ALBERTA UNITES ON TEACHING QUALITY

By Tracy Crow

Education policy in the province of Alberta is set by Alberta Education, a ministry led by the province's minister of education. There are two key policies or ministerial orders that guide professional learning in Alberta. The Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 1997) outlines the knowledge, skills, and attributes that teachers are expected to possess. The standard specifies competencies for those teachers holding interim certificates (typically teachers in their first two years of practice) and permanent certificates. (See the list of knowledge, skills, and attributes in the box on p. 31.) The Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy (Alberta Education, 2008) aims to ensure that each teacher's ongoing actions, judgments, and decisions are in the best educational interests of students and support optimum learning.

Val Olekshy, executive director of the Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, is careful to point out that she is not part of the government. She adds that it is comforting to work in a policy environment that is extremely col-

laborative. "What's so unique about our standards is that when the ministry established these policies, it worked with our teachers association to talk about what teachers need to be responsible for to remain current. They really focused on teachers' career-long professional growth," said Olekshy.

In Alberta, teachers are required to complete an annual professional growth plan that addresses their learning priorities, both in relation to the specifics of the Teaching Quality Standard and also to meet their own expectations about where they know they need to grow, according to Michael Podlosky, coordinator of the Alberta Teachers' Association's professional development program area. The Alberta Teachers' Association supports the creation and support of these plans. The association stresses that exercising professional judgment in diagnosing and responding to student learning needs and in assessing their progress is central to what it means to be a teacher in Alberta. Therefore, teachers have a professional responsibility to keep abreast of new developments in education and to develop their professional practice (Alberta Teachers' Association, n.d.).

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Partnerships and collaborations are at the heart of Alberta's implementation of high-quality professional learning, according to Olekshy. In her role as director at the Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, one of seven learning consortia in Alberta, Olekshy is part of a system that ensures that teachers, schools, and districts have the support they need to implement provincial curriculum and other program initiatives. In September 2010, a partnership of stakeholders in the province released *A Guide to Support Implementation: Essential Conditions* (Alberta's Education Partners, 2010). Crafted with the aim to support the province's educational change efforts, the document describes the conditions that need to be addressed to ensure successful implementation of education initiatives.

"The essential conditions document grew from the questions that our ministry asked us about how we know what the impact is of our professional development," said Olekshy. The document is based on a thorough review of current research and promising practices to help educators understand the characteristics and conditions necessary for successful implementation of any education endeavor.

"The document has no official status [as policy]," Olekshy says. However, every major education stakeholder group in Alberta has endorsed the guide. "Several organizations worked together to say, 'This is what we collectively feel is right.'" Then it is up to school jurisdictions to determine if they will follow this model.

Olekshy says those who worked collaboratively on the guide believe all stakeholders have a shared responsibility for supporting implementation. "It's not just about shap-

TEACHING QUALITY STANDARD:
REQUIRED KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ATTRIBUTES

Quality teaching occurs when the teacher's ongoing analysis of the context and the teacher's decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply result in optimum learning by students.

All teachers are expected to meet the Teaching Quality Standard throughout their careers. However, teaching practices will vary because each teaching situation is different and in constant change. Reasoned judgment must be used to determine whether the Teaching Quality Standard is being met in a given context.

The following descriptors cover the range of expertise that teachers in Alberta are expected to be able to access in effectively teaching students.

- Teachers' application of pedagogical knowledge, skills, and attributes is based in their ongoing analysis of contextual variables, such as student, regulatory, school, parent, and societal variables.

- Teachers understand the legislated, moral, and ethical frameworks within which they work.

- Teachers understand the subject disciplines they teach.

- Teachers know there are many approaches to teaching and learning.

- Teachers engage in a range of planning activities.

- Teachers create and maintain environments that are conducive to student learning.

- Teachers translate curriculum content and objectives into meaningful learning activities.

- Teachers apply a variety of technologies to meet student learning needs.

- Teachers gather and use information about student learning needs and progress.

