THE PRINCIPAL QUALITY PRACTICES' INFLUENCE ON A PRINCIPAL'S JOURNEY IN IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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Dedication

I dedicate this paper to my wife, Treena. For the last two and a half years she has picked up the slack without hesitation. Thanks for being so understanding through all the late nights and single parenting in July. I am very grateful and have felt supported every step of the way.

To my babies, thanks for being so understanding all those times daddy was too busy.
Abstract

This document will reflect my experiences as a new principal and how the Masters of Education Leadership program guided my development as a leader. Coming into a school community with established practices and procedures is difficult when you see the need for change. Based on the seven facets of the Principal Quality Practices, I will demonstrate how this program helped lay the foundation for my decision-making in guiding my school toward improved student achievement.
Acknowledgement

These last two years have been an incredible journey. It would have been impossible without the support from so many different people.

I would like to begin by thanking Dr. Art Aitken, Dr. George Bedard, and the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. Their guidance throughout the program has been invaluable. They continued to challenge us to improve our leadership skills.

My success could not have happened without the support of my colleagues in Lloydminster; Michael Diachuk, Director, and Assistant Directors JP Claire and Todd Robinson, and especially my Vice Principal Stacy Klisowsky. These four people were always available to provide guidance and direction or even give me a kick in the pants when things got crazy.

A big thank-you needs to go to my uncle and aunt, Lynn and Leona Marthaller. For three summers they opened their home to me and my family.

Last and most important is our cohort. I could always count on them to support, challenge, and question me. Without them none of this would be possible. Through this program, we have created a network of colleagues and friends that will support each other throughout our careers. For that I am eternally grateful.
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Preface

Throughout the paper I make reference to initiatives and decisions made at the school level. It is important to understand that there were actions carried out by the school and those carried out by me and the vice principal. To avoid confusion between parties, the term “we” refers to the school community, but the word “I” refers to both the vice principal and myself.

Introduction

Lloydminster Public School Division is a bi-provincial school division. It is made up of only 10 schools; two of them are middle schools. Being a bi-provincial school provides a number of benefits. Being a resource rich school division we are provided with excellent facilities, small class sizes, exceptional professional development opportunities, and first-rate technology.

I was one of two vice principals at E. S. Laird Middle School. The two middle schools were always being compared to each other and it was more than friendly competition. E. S. Laird is on the “have not” side of town. Bishop Lloyd Middle School has been traditionally made up of mostly middle class and upper middle class families. When comparing the two schools, Bishop Lloyd always came out ahead. This school community never had any reason to believe what they were doing was not in the best interest of their students.

All of this has started to change over the past few years. Lloydminster has seen a large increase in population. This has increased the transient population. The area around the school is getting much older and drawing in families with lower income. A much larger number of single parent families are moving into the area. Bishop Lloyd began developing a
much more diverse population. The school has seen an increase in social, emotional, and behavioural issues.

During the spring of 2006, the principal of E. S. Laird became an assistant director. The other vice principal became the new principal and I became principal of Bishop Lloyd Middle School. Initially, Bishop Lloyd staff saw me as a puppet of the assistant director; someone who was given the task of creating a clone of E. S. Laird.

Along with the principal, the vice principal and both Educational Support teachers (ESTs) had left the building. This had a profound influence on the staff. Seeing so many people in new roles, left them confused and questioning what was happening to their school. At first, I saw this as a setback, but later realized this was a great opportunity.

After completing my first two courses at the University of Lethbridge, I began work at my school. It was in the middle of a multi-million dollar renovation. The staff room, office area, central courtyard, counseling offices, EST room, library, computers, band room, and gym were all months behind schedule. As a structure, the building was in a disaster.

The summer courses on leadership and school culture gave me a number of good ideas about how to proceed, but the construction interfered with any sort of school initiatives. Besides not having a roof over portions of the school until after Thanksgiving, a large portion of the school had been blocked off. The counselor and education support teachers did not have working area. Some teachers had set up offices in closets and classes were even taking place in the hallway. There was no library, gym, or computers available. The level of frustration was growing and morale continued to spiral down.

Once the dust had settled I was able to get a better look at the school community I had inherited. There were a number of areas where I had concern. Although the name had
changed from Bishop Lloyd Junior High to Bishop Lloyd Middle School, I saw little
difference from the junior high I attended in the late 1970s. In general terms, the school was
very curriculum centred and efforts to focus on the individual needs of the students were not
prominent.

