PARTNERS *in* ACHIEVEMENT

SYNERGY FUELS GROWTH IN LITERACY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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About a decade ago, Saskatoon Public Schools — the largest in district Canada's province of Saskatchewan — typified all districts in the province.

Though the nature of the work shared between central office and the district's 50-plus schools was professionally harmonious and positive, that work did not always align or focus ultimately on improving student learning.

Professional development was sometimes fragmented and transitory. Given the dearth of standardized measures of student achievement, the province undertook few — if any — checks on student level progress.

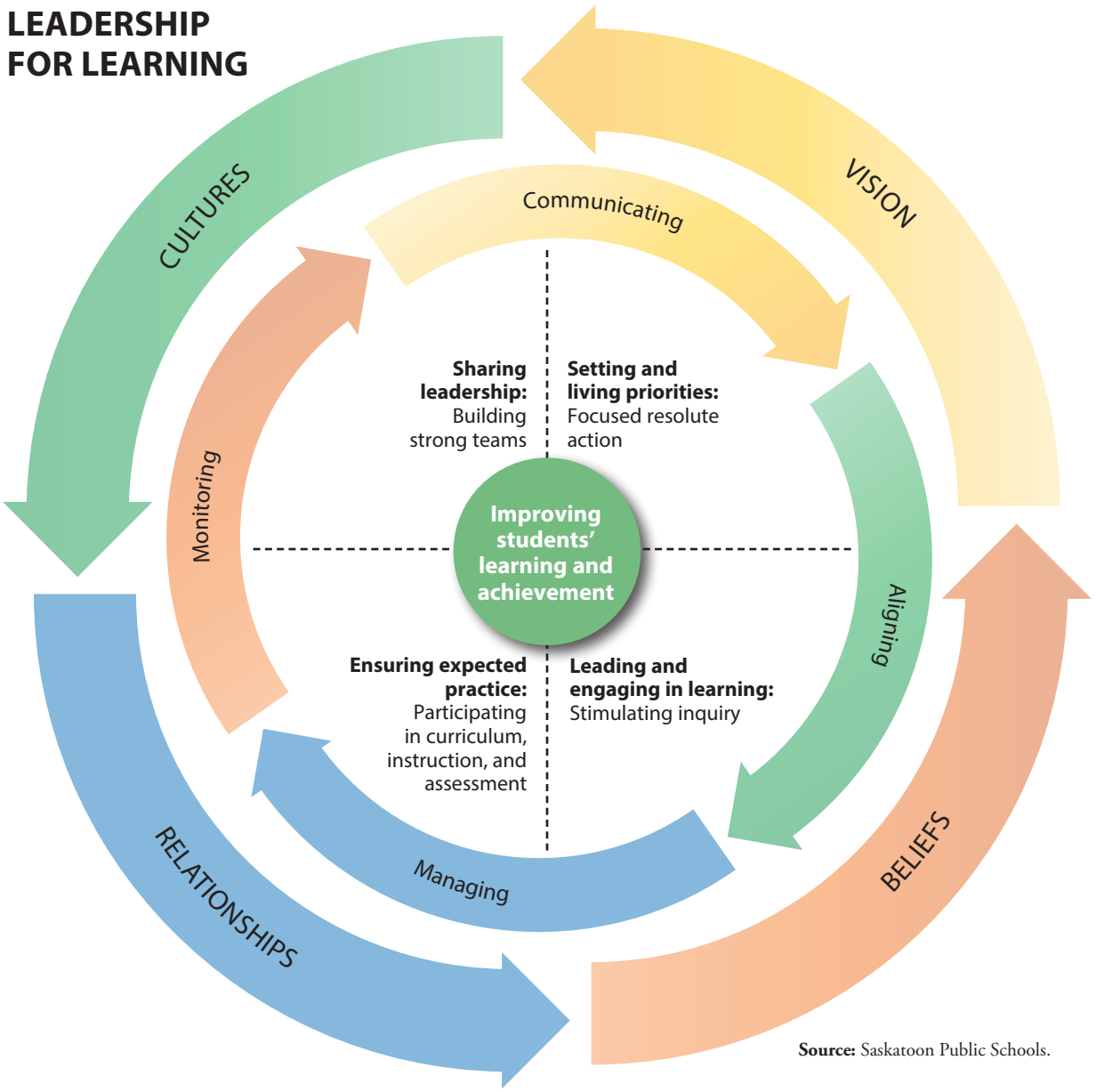
The role of central office was to emphasize a consistent administrative approach to managing schools. Central office was a space where professional territory was clearly defined. Each person managed a discrete area of emphasis, such as technology, instruction, or assessment. The work of each department was neither inherently competitive nor collaborative relative to another.

