

**PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP:  
BLENDING THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE WITH THE CURRENT FOCUS  
ON COMPETENCIES IN THE ALBERTA CONTEXT**

[Carmen Mombourquette](#), *University of Lethbridge*

This study was designed to explore the impact of the standards movement on the principalship in the province of Alberta, Canada. In 2009 the minister of education approved a set of practice guidelines for school leaders. The *Guidelines* list seven practice standards called leadership competencies. In 2012 a review was conducted to see how these leadership competencies were being articulated in the policies and procedures of the province's English speaking publicly funded school jurisdictions. Fourteen of the 46 jurisdictions reviewed had policies or procedures that were consistent with the *Guidelines* mandate. This lack of acceptance of the *Guideline* as formal policy presents itself as a worrisome finding and indicates a lack of penetration from the provincial to the school jurisdiction level.

**Historical Backdrop**

The duties of our Principals are manifold and important. Not only are they required to teach continuously a large class preparing for Entrance examination, but they must also take charge of a large school plant; look after the admission of new pupils, consult with parents, receive and distribute school supplies. (London Board of Education, *AR, 1910* as cited in Gidney & Millar, 2012, p. 312)

Lacking in this description of the principal of the early 20th century, as well as in subsequent descriptions, was the mention of instructional leadership or, more specifically, student learning—the principal was the boss, not necessarily the leader. He, and it was almost always a male in the role of principal (Porat, 1985) didn't have the time to do much more than some basic management functions. The average Alberta principal in 1900 had less than one hour

per day free from teaching in which to attend to school administration matters (Reeves, 1962; Richardson, 1922). However, through organizations of their own creation and as a result of the increasing bureaucratization of school districts, the principal's role grew in stature and importance, as well as in influence over the teachers in schools (Johnson, 1968). By the 1920s the role description of the principal was looking very similar to what many adults alive today would remember of the way in which the principal led the typical Canadian school (Stamp, 1978).

The Great Depression of the 1930s was not kind to Alberta, Canada, and indeed much of the world. In Alberta, the people were faced with a double whammy when depression misery was exacerbated by severe drought. The resulting economic conditions led to drastic education spending cuts and changing relationships in schools (Lawr & Gidney, 1973). However, whether spurred on by the difficult economic realities and the need for people to band together or from a push of the recently elected Social Credit provincial government many schools adopted the educational reforms sweeping North America. These reforms grew from the educational philosophy of John Dewey and reinforced the goal of individual development and the need for caring for the whole child (Kach, 1992). As a result, schools began the process of developing vocational education and guidance departments. Democratic leadership also started to make itself felt within the life of the principalship. The 1930s also witnessed increased growth in school size and greater consolidation of rural and urban school districts. High school education became more of the norm (Gidney & Millar, 2012).

One of the consequences of the great social upheaval in Canada during the 1940s and 1950s was a change in schools to a male dominated principalship (Gidney & Millar, 2012). Male dominance continued into the 1970s when women only accounted for 19% of the people who sat

in the principal's chair (Porat, 1985). However, changes that started in the late 1950s led to radical change in the 1960s and into the 1970s; foremost among these changes was the requirement for teachers to have a four year degree in order to obtain initial certification (Aalborg, 1963). The heady days of optimism associated with the 1970s led to a belief by educators and society in general that education could change the world. In a status update on education that has come to be known as the *Worth Report*, Baker (1974) stated that "public education through schools, imaginatively conceived and socially dedicated, could have a crucial effect on the quality of our future" (p. 16).

Principals were confronted with issues often associated with the freedom eras of the 1960s and 1970s. Societal issues like a crises of teen pregnancy, youthful drug abuse, alcoholism, and decreasing attendance crept into the school and principals were expected to provide leadership in solving these non-academic, community problems. The role of the principal changed as a result of these societal expectations and in response to new forms of government funding. The traditional tasks of curriculum innovator, personnel evaluator, and student body supervisor were basic components; however, the student rights movement, collective bargaining, financial crisis, and legislative mandates impacted greatly on the principalship (Alberta. Commission on Educational Planning, 1972).