For the most part, teachers worked in isolation. Other than sharing a unit with little to
no discussion, there was little collaboration around common assessment or unit development.
A number of teachers taught the same year over and over again. In fact, six years earlier, I
shared my Grade 9 math material with a teacher to help him get a start on the program. I
found a copy of my exam on the photocopier. The teacher made no changes. There were still
spelling mistakes I had originally made.

I often get the impression that some teachers have a distorted view of the education
system. It is as if the teachers that are the focus and the students are there to support them.
For years this school community has been able to teach one way and the students have been
moderately successful adapting to the different styles. This is not working anymore. Teachers
are finding that more and more students are falling through the cracks. For the most part, they
point fingers and blame the student’s ability, work ethic, or family support.

During the tenure of the previous principal, the solution to the changing dynamics
was to create policies to deal with all these situations. When I arrived, there seemed to be a
policy for everything. I recall the previous principal complaining to me because in one day he
had to suspend 17 students for throwing snowballs. It appeared to be a quick and easy way of
consequencing negative behaviour without having to put in the time and effort necessary to
teach the students about appropriate actions.
It got to the point where they had created a “hands-off” policy for middle school students. Anytime students were seen touching each other in a manner that was inappropriate, the student’s behaviour was recorded in the office. The teacher, who may or may not know the student, would then be responsible for disciplining the student and calling parents. Once their names were entered three times, they were suspended for one day. A fourth time resulted in a 2-day suspension. A number of parents have shared with me that their child was reprimanded for “high-fiving” or hugging a friend. Because I was not in the building, I cannot talk about the success or failure of the efforts, but I do know that a survey by teachers, parents, and students showed that Bishop Lloyd had the highest rate of bullying in the whole division.

A Principal’s Journey

Fostering Effective Relationships

Developing positive working relationships is a vital component to the success of any school principal. Although some may confine this view to teachers, it is much more than that. The principal must have a positive relationship with all stakeholders.

The first change I made as principal of Bishop Lloyd was in regards to the first day of school. The previous practice was to have students file into the gym. They would sit wherever they chose or where the older students would allow. The principal would then inform the students about the school expectations. This would be followed with a role call. Teachers would shout out students’ names and they would follow them to their class for the rest of the morning activities.

Imagine being a shy Grade 7 student. The sheer terror of your first day in a new school surrounded by 500 strangers would prevent you from hearing anything else that was
going on. As discussed by Mazlow (1954) and others, it is impossible to learn anything if concerns regarding safety and security are not addressed.

Instead, I posted class lists a week in advance. This gave me an opportunity to talk to parents and students about their class and address any concerns they may have. On the first day of school, I was at the front doors, greeting students and assisting them in finding their homerooms. Other teachers were located throughout the halls to continue the process. Homeroom teachers stood at their door welcoming students as they entered the rooms for the first time. When the bell rang, students would spend the majority of the morning taking time to get acquainted with their classmates and teacher. They would go over school expectations and address other issues associated with the first day of school. This was followed by a school-wide assembly where we would introduce the entire staff. The Grades 8s and 9s would then go back to homeroom and the Grade 7 students would remain. We would then concentrate on all the matters associated with first day jitters.

By the end of the year, we reviewed and overhauled the entire Grade 6 orientation process. Previously, the Grade 6 students would come over for a quick tour of the school in the spring. We increased the contact between us and our three feeder schools. Before the Grade 6 tours, we send a delegate of Grade 7 students back to their home school. This allows them to ask questions from students they know. The vice principal and I both accompany these students. This gives them a chance to meet us in a non-threatening environment. These Grade 7 students will also be the tour guides for them when they visit our school. We also give them an opportunity to attend a class to see that it is not much different from elementary school.
To complete this process, we invite all the Grade 6 parents to come to the school for an evening presentation of the school philosophy, programs, introduction of key staff, and tour of the facility. This has been a very successful process to help alleviate the stress that is also felt by the parents.

For our departing students, we have also pushed the high school to provide more supports. We have insisted on tours so students can have a first hand look at the different program areas before they register for any courses. We also have extra tours to meet the needs of our special needs students.

I am constantly out in the halls visiting with students. This relationship building may take time, but allows me to get to know students, and more importantly, lets them get to know me. This is critical in dealing with more serious issues that I am often called upon to investigate. I also want students and parents to see me as more than just a principal. Not only do I take time to coach sports, but I also attend other activities where my school is participating. These include band concerts, dances, school celebrations, pep rallies, ski trips, and activity days.

