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**Implementation of the Alberta Accountability Framework**   
  
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**Introduction**

In 1994 the government of Alberta introduced legislation that mandated accountability for all government departments, including education.  At the same time, the provincial budget cut dollars to education by 12.4%.  The message to educators was clear: reduce education costs while retaining and improving education results.  The impact of these directives was dramatic.  The Alberta ministry of education closed regional offices and reduced staff.  School boards, through amalgamations, were reduced in number from 140 to sixty. One intent of the accountability legislation was to align classroom, school and jurisdiction goals with provincial education goals and priorities.  The alignment was monitored through Three-Year Plans and Annual Education Results Reports that were submitted to the ministry by school jurisdictions.  At the same time, decision-making was decentralized to the school level and site-based administrators were given the responsibility of developing school plans that reflected jurisdictional and provincial education goals.

This paper summarizes the development of the provincial accountability framework and reports an action research project that investigated the implementation of this framework from a field perspective. The paper is a synthesis of four papers by different authors.  The four papers have been merged to present a more comprehensive story of the development and implementation of the Alberta accountability framework.

**Research Design**

The research reported here is based on the participant observation of an associate superintendent and a school principal who worked in the same moderate-sized, rural Alberta school jurisdiction as it worked to implement a new provincial accountability policy.  Also represented are a ministry of education official, who worked with the jurisdiction and monitored the accountability work, and an external critic, who provided objective input to the action research project as it progressed. The Ministry official contributed the historical and legislative context of the Alberta accountability model based on analysis of related statute, policy and background documents. The documents analysis covers policy design initiatives from 1993 to 1996. The principal, through reflection, shares her experience of implementing accountability as a principal of a moderate size kindergarten to grade 3 school in a primarily rural Alberta school jurisdiction. The associate superintendent was formerly employed as a policy consultant in the Alberta Ministry where he played a major role in writing the School Authorities Accountability Policy.  Upon joining the school board central office staff in October 1997 he was assigned responsibility for implementing the same policy he had helped craft while with the Ministry.

This relatively unique set of circumstances stimulated the idea of documenting the experience of transformation from policy maker to policy implementer through journal writing.  A daily journal was the key method in capturing the experience of implementing the accountability policy. Journal entries, made from October 1, 1997 to November 19, 1998 were analyzed and any text addressing accountability processes were isolated. Next, the fundamental topic of the entry was labeled and described briefly. These brief descriptions were then reviewed and categorized. Frequency patterns for each topic were noted and this topic frequency map was used to identify the key implementation themes discussed in this paper.

Finally, the paper is supplemented with a critique by a professor from the University of Lethbridge. The four co-authors met on several occasions to review the development of the work reported here and to explore and explicate through dialogue the inter-related themes as they developed.  Researcher bias has been minimized through these process meetings of the co-authors where emerging perspectives were critiqued and validated.

**Limitations, Delimitations and Caveats**

A purpose of this research was to compare policy making with policy implementation. It is not an evaluation of a School Division's implementation efforts. Data collection is primarily through the eyes and experiences of the authors and is, therefore, subject to the biases of the authors.    For example, the authors believe that accountability functions have potential to improve school and school jurisdiction effectiveness, but only if implemented with appropriate supporting structures and processes. Poorly implemented accountability models can conceivably do more harm than good.

**The Ministry Official's Perspective - Historical Overview**

In the May 1993 presentation of Budget '93 to the Alberta Legislature, the Provincial Treasurer introduced a new approach to government. One of the elements of change was more open and accountable government. In response to this initiative, Alberta Education evolved an accountability structure that involves multiple stakeholders, is measurable and is accessible to the public. The new accountability strategy was centered on the development of three-year plans by all government departments, agencies and organizations receiving public funding.  Outcome measures were an important component of these plans. In addition, each government department, agency and organization must report annually on progress achieved. The focus on measurable results was a hallmark of the plan for accountability. This new accountability framework also applied to local school authorities that received government funding.  The Alberta Ministry of Education designed a system for planning and reporting that would be used by school jurisdictions and schools that focused on measurable results.

The Alberta Legislature, Office of the Auditor General (1994) produced a core document that was instrumental is defining accountability in the Alberta Government.  This document defined accountability as follows (Alberta Legislature, 1994:1):

*Accountability is an obligation to answer for the execution of one's assigned responsibilities.*

In simpler terms, accountability is reporting.  People account, or report to other people.  Therefore, it is useful to consider accountability in context of the relationships between the people or organizations involved.

The basic ingredients of successful accountability relationships are as follows:

- set measurable goals, and responsibilities,   
- plan what needs to be done to achieve goals   
- do the work and monitor progress,   
- report on results,   
- evaluate results and provide feedback.

Building on the Auditor General's work, the office of the Provincial Treasurer undertook the lead role in government for the development of department three year plans which included the development of a set of common elements that would be used by all departments. These required elements included: environmental issues that influence the organization's operation, a mission/vision statement that describes a preferred future, prioritized goal statements with accompanying performance indicators, key strategies required to achieve the designated goals, and a financial plan summarizing three year revenue/expenditure targets.

To assist in the development of a more accountable education system, the Minister of Education appointed a three member M.L.A. Implementation Team in March 1994.   This team consulted with the public about what information they wanted to know about the education system and how this information would best be communicated to them. The I-Team consulted with a Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Committee and more than 600 Albertans.  Shortly thereafter, in June 1995, the Accountability in Education Policy Framework summarized the key messages heard by the I-Team at consultation meetings. The team concluded:

* There is strong support for accountability at all levels of the education system: provincial, school district and school.
* The costs of reporting must be justified by their usefulness in improving education. Staff time and dollars are not to be taken away from the classroom.
* Results reports should be linked to education to enable progress to be assessed and reported in a meaningful way.
* Results reports should be clear and concise.
* The provincial accountability system must recognize that some required information is already collected and reported at the local level. The accountability      framework is not starting from scratch.
* School districts and schools want the flexibility to develop local measures that reflect and make sense to their communities. Flexibility is especially necessary with rural districts and small schools, as well as with those who wish to address the faith component of their school.
* Academic results are not enough to judge the performance of all children.
* Timelines for phasing-in accountability requirements must be reasonable.
* Results reports need to include some valid and reliable measures of teacher accountability. Parents want more information about how teachers are evaluated.
* Mandatory measures should be reported in the same way across the province. Guidelines need to be established about the elements that comprise the performance measures and on the reporting format.
* School districts and schools use a wide variety of ways to communicate results and need the flexibility to continue to do this.
* School councils have a potential role in communicating and using results, especially at the school level.