MODELING COLLABORATION

Saskatoon Public Schools made the decision 10 years ago to undertake major changes in how it supports professional learning. The district began with two major priorities: increasing literacy in elementary schools and transforming high schools to increase student engagement.

The district appointed a facilitator for each priority in central office, and thus began a process of building new structures and processes for professional learning.

To bring tighter focus to improving student learning, the district undertook two key strategies to enhance instructional leadership. The first was to construct the Leadership for Learning framework (see graphic on p. 37). The



Source: Saskatoon Public Schools.

second was to revise existing practices for assessing teachers, moving to a somewhat localized version of Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, known in the district as Assessment for Teaching.

The end goal of both strategies is to improve student achievement and engagement through developing instructional leadership across the district. Related changes soon followed.

EXPLICIT MODELING

Leadership meetings — that occasion when central office leaders collaborate with in-school administrators — have come to reflect the change district leaders most wish to see in classrooms. This entails shifting from a focus on administrative and management tasks, with an agenda set by central office, to one that emphasizes learning and instructional leadership.

The agenda is now built in a collaborative environment representing a districtwide cross section of instructional leaders. Leadership development remains a central tenet to the process, and is part of the Leadership for Learning framework.

EXPANDING TRUST

The district has intentionally pursued greater collaboration between central office and schools, characterized by

shared leadership of professional learning. The impetus for this approach was a change in district leaders' beliefs about the role of school-based professionals within professional development.

Specifically, the district now understands that those closest to instruction are most responsible for success in any initiative. When district leaders realized that the goal was to co-own responsibility for professional learning, rather than to direct or control processes and outcomes centrally, schools and central office became partners in learning improvement.

As partners, school and central office staff now play complementary roles that are equally valuable and distinct. All involved acknowledge that co-constructed learning goals can only be accomplished if they collaborate.

COHERENCE AND SIMPLICITY

Research confirms that it takes nearly 50 hours of professional learning to realize any substantive change in teacher instructional practice (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). One of the first tasks of central office, therefore, is to reduce the number of new instructional behaviors expected from teachers.

Over the last two years, central office leaders in the two district priorities, curriculum and instruction, First Nations education, assessment, and staff development have integrated all work toward achieving a singular vision and goal for a school year — one focusing on specific teacher behaviors highly correlated with improved student achievement.

By focusing the district's efforts, central office provides coherence by reducing the competing priorities facing schools. Without this coherence, professional learning cannot yield improved results for students. This same simplicity and coherence is reflected within the district's leadership development.

CRITERIA FOR LEADERSHIP

In 2010, the district's senior leaders recognized the need for clear criteria for effective leadership. To address this need, top-level district leaders initiated a process to develop a vision of effective leadership in the schools and district.

More than 20 school-based administrators volunteered for the project. The process, which included extensive investigation into effective leadership practices, yielded a co-constructed vision for effective leadership called the Saskatoon Public Schools' Leadership for Learning framework.

Developing the framework collaboratively created an overwhelming commitment to realize its vision. The framework carried the stamp of approval of those administrators who helped create and promote its value. Their contributions increased the quality of the leadership concepts and competencies in the framework, and their voices were clearly reflected in the final product.

This collaboration created a much deeper sense of ownership for the framework than was possible had it been developed by central office leaders, then simply presented to other leaders for implementation.

The strong sense of shared ownership was evident when 20% of in-school administrators volunteered to support their peers in using the framework and plan the work. Nearly 80% of the planning committee then led a learning session for their peers last year. Because of the common sense of ownership, the framework became the plan for building and celebrating instructional leadership in all leaders.

Harold Robertson, an elementary principal and member of the committee, described the value of being deeply involved in sharing the work: "For me, the value in being part of the development team was the grass-roots development of our model and being part of the research, the stories, and the discussions, that supported what we valued as leaders within our division.

"We all make our own meaning of what we read, hear, or are presented. In this model, we were able to have meaningful discussions in small and large groups that allowed us to better understand each other and share our meaning. The buy-in amongst our group was huge.

"I recall presenting our work to the larger leadership group on two occasions and thinking: It would have been great if all of you were at the meeting when this point was discussed/debated/developed," said Robertson.

The Leadership for Learning framework articulates the organizational structure and focus for all leadership learning in the district. Leadership groups constantly review the contents and interpretations within the framework, which refreshes and invigorates the district's ongoing leadership development.

All processes and content respond to the framework and are planned for — and facilitated collaboratively by — school-based administrators and central office staff. This group is convened, but not controlled, by central office leaders.