It was important to me to get to know the staff. I made a dozen visits to the school before the end of the previous year. I attended school functions and took time to introduce myself to every teacher. Even though I was not going to be principal until September, I talked to staff members and asked them about their views for the coming year. I host a staff social at the beginning of every year and also host the Christmas party.

At the beginning of every year, I write everyone’s birthday in my agenda. I make a point of saying happy birthday to every staff member. It is not an announcement and I don’t do it if anyone else is around. At first I thought this was a pretty trivial activity, until a staff
member said, “That is very special. A principal has never said happy birthday to me before. Thanks.”

Getting to know who teachers are outside the building is important. I make an effort to learn the names of their spouses and children. Without being too nosy, I ask them how holidays and special events were. Most importantly, I try to let all staff know that I am there to support them as best as I can during those difficult times that are a part of our lives.

LPSD has a motto that includes parents, school, and community. Following this thinking, the school must make the parents a part of their child’s education. Every homeroom teacher was instructed to phone the home of each of their students during the first week to introduce themselves. This would be the first step in developing a relationship to create a bond between the school and home. During this call, they would share a little bit about themselves and the class. This was also an opportunity to invite parents to a welcome morning at the school.

Since these initial discussions, I have seen teams of teachers find numerous ways of communicating with parents. Wikis, blogs, team newsletters, student agendas, and emails are all commonly used to share information in regards to upcoming assignments, tests, and events. Parent-teacher conferences are scheduled for specific times. If parents do not show, there are follow-up phone calls to reschedule. We currently have attendance from over 85% of our parents.

Monthly newsletters from the school and our school website are two other methods for the school to communicate important information. Our website also includes links to all our email accounts. Special events are advertised in the newspaper, the LPSD website, and an electronic bulletin board that is located on one of the main streets of the city. We are
currently looking at getting an information sign for the front of our school in order to further our lines of communication.

The Saskatchewan government mandated that all schools develop a School Community Council (SCC). These are very similar to those that exist in Alberta. This was a necessary component to our partnership. I wanted the parents to have a more involved role than just looking after hot dog sales. I knew that parents, once presented with the information, would be an ally in supporting best practice.

The SCC has now finished its first complete year. I would not say they have influenced many decisions, but they do have a big impact in a number of areas. Many parents are now more informed about what is happening in the school. They are becoming advocates for their children, the school, and the different programs. They are also liaisons between the school and the community. They became more aware of the need for support and volunteer more and more to help meet those needs.

The importance of relationships cannot stop there. It must involve all stakeholders. This list not only includes the full spectrum of LPSD employees (from bus drivers to central office staff), but must also include government departments such as the RCMP and social services, the business community, and all those who take an interest in school activity.

Across the street from the school is a little strip mall that contains five businesses. During the first week of August, my first year, I went over and introduced myself to the owners and employees. I gave them my contact information and told them that I wanted to be sure our students were being positive citizens and not disrupting their daily activities. Since that day, the confectionary owner and I have developed a garbage program in order to deal with the refuge from the students’ purchases. He also agreed to follow suit with our school
and stop the selling of power drinks during school hours. I can only believe that it is because of our relationship and the support I have given the store. Because I have assisted the video store owner with students loitering in her building at lunch, she gives the school free rentals to show the students movies during the winter lunch hours.

There are busses that service our school, but most of them are across the field at a neighboring elementary school. I frequently talk to them about how I expect our students to act accordingly on the bus. I let them know I was interested in helping them with any issues they may have with any of our students. Bus drivers will regularly visit to discuss students and ask for my assistance in dealing with issues.

The director has informed me that the store owners and bus drivers let him know they were very happy with the job I was doing and this was the first time they had met a principal at my school.

One of the biggest frustrations has been the RCMP. On numerous occasions, I have supplied them with information which has led to the arrest of a number of individuals who are not students at my school. This information has included gang activity, graffiti rings, firearms violations, email fraud, drugs, and alcohol. Unfortunately, I do not feel the support is reciprocated. Our RCMP Liaison Officer has been invited to participate in a number of activities to get to know the school community, but has always been unavailable.

*Embodying Visionary Leadership*

Running a school is not something that can be done by one person. The principal may be steering the ship, but it takes a team with a common goal in order to reach your destination. It is important that everyone had a good understanding of what was happening and why it was happening.
Every Monday morning began with a brief meeting. It was expected to be attended by the ESTs, counselors, and administrators. Any other staff interested in attending were welcome. The purpose was to share the events for the coming week and discuss topics that warranted staff input. If a topic were deemed important, it would be presented at an upcoming staff meeting. Monday morning was also the time when I sent out a weekly bulletin to all staff members. This highlighted key events, professional development (PD) opportunities, and meetings for the upcoming week.