In 1995 the proclamation of the Government Accountability Act required each government Minister to prepare an annual plan for the ministry as well as an annual report. The Act further specified that school boards must prepare annual plans and reports in a form and at a time acceptable to the Minister. The 1995 Legislature also approved an amendment to the School Act that added Section 60.2 - Accountability of board:

*60.2(1) A board shall develop a reporting and accountability system on any matter the Minister prescribes.   
(2)  A board shall disseminate any information in the reports and accounts produced under the reporting and accountability system it develops under subsection (1) to students, parents, electors or the Minister in the manner the Minister prescribes.   
(3)  A board shall use any information in the reports and accounts produced under the reporting and accountability system it develops under subsections (1) in the manner the Minister prescribes.*

Supplemental to this statutory structure was the Accountability in Education Policy Framework. The key principles upon which the framework was based provided that:

* Provincially mandated goals, strategies, and measures for school boards and schools will be few in number but sufficient to ensure alignment with key provincial directions.
* Six of the nine provincial goals and eight of the 40 provincial strategies applied directly to school boards for the 1995/96 education plan. The designated goals were:

\* high learning standards and quality programs for students,   
\* parental support and involvement,   
\* community support and services,   
\* excellent teaching,   
\* an efficient and effective education system,   
\* public accountability.

* School boards should determine additional goals, strategies and measures to reflect local needs.
* School councils should be considered as key participants in communicating local results and in suggesting ways to improve education at the school and board levels on the basis of local results.

The first provincial three-year plan for education, Meeting the Challenge, was completed in early 1994.  The first Ministry of Education Results Report was completed in the fall of 1995. Alberta Education supported the work to be done by school boards by preparing a Guide for Developing School Board Plans and Results Reports. School boards developed an interim plan for the 1995/96 school year based on Meeting the Challenge II, the second provincial three year plan for education. The interim plans were submitted to the Minister by September 30, 1995. Thereafter, boards would develop annually a three-year education plan aligned with provincial directions by April 30. The first school board Annual Education Results Reports, based on the Interim Plans, were completed by November 30, 1996. Subsequent Results Reports on board three-year plans are due annually on November 30.

Ministry of Education policy also required school-level planning and reporting. School three-year plans, as an extension of the provincial accountability framework, were to be implemented by April 1997. These plans were required to address three of the provincial goals and related strategies, as well as additional local goals and strategies reflective of local needs.  The school plans were also to be sensitive to advice from school councils. The first mandatory school results reports, aligned with school board results reports, were to be in place by November 1998.

**Review of Related Literature**

Education accountability is a source of major controversy in North American school systems and with their publics. Jones and Whitford (1997:  276-277) criticized Kentucky's student assessment based accountability model for encouraging teachers to focus on "Öwhatever is thought to raise test scores rather than on instruction aimed at addressing individual student needs."  In view of this criticism, the authors called for a next generation of school accountability involving, "Öa movement away from bureaucratic control toward professional accountability."   This movement would involve professional commitment, not just compliance and would be based on a more inclusive and collaborative accountability model using qualitative as well as quantitative data (1997:281).

Shields and Knapp (1997:294) recently reviewed accountability models in the U.S. and concluded that authorities can be sources of ideas and provide direction and resources, as much as sources of constraints and obstacles. They observe that the ultimate proof [of successful reform] lies in student outcomes and ascertaining these outcomes in some convincing richness and detail is the next great challenge confronting school-based reformers (1997:294).

Wagner (1998:512-514) also focuses on school based reform processes and observes that too often students, parents and teachers are not included in the 'publics' to be engaged in change processes. He suggests a change process should reflect parsimony and focus on a few important priorities. Wagner (1998:517) further suggests that, "All school improvement plans should be public documents and should be widely read and discussed both within and beyond the schools."  He mirrors Jones and Whitford (1997) in calling for change models based on collaboration rather than compliance and notes that trust and respect are necessary for meaningful and effective dialogue.

Hatch (1998:518-520) also points out that comprehensive reform or change initiatives [such as provincial accountability models] are in trouble, lacking coordination, a clear rationale for change, and a common vision integrated with effective improvement processes. Hatch (1998:522) concludes, "Important differences in the theories of action underlying many reform efforts, the challenges of changing everything at once, and the absence of an accessible knowledge base for school improvement all pose significant challenges". Furthermore,  "a failure to examine critically the process of educational reform and not just the problems in schools will contribute to the continuing struggles between people, programs and ideas." Alberta Superintendent and then President of the College of Alberta School Superintendents, D.  Lynn (1998), in a paper presented in January to a zone meeting of the College of Alberta School Superintendents, commented on change processes in Alberta Schools. He noted, "We are at the limits for improving schools within the current context of structures, resources and school system culture."   Similar to the observations of the American authors noted above, Lynn further stated,

*The major restructuring changes mandated by the Province of Alberta have not fundamentally affected the learning experiences of students. The classroom has been protected; not changed.  .  .  Little systemic change has occurred in schools. Alberta's restructuring efforts have increased the pressures on school personnel without providing school personnel the opportunities to significantly change the lived curriculum -- the learning experiences of students.*

Based on these observations, Lynn concluded, "unless we change the structures in which people work, we will not be able to change the culture in which they work.  The structures must be enabling. If we do not enable our personnel, then we are sowing the seeds of disillusionment."

In February 1998 there was substantial discussion about accountability on The Change Agency, an Internet based listserv maintained at the University of Calgary, Faculty of Education. This discussion was stimulated by a teacher who asked, "Who are teachers accountable to"  and  "How is accountability measured?"  One respondent, McClure (1998), articulated what could be considered the basis for a professional model of accountability when he commented,

*Perhaps we are placing too much emphasis on the ways we are measuring accountability - i.e., achievement tests for grades 3, 6 and 9 and diploma exams for grade 12 - when we should be examining how well are we, as educators, meeting the 'needs' of our stakeholders - i.e., through innovative teaching practices, child centered curricula, parent orientations,  school evaluations, open houses, public forums and school councils. Many of the parents I have worked with place very little importance on achievement tests. Their main concern is that they are allowed to be actively involved in their child's education. The accountability they appear to be looking for is information - i.e., how well are you - the teacher - doing at keeping them informed on their child's educational development? As I see it, that is what accountability is really about!*

Otto and Skulsky (1998) provided some further insight through their input to the Change Agency regarding what conditions might be necessary for a professional model of accountability. They commented,

*Much conversation lately has centered around accountability. This topic is one that stirs up many feelings in a wide range of places from staff rooms to boardrooms to legislatures to family rooms. The call for accountability in the education system cannot be ignored or treated incidentally. In order for accountability to be meaningful for all stakeholders, there needs to be honest and open dialogue involving all parties. This dialogue needs to be frequent and ongoing, not just once or twice and in an adversarial atmosphere. The underlying factors needed in the very beginning are of course trust and respect. Without trust and respect there is unlikely to be any real learning or sharing of ideas.*

School effectiveness research has brought to light the importance of organizational culture and the development of conditions, such as trust and respect, conducive to creating effective schools (Barth, 1990; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1989). The building of culture in an organization is an evolutionary and ongoing process (Schein, 1985:83-84), fuelled by "external pressures, internal potentials, responses to critical events, and ...  chance factors."  Organizational culture evolves as the outcome of group learning when people face a problem, work it out together, and find a solution that continues to work in future situations.  Holly and Southworth (1989:25) called this evolving culture the school's development culture, where culture "grows from the inside, tempered by what is happening on the outside."

