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Strong Districts & Their Leadership:

A Professional Learning Resource

USER GUIDE

A Project Commissioned by the Ontario Institute for Education Leadership (IEL), the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) and the Ministry of Education

August 2018

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What is *Strong Districts and their Leadership: A Professional Learning Resource*?

This *Strong Districts and their Leadership: A Professional Learning Resource* is a compendium of professional learning materials that supports and advances the research reported in *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* (Leithwood, 2013) and in *Strong Districts and Their Leadership Project* (Leithwood & McCullough, 2017) which identified nine characteristics of high performing school districts and the practices of senior leaders in those districts. The findings in this research show that districts contribute to the meaningful integration of student achievement, equity and well-being of the students and staff in their systems to the extent that they develop these nine key characteristics.

This unique resource draws on the expertise of senior district leaders who have contributed their narratives of improvement experiences related to one or more of the nine characteristics. Their stories, which are presented as case studies and then integrated into professional learning modules, serve as a vehicle for further developing and strengthening school and system leadership across the province.

Why is it important for senior district leaders to learn about and benefit from the improvement efforts of other districts?

Research and practice show that when leaders observe and then learn from successful organizations, especially those that reach similar goals in the face of familiar opportunities and challenges, their belief in their own organization's collective capacity to achieve identified goals is strengthened. This finding also holds true in cases where leaders observe organizations whose goals and features differ, provided that the values and beliefs about outcomes they seek are aligned. Consistent with these findings, the case studies that are the centrepiece of this resource give senior district leaders a bird's-eye view of the improvement efforts of other senior district leaders and help expand their repertoire of promising leadership practices.

The benefits of leaders deprivatizing their practice by making it accessible to others through collegial conversation and collective inquiry in order to build both individual and organizational capacity is not only confirmed in research, but also is evident in professional practice. In fact, deprivatizing practice is the overarching goal of this resource which has

According to the findings of *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* (Leithwood, 2013) and *Strong Districts and their Leadership Project* (2017) districts contribute to the achievement, equity, and well-being of their students and staff to the extent that they develop the following nine characteristics:

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

the potential to contribute to building strong districts in the province by offering a broad perspective on the work of senior district leaders. It aims to support leaders in making improvements in their own districts and by providing a platform for leaders to access the giving and receiving of the advice and support of other leaders across the province. It offers a significant starting point for drawing on the wisdom of peers and emerges as a high impact approach to strengthening leadership practice in the province.

How was this resource developed?

This resource was developed over a three-year period as follows:

- **Beginning Spring 2014**: The Ontario Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) invited districts to write case studies, video recordings, and/or interviews that described their efforts to strengthen one or more of the nine characteristics of strong districts. The IEL provided

participating districts with the following questions to guide their reflection on the nine characteristics of strong districts and write or video-record narratives of the improvement efforts in their districts:

1. Which one or two characteristics does this case study address?
2. How did you decide this characteristic needed more attention in your district?
3. What was the state of this characteristic when you began to work on it?
4. What did you do to improve the condition of this characteristic; e.g., who was involved, what actions were taken, how did you respond to unexpected events along the way?
5. Were there significant turning points in your efforts to improve this characteristic? What were they?
6. How would you describe the condition of this characteristic in your district now and what evidence do you have to justify this description?
7. What advice would you provide others, given your experience with improving the condition of this characteristic?

- **Beginning Fall 2014**: CODE, the IEL, and the Ministry of Education contracted with Ken Leithwood to create and field-test stand-alone professional learning modules which were aligned with each of the nine characteristics and would include two or three of the case studies.

- **Beginning Spring 2015**: The modules consisting of an agenda, a set of slides summarizing relevant research, and two or three case studies were field-tested and revised to reflect feedback which resulted in the addition of a set of questions to guide discussion of the case studies.

- **From Fall 2016 to Spring 2017**: CODE and the Ministry of Education commissioned Ken Leithwood to test the efficacy of the nine characteristics of *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* and to deepen understanding about the features of each district characteristic in its most effective state. Findings and recommendations for next steps are reported in *Strong Districts and Their Leadership Project* (Leithwood & McCulloch, 2017).

- **In the Spring 2018**: The Ontario Institute of Education Leadership (IEL) revised and updated materials posted on the IEL website.

STONG DISTRICTS AND THEIR LEADERSHIP

THREE LESSONS

1. Valuable knowledge for improving practice was found in both the existing district leadership community and in the research community.

2. District leaders contributed to knowledge improvement by engaging their colleagues in the sharing of both failed and successful practices and by remaining open to ideas from the research community.

3. The research community contributed to knowledge building by applying robust research procedures to solving problems identified in collaboration with the district leadership community, as well as by bringing relevant results of research to the attention of district leaders and participating with them in making sense of those results for improving their own practice.

Source: Demystifying Effective District Leadership
(Leithwood & McCullough, 2015)

What can be found on the *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* section of the IEL website?