Besides the frequent use of email, there were other ways of sharing daily events. A communication binder was set up by the mailboxes. All staff was expected to read it on a daily basis. They were also required to record weekly events and staff absences. A calendar was displayed in the staff room for everyone to record all the yearly events and information. This would include awards celebrations, sports tournaments, band concerts, drama plays, and a number of other activities. When situations would warrant in-school or out of school suspensions, the whole staff would be notified, and the team of teachers would be given details in regards to the reason.

There were also a number of opportunities for two-way communication. One of the two staff meetings were taken away so the staff could meet to discuss professional development issues. I would initiate some of these topics, but often other staff members saw an area where we could explore.

At the beginning of each year, there are discussions in regards to teachers’ professional growth plans (PGPs). In February, I take time to have a formal meeting with every teacher. A discussion of their PGPs and review of the expectations helps keep the focus
on professional development. This also gives the teacher and I get a better understanding of
our direction and areas of concern.

During the first year, I noticed a number of questionable practices in regards to
assessment. Any failing marks were determined to be the fault of what the child was doing.
There was always the simple solution of more homework or detentions to improve those
scores. Zeros were common place for any missing assignments. Marks became punitive. On
more than one occasion a teacher told me, “Maybe it will teach them a lesson.” Many
teachers did not feel they were accountable for any of these issues.

I think back to the first report card when I had over a hundred failing marks in
classes. I asked the teachers “Why?” Most of them told me the student wasn’t doing the work
or getting the assignments in. I again asked them “Why?” The answers were all over the
board. The list would include responses like, “they haven’t been here” and “they don’t know
how to do the work.” I would then ask them a number of questions. The first one was, “What
are we assessing? Are we assessing their attendance or are we assessing their ability or
understanding?”

When I dug deeper into that topic, I discovered some interesting things. Almost every
teacher had marks for behaviour. Students who were more cooperative and helpful received
better marks. I also found out that every teacher gave marks for neatness. This triggered
discussions about the importance of assessing the objectives and basing grades strictly on the
outcomes (Reeves, 2008). It is important we know what we are assessing and why we are
assessing it. Our marks should reflect the level of understanding our students have
demonstrated (Wormeli, 2006).
After many discussions, we were able to pilot an insert into our report cards in the form of a checklist. This checklist is a tool to report different behaviours without influencing the percentage mark on the report card. Our initial survey showed that 86% of our parents were very excited about the change. The other 14% felt it was important to reward students for good behaviour; exactly what we do not want to do.

More importantly, I would ask them, “What are you doing about it?” This seemed like a foreign question to many. Extra help for the student, accommodating student issues, phone calls and meetings with parents to develop plans, and modifying programs and assignments were some of the suggestions. This does not even address the number of supports to assist the student in dealing with outside issues that may influence their behaviour in school. This was difficult for a number of staff. They were too focused on the idea that “fair” was synonymous with “equal.”

I didn’t want the staff to take my word for it; I wanted them to see what current research had to say. At our next staff meeting, I gave a presentation on assessment. I talked about a number of different aspects all based on the work of Guskey (2007), McTighe and Wiggins (2005), and Wormeli (2006). From recent professional development, I was introduced to the idea of Assessment As Learning. Earl (2003) talked about the importance of having students involved in their own learning. In fact, if students and parents are part of the assessment process it is much more beneficial to all parties (Davies, Cameron, Politano, & Gregory, 1992).

In regards to student achievement, there was always an unjustified confidence that the students were doing well. Because E.S. Laird’s results were always a little lower on provincial assessments, it created a buffer zone for any concern. Over the years the gap has
been steadily closing. This is due to two reasons. E. S. Laird has been improving and Bishop Lloyd’s scores have been lower.

It was necessary to take time to sit down and analyze the data. Being a bi-provincial division creates a number of issues. Provincial assessments are one such area. We participate in the Alberta Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) and the Assessment For Learning (AFL) in Saskatchewan. As part of our Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) project, we also test the students using the Canadian Achievement Test (3rd ed.). This provides us with plenty of data from standardized tests. Because we are testing on so many fronts, we find there are a number of contradictions between the data. For example, our Grade 8 AFL math scores are at or above the provincial average, yet our Grade 9 PAT math data shows us significantly lower than most Alberta schools. It is difficult not to have a tendency to select the most favorable data and disregard the rest. Rather than wasting energy on which is more accurate, our focus for next year will be to analyze and take advantage of all the data. This will allow us to channel our effort on improving student achievement.