In the 1980s, yet another swing was about to occur as schools entered decades of financial constraint. The principal's role was viewed as one of instructional leader, problem solver, resource provider, visionary, and change agent even as school districts had to accommodate the quest for accountability and the rise of provincially mandated tests. Entering the 1990s, it seemed that more principals took on the tasks of problem solving and group facilitation, necessitated by the demand of local communities to exert greater influence on the

direction of the school. From the evidence presented in this exploration of the principalship in Alberta the following passage about the state of affairs in the American principalship also applies and to a large degree also serves as a tidy summary of the changing nature of the role of the principal:

When one reflects on the duties of the principal teacher in 1839 and reviews the social, legal, managerial, and political expectations that have been added through the 19th and 20th centuries, one begins to understand the complicated and complex role of the contemporary principal. The contemporary principal faces increased expectations for school improvement, demanding social pressures, and conflict between the roles of instructional leader, organizational leader, community leader, and strategic leader. (Goodwin, Cunningham, & Eagle, 2005, p. 7)

The situation had indeed become more complex, but it was not necessarily defined in provincial legislation. The principal's role evolved but not always because of mandates from political leaders. More often than not, the role evolved out of the necessity of responding to local conditions.

### **A Legal Perspective**

Provincial governments eventually responded to societal change by putting laws in place that reflected existing reality; they did not always seek to act as leaders of their education systems. In Canada, education is the responsibility of the provinces and, therefore, a standard definition or role description of the teacher or principal, as it applies throughout the nation, does not exist. Each province, in turn, has created its own laws to govern education. Yet Gidney and Millar (2012) quote Peter Sandiford's description of the "Canadian System" to an international audience in 1919 in which he stated:

Theoretically speaking, there is no such thing as a Canadian system of education; there are nine provincial systems. Such, however, is the unanimity

of spirit and ideals possessing the whole, that in spite of local differences in detail . . . one is justified in speaking or writing of a Canadian system of education. (p. 7)

For the purposes of this paper then, the Alberta legislative experience is used to reflect the evolving nature of the Canadian principalship and to demonstrate the extent to which the role description has changed throughout the past century and into the current era.

In 1885 a formally designated role description for principal was not included in the Ordinance for Schools (Northwest Territories, 1885). However, a role description for the teacher did exist. Discipline, book coverage, public accountability, and basic administration were deemed to be the important functions performed by the teacher. Schools were one-room entities, with a lone teacher employed to instruct all the children. As long as the one-teacher, one-school norm continued, there was no need for a principal teacher.

In the 1931 version of the School Act, the primary duty of the teacher changed from one of maintaining order to one of instruction: “It shall be the duty of every teacher to teach diligently and faithfully all the subjects required to be taught by the regulations of the Department” (Alberta Department of Education, 1931, p. 139). The School Act also included a provision for the appointment of a principal.

In every school in which more teachers than one are employed, the head teacher shall be called “the principal” and the other teachers “assistants.” Subject to the approval of the Board, the principal shall prescribe the duties of the assistants and shall be responsible for the organization and general discipline of the whole school. (Alberta Department of Education, 1931, p. 141)

In 1952, the duties ascribed to the role of teacher continued to remain relatively the same as those found in the 1931 version (Alberta Department of Education, 1952), yet the duties pertaining to the principal grew to encompass discipline and order as well as organization. The

School Act of 1952 added new responsibilities to the role of principal: allocate duties to the teachers of the school, be responsible for organization and good discipline, and report to the Department (Alberta Department of Education, 1952).

In the 1972 legislation there is only a passing reference to the role of the principal. The School Act stipulated “that a Board shall designate one teacher to be a principal of each school” (Alberta Department of Education, 1972, p. 4937). However, it is interesting to note the insertion of the word “shall.” The School was no longer a one-room entity, and the teacher was rarely the sole adult in the school building. Society, through its government, recognized the need for school leadership.<sup>1</sup> However, what was not being clearly defined was what that leadership should look like.

In 1988, the School Act changed the way in which the principalship was to be viewed in Alberta. The government of the day recognized that schools required clearly delineated lines of authority and leadership. Those lines were articulated as follows:

A principal of a school must:

- (a) provide instructional leadership in the school;
- (b) ensure that the instruction provided by the teachers employed in the school is consistent with the courses of study and education programs prescribed, approved or authorized pursuant to this Act;
- (c) evaluate or provide for the evaluation of programs offered in the school;
- (d) ensure that students in the school have the opportunity to meet the standards of education set by the Minister;
- (e) direct the management of the school;
- (f) maintain order and discipline in the school and on the school grounds and during activities sponsored or approved by the board;

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper school leadership refers to the role ordinarily ascribed to the school principal.