A primary responsibility of an effective leader in building a healthy culture is the development of a clear, shared vision (Barth, 1990; Goldring & Pasternack, 1994; Rosenholtz, 1989).  Although it is important for each staff member to have their own personal vision, it is more important for a successful school culture to build and define a vision collectively (Barth, 1990).  In her study of school culture, Rosenholtz (1989:39) called these schools 'high consensus', where "shared goals, beliefs, and values led teachers through their talk to a more ennobling vision ...  that bound them, including newcomers, to pursue the same vision."  Researchers agree that one evidence of an effective school culture is collaboration (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1989).  Collaboration promotes effective school culture and helps break down teacher isolation.

This limited review of related literature helps to identify several critical supports necessary for successful implementation of accountability models in schools and school systems. A central theme is, what variables are most influential in making an accountability model meaningful versus meaningless for the policy implementers?   Variables observed to contribute to meaningful accountability could be seen as fundamental to a professional model of accountability and involve:

* inclusion of the key actors in all phases of the decision-making process;
* open and honest dialogue and trust among all parties - from policy makers to the complete set of people responsible for policy implementation;
* an emphasis on collaboration vs. compliance mechanisms;
* design simplicity or parsimony;
* appropriate use of student achievement testing; and,
* routine review and critical analysis of the policy design and implementation processes with the view to making adjustments as necessary.

**The Associate Superintendent's Perspective**

This section details the themes that were synthesized form the daily journal entries of the associate superintendent chronicling his experiences of implementing the accountability policy. Journal entries were made from October 1997 to November 1998.

**Relationships - Alberta Education and School Boards**

Ministry - jurisdiction relationships were driven primarily by timing and content requirements for the school board's Annual Education Results Report (AERR) and Three-Year Education Plan.   Due dates for both documents were moved back ? four weeks, from October 30 to November 30, for the results report, and six weeks, from April 30 to June 15, for the plan. The latter change held major significance for the timing of the relationship between board and school plans.  It also raised questions within the system about the capacity of the Ministry to appropriately envision the accountability process in the field and to meet its commitments, given the downsizing that has occurred in the Ministry over the past few years. One educator in the system commented, "Those guys (the Ministry) really are making this up as they go."

The school jurisdiction decided to proceed with the plan development process with the original April 30 completion objective, so that the boards 1998-2001 plan could reasonably inform school plans for the coming school year. In the view of senior administrators in the jurisdiction, delaying the board's plan completion to June 15 would have made this relationship untenable.

**Relationships - Central Office and the Schools**

The development of positive central office relationships with the schools was heavily dependent on central office staff providing support and assistance to school administrators and staff. Opportunities to establish positive working relationships with the schools were valued by the associate superintendent for numerous reasons, not the least of which was the recognition that positive working relationships would facilitate more effective accountability linkages between central office and the schools. However, development of positive rapport with school personnel was not sufficient in itself to counteract the existence of tangible skepticism among school principals and teachers that the accountability policy would improve the lived reality of students and teachers.

The jurisdiction's Annual Education Results Report (AERR) was completed at the end of November and the strategy emerged to position this visible outcome of accountability as a key element in an on-going process of critical reflection. This process was premised on celebrating the school division's successes, as well as improving system weaknesses in a community focused on growth. Full page ads were run in all the local newspapers early in January 1998 to convey the key points in the AERR, featuring both system strengths and weaknesses. The audience for these advertisements was as much the staff of the school Division as the public.

Several journal entries noted that the work of accountability is data and text rich and moves through iterative development stages. Computer based communications are particularly well suited to involving school based staff in the accountability cycle. However, communications structures within the Division presented challenges to implementation efforts. Ironically, it was easier to communicate through e-mail to colleagues in Australia, the United States and other provinces, than to many principals in the Division's schools, given the nascent development stage of the system's e-mail networks. Several journal entries commented on this ongoing barrier to policy implementation efforts.

A more compelling and substantive barrier to implementing the accountability policy, though, emerged in the form of the day to day crises that arose in schools and in central office. The phrase, "When you're up to your ass in alligators, it's hard to remember the original objective was to drain the swamp" often seemed relevant when addressing issues of student misbehavior, staffing matters, parent complaints, sensitive board politics, budget matters or other organizational crises.

This "swamp" observation was also linked to resource issues. A trustee, when reviewing the AERR, was openly hostile to the accountability requirements in the face of several years of fiscal restraint. When exasperation with the pressures of day to day management challenges is linked to frustration with resource levels, a potent combination of resentment to the accountability requirements can become entrenched.   
Later in the school year, in late June, the school board's strong concerns about the fiscal position of the jurisdiction was evident as the board spent extensive time and effort reviewing the school level plans with an almost exclusive perspective on each schools budget submission. Although boards have a reputation of focusing on the "three B's" (buses, buildings and budgets) what seemed to be evolving was a compulsive need to closely monitor school level budgeting as a means to ensure the boards budget would be balanced and that school budgets provided optimally for students' needs. This focus on system and school finance provided limited opportunity to see the school plans as a vehicle to understanding broader issues of program or the more complex dynamics affecting the quality of learning in the jurisdiction's schools.

**Relationships - School Councils and the Public**

The concept of building stronger linkages between schools and their communities is fundamental to the underlying theory of accountability.   Several exciting possibilities for more tightly coupling schools and community were observed in relationship to implementation of the accountability policy. One school council was enthusiastic about getting involved in strategic planning as a means of improving the school's climate. The possibilities of linking the school council's strategic planning initiative to the school administration's responsibility for completing its school plan as a function of the Board's plan was explored and held promise. Although these opportunities were promising, they needed to be aggressively pursued to achieve fruition.   
Another promising development was the creation of a Council of School Councils (COSC) supported by a formal Board policy. This COSC provided a dual layer of community input and involvement in the accountability processes of planning and reporting both at the school and board level. Overall, this area was quite stimulating and exciting in the additional energy it brought to the accountability experience.