- Teachers establish and maintain partnerships among school, home, and community, and within their own schools.

- Teachers are career-long learners.

Source: Alberta Education, 1997.

ing the professional development that an organization like ours would provide, but describing all the factors that support adult learning," Olekshy says.

"My favorite example is around interactive whiteboards," said Olekshy. "We can provide a great interactive whiteboard professional development session. Then the teachers might go back to their school, and their school priorities might tell them that 'we don't want to use technology here because we need to focus our efforts on something else.' Or they might go back to their classrooms and the resources

aren't there or the interactive whiteboard isn't hooked up or the teacher isn't provided time to practice. There might not be leadership in the jurisdiction or school setting to promote and support proper use of these tools to support student learning."

DEFINING THE CONDITIONS

There are seven essential conditions in the implementation guide: shared vision, leadership, research and evidence, resources, teacher professional growth, time, and community engagement. See the diagram below to understand how Alberta's stakeholders envision how the partners and the conditions all work together, with a culture of learning and shared responsibility at the center.

The guide is posted online and includes extensive information about each essential condition, with guiding questions to help educators consider all aspects of implementation as they undertake a complex planning process (**www. essentialconditions.ca**). For each condition, the document also asks educators to consider the evidence they will accept to know that the essential condition is being addressed.

"Let's go back to the interactive whiteboard example," Olekshy says. "If we know that we don't want teachers to learn just to turn the machine on, but we want them to learn how to infuse this tool and resource into their program so they're sup-

porting student learning, then we have to be aware of the shared vision for student learning. Teachers have to know that attending professional development and learning how to turn the machine on is just the first part of the journey." From there, other essential conditions — leadership, resources, time — are a part of implementing the use of a new tool like an interactive whiteboard.

Where does the professional learning come from related to these conditions? The committee that developed the guide believes that "successful implementation required the coordinated, collaborative, and comprehensive efforts of the education partners working together towards a shared vision of learning success for all students," Olekshy says. To reach this goal, the system needs to work together to support implementation — with due attention to the work and classroom demands of teachers.

"The essential conditions highlight the need for stakeholders to listen carefully to the needs of teachers to ensure learning opportunities are timely, varied and purposeful," says Michael Podlosky of the Alberta Teachers' Association. Each essential condition can be used to focus a conversation around addressing the intent to support implementation and adult learning. For example, the community engagement essential condition takes into account the broader sense of who in the community needs to be involved in any educational innovation or change.

Olekshy says, "This one's really been an important eye opener for me. We met with our First Nations, Métis, and Inuit advisory committee and used some of the essential conditions planning tool templates to plan our programs for the year. The district representatives talked about the need to be connected with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit groups. It became evident to me that I needed to be more engaged with various community groups in my role as a professional development provider. I'm going to learn a lot more in this particular content area because the group identified this as an important condition for this specific context."

Though the latest version of the essentials condition guidelines have just been released, some districts have been using it in draft form. One superintendent, Olekshy says, has used it in his district to stimulate conversation around his three-year planning. Another used it as part of a school improvement planning reflection year-end. "Ultimately, we want to know that we're supporting teachers' professional growth, and initial district use has focused on reflecting on current practice and areas they may wish to address given their desire for continuous improvement and the

ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION
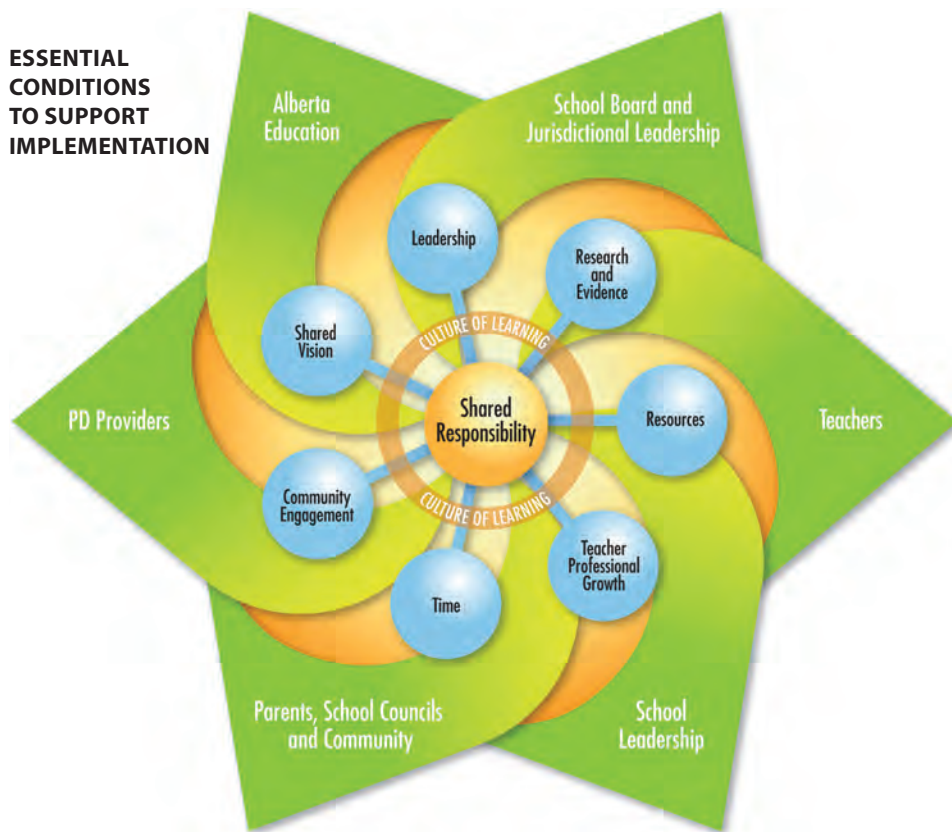
Source: Alberta's Education Partners, 2010.

framework shared in the guide," Olekshy says.

While the essential conditions work examines the complex systems required to support educational changes, an earlier document, *A Guide to Comprehensive Professional Development Planning* (Alberta's Education Partners, 2005), specifically addresses the key elements of professional development planning. Also created by a collaborative of Alberta stakeholders, the document describes a planning process based on evidence that considers provincial, jurisdiction, and school priorities, student data, and careful goal setting before outlining possible learning strategies and action plans.

Olekshy is optimistic about the work the province is undertaking and about how they've worked together thus far. "There are a number of transformational changes happening in education in our province. And at the same time, there's a collaborative nature in the province that lets us as stakeholders work together to decide what would work best to support change," she said. "As stakeholders, we'll explore how to use this framework and learn together how these guides may support school districts in planning more effectively for the changes that are coming. The intent moving forward is to know, as professional development providers, how we can best support systems with the transformation they wish to achieve in supporting student learning."

> "Ultimately, we want to know that we're supporting teachers' professional growth, and initial district use has focused on reflecting on current practice and areas they may wish to address given their desire for continuous improvement and the framework shared in the guide."
>
> — *Val Olekshy*

REFERENCES

Alberta's Education Partners. (2005). *A guide to comprehensive professional development planning.* Available at http://erlc.ca/who/pdf/PDPlanningGuide.pdf.

Alberta's Education Partners. (2010). *A guide to support implementation: Essential conditions.* Available at www.essentialconditions.ca.

Alberta Education. (2008). *Teacher growth, supervision, and evaluation policy.* Available at http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/certification/standards/teacher.aspx.

Alberta Education. (1997). *Teaching Quality Standard applicable to the provision of basic education in Alberta.* Ministerial order #016/97. Available at http://education.alberta.ca/department/policy/standards/teachqual.aspx.

Alberta Teachers' Association. (n.d.). *Professional growth plans.* Available at www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/Professional%20Growth%20Plans/Pages/Teacher%20Professional%20Growth%20Plans.aspx.

•

Tracy Crow (tracy.crow@learningforward.org) is associate director of publications for Learning Forward. ■