- (g) promote co-operation between the school and the community that it serves;
- (h) supervise the evaluation and advancement of students;
- (i) evaluate the teachers employed in the school;
- (j) subject to any applicable collective agreement and the principal's contract of employment, carry out those duties that are assigned to the principal by the board in accordance with the regulations and the requirements of the school council and the board. (Alberta Department of Education, 1988, c. S-3.1, s.15)

Even though these same duties remain in effect today, our society has continued to change. Schools have grown in size and complexity; teachers' professionalism has increased; and schools have continued to respond to emerging needs, issues, and concerns. However, it is evident that governments have been slow to respond to change with appropriate legislation. When such legislation did come through, it seemed that a transformation had occurred in education.

### **The Rise of Standards of Practice (Leadership Competencies) for School Leaders**

The recognition that the role of the principal should be included in legislation and that the principal should be the instructional leader emerged from the government's efforts to capture Alberta citizens' appetite for educational change in a succession of documents culminating in *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010). The perceived need to consult widely with Albertans was probably triggered by years of unrest in the public education system.

In the 1990s, Alberta was an acrimonious land. The Alberta Teachers' Association was battling the fiscal restraint of the Klein provincial government and principals were trying to run schools with ever-decreasing funds (Taylor, 2001). Matters reached a climax in February 2002

when teachers in many school jurisdictions in the province of Alberta went on strike over wages, working conditions, and publicly announced concerns about the education of children. Part of the government-brokered settlement that ended the strikes contained provisions for an investigation into the state of education in the province (Bruseker, 2008). The report that grew out of the findings came to be known as *Alberta's Learning Commission Report* (Alberta's Commission on Learning, 2003), and from it came landscape-changing responses to local needs.

Societal change, fiscal restraint, changing role of school leadership, and greater demands being placed on schools were some of the contextual factors that led to conflict and then compromise. The *Alberta Learning Commission Report* made 95 recommendations, two of which dealt directly with the role of principal as leader. Recommendation 76 identified the need to develop a quality practice standard and to identify the knowledge, skills, and attributes required for principals (Alberta's Commission on Learning, 2003, p. 14); and recommendation 77 suggested that a new program be created to prepare and certify principals (Alberta's Commission on Learning, 2003, p. 14). By June of 2005 the first draft of *The Alberta School Leadership Framework* (Alberta Education, 2009) had been developed and was, shortly thereafter, distributed to school jurisdictions for feedback and comment. Some jurisdictions used the first drafts of the framework to begin work on principal supervision and evaluation policies and administrative procedures. Embedded in the *Framework* document was a section dealing with professional practice leadership competencies (Alberta Education, 2009). It is important to note at this juncture that the development of the *Framework* was a collaborative effort. All major education stakeholders shared in the development of the document and unanimously recommended its adoption by the minister of education. Alberta Education, Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, Alberta School Boards Association, Alberta Teachers'



Association, Alberta Teachers' Association-Council of School Administration, Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta, Alberta Association of Public Charter Schools, College of Alberta School Superintendents, Council on Alberta Teaching Standards, La Fédération des conseil scolaires francophone de l'Alberta, and representatives from the various faculties of education in Alberta all shared in the development of the *Framework*.

The leadership competencies are now currently being considered for placement in the next writing of the Alberta School Act and discussions abound within the stakeholder committee about making them requirements for all school based leaders in the province. The leadership competencies, as per the recommendation of the stakeholder committee that developed them, were to form the basis of school jurisdiction principal evaluation and supervision policies. The leadership competencies were research driven, practice proven, and reflective of the necessity for school leadership to play a key role in school based student learning. The seven leadership competencies found in the *Framework* are (Alberta Education, 2009):

- fostering effective relationships,
- embodying visionary leadership,
- leading a learning community,
- providing instructional leadership,
- developing and facilitating leadership,
- managing school operations and resources, and
- understanding and responding to the larger societal context.

The document further states that these leadership competencies need to be viewed in conjunction with a more general understanding of school and student learning:

Moreover, and key to the *Framework*, is the stipulated mandate that the school principal is required to focus more than ever on the core purpose of the school—providing all students with the best possible opportunities to learn. Consequently, school principals must have a deep and thorough knowledge of teaching and learning so that they are able to serve as instructional, educational, and organizational leaders focused on the school’s core purpose. (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 3)

The standards of practice movement in Alberta did not grow in isolation. Governments around the world were examining models that could be used to better define and codify the role of school leaders. Bedard and Aitken (2003) state, “the initial impetus for reconsidering educational leadership programs in the United States came from the benchmark report from the National Commission of Excellence in Education (NCEE, 1987), *Leaders for America’s Schools*” (p. 3). The work of the National Commission of Excellence in Education (NCEE) led to the development of what has come to be known as the Interstate School Leaders’ Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards. The ISLLC standards, in turn, were added to by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA). According to Bedard and Aitken (2003), “the result was a model of leadership standards designed to enhance an understanding of effective leadership, to reflect the changing nature of society, and to nurture an evolving model of learning community” (Bedard & Aitken, 2003, p. 7). In other words the focus of school leadership was squarely sighted on the primacy of student learning.