**Accountability Processes**

***Simplicity vs.  Complexity***  
Similar to biological evolution, accountability activities demonstrated a tendency to increased complexity.   Work in December and January on translating the then existing 1997-2000 school board Three-Year Education Plan into an Action Plan demonstrated the ambitious nature of the Board's existing plan. The act of allocating resources to three-year plan strategies helped to more realistically define what could be achieved in the planning time frame. The emerging perception of the plan concluded that it was too complex given the resources available to support plan implementation. One could argue that the genius of planning is in knowing when to stop a work in progress.

***Implementation Capacity***  
A concern regarding implementation capacity became apparent in February during a visit to one of the schools in the system. While visiting a school where a number of challenges were ongoing, the "irony of accountability" seemed apparent, i.e. those schools most in need of accountability as an improvement process are the least able to implement it.   External supports from the central office and linkages with the community may indeed be necessary conditions for effective change in schools lacking an internal culture supportive of accountability.  Witness the principal's reflection section in this paper.

***Reporting Cycle***   
Ministry of Education policy requires that an Annual Education Results Report (AERR) be completed by October 30, but, as noted above, effective in 1997 this deadline was extended to November 30. This adjustment was well received since work on the report did not begin until October 14. A week was spent discussing and deciding on report design. The power of good tools such as interactive word processing with spread sheet/graphing software was extremely helpful in pulling the report together in a timely way.   
By mid-November a draft of the AERR was tabled with the School Board for comment and reaction. The report was positioned as a vehicle for improving education in the system and was positively received by the trustees in this context. The Board asked for some minor changes and the final document was sent to the Ministry before the deadline date.

On November 26, the AERR was shared with the system's Administrators' Association as information. The system administrators were seen as crucial to successful utilization of the AERR within the system, so the strategy at this meeting was to emphasize the elements in the AERR that were cause for celebration while also noting there were also key areas requiring improvement. Some discussion was held about how the AERR should inform the planning process, but the relationship of reporting to school and board level planning stimulated more questions than answers at that time.

By early December it was clear that there were two audiences for the AERR; internal and external to the jurisdiction. The internal audience was the staff and the external group was the jurisdiction's clients - interested students, parents and the public. Senior administration discussed with the Board the merits of a full-page advertisement highlighting the AERR versus mailing a synopsis to ratepayers. The decision was taken to use the full- page advertisement in every newspaper in the system with the objective of raising staff awareness of the key implications of the AERR, and to communicate to the public the message that the AERR was a document of hope and improvement. The advertisements appeared in the papers the first week of January immediately following the Christmas break, but did not stimulate any reactions, which suggested the public impact was limited.

The AERR was used strategically on two other occasions. On December 9 it was shared with the Council of School Councils where again it was described as a document to facilitate improvement processes in the jurisdiction. At this meeting the parents high interest in meaningful input to the decision-making processes in the jurisdiction was clear.

The AERR was also used to highlight weaknesses in achievement test and diploma exam results in March 1998 at the annual multi-stakeholder meeting to review the existing three-year plan. While considerable caution was exercised to not overstate the significance of the test results, the data was cited as one set of information to use in setting priorities and improvement strategies,  these high stakes test results have a notable capacity to negatively affect the attitudes of some staff towards accountability. Subsequent evaluation of the planning day indicated it was well received and provided meaningful relationships between planning and reporting. However, the results also demonstrated that considerable work needs to be done so that staff are empowered by test results; so that they use the data to demonstrate to the community their knowledge of strengths and weaknesses and their commitment to address the latter.

***Planning Cycle***   
The Ministry of Education's initial Planning Policy (Alberta Education, 1996:2) stated that planning, "ensures that overall directions for change and improvement to education are focused, efficient and effective throughout the education system."   The planning cycle was initiated in early January with discussion at Superintendents Council regarding the implementation status of the current three-year plan and a review of what administrative actions were needed to keep the plan alive as a force for change and improvement in the jurisdiction. As noted above, some concerns were identified at this time that the three-year plan was too complex for the administrative resources available to facilitate implementation. Central office staff resolved to look for ways to shift the plan into a more action oriented strategic framework to help make the transition from plan to action more direct and concise.

From January 13 to January 28 the decision evolved that the planning cycle should flow from the board to the schools in keeping with the top-down flow of planning directions from the province, but complemented by grassroots input to the board's plan. On January 13, at Superintendent's Council, senior administrators concluded that previous school plans, the AERR, the provincial plan and current staff and community input should all inform the revisions to the Board's three-year plan by April 30. A revised Board three-year plan by this date would provide the basis for updating school plans by the end of May before the advent of the June school-closing rush. The decision regarding the relationship between board and school planning was reviewed with the system's principals on February 28 and was accepted by the school administrators. However, they also expressed strong concerns regarding tight timelines for meaningful input and questioned whether it is feasible to fit all of the planning and reporting requirements across board and school levels in a single school year. The verdict is still out on this question, but the decision at least brought some closure to what the intra-jurisdiction planning dynamics should be.

The organization of the three-year plan review process occurred in February and March. A multi-stakeholder planning day, including parents, students, trustees, principals, ministry officials and senior administration, was set for March 23 despite delays in the Ministry's annual guidelines to planning and reporting. Senior administration decided to proceed without the Ministry's guidelines, as noted earlier, for fear that to delay would make meaningful inter-activity between the board plan and school plans unattainable, especially in light of earlier concerns of principals regarding the already tight timelines for meaningful planning to occur.

Sixty-one people representing a good cross section of internal and external clients attended the March 23 planning day. The journal entry for the day commented, "The days agenda worked well and people seemed happy with the opportunity for inputÖ."  The formal evaluation of the day confirmed this impression and also demonstrated a strong desire by the participants to engage in this grass roots level planning activity annually.

The third draft of the board's plan was completed in mid-April, and opportunities for the document to effect strategic analysis by the board had to compete with, as opposed to complement, budget preparation processes by the school board. The April 14 journal entry notes, "We may need to defer approval of the Three-Year Education Plan, ironically because of budget issues ? suggests the plan is far from the strategic document it should be in order to fundamentally affect key budget decisions."  The Three-Year Education Plan was approved by the Board on May 7, 1998.

