

# Supporting the Principalship in Saskatchewan Schools



The release of the *Educational Governance Review Report* in December 2016, presents an opportunity for key stakeholders in the education sector to explore and work collaboratively for improvements to the delivery of education in Saskatchewan. Together, the partners in education can ensure equitable access to high quality publicly funded public education for all children and youth today and in the years to come.

In fulfilling its legislated mandate, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation has maintained that prior to the adoption of any educational change decisions, serious and careful thought be given to the extent to which the reform will impact the role of teachers and principals in meeting the needs of the school community. Over the years, the Federation has fostered the development of meaningful and collaborative teacher-principal-community relationships in its services and programs as well as through the organization's policies – most notably STF policies 2.1 (Teacher Success) and 2.2 (Principalship Success).

At the heart of the school community is the principal who establishes an effective learning environment that is unique and responsive to the local context. The 2016 *Educational Governance Review Report* acknowledges the diversity of student needs and refers to the importance of “preserving and strengthening parent and community voice.”<sup>1</sup> Research confirms the significant role of the principal in achieving successful outcomes for students and further, that the relationship between the principal and the school community is a critical element of that success.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this submission is to reiterate the Federation's commitment to principals success and to outline a proposal for professional development for the principal as a key leader for learning in Saskatchewan's schools. The Federation's long standing responsibility to and support for its members, including principals and vice-principals, is endorsed by both legislation and organizational policy. The Federation is seen by key stakeholders in the education sector as a credible and respected advocate for principals as catalysts for effective teaching and learning in schools across the province.

The creation of a renewed professional development program for principals facilitated by the Federation that is informed by, and reflective of, the sector's vision for effective teaching and learning would strengthen the ability of schools to respond to the diverse learning needs of students.

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<sup>1</sup>Perrins, D., 2016, p. 22

<sup>2</sup>Leithwood et al., 1999, 2005.

## The Changing Role of the Principal

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The principalship is an “increasingly multifaceted and complex” role.<sup>3</sup> Principals require an array of skills to fulfil their multiple responsibilities as leaders for their school and community. The STF policy on principalship success reinforces much of what is found in research on educational leadership and recognizes the principal as a teacher with broad responsibilities associated with being the formal educational leader at a level closest to the communities that they serve.

Principals are responsible for setting personal goals and objectives for successful professional practice while considering the particular teaching and learning environment, and the needs of students, teachers and the school.<sup>4</sup>

The role of principal, including vice principals, involves creating and assuring an environment conducive to student learning, collegial dialogue, high-quality teaching, staff development and that an effective alignment of resources with academic goals exists within the school community.

*Regardless of school size, the principal's actions, decisions and interactions undoubtedly have a profound influence on the teaching and learning in the classroom.”*

Macleod, 2016

Research studies at both the national and international level attest to the fact that among school-related influences on student learning, leadership is second only in importance to classroom instruction.<sup>5</sup> Further, studies show that schools, and ultimately the classroom, are the point at which initial change occurs and goals for student success can be effectively facilitated and achieved by ensuring that the unit of change, the classroom, is properly resourced and led by effective professional teachers.<sup>6</sup>

The 2014 *Report on the Future of the Principalship in Canada* as well as consultations highlighted in the 2014 *Student First Engagement Discussion Guide* confirmed the diversity of school communities across Canada and Saskatchewan. Regardless of context, the conflation of societal change and role complexity requires principals, as the formal administrative and instructional leader in the school, to understand and manifest a wide array of leadership skills to facilitate and sustain successful teaching and learning across the school community.

In Saskatchewan, as elsewhere, geographical circumstances and contextual variations can significantly influence the nature of a principalship role. As decisions about and responsibilities for meeting the needs of the school context shift more to the local level, principals require the skills to work effectively with school community councils and staff to address the diverse needs of students. Leadership for successful teaching and learning requires principals to exercise professional judgment, influenced by relevant and informed research and a deep understanding of the specific school community.