### **Evidence of Practice**

Leithwood and Mascall (2008) affirm that the role of the school principal is of paramount importance in enhancing student learning, and by so doing indicate that school jurisdictions throughout the province should be expected to be moving swiftly to develop policies and procedures that meet the guidelines set forth in *The Alberta School Leadership*

*Framework* (Alberta Education, 2009). The question that guided this study was: *To what extent are school jurisdictions establishing policies and administrative procedures that meet the new leadership competencies model?* That question led to an examination of 46<sup>2</sup> public and separate (or faith-based) school jurisdictions (francophone and charter schools were not studied) in the province to see what they are currently doing in regards to describing the role of the principal and, in turn, whether they have established principal supervision and evaluation guidelines so as to ensure that school leaders are doing the job that is inherent in the competencies mandate.

With the release of the *Learning Commission Report* on the state of education in the province it became evident that change was required in the role description of the principal. The provisions of the School Act reflected the historical role of the principalship (Fleming, 2010) but did it meet current 21st century requirements driven by the changing nature of society and its schools? The stakeholders' committee that was formed to study the issue came to the realization that something more was required in the role description. From the stakeholder committee's efforts came leadership competencies development with wide distribution of the various iterations of leadership competencies, and eventual adoption by the minister of education in 2009. Should school jurisdictions now respond just because the minister said they should? The minister of education, after extensive consultation, in keeping with the Learning Commission's recommendations, upon the advice of every education stakeholder in the province issued a guideline for practice. Is it fair to expect that Alberta's school districts should then have acted on the guideline changes?

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of the writing of this paper only 46 jurisdictions in the Province had their school policies/administrative procedures publically accessible on their websites.

## **Research Method**

After careful analysis of the leadership framework's language and philosophy (Alberta Education, 2009), a marking rubric was developed (see Table 1). The rubric was then applied to all school jurisdictions that had posted their policy or administrative procedures on their websites (see Table 2). The exploration of websites was conducted between May and October, 2012. The criteria and marking code are presented below:

Table 1  
*Marking Code*

Code	Description
4	Intent of framework practice competencies and school division policy align very closely.
3	Intent of framework practice competencies and school division policy align somewhat.
2	Intent of framework practice competencies and school division policy alignment is minimal.
1	Intent of framework practice competencies and school division policy are similar, but only superficially.
0	Areas of alignment are not evident between the intent of the framework practice competencies and school division policy.

Table 2

*Rubric Applied to All School Jurisdictions That Posted Their Policy and Administrative Procedures on Their Websites*

<b>Items to Be Assessed in the Policy</b>	School Division 1	School Division 2	School Division 3	School Division 4
<b>Leadership Competencies to Be Addressed</b>				
Fostering Effective Relationships				
Embodying Visionary Leadership				
Leading a Learning Community				
Providing Instructional Leadership				
Developing and Facilitating Leadership				
Managing School Operations and Resources				
Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context				
<b>Provisions in the Policy to Allow For</b>				
School Leader Professional Growth - Annual Growth Plan				
School Leader Supervision				
School Leader Evaluation				
<b>Guidelines for Each Partner in the Process to Contribute</b>				
School Authority Itself				
Supervisor/Superintendent				
School Leader				
<b>Other Items to Note</b>				
Focus Is on Student Learning				
Local Conditions Addressed				
Evidence of School Leadership Framework Being Utilized				
<b>Catholic School Jurisdictions Only</b>				
Faith Dimension Addressed				

The use of this the rubric allowed for an assessment of each jurisdiction’s policy or administrative procedure, and for tabulation of group results. Of the province of Alberta’s listed public and separate school jurisdictions, 46 had policy and administrative procedures accessible by the public on their websites. Fourteen either did not have their policy and administrative manuals on their websites or they had taken this particular policy and administrative procedure off the site in order to update it.