***School Planning***   
When the jurisdictional plan strategies were reviewed at the Administrators' Association meeting on March 26, they stimulated questions regarding the relationship of the board three-year plan to school plans. It was suggested that to facilitate the school level planning, central office should develop and provide digital templates of the school plans based on the board's plan. This suggestion next was discussed at Superintendent's Council and the decision to proceed with it was confirmed on March 31. The digital templates were reviewed at the April 29 Administrators Association meeting and were emailed or sent via diskettes on April 30. Principals expressed appreciation for this support for their planning responsibilities and the strategy of using technology to ensure linkages between board and school plans became an on-going experiment. One senior administrator commented, "If principals don't know or are not sure of how to create school plans they will resist it, but if they have help they will be much more positively oriented to the process." Although supports like digital plan templates can facilitate school planning, attitudes can be deeply entrenched. One principal expressed considerable anxiety regarding the impact achievement test results could have on the school's image. Another principal when asked how the school planning process was going, commented, "It's hard to generate enthusiasm [among the staff] for planning when they respond,  'we did that last year'."  Reflecting on the above scenario's, a May 19 journal entry states,

*So we see a pretty dramatic negative impact on schools. It is one thing to argue these points [of the potential benefits of accountability and planning] and get acceptance, but one knows to get true buy-in requires much, much more. It could require a long-term investment of time and effort to really effect meaningful change with respect to accountability processes [in] some schools.*

In mid-June the School Board devoted two days to meetings with each school principal to provide an opportunity for each principal to present their school plan. Comments regarding the digital template were generally positive. One principal did think that it resulted in a loss of ownership in the school plan, but at the same time appreciated the assistance it provided. Another principal commented on the limited time available for meaningful staff input. The plans demonstrated that the range of staff involvement in the school planning processes ranged from token participation to highly meaningful dialogue and discussion.   
Principals typically clearly highlighted key issues affecting their schools, although trustees focused consistently on the school budget data presented in the plans to ensure the school budgets were balanced relative to the bottom line and in relationship to students' needs for texts, etc. One principal shared the perception of their school council that the planning process at the school level seemed top-heavy with issues and priorities coming from the school board or the province.

**Accountability and Professional Development**

Senior administration agreed on January 13 to use the Annual Education Results Report and the Three-Year Education Plan as primary resources for a needs assessment of system professional development (PD) priorities and for focusing available system-based PD resources. The need for a distinct dichotomy between system and school based PD was recognized, but senior administration also supported the view that both can be informed by the accountability processes of planning, evaluating and reporting.

Actions to implement this orientation to PD were initiated at the jurisdiction's PD Committee on February 2 when the AERR was reviewed in detail with the objective of identifying system strengths to celebrate, and weaknesses that might be targeted through PD activities. The PD Committee met again on April 27 and at this meeting the draft of the new School Board three-year plan was discussed and specific PD needs rooted in the plan were identified along with the proposed responsibility head for following up the PD need. This PD framework worked well in assisting the committee in structuring the PD day scheduled for October 1998 and demonstrated a functional link between accountability processes and PD needs/activities.

**Resources - Staff, Dollars and Time**

Implementing the provincial accountability requirements takes a substantial investment of staff resources, ironically at a time when Ministry funding guidelines required downsizing of central office administrative staff resources on the premise that education dollars should flow optimally to the classroom. These dynamics were notable in April when target-setting procedures received limited discussion because of the competition for central office administration time from staffing matters.

Launching a major policy initiative like the Ministry's School Authority Accountability Policy, without providing provincial resources intended to support policy implementation may work on the premise these accountability requirements should be in place in any effective school organization. On the other hand, it may encourage central office policy implementers to engage in ritualistic compliance without a commitment to build accountability into the organizational culture of the school jurisdiction. In the latter scenario, additional incentives would be needed to link accountability to a professional ethic of school system improvement.   
In the complex world of school administration, time is always a scarce commodity. School level planning and, beginning in November 1998, reporting accountability requirements have caused concerns among system principals regarding the time requirements it places upon them. Several principals have recommended the accountability cycle should cover two or three years instead of the tight timelines inherent in an annual cycle of planning and reporting.

Accountability requirements can complement a school culture where critical reflection and improvement processes are already in place, as witnessed in Bolender (1998). However, the "irony of accountability" noted above suggests that multiple supports are needed in schools that lack the prerequisite school culture for implementing accountability requirements. At a special meeting of the School Board on February 11, 1998 to review school-based decision making, budget and accountability processes, strong feelings were expressed by trustees regarding provincial resource issues acting as a barrier to implementation of the accountability requirements of the Ministry. A journal entry on this day noted one trustee, "Öwas critical of governments emphasis on accountability without providing adequate resources to achieve the results they [government] were emphasizingÖgovernment has gotten it backwards regarding emphasizing accountability ahead of resourcing education adequately."

**The School Principal's Perspective**

One of the authors was an Alberta school principal when the government's accountability initiative was first implemented.   It was her experience that the expectations raised by the accountability framework affirmed work already in progress at the school and did not require excessive effort or time to meet the planning and reporting requirements. Given the observed reaction of other schools in the jurisdiction, this reaction was atypical.  This is her story.

When the lamp of accountability shone on all facets of school life and forced teachers and principals to examine their practices and priorities in this new light, school administrators had to rethink school structure and governance and their role as leaders.  Could the daily life of a school be described in a language of goals, strategies, measures, targets and results?  Given decreased support at central and regional offices and increased workloads at the school level, how could this planning and reporting process be addressed efficiently and effectively?

An explanation of this school's ability to embrace the new directives is linked directly to the culture of collaboration and community that already existed in the school. This school was opened a few years prior to the introduction of the accountability legislation in 1994. At the schools opening in November 1990 the student population totaled 105 with a staff of seven.  It expanded three years later to 183 students and 15 staff members.  Construction of eleven additional classrooms, a library, a gymnasium, a music room and more office space was completed in August 1994.  Doors opened in September 1994 to 335 students and 33 staff members.

Through the three years as a small school, empowerment of teachers and nurturing a community of learners were the primary goals of the principal.  Consequently, initial staff efforts were directed towards collectively and collaboratively establishing a clear vision and specific goals for the school.  Teachers supported each other through joint planning, shared resources, and shared decision making regarding most school matters from supervision schedules to budgeting and ordering.

As plans for the 1993-94 expansion became reality, staff members worried that the supportive and collaborative climate they had worked to create would be lost in the changes brought by growth. Maintaining and encouraging this climate became their priority.  As staff were transferred from the overcrowded sister elementary school, the staff took steps to ensure that new staff were welcomed and actively involved in the process of defining school vision and values (Barth, 1990). Specifically, the staff wanted to share their vision of working as a team within a truly collaborative culture (Rosenholtz, 1989; Wise, 1992).

Prior to school opening in August 1993, team building was the focus of a school-based professional development activity with all staff. Recognizing that a climate of trust and co-operation was necessary as a foundation for effective collaboration (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991), the session began with The Goose Story.  This tale presents a metaphor for teamwork through its description of the life and flight of the goose.  It stresses encouragement, shared leadership, and loyalty despite differences.  It set the tone for the tasks that followed.