One of the key events for the upcoming years will take place our first week back to school. As a staff, we will review our mission, vision, and goals. To many of the staff, it may look like our PD has been disconnected. I expect this will give us an opportunity to discuss how everything we are doing fits together with what we believe. This topic will be explored further later in this paper.

Leading a Learning Community

School culture was one of the first areas where I wanted to concentrate my efforts. It did not take long to see areas where we could improve. The school community needed to
become a learning organization. This did not only mean students, but staff and parents as well. The problem I faced was trying to do too much too quickly.

The hands-off policy, discipline plan, and other school rules were things the staff had come to rely on in order to deal with day-to-day activities. Because the school’s policies were different from what I was used to, it was necessary I had the evidence to back up my decisions to change any practices I found to be inefficient or even counter-productive to student learning.

In the first year, I didn’t eliminate the hands-off policy. I did express my concern with suspending a student without investigating the situation thoroughly. I talked about the value in keeping the student in school and treating it as an in-school suspension. This seemed to be a reasonable compromise. The staff could see that I would not ignore the subject, but I was able to avoid an automatic suspension. There was a significant increase in the number of in-school suspensions, but we were able to keep students at the school focusing on their studies.

During the second year, I was able to make a more significant change. I now had the data necessary to convince the staff the practice was not working. The records showed a number of teachers were not using the policy at all. Others were using it for certain students, but not for others. I saw one teacher go to write something in the book, but noticed this would result in an in-school suspension and changed her mind. It was evident teachers didn’t like the practice, but needed something that would assist them in dealing with certain issues. I changed the focus of the program from “punishment” to “discipline.”

With the new practice, teachers would still record the information in the binder and talk to the students about their behaviour, but notice would also be sent to the homeroom teacher. The teacher would then monitor the behaviour of the student and determine the
course of action. Based on the teachers’ relationship with the student, they can make informed decisions on how to address the issue. Parents are then receiving information from a teacher they have a relationship with and are confident it is someone who understands the needs of their child. This becomes a much more informed and educational process for the students and their family. Administration can then make decisions based on the student’s needs, not just the behaviour.

One of the pillars of middle school philosophy is interdisciplinary instruction. The creation of teams of teachers who teach a number of different subjects to the same students provides numerous benefits to teachers, parents, and most importantly, students (Mertens & Flowers, 2004). During my first year as principal, I inherited a completed timetable, but for the second year, I was able to make the schedule fit the needs of the students. This did not happen with some difficulty. Past practice complicated creating a timetable on two issues; they were what and when teachers taught.

Even though teachers may have had training in certain areas, they believed they were, and should remain, “the English teacher” or “the math teacher.” They were not happy about teaching other subjects. I was not proposing that a science teacher needed to teach band, but felt teachers should be comfortable teaching within their area of humanities or sciences. I believed it was reasonable to expect a Grade 7 math teacher to also be able to teach science and computers. Initially, this was not the case. In many cases teachers taught what they wanted and did not want to deviate.

To further complicate things, teachers would influence when they taught. The previous administration set some teachers’ schedules based on their needs, rather than the needs of the students. When discussions focused on the needs of the students, we were able
to make the appropriate changes. Once those road blocks were removed from the equation, it was much easier to create a schedule that was in the best interest of the students. Students went from having 5-7 teachers a day to having 3-4 teachers a day. When I combined this with a blocked schedule, teachers were able to benefit from having the same students for a greater period of time (Brown, 2001).

Another important component to the student’s day is advisory time. Each morning starts with a 15-minute period designated to deal with a wide variety of issues. Besides morning exercises such as the anthem, O Canada, attendance, and morning announcements, this was intended to be used for coordinating school activities, addressing school or team concerns, character education, and relationship building. For a number of classes, this is not the case. Typically, the Grade 7 and 8 teachers are taking advantage of this time to meet the needs of their students, but the Grade 9 teachers are using the time for book keeping, silent reading, or unstructured time. I have built in much more structure to this program. Classes will have a variety of options to choose from, but must select and implement these choices in order to maximize the opportunity for their students.

Student learning is the main focus of any school, but it cannot ignore the professional development of its staff. For the start of my second year, over a third of the teachers were new to the staff. The increase in staffing, transfers from other schools, and expected turnover from a young staff, led to 12 new teachers on a staff of 31. I expected this to be a great opportunity to influence the school community by selecting teachers who shared my beliefs.