## **Results**

When reviewing the results for the 46 jurisdictions that were available, it was obvious that the framework document and the inherent standards of practice for school leaders are having an impact in the province of Alberta. The swiftness with which some jurisdictions responded to the need for identification of standards of practice for school leaders—known in this province as leadership competencies—strongly indicates that society recognizes the significant role being played by the principal and the impact that role is having on student learning.

One third of the school jurisdictions in this study had rewritten its principal supervision and evaluation policy as well as administrative procedures to be fully compliant with the intent and language of the framework document. One third had not rewritten their documents but had policy and administrative procedures that were in keeping with the intent of the framework. The final third did not have policy and administrative procedures that were in keeping with current thought and practice on the role of the principal. Generally, their documents were compliant with the language in the 1988 version of the Alberta School Act.

Fortunately, within the third of the school jurisdictions that had used the mandates from the framework to develop policy and administrative procedures that emphasized the primacy of student learning, there exist models for other jurisdictions to follow. Canadian Rockies School Division #12 serves as one such exemplar. The Canadian Rockies model fully integrates the leadership competencies into the role description of the principal; addresses the need for the supervision and evaluation of the principal; and builds on a requirement for principals to develop and report on their own professional growth. The supervisor's role in the principal growth plan process, as well as that of supervision itself, and, where necessary, evaluation, was clearly articulated in this model. Student learning was at the centre of the document, giving credence to

the important role played by the principal in ensuring that all students in the school achieve maximum growth.

Similarly, Living Waters Catholic School District #42 serves as an excellent model for Catholic school districts.<sup>3</sup> The Living Waters Catholic School District #42 documents met all the requirements of the framework mandate while, at the same time, ensuring that the religious and faith component of the leadership role within Catholic schools was addressed.

### **Conclusion**

School jurisdictions have responded to the *Framework* document by putting in place policies and administrative procedures that acknowledge the important connection between school leadership and student learning. Some have tried to lead the way; yet others have simply recognized the current situation and responded to it. In either case, the documents that result articulate the new role of the principal and, in effect, are establishing mechanisms whereby the role can be supported, supervised, and evaluated.

The analysis of data also shows that change in this area of policy is not universal. Why not? Why have some jurisdictions not followed the mandate inherent in the guidelines set out in the *Framework* document? Are these jurisdictions waiting for formal direction and mandate from the minister of education? Or, is there some kind of resistance to change in these jurisdictions? Will the *Framework* need to be enacted into law to force the change, or is it just a timing issue? These questions will require further study.

There is a history in Alberta of school trustees closely guarding their historical rights

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<sup>3</sup> In Alberta both public school districts and faith-based school districts, which are called separate school districts—usually of the Roman Catholic faith, receive the same taxation generated revenues from the Alberta Department of Education as that received by Public school districts.

and privileges associated with school jurisdiction leadership. In 1928 and again in 1930 Minister of Education Perren Baker introduced legislation to force school jurisdictions to amalgamate and form school divisions. School trustees viewed the move as presenting undue restrictions on their local autonomy. The legislation was withdrawn because of the pressure the trustees brought to bear on the issue (Chalmers, 1967). The dispute between the trustees and the minister of education continued into the late 1930s when the new Premier and Minister of Education, William Aberhart, forced the bill through the legislature and rural school divisions became a reality.

Similarly, policy implementation perspectives LaRocque (1986) found to be in existence with trustees, school district administration, and with school personnel in her study of a Western Canadian school district appear to apply across the jurisdictions in this study. LaRocque found that trustees and school district administration believed that they just simply had to pass the policy and school personnel would abide by the new rules. However, school personnel believed that policy acceptance was contingent upon a number of factors including: a) that they had to believe the policy would provide something to them if they followed it, b) that their interests must be promoted and protected, while c) at the same time they considered the likely effect the policy would have on the environment and working conditions in the school.

From the world of Canadian public administration and policy development and implementation we can start to understand in part some of the hesitancy associated with the full implementation of the *Framework* mandate. Prince and Chenier (1980) assert that many policy initiatives bubble through the system for years before finally bursting onto the scene and causing major change in the system to occur.



The role of the principal has evolved greatly since the first writing of a School Act in Alberta—from the principal not even being mentioned, to the role being formally acknowledged, to it being codified as one of instructional leadership, to a view of the principal as instrumental to student learning. However, the fact remains that some school jurisdictions are responding to a recognized need and, by so doing, they are demonstrating the leadership expected of them by the people of Alberta. The question remains: What will it take to make the change universal?

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