In our district, the superintendent, all principals, and the four other staff who report directly to the superintendent are considered senior staff. Being recognized as senior staff, principals share the district leadership and have become a major part of the management team, setting the district’s direction, vision, and standards. The senior staff supports the superintendent and his work and is the conscience of the organization.

Unlike many other large urban centers in North America (D. Eckstrom, 1997; Educational Research Service, 2000), Edmonton Public Schools has not had a shortage of principal applicants or applicants for other leadership positions. For example, in 2000-01, more than 100 external and internal candidates applied. New principals have told us this is due to the comprehensive training programs and ongoing support for principals.

IN THE BEGINNING

Edmonton Public Schools is known for its work on school-based budgeting and site-based management, begun more than 20 years ago. When the superintendent changed five years ago, the opportunity was perfect to take this process a step further — to empower principals and allow them to assume responsibility as senior staff in the district. The change was easier because the district already had site-based decision making and the schools controlled 90% of operating funds. In addition, the district was coming close to fully implementing a model in which schools paid for the central services they used, funding the central office on a support/service basis. As principals “purchased” central services, they were able to decide which services were important and should continue.

At the outset, we focused on eight requirements for empowerment (see box on page 28). However, we soon recognized that the existing bureaucracy of people, rules, and regulations had stifled principals’ need to feel empowered and to act independently and had made them dependent on central staff. So we began to eliminate middle management (directors, assistant superintendents, associate superintendents) and all 205 principals reported directly to the superintendent. We estab-
The bureau-cracy of people, rules, and regulations had stifled principals’ need to feel empowered and to act independently.

Established a “dumb rules” committee and asked it to identify policies, rules, and regulations that got in the way of principals doing their jobs.

With all principals reporting directly to the superintendent, he now had to become the “leader of leaders” and the “superintendent of schools,” not the superintendent of the central office.

RETHINKING THE JOB

To do it, the superintendent stopped directly managing the central office by empowering two department heads to assume responsibility for providing services to schools. He then focused on working directly with principals, spending most of his time in schools visiting with staff, becoming familiar with the facilities, and meeting with principals to review their plans and targets for improving student achievement. To prepare for those meetings, he reviews data including local and provincial achievement test results; student, staff, parent, and community attitude surveys; and each school’s annual plans. The superintendent prepares questions to focus on in the discussion and sends them to the principal in advance of the meeting.

Sound unwieldy? Of course it does, but because these principals have been given the chance to accept responsibility and act independently, they have teamed up to make it happen.

A DIFFERENT WAY OF LEADING

The superintendent’s approach to leadership is: “I don’t have all the answers. The solutions to problems are among the senior staff. Don’t come to me with problems unless you suggest a solution.” This approach, together with the work of the collaborative groups of principals, has resulted in broader ownership and principals with a district perspective.

As one might expect, not all principals have accepted the empowerment and responsibility of senior staff members. This is a process that does not happen overnight. We provide structured and on-going support to help each one’s professional development.

Three factors have eased principals’ transition into their new role as senior staff:

● The present superintendent appointed more than half the principals in the district. These principals have not had to go through the same paradigm shift or change in thinking that the more seasoned principals did. The new vision and structures were already in place when these principals were appointed.

● Two separate leadership training and development programs for leadership candidates were created. One is the Leadership Education and Development program, which includes 13 weekly sessions and one all-day Saturday session. It is for those who will be first-time leaders, such as assistant principals, department heads, or consultants. The other is the Principal Education and Development program, intended for those preparing to assume their first principalship. This program is presented in 20
weekly sessions and four Saturdays.

Interested staff members apply to either program, and the present principal must endorse the application. The district’s personnel services and a committee of principals screen applicants. Participants in both courses are expected to complete an in-school project to demonstrate their leadership in improving student achievement. Those who wish to use these courses for graduate-level university credit must complete written assignments to be graded.

The programs are rigorous, and each session includes practical and theoretical knowledge developed and presented by a team of practicing principals and central services personnel. The topics the two programs cover are quite similar:

- Leadership and vision;
- Enhancing student achievement;
- Assessing and reporting student progress;
- Aligning curriculum and instruction;
- School climate;
- Student conduct and safety;
- Managing fiscal and physical resources;
- Staff performance; and
- Staff development.

However, each program’s focus is quite different. The Leadership Education and Development program is global, designed to prepare enrollees to participate in district leadership. Sessions in the Principal Education and Development program are more in-depth, including specifics of the school principal’s work.