This came with a number of drawbacks. Six of these teachers were straight out of university. This created a strain on our leadership team. All those things we take for granted as veteran teachers needed to be explained in extreme detail. I have worked with first-year
teachers before, but when they make up 20% of your staff, it resulted in more effort and resources than I anticipated. We have since used this experience to create procedures for first-year teachers to cover all those pitfalls that we experienced over the year. These topics ranged from parent teacher conferences to using the photocopier.

The other six teachers each brought their own set of beliefs. Some of these agreed with our school’s practice, but some did not. This has led to a number of positive conversations that force us to analyze our practices to ensure we are doing what is in the best interest of students. Unfortunately, this has also led to a number of times where past practice from a previous school was not based on student learning. An example would be a teacher who came from a high school. If students did not do their assignments, they were given a zero. This teacher did not question students, call home, or communicate with administration. Instead, Grade 7 students were quite happy to ignore assignments and not be asked to do them at a later date. Over half of his students had no mark for the first report card.

I have changed a number of different practices in order to assist new teachers and the entire school community in adjusting to the new situation. I was able to survey our new staff to determine the areas where we fell short. Using this information, we are refining our mentoring practice to include more specific expectations designed at making sure the assistance is available to the new staff member. We will also be having a special staff meeting prior to the meeting with the whole staff. This will allow us to spend more time going over the necessary details to assist teachers with a positive start to the year. I have also created a staff handbook that includes information in a number of different areas ranging from school philosophy to evacuation procedures.
During my first year as principal, our AISI project was the focus of our PD. All the non-student days were already scheduled. I lost a number of important opportunities to share my vision and direction for the school.

The concept of the project was very good. We were investigating strategies to improve reading across the curriculum. The problem was the project was given to a group of young teachers who had enthusiasm, but lacked the experience in research to make an impact on student achievement. At the beginning of my second year, the vice principal became one of the chairpersons of the project and I did some shoulder tapping to involve some of the veteran teachers. The second year of our project was much “meatier.” We were able to incorporate a number of proven strategies to assist students with literacy and comprehension.

The focus was on writing across the curriculum. This was an excellent vehicle to talk about a more global perspective of cross curricular and integration of all subjects. Because the staff had agreed on the AISI project, we were able to build on this concept to introduce the potential for mathematics and other subjects to be combined to paint a more complete picture.

For the most part, this staff did not participate in other PD opportunities. The professional development budget was rarely used and never came close to the allocated amount. In fact, the only request by staff for any expenditure was for the home economics teacher to go to the provincial home economics conference.

For the last two years our school PD was relatively scattered, but I felt it was important to direct the right staff to a number of events. We sent people to conferences and workshops that focused on our AISI project, assessment, instructional strategies, interdisciplinary instruction, mentoring, PRIME mathematics, assistive technology, middle-
school philosophy, and students with specific behaviours. We wanted to target staff that we thought would be open to new ideas and share their vision with the rest of the school. I would describe this effort as moderately effective.

Over the past two years we have spent a number of PD sessions focusing on reading strategies, writing strategies, and integrated and interdisciplinary units. We have insisted that all of our teachers experiment and practice using these different strategies in order to see the positive effect they have on their students’ achievement.

During our Education 5632 course (July 2007), we began a discussion around professional development. Dr. Art Aitken explained the importance of the alignment of division goals, school goals, and individual professional development.

Coincidently, the director and both assistant directors started their positions the same time I began my principalship. We saw a parallel between what I was doing at the school and what they were doing with the division. Goals were one such similarity. It has only been this spring that central office has presented a direction for the division. We will be able to use this document to create that necessary alignment to be sure we are all moving in the same direction. Once we have begun this task, only then can we drive our PD to improve student achievement.

The division has provided us with two opportunities that are rare to most schools. The first is common planning time (CPT). Every one of our homeroom teachers is given two extra prep. periods. These are to be used to meet with other teachers in order to discuss students and their programs. Typically, these have been used by homeroom teams to discuss concerns with certain students. They have not been as productive as they should be. This year, I was able to take one of those periods and schedule a common planning period for
subject teachers. All the Grade 7 math teachers or Grade 8 English teachers will have a regular meeting in order to discuss topics such as units of study or common assessments.

The second opportunity is early dismissal on Wednesday afternoon. For one hour every week teachers will be meeting to work on research based projects that are tied to our school goals and influence student achievement. We have recently reviewed early dismissal time and anticipate our tighter expectations will create some issues, but lead to more productive projects.

