of the research are quite consistent. When districts have those characteristics described in section 2 of this paper and when district leaders enact those practices and dispositions described in section 3 of this paper, significant value is added to the achievement of their students beyond the value added by their schools and classrooms.

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<sup>77</sup> Louis et al (2010); Leithwood & Louis (2012)

<sup>78</sup> Lee et al (2012)

<sup>79</sup> Leithwood & Jantzi (2008)

## 7. Conclusion

Not all districts add value to the learning and well-being of their students. Considerable handwringing also can be found about the value added to student learning and well-being by school organizations, school leaders, teachers and parents. Unlike the district literature, however, it is rare to find arguments favoring the elimination of the school organization, school leaders, teachers, or parents; in these cases, the questions considered most appropriate to pursue are about the value each of these entities adds to student learning when they are performing “at their best”, or close to it, and how the performance of each of these entities, in the real world, can be optimized.

These are also the most productive questions to ask about districts. After all, as the introduction to this paper indicates, there were good reasons for creating districts even before they became as directly accountable for improving student learning and well-being as they are at present. These reasons included, for example, facilitating the implementation of government education policy in schools, representing local community aspirations for children in decisions about their school curriculum, and helping to ensure the equitable treatment of children across schools. These reasons have not gone away, they have been added to. So the focus of this paper has been about the nature of strong districts and their leaders, along with the contribution they make to student achievement.

Districts contribute to their students’ learning, evidence in this paper suggests, to the extent that they develop nine key characteristics or conditions. These characteristics encompass districts’ purposes, the coherence 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.

For district senior leadership teams, developing these nine characteristics in their organizations should be the proximal or immediate goals for their work, with student learning and well-being as the distal or long-term goals. Borrowing the title of one important Ontario study<sup>80</sup>, these nine characteristics are the means through which district go about “Unlocking the Potential for Learning” in schools and classrooms.

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While the nine district characteristics are *what* needs to be developed by senior leaders, *how* to develop those characteristics has been captured in the paper by unpacking evidence about the practices and personal leadership resources of strong district leaders. Each district characteristic, as the paper indicates, 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 extensive, it reflects both the extent and complexity of the work done by strong district leaders. A shorter list of practices could only be created by offering a more abstract and less practical account of what strong district leaders do.

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* (OLF) as attributes, traits or dispositions of effective leaders at all “levels”. This paper added two personal leadership resources, to those already included in the OLF, because of their importance for senior district leaders, in particular. The sheer size of district organizations, as compared with schools, for example, means that district leaders are potentially even more vulnerable than school leaders to being distracted from their improvement efforts and so need a strong predisposition toward “proactivity” (a psychological resource in OLF terms). The complexity of district organizations, in combination with the relatively longer time frames over which improvement work must be planned places

<sup>80</sup> Campbell & Fullan (2006)

a premium on senior leaders' "systems thinking" (a cognitive resource in OLF terms).

How much value do strong districts add to the learning of their students over and above the contributions of schools and classrooms? This is a technically complicated question to answer; the paper addressed this question by reviewing the results of a relatively large set of studies that report qualitative data about the work of exceptionally performing districts and several large studies conducted in the U.S. and Ontario using more rigorous mixed-methods research designs.

Before summarizing the conclusions drawn from this evidence, it is useful to outline what might reasonably be expected as an answer. In his new book *Thinking Fast and Slow*<sup>81</sup>, Nobel award winner Daniel Kahneman devotes several chapters to what is known about expertise in different domains of human functioning and just how reliably experts in different domains can predict and control the outcome of their actions or practices. The wide variation among experts in this ability to predict, Kahneman points out, is not primarily due to variations in the capacities of experts themselves; rather, it is mostly due to variation in the certainty of their environments.

Political scientists and highly-trained economists, for example, have dismal track records in predicting outcomes in their domains for this reason, whereas neurosurgeons and chess masters do much better.

The environment in which directors and superintendents work is clearly uncertain. Governments, local community groups, trustees, and parents are among the many sources of such uncertainty because they all have a legitimate stake in what schools do and a right to strongly advocate for their views. Following Kahneman's argument, such uncertainty suggests a very modest impact of directors and superintendents on the improvement of student learning and well-being in their schools. Yet the research reviewed in this paper paints a much more optimistic picture. When senior district leaders develop the characteristics and conditions of strong districts described in this paper, the best available evidence indicates that 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. Strong districts do add significant value to the learning of students beyond the contribution of schools and classrooms.

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Strong districts do add significant value to the learning of students beyond the contribution of schools and classrooms.

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<sup>81</sup> Published by Doubleday Canada.

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## APPENDIX

### Evidence Used to Develop the *District Effectiveness Framework*

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