The ongoing effect on all leaders is a deep commitment to using their day-to-day leadership actions in schools to realize the clear, common vision described in the framework.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING GOALS 2013-14

VISION: Student learning will improve because teachers know where students are right now and choose purposefully what to do next instructionally to respond.

THIS YEAR:

- Teachers use a growing range of formative assessments to determine where students are now.
- Teachers learn an increasing number of research-based instructional interventions/strategies and try some based on student need.
- Teachers talk with peers about trying those strategies and discuss evidence of impact.

Administrators support one another in devoting more time to instructional improvements that make a difference for student learning. Administrators decided to work together in groups of critical friends to discuss instructional needs and, in addition, administrative teams in schools started weekly or monthly learning walks to view the progress of instruction.

Teachers receive more and better instructional guidance in the form of clearer expectations, more feedback and coaching, and more effective professional learning, through processes such as collaborative learning communities. This increased support is yielding consistently higher-quality classroom instruction and better learning outcomes for students.

For example, the division prioritizes literacy, and last year saw a 4% increase in Grade 2 students who read near, at, or above grade level using the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Reading Assessment. Both Grades 2 and 3 see 75% near, at, or above grade level in reading. In high schools, where the focus is student engagement, the percentage of students reporting high levels of engagement is now 13% above the national norm.

The district used a somewhat identical process to implement Danielson's Framework for Teaching last year. Just as the district has narrowed the focus for teachers, so, too, has the skill of district administrators been sharpened toward instructional leadership. It now takes center stage at all leadership meetings. At least one hour of the biweekly half-day administrator meetings is dedicated to learning about and practicing the skills of observing teachers.

All district leaders have enhanced their capacity in collecting sound evidence of instruction. As a result, inter-rater reliability among our in-school and central office leaders continues to improve. On five occasions last year, administrators and central office staff worked through practice videos together and compared results.

By September 2014, 94% of administrators and central office leaders who completed an online course in the Danielson framework were rated as proficient. Furthermore, 92% of all administrators attempting the assessment were proficient on the first attempt.

Students, teachers, and administrators benefit from the deliberate intent of central office leaders to act in partnership with school-based staff. Because principals and vice principals are pivotal within each framework, each framework found instant legitimacy in the hearts and minds of all in-school administrators. This manifested itself in the location of greatest import — the school.

As a result of these collaborative processes, district culture is now characterized by mutual respect between schools and central office and by a fundamental regard for the quality and professionalism of teachers and administrators in schools and at central office. Principals and school-based leaders describe a synergistic relationship at the heart of school-based professional learning.

"The one example that stands out for me is our April staff professional learning, where we reflected on our year's work with a Wordle from our student survey responses, then moved into a classify/categorize instructional strategies activity," says high school principal Tammy Girolami. "I was able to set the stage, make it real for our school with real student examples.

"What the central office team member brought to the conversation was the capacity to show us why a particular process is, or is not, a certain strategy, and why one [strategy] is better than another, supported with statistics and relevant research."

EXPLICITLY GROWING SKILLS

Central office has played a critical role in helping leaders comprehend and assess the skills and understandings essential for pursuing the collective focus. Formative assessment, in its various forms, remains a key target in professional learning.

Initially, central office helped build leaders' understanding of formative assessment and its impact. External experts, such as Dylan Wiliam, came to the district through central office budgets.

Formative assessment practice became embedded in school-based leaders' professional learning. For example, formative assessment continues to be modeled in professional learning. The leaders practice using it to support learning communities, and coaches learn how to use literacy tools formatively.

Central office continues to embed the mindset of formative assessment as the foundation for all activities and documents. It is central to the district's work within its Assessment for Teaching.

Support from central office is essential in helping school-based leaders shift teacher practice. In Saskatoon, consultants and coordinators work directly with school groups such as data teams and learning councils. They also develop materials for schools to use in professional learning that illustrate and promote the use of formative assessment.

Because the process is decentralized but centrally supported, teacher leaders maintain ownership for the processes and outcomes. As such, they are more likely to see central office experts as supporters and providers of needed materials. Tom Sargeant, a high school principal, says, "It is a great team atmosphere with central office because they come into our schools and understand the community, school goals, and the challenges we face to meet the needs of our learners. Their insight and expertise is valued by all staff members, and they truly make a significant contribution at the school level on a regular basis."

As part of the district's ongoing transformation of professional learning, district leaders continue to improve their understanding that the value of any professional learning model is assessed, foremost, by student outcomes. This remains a crucial point of emphasis initiated by central office leaders.

When school leaders collect data to turn in to evidence of student progress, central office becomes the conduit for sharing results, improving data analysis skills, and organizing ongoing

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