Building principal leadership capacity, both individually and collectively, requires a broad range of professional growth opportunities so that teachers who take on this role can perform their administrative, instructional and other leadership duties at the required level to effectively serve teaching colleagues, communities, students and Saskatchewan’s public education system. This evolving role necessitates a change in the professional supports currently offered to school leaders.

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<sup>3</sup> Canadian Association of Principals and the Alberta Teachers Association, 2014. p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Section 2.2.2 (2), STF Policy 2.2 (Principalship Success).

<sup>5</sup> Leithwood et al., 1999, 2005; Robinson, Hohepha, & Lloyd, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop, 2012; Williams, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

## **The Principalship – A Conceptual Model<sup>8</sup>**

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As an instructional leader, the principal is the key agent to facilitate the creation and maintenance of a shared vision for a school that is responsive to the needs of both the students within the school and the community. The collaborative school-based planning and leadership model below is supported by the four dimensions of instructional leadership.

### **Vision, Mission and Culture**

Principals play a vital role in establishing the mission, vision and culture of the school; one that is focused upon the learning success of each student. Through collaboration students, staff and community can share in the vision of success for each student.

### **Instructional Leadership**

Principals use data, evidence and inquiry to analyze student learning and instructional practice. Principals use a research-based framework to observe teacher practice, engage in cycles of inquiry, and plan for on-going and effective coaching and professional development.

### **Strategic Resource Allocation**

Principals allocate resources strategically so that instructional practice and student learning continue to improve. Working with the community and school staff, decisions can be made to meet the needs of the students.

### **Effective Relationships and Processes**

Principals engage in critical processes of planning, implementing, advocating, supporting, communicating and monitoring curriculum, instruction and improvement planning. Principals create supportive environments that include professional development and time and space for collaboration.

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<sup>8</sup>Adapted from 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership (Center for Educational Leadership, 2012).



## A Collaborative Responsibility for Leadership Development

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The recommendation below from the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation 2001 *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Principals* effectively captures the need for a centrally organized and coherent approach to professional leadership development for principals:

Professional development opportunities for principals should be presented in a coordinated way so that any gaps may be addressed and principals are not confused by contradictions or apparently competing points of view.

In his 1999 study on in-school leadership, Patrick Renihan highlighted the shared responsibility among the educational partners for ensuring effective school leadership and identified the need for collaboration among stakeholders. Renihan's findings indicated that schools require effective principals who required time, resources and a coordinated collaborative system of professional growth opportunities to enhance their effectiveness.<sup>9</sup>

Today, successful principalship is a shared vision and responsibility of all partners in Saskatchewan's education sector. The notion of a single, coordinated program of professional development that responds to the needs of school leaders, principals, vice-principals as well as to our educational partners can make a positive and profound impact on principals as they support quality teaching for enhanced student achievement.

*"...the most critical issue is not one of succession, but the limited autonomy that principals can exercise on behalf of their school and community."<sup>1</sup>*

Renihan, 2012

In this manner, the Federation envisions that student success can be facilitated by the development and delivery of a well-researched and contextually informed professional growth program for instructional leaders.

### Next Steps

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The work of the principal is vital to successful teaching and learning in schools today. Any changes in educational governance will no doubt have an impact on the work of principals and the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation welcomes the opportunity to present a proposal for a comprehensive and on-going leadership development and support program for principals in all contexts and at all stages of their career pathway.

The Federation has the capacity and expertise to provide meaningful professional growth and leadership supports for principals that would be built upon many years of successful initiatives within the organization as well as in collaboration with its sector partners. If supported in principle by the Ministry of Education, the Federation is prepared to work with the partners in education to strengthen school leadership in the education sector.

A coherent program of professional development, which enables principals in all regions of the province to access programs and resources that address the needs of their respective school community, is required to effectively meet the goal of delivering the best possible education for all students. The core elements of this collaboratively designed program will take into consideration the enduring strategies established in educational sector planning as well as the Student First understandings of: shared responsibility; relationships; learning environment; student and teacher support; and, engagement of the student/learner.

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<sup>9</sup> Renihan, P. (January 1999). pp. iv-vi.

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