The third factor that has facilitated principals’ transition into their new role is an on-going support program for practicing administrators. The support mechanisms include:

**Principal teams.** Principals work together collaboratively and contribute to district leadership by participating on at least three teams.

**First-year principals.** New principals attend monthly meetings to prepare for upcoming activities such as results reviews with trustees, developing the school plan and budget, writing performance reviews, and selecting staff. In addition, each new principal is assigned

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**DISTRICT PRIORITIES**

- To improve student achievement in the core subjects with an emphasis on language arts and mathematics.
- To improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students at risk of not completing their schooling.
- To ensure high quality teaching and high quality leadership.
- To achieve high standards of conduct, safety, and well-being of students and staff.
- To continue to increase levels of public support and funding for public education.

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**Eight requirements for empowerment**

The Edmonton Public Schools superintendent and board viewed giving principals the power to really make a difference in student achievement as a top priority. To do that, the superintendent must:

- Inspire a shared vision focused on improving student achievement.
- Ensure open communication so that access to anyone in the district is open and non-hierarchical.
- Recognize that teachers do the critical work. Everyone else in the district must support that work.
- Help principals develop effective working relationships by developing protocols for how they will operate with one another.
- Strengthen principals by sharing power and information at the district level. This is facilitated best through site-based management, which requires a major decentralization of authority and resources to schools.
- Recognize that district leadership is a team effort that requires collaboration. Principal teams must be developed, supported, and trusted.
- Provide principals with the training, information, and parameters they need to make good decisions.
- Recognize that shared leadership and principals’ empowerment does not mean license or isolated autonomy. Decision making must be in accordance with the law, the vision and mission of the district, board policy, and administrative regulations. The superintendent must stay in close contact throughout the process, which involves approving plans, coordinating resources, facilitating networking, and reviewing progress.

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**MISSION STATEMENT**

The mission of Edmonton Public Schools, as an advocate of choice, is to ensure that all students achieve success in their individual programs of study.

It is the belief of Edmonton Public Schools that parents, students, and community members are committed as partners and accept their respective responsibilities in education.

The mission is being accomplished through exemplary staff performance, program diversity, measured student achievement of outcomes, and decentralized decision making.
an experienced principal as a mentor for support and to serve as a role model.

**Principal institutes.** Four principal institutes of five sessions each are provided using a format similar to the leadership development programs. The institutes address various facets of the principal’s role in improving student achievement. They are interactive and stimulate dialogue. Each institute’s content is based on feedback from various principal teams.

For 1999-2000, the Principal Institutes were:
- Student achievement and curriculum — 77 principals.
- Working with staff to improve student achievement — 45 principals.
- Dealing with complex situations — 21 principals.
- Management — 21 principals.

**Leadership services.** Principals can get advice and assistance from non-threatening principal colleagues who are on assignment in the district office. Staff within this service also facilitate the leadership and development programs, the principal institutes, and the support for first-year principals.

**WHAT LIES AHEAD**

The Edmonton district wanted to help principals make a difference in improving student achievement. With these changes, we have seen a steady and significant increase over the past five years in the percentage of students meeting the acceptable standard on the grades 3, 6, and 9 Alberta Achievement Tests, relative to provincial data. We know there are other variables, such as a focus on curriculum alignment, that have contributed to these results; however, we feel that our focus on principal development has been a major factor.

Much work still needs to be done to refine and define the role of the principal as a member of senior staff. It is a dynamic role that is continually evolving. At the same time, however, we must take this vision farther — to the classroom. Teachers must accept the empowerment and responsibility due to the truly professional educator. Pursuing this dream will have a profound effect on the classroom teacher’s role and in further improving children’s achievement levels.

**EDMONTON AT A GLANCE**

**Edmonton Public Schools,** an urban school district in the capital city of the Province of Alberta, is the 5th largest school district in Canada. It is about 350 miles north of the Canada-U.S. border.

**Edmonton has** the highest concentration of people living below the poverty line in the province. Community charities fund free or reduced-price lunches in inner-city schools and 1.6% of students participate in this program.

**The city has** the largest Aboriginal population in the province. A high proportion of the Aboriginal population lives in poverty. Aboriginal students are asked to self-identify and 6.15% have identified themselves as Aboriginal.

**The public schools** offer programs/courses for 10 non-English languages. In addition, the district offers students a wide variety of choice programs in schools, and only about half of students attend their designated, neighborhood school.

- Number of schools: 205
- Enrollment: 81,000
- Number of teachers: 4,500
- Special education students: 11%
- English as a Second Language Students: 1.9%

**REFERENCES:**