*Providing Instructional Leadership*

During the first year, being new to the position, dealing with the construction, focusing on the school culture, developing relationships with staff and students, and presenting my views on middle school philosophy and assessment, I did not spend enough time concerning myself with the instructional practices in the classrooms.

When I did have time, I tried to get into the classroom. I believe this is the best measure of how students and teachers are doing during instructional time. When I first began informally visiting classes, the whole class would stop what they were doing. Everyone would look over at me and the teacher would ask what I wanted. Even when I replied that I was just visiting, there was an uncomfortable feel to the class and it disrupted the proceedings. Two years later, the students and teachers don’t miss a beat. I can come into the class, sit down or visit with students, and everything proceeds as if I wasn’t there. I am not naïve in thinking the behaviour doesn’t improve a little, but for the most part, the activities proceed as if I weren’t there.

This practice keeps me informed and confident I know how teachers are doing. As the year went on, I became more and more aware that things weren’t as good as I had assumed.
While some teachers were doing a great job of meeting the needs of all their students, many could not make the same claim. Many teachers were trying to take a swath out of the middle and ignore those standing out on the two ends. Traditional schooling practices had allowed them to point their finger at the bottom group and blame it on them. As for the top group, they were doing fine and their boredom was solved by giving more work. These students quickly learned to not be bored. A “one size fits all” model of instruction was what many of the teachers has become accustomed to using. “But that’s how I was taught” was an expression I heard more than once. Teachers needed to understand this cannot be a continued practice if all students are to be successful.

In most areas, the university courses reinforced a lot of the beliefs I brought with me into the program. One of the areas where I realized I had the least experience was as an instructional leader. I was concerned about being the expert of all curricula. This was contradictory to everything I was telling my teachers. I tell them, “you are not the teacher of subjects, you are the teacher of students.” I needed to take my own advice. The issues were never centred on the subject. It was around the common strategies used to present that course material. The strategies that were based on research and best practice, would apply to every subject.

Besides having discussions with staff individually and as a group, we employed a number of strategies to improve classroom instruction. Some teachers were directed to specific workshops that targeted specific areas. Release time was given to teachers to observe other teachers. I went into classrooms to make formal observations. The teacher and I had decided what specific areas I was to focus my attention on. We were also able to participate
in team teaching. This gave teachers an opportunity to work with other teachers who had strengths in different areas.

With all the new staff members and a number on supervision cycles, 14 teachers had supervision reports due this year. Because teachers are all at different points in their understanding of pedagogy, it is necessary to tailor their supervision to meet their specific needs.

Through mentoring, the new staff members were able to take this opportunity to learn about the profession. Just as with students, teachers all have specific areas where they excel and others where they can work to improve. Formal and informal observations allow me to have a good understanding of where to focus. While some need to work on classroom management others can focus on differentiation and instructional strategies.

I also worked with the veteran teachers who were on their 5-year cycle. Each took the opportunity to develop a project. These ranged from researching best practice in regards to homework and assessment to developing professional and student portfolios. It was critical that the teachers took time to research their projects before they began. As educators, we often look to tradition, common sense, and authority to make our decisions. Unfortunately, they are usually wrong (Mertler & Charles, 2005).

During my first year as principal, I did not teach. Initially this did not seem to be a concern, but I found this created a barrier in relating to teachers. Most had never had a teaching principal. I was aware of certain issues, but did not have the opportunity to experience them. Concerns with the marking program or the wireless computer system were brought to my attention, but I did not share in the experience of the teachers and students. It was important to me that I taught a class during the second year. This has allowed me to have
a more accurate account of the concerns with day-to-day activities and staff saw me not just as a principal, but as a teacher as well.

We have spent the last two years trying to give our staff snippets of different things in order to peak their curiosity and make them think about best instructional practices. Unfortunately to most, it all seems unfocused and disjointed. This has been partially resolved with our AISI project and focusing our collaborative planning groups. Over the course of this next year, we have decided to focus our PD on the concept of *Understanding by Design* or backwards design. By starting with the outcomes you are more likely to achieve your intended goal of true understanding (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005). We truly believe this is the component that will bring everything together for our staff. This will assist teachers with a strategy or philosophy for developing solid units that meet the needs of all students.

I have increased the number of Smartboards in the school from one to six and am continuing to add more. We have created two portable labs of 30 computers each to be accessed from anywhere in the building. I have also purcahses 15 extra laptops for students to use on an individual basis. The purpose is to assist students with specific learning needs. I have invested into improving the resources within all subject areas; math manipulatives, gym equipment, drama props, light and sound equipment, and language arts resources in order to stimulate the creativity of our teachers.