First, staff members individually completed needs assessment questionnaires prepared by the principal: (1) what do you consider to be our strengths as a school community? (2) what do you see as our weaknesses? (3) what changes would you initiate immediately? (4) what are five important functions of the principal? (5) what evidence would you expect to see of satisfactory fulfillment of these functions?

Second, responses from the questionnaires were shared through a group brainstorming exercise. Responses were voluntary; no one was put on the spot to speak, and all responses were accepted.  As the brainstorming progressed and strengths, weaknesses, and changes were listed, recurring themes became apparent.  Out of these common threads, values for the school were listed.  Specific goals for each value were developed for the school year 1993-94.  Three weeks later at a staff meeting the rough draft of values and objectives was amended slightly and adopted unanimously for the year.  Copies of the final draft were posted throughout the school for students, staff and parents to see.  A copy was included in the school handbook and one was sent to central office.

Thus the staff had, two years prior to government requirement, entered into a commitment and embarked on planning that would hold them accountable to their vision, values and strategies for the 1993-94 school year.  The mission statement, "Celebrating a Community of Learners", epitomized in brief the joint vision for the school.  The values agreed upon by the staff provided the underpinnings for the mission statement: staff cohesiveness, co-operative and supportive school climate, well-being and safety for all students, respect for and by all people in the school, learning and achievement, and celebration of our accomplishments.  The objectives built on the values were specific and measurable, and provided the first steps in building a school culture that reflected the staff's vision.

By Christmas, objectives of the 1993-94 plan had been met.  Were the staff ready to add shared leadership to their accountability? The idea of teams, each responsible for specific school goals and their ensuing strategies and measures was suggested.  The staff responded enthusiastically.  Ideas flowed as one staff member suggested a conflict management program that the "well-being and safety team" could tackle, while another introduced the idea of a "learning team" that would examine effective integration of the new library resource centre with the curriculum.  These ideas expressed not only creativity, but also a willingness and readiness to share leadership through teams.

After three years of nurturing collaboration and shared leadership, of encouraging staff members to try a new teaching method or take a course, of celebrating successes and accepting differences, of admitting mistakes and discussing failures, courage to share leadership had infected the staff.   Discussions overheard in the hallway and staff room included "I have an idea for this team", "Why don't we try this?" and "Has anyone ever heard of this?" A teacher one year from retirement told the principal that this was the most exciting time she has had teaching.

Team building became the focus for the remainder of the school year.  One hour of each staff meeting in January and February 1994 was spent determining and clarifying the focus for each team. Staff members signed up for the team of their choice and the teams emerged evenly balanced. In March 1994 an external facilitator led a school-based workshop on team-building skills.  Characteristics of high-performing teams were examined: a shared vision, open communication, trust, useful creative conflict, appropriate working methods, appropriate leadership, regular review and reflection, enabling individual development, and sound links with other teams (Murgatroyd & Morgan, 1992).

The commitment of 'school' time to team work emphasized the importance placed on a collaborative approach to leadership.  As a continued acknowledgment of the importance of the teams in the school culture, monthly staff meetings in subsequent school years would devote time for team-building and team work.  Remaining agenda items were covered at shorter, weekly meetings.  As well, the professional development day in March 1995 was set aside to examine our team work and school plan results to date,  and to talk about what was working and what was not.

As a result of building a collaborative school culture with a strong commitment to a common vision, the school plan for 1994-95 contained goals and strategies identified by each team that upheld the vision and values of the school.  It was then a sensible transition to link these plans to the government accountability framework.  It was a continuation of the work already begun because this staff had already learned the benefits of collaborating to build a successful school.  In mandating accountability, the government of Alberta was providing an opportunity for all schools to do the same.

Since 1995, two years before it was required, the school's plan reflected the Alberta Ministry of Education's goals and strategies (Alberta Education, 1995). For example, the provincial goal of excellent teaching was addressed in the 1996-97 strategy by developing student portfolios that follow the child from year to year.  Teachers decided what the portfolios should contain and met by grade to communicate with the receiving teachers current and recommended programming.  Teachers also shared 'best practices' in grade meetings, staff meeting and at district-wide professional development days.  Some of the 'practices' included cooperative learning, hands-on activities for the new math curriculum, student portfolios and student-led conferencing.

The Ministry's goal of increased parental support and involvement was also addressed in school plans since 1995.  Two teachers were trained in student-led conferencing and, because of their sharing and enthusiasm for the effectiveness of this method of communicating student progress to parents, 50% of the teachers adopted this approach.

As well, there was a high level of parental involvement throughout the school.  Parents and community members were actively encouraged and welcomed to the school: to eat lunch with their child; to listen to children read; to prepare materials; to work in the library; and, to help organize curriculum nights where students demonstrated skills in specific subjects, such as science and art.  The more that parents became involved in the daily activities of the school, the better was their understanding of the ways that teachers fulfilled curriculum and achievement requirements.  As their understanding increased, so too did their commitment to working with the staff in the best interests of the students.  Increased parental involvement was also evident in the establishment of a school council, as directed by Ministry.  The school council advised the school on matters ranging from budget and staffing, to curriculum focus and fund-raising.  Parents raised over $40,000 for playground equipment after the final school expansion.  Since 1994 they have systematically contributed funds for each class to have a small 'library' of math enrichment resources.

Public accountability, goal nine from the ministry's 1995 Business Plan, was already a focus of both the evaluation team and the communication team.  Results of the school's "Satisfaction Survey" in April, 1995 were used in determining goals, strategies and targets for the 1995-96 school plan.  School-wide achievement results were published in the school newsletter, and individual test results were discussed with parents at the reporting conferences.  Achievement results were also targeted and reported in the annual school plans and reports.  These results were used to direct teaching practices in the classroom.

Student achievement was, and is, an on-going priority provincially and locally.  High learning standards and quality programs for students were the goals of the achievement team.  Achievement scores were tracked and targets were set for the following years based on these results.  Since 1995, achievement scores for English language arts and math have met or exceeded provincial targets of 85% at the acceptable standard and 15% at the level of excellence.  French immersion students surpassed provincial targets substantially.

Finally, starting with the 1994-95 school plan, the achievement team analyzed Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) scores and Canadian Achievement Test (CAT) scores for strengths and weaknesses.  The analysis was used to target strengths and weakness in student learning and to direct teacher efforts where improvement was needed.  For example, noting a general weakness in spelling in the grade two CAT scores, the grade two teachers sought out workshops and resources that would enhance their teaching and enable their students to learn more effectively.  This team also revised the existing report card to reflect not only curriculum changes, but also the department priority of reporting student progress in direct relation to curriculum standards so that parents clearly understood the level at which their child was working. 