This resource comprises the following:
- **User Guide** which introduces the resource, describes its components, offers some suggested uses, and provides a short-annotated list of recommended readings.

- **Areas of Focus** which encompass the nine characteristics of Strong Districts.

- **District School Board Profiles** that provide at-a-glance information about districts that contributed case studies used in the modules.

- **Case Studies** which focus on one or more of the nine characteristics.

- **Eight Modules** that provide real-life case studies written or video-recorded by senior district leaders to show how they enact the leadership practices and draw on the personal leadership resources (PLRs) of the *Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF)* to build and sustain strong districts. Modules include written case studies, some supported by videos, and video case studies. Each module includes the following components:

  » **Module description** which focuses on the characteristic being addressed at the end of these statements, except the last one.
  » **An annotated agenda** that can be tailored to individual interests and needs.
  » **Case studies** from participating districts.
  » **Relevant research** using a PowerPoint presentation.
  » **Overview of each case study** with guiding questions.
  » **Synopsis of case studies** and further thoughts about what was learned.
  » **Self-assessment and module evaluation** consisting of a set of questions that can be used to determine how participation in the module has built capacity of the district senior team and/or increased their awareness of challenges and promising practices associated with the characteristic featured in the module.

Note that there are eight modules in total representing one or more of the characteristics of strong districts. Budget, structures, time and personnel policies/procedures aligned with the district's mission, vision and goals is one of the most important characteristics of strong districts and should be a characteristic that is considered within all of the 8 modules. Without alignment of all aspects of district work, it is unlikely that its mission, vision, and goals can become a reality.

> For district senior leadership teams, developing the nine characteristics in their organizations should be the proximal or immediate goals for their work, with student achievement, equity and well-being as the distal or long-term goals.
>
> *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* (Leithwood, 2013) and *Strong Districts and Their Leadership Project* (Leithwood & McCulloch, 2017)

How can this resource be used to leverage learning and in what contexts?

This resource is designed as a professional learning support tool. It can be used in a variety of ways depending on your district's focus and its approach to capacity building.

Starting points for using this resource

- **Embed the professional learning in the work**
  » In addition to opportunities that may be available in districts for learning from the case studies in stand-alone, formal professional learning contexts, job-embedded approaches that are timely and tailored to current challenges, contexts and circumstances hold greater promise for building capacity focused on building strong districts.

- **Focus on the characteristic(s) that need to be strengthened**
  » Choose a module whose focus is on a characteristic that is relevant to current circumstances – one that has been identified as needing to be improved or strengthened.
  » Use guiding questions that are included with the case studies as a springboard for problem-solving discussions that can help identify ways to address your current realities.

- **Identify challenges, promising practices, and applications:**
  » Use the challenge scenarios that are identified in the case studies to engage in problem solving, to generate additional strategies for addressing them and then consider application of the new strategies to current context.
  » Draw on the challenges and lessons learned in setting group professional learning goals.

- **Draft new case studies**
  » In teams, draft new case studies and use them as vehicles for monitoring and reflection at specified times of the school year to support the strategic planning process.
  » Questions to consider in writing a case study include:
    – As a senior leadership team develop your case study (tell your story).
    – Which one or two characteristics will your case study address?

– How did you decide this characteristic needed more attention in your district?
– What was the state of this characteristic when you began to work on it?
– What did you do to improve the condition of this characteristic; e.g., who was involved, what actions were taken, how did you respond to unexpected events along the way?
– Were there significant turning points in your efforts to improve this characteristic? What were they?
– How would you describe the condition of this characteristic in your district now and what evidence do you have to justify this description?
– What advice would you provide others, given your experience with improving the condition of this characteristic?
» Use the new case studies as the basis for capacity building dialogue with peers across districts
» Submit your new case study to the IEL Coordinator for posting on the IEL website at communication@education-leadership-ontario.ca.

Contexts for using this resource

Examples of existing professional learning programs and contexts in which these modules as a whole or in part can be used include the following:

- **In job-embedded professional learning contexts; e.g.:**
  » mentoring
  » professional networks
  » study groups
  » succession planning

- **In district leadership teams; e.g.:**
  » Consider the ideas presented in this series as a reference for identifying strategies to support goal-setting of Board Leadership Development Strategy (BLDS) lead teams, and the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and Well-Being (BIPSA-WB) teams that participate in the Student Achievement Division's K–12 System Implementation and Monitoring (SIM) initiative.

- **With senior leaders across districts; e.g.:**
  » Regional Education Councils

- **By providers of professional learning programs; e.g.:**
  » Use selected case studies and/or embed key concepts to support relevant program components in existing programs such as:
    – Supervisory Officer and Principal/Vice-principal Qualifications Programs
    – Executive leadership programs such as those offered by The Learning Partnership and Centre Franco-Ontarien de Ressources Pédagogiques (CFORP)

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