**Conclusions -Impact of the Accountability Framework**

***The Ministry Officials' Perspective***   
In the initial 1995-96 school board plans, some boards were not able to demonstrate alignment to the provincial plan in all goal areas. School board's plans increasingly reflect each board's awareness of local priorities for education as well as the required elements  from the provincial plan

The increased local content in school board three-year plans may also be indicative of a trend to develop the plans with increasing involvement of members of the school community. As school boards develop local accountability policies and processes, many boards have instituted practices that include broadly-based consultation with the local community.

Since that first plan, school boards have become more selective about performance measures. They make careful decisions about designing measures that are descriptive of the result they want to achieve and ensuring that it is feasible to collect the data. Consequently, both three-year plans and results reports have improved in quality.

A few aspects of the accountability framework continue to be seen as problematic. The first of these is the timelines specified in the original plan. The provincial plan is published as part of the government's Budget presentation to the provincial legislature. Because the goals and strategies of the plan are supported by budget decisions, it is not possible to release the three-year plan prior to the release of the budget. Schools and school boards feel that they are put at a disadvantage because there is no firm date for the release of the provincial plan, and, therefore, changes from the previous year or specific elements that will be required in school board plans are not known until the spring. As a result, the due date specified for submission of the school board plan tends to be moved to later in the year.

This change impacts boards differently depending upon the model they use to develop school plans. Some boards have a planning model with their schools that duplicates the relationship of the provincial plan to school boards' plans. For these jurisdictions, a delay in receiving information about the requirements from the province results in a delay in developing the school board plan and a corresponding delay in providing planning requirements to schools. Yet the boards still want to have all planning activities finished prior to the end of the current school year. Consequently, both school boards and schools suffer from shortened timeframes in which to conduct planning activities.

The second planning model sees school plans developed earlier in the year and reviewed by the school board as a means of input to the school board's plan. In this model, a late release of provincial requirements could mean that the school board would not have information from schools relative to new requirements for the board plan. This could result in a need for revision to the school plans or seeking alternate sources of input.

No matter which planning model is used, both school boards and schools would benefit from a closer examination of the rolling three-year plan model used by the Alberta Ministry of Education. The three-year plan, that is updated annually, should not be viewed as a new plan every year. Changes to the Ministry of Education's three-year plan involve either the elimination of elements that have been achieved, a recombination of elements that already exist in the plan, an editorial rewording or a change in the priorities for improvement indicated in the Alberta Education Annual Education Results Report. In local planning, it should be emphasized that the three-year plan is a broad outline of the priorities of the board or school. It does not need to contain all of the implementation steps that will be undertaken to put the plan into effect. A plan that includes a high level of detail is hard to communicate.

Long, detailed plans and results reports are not effective means of communicating with one's public. School boards have begun to address the issue. They are adopting a variety of accessible formats for their plans and reports. Alberta Education can support this initiative by ensuring that the number of required elements for plans and reports be kept to a minimum and that "practices that work" be shared among partners.

The Accountability Framework for education in Alberta contains the ingredients for successful accountability.  Whatever the extent of their participation, education stakeholders display an increasing desire to make accountability work. Education partners engaged in an effective accountability relationship see a benefit for education - a focus for improvement in student learning.

***The Associate Superintendent's Perspective***   
Accountability processes have worked very well when judged in terms of one jurisdiction's ability to comply with the external policy requirements of the Ministry's School Authority Accountability Policy. In the jurisdiction reported here, the AERR was compiled ahead of the deadline and was shared broadly with staff and the public. Extensive efforts were made to provide for open and honest dialogue among all parties; although it is noted substantive perspectives questioning the merit of accountability persist at multiple levels of the organization.

Planning processes including the optimal linkages between reporting and planning and between Board and school planning were given extensive scrutiny and an effective planning cycle was established providing for meaningful input to the review of the Board's three-year plan by internal and external stakeholders.   Jurisdiction-based implementation strategies emphasized collaboration as a counter-balance to provincial compliance requirements. Accountability design complexity in the board's three-year plan was recognized and some preliminary efforts were made to achieve simplification. Student's test data were used in a context that recognized the limitations inherent in test design, although this research made note of staff anxiety associated with high stakes testing as a potential barrier to implementation of accountability. Meaningful linkages were established between accountability processes and professional development planning.   Lastly, potentially useful supports in the form of digital planning templates were provided by the central office to school administrators to assist the school planning processes and provide meaningful links to the board's plan. However, it is noted that these templates must be used carefully to not limit opportunities for local ownership of school plans.

Key questions are 1) the extent to which the Ministry's accountability policy has been implemented, and 2) does the policy have the capacity to improve education for students?  Given the rich descriptors that have been captured and conveyed though journal writing and reflection and through documents analysis of planning and reporting documents, the answer to this question is mixed.   Compliance with the external policy requirements of completing three-year education plans and results reports is firmly implemented and the support mechanisms for developing plans and reports have been well developed. Factors working against full implementation would include:

* perception of funding levels as insufficient to support implementation,
* over-emphasis on compliance relationships,
* anxiety associated with high stakes testing,
* the tendency towards planning complexity,
* competition for staff time in schools and central offices,
* the need for more staff training in accountability processes, and
* a lack of a vision of how accountability processes can empower a staff in making school improvements.

When viewed in light of the overall jurisdiction organizational culture, implementation is well underway, but if quantified, the best estimate is that implementation is in the range of 30 to 50%. To the extent the experiences of one jurisdiction can be extrapolated to the province as a whole, substantive provincial, jurisdictional and school-based strategies will continue to be required to support comprehensive implementation of the provincial accountability policy. It is unfortunate that the policy was being implemented at a time when the perception in the field was that fiscal austerity had compromised the capacity of all parties to do so.

The requirement for school level reporting in November 1998 may mark the achievement of the structure for a comprehensive, articulated accountability model across provincial, school board and school levels.  However, it is becoming clearer that a belief in and commitment to implementing the structure of accountability into the lived reality of the school system is a necessary condition for the full potential benefits of accountability to be achieved.

***The School Principal's Perspective***   
Schools that have a culture of collaboration and shared leadership are at an advantage to adopt accountability directives and view them as reasonable expectations.  Schools in the jurisdiction without a culture of collaboration and shared leadership appeared to become defensive, suspecting a more sinister motivation behind the legislation, namely the relationship between student results and teacher performance.

What became evident through one author's school-based experience was that the organizational culture already in place was receptive to Alberta Education's accountability directives because its culture was already rooted in collaboration, community, confidence and reflection.  Answering the government's mandate was not an intrusion or roadblock to existing practice.  Rather, it was an extension of the commitment one school had already made to accountability.  It became an opportunity to validate the united efforts of staff and parents to see students learn at school.

The staff at this school had determined to set goals and strategies that would best meet students' learning needs, in accordance with curriculum and achievement standards.  If the intent of the accountability framework was to ensure quality and equitable education for all students, the culture established at the school was a direct avenue to pursue and accomplish that intent.

**A Critical Response**

In this careful documentation of one jurisdiction's attempts to adopt government-mandated accountability procedures the authors have in fact provided first-hand evidence of why such initiatives have such limited impact on the operations of the school systems into which they are introduced. As they have noted, and many other authors have confirmed, even getting key participants to an acceptable level of compliance takes a lot of time and energy in a typical school jurisdiction. If the goal is more than that, the chances of its achievement decline dramatically unless extraordinary measures are taken or unless there exist particular circumstances into which these reforms can be productively integrated. In the case of the elementary school described in this paper, it appears the culture of the school would probably have been receptive to any change initiative that was seen to provide another way of promoting and enhancing good things that were already happening there. In the case of the jurisdiction as a whole, the authors themselves are not sure that any goal beyond "visible compliance" can be achieved in the absence of "substantive provincial, jurisdictional and school-based strategies to support comprehensive implementation".

The paper shows that the district administrators, working together over time and with a fair amount of well-informed direction, were able to solve many of the technical problems associated with compliance. At times, group members were seen to enjoy the camaraderie and challenge such tasks can engender. Clearly, some administrators became more knowledgeable and skillful in ways that could translate into other aspects of their work, and it is fair to assume that many administrators are now somewhat relieved that they are seen to be up-to-speed with an important government expectation. At the same time, central-office administrators were able to take a leadership role in helping key educators in the district come to a clearer understanding of their respective responsibilities in the areas of accountability and planning at the jurisdiction level. However, it all seems like a great amount of effort for very little real return. The changes that have taken place appear more stylistic than substantive and there is a sense in this paper that these accountability measures are separate from and, in some ways, quite unrelated to the important goals that administrators must be pursuing in their respective schools. In this regard, the authors' reference to the failure of the e-mail system is ironic  in that it hints at a serious false-step in Alberta's reform process.  As one example of this, school jurisdictions are being told that rapid progress in the uses of information technology must be accomplished according to provincial goals and timelines.  But this order comes in tandem with rigorous fiscal restraint and, in some jurisdictions, fiscal deficits creating new "have-not" systems and further antagonizing educators in the field.

The authors speculate that implementation of the accountability framework is "30 to 50%" accomplished in this jurisdiction. It may be true that the kind of accountability described in this paper is just as advanced in its implementation all across the province. A recent survey of Alberta teachers, principals and superintendents (Townsend, 1998) indicated that 49% of teachers, 59% of principals and 60% of superintendents agreed that educational reforms have led to an increase in accountability for teachers.  Also, 58% of teachers, 74% of principals and 82.5% of superintendents agreed that reforms have brought about an increase in accountability for principals.  However, large majorities of Alberta educators discount any links between the implementation of these accountability measures and improvements in teaching and learning.  This seems to confirm what Fullan (1998), Lynn (1998) and others have argued; that the kinds of reforms Alberta has initiated are not those that will have any significant impact on the core operations of schools.

Accountability is one of many reforms, the full effects of which are only now beginning to be felt in the public schools of Alberta.  Other key initiatives in the comprehensive reform package include:

* site-based decision making;
* enhanced roles for school councils;
* revised funding structures;
* fiscal equity;
* enhanced school choice for parents and students;
* technology applications;
* coordinated delivery of services for children; and
* teaching excellence/new teacher evaluation policy.

Still, after five years, 91% of teachers, 83.5% of principals and 65.5% of superintendents do not believe that overall reforms have contributed to improvements in student learning. Similarly, almost identical numbers of each group do not believe overall reforms have contributed in any way to improvements in classroom teaching practices (Townsend, 1998).

This paper is an informative one in that it provides a detailed description of the process whereby an externally-mandated reform can be incorporated into the awareness of district administrators, made part of their planning and reporting procedures, and implemented to a certain level of compliance.  However, the paper hints at an implementation process relatively unimpeded by concerns about its appropriateness, its relevance to what's really happening in the schools into which it has been introduced, the assumptions upon which it is based, and the intended and unintended messages it sends to the educators who now must work under its direction.

Perhaps it would be a good thing if all Alberta's schools were as effective as the one described in the paper. Such schools certainly exist, and their successes are remarkable but, in this context, they serve to highlight nothing so much as the futility of the kinds of reforms that have been introduced in Alberta. The authors have said it themselves in so many words: least-effective schools are least able to embrace accountability processes.  And, for those schools that are already effective, accountability is not a sufficient condition to improve the quality of teaching and learning.  The only valid reason for introducing major reforms into a public education system is to contribute to the improvement of that for which the system is most responsible. That's something missing from Alberta's accountability implementation strategy óany notion that responsibility should be the operational ethic of the public education system and that accountability can flow freely from responsibility. The idea that an intensification of accountability measures can produce essential responsibility is, at the very least, misguided.  It assumes accountability as a policy initiative can function as a sufficient condition for school improvement.  This paper, however, demonstrates that it functions, at best, as a necessary condition for effective and excellent schools.

It can be argued that accountability is at the centre of Alberta's reform initiative and, as the evidence of this paper shows, the unquestioned need for it, in this form, is one of the key assumptions upon which fundamental changes to the education system are now being undertaken. Alberta's educators in general, however, want reforms that will give them a better chance of doing well the jobs they are responsible for doing and they are in no doubt about the effects of the overall reforms that have been introduced since 1993. When asked their opinions, 47.5% of superintendents, 67.5% of principals, and 80.5% of teachers said reforms had made the Alberta public education system worse in 1998 than it was in 1993 (Townsend, 1998).

So, is the Alberta education system in the middle of an accountability process that will support excellence in schools?   It's probably fairer to say the system is being affected by poorly-developed and poorly-implemented policy based on some key false assumptions, the most misleading of which is that there is one best way to bring about change. It may be fairer yet to suggest that the health and well-being of the education system is being threatened by the comprehensive reform initiatives in the absence of a more rigorous dialogue between reform-minded policy makers and the full range of policy implementers.  Relative to the period under study in this paper, policy makers in Alberta appear to have forgotten the crucial role that communication and collaboration plays in reform initiatives.  They need to remember that Alberta traditionally has had a public education system with more of the potential advantages and fewer of the potential disadvantages than any comparable system anywhere in the world. 

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