We have increased the number of options and opportunities for students to explore new and exciting opportunities. As a staff we have agreed to increase the number of discovery afternoons. These are school-wide, cross-graded activities where students can be introduced to activities outside the curriculum. These can range from cricket to first aid to sushi making. I have also created a program, where students are removed from two classes
during our 6-day cycle. This gives students the opportunity to explore a passion area they may have. It is still in its infancy, but students have already created a model of a skate park, a computer help manual, and an Asian cookbook. Next year will be the first year for our Native Cultural Arts program. This was designed to create awareness of the Native culture within our area. Students will be exploring history, arts, and language.

There were already a number of extra curricular activities for students to participate in, but I thought there was value in increasing the options to attract more students. We initially offered five school sports, but have since added curling, rugby, soccer, and cheerleading. We have also added a fitness club and peer support group. Academically, we have created a math help program, after school academic support, and a lunch-time homework club.

**Developing and Facilitating Leadership**

I found that developing the leadership capacity of teachers was one of the standards that had the slowest process. I found I had difficulty allowing others to take a leadership role unless I had confidence in their ability. This took time. Until relationships and common understanding developed, I struggled with giving up control. The first year, I saw our AISI project do little to influence student achievement and our collaborative Wednesdays produced little to move our school forward. In regards to CPT, teachers were not taught what to do with that time. Over the first few months I was able to attend a number of team meetings. I saw very little discussion in regards to team planning. There were no activities or unit planning. For many, it became a session to complain about the students’ behaviour and work ethic.
With the new look for CPT for next year, teachers will be able to work collaboratively to develop common understanding of their students and subjects. This will give them the opportunity to take leadership roles within their group to improve what they are doing in the classroom. The use of agendas and distribution of minutes will allow me to be kept abreast of where they are going and what support I may provide them. In the beginning of the second year, we developed PLC groups they were based on numeracy, literacy, and assessment. Each staff member signed up for one of the groups, but I specifically asked different staff to chair the committees. Immediately, the groups began asking what I wanted them to do. I explained that it wasn’t what I wanted them to do, it was what best practice and the research was telling us to do. The groups were skeptical. They thought that anything they came up with would be vetoed by me or central office. I reassured them that if what they decided was based on current research, it would be welcomed as a positive move and something worth exploring. I also helped out by giving the groups leading questions and asked them to tell me what we should do. I asked the assessment group questions like, “What should we be assessing?” and “What does the research say about zeroes?” Different articles were given to members of the group. Articles such as Douglas Reeves (2004), “The Case Against the Zero,” channeled discussion and challenged current practice.

Initially, the group leaders were coming to me with frustrations about the direction for their group. They spent a number of meetings debating how to approach different topics and what recommendations to make. The process proved favourable. Based on some of the assessment practices of the school, the assessment group decided to look at ways of reporting
work habits and achievement. The work in researching, developing, and implementing our report card checklist was the results of their efforts.

Within the current framework of our building there are a number of different opportunities for staff members to take a leadership role. Department heads, committee participation, awards and achievement celebrations, community events, and extra curricular activities are a few examples. Over the course of last year, each grade determined they wanted to showcase their students. Math night, culture fair, literacy night, world math day, and art showcase are all evidence of teacher and student leadership within our school community.

Central Office has been very supportive and creative in regards to some initiatives they are taking to assist us in dealing with these issues. PRIME math training, supervision procedures, and creating numeracy and literacy coaching positions are all recent changes that have helped develop leadership within our building.

A recent review of our collaboration time has warranted some interesting changes. Every teacher needs to be part of a project of their choosing. Projects need to be research based and tied to the curriculum with the intention of improving student achievement. This will give the staff an opening to explore a passion area and improve their practice.

In regards to parents, our SCC meetings have come a long way from bake sales. Any changes to programs and activities are filtered through this group. If I see a need to move in a certain direction, the parent group is asked their opinion. If we are truly a learning community, parents need to be included in the decision-making. Often as teachers we are not looking through the lens of a parent. These school-initiated partnerships are necessary in order for middle school students to be successful (Burkhardt, 2004).
Managing School Operations and Resources

Obviously, I am faced with the task of dealing with budget items, scheduling issues, administration and implementation of provincial and divisional expectations, and management concerns. I look after a number of different accounts at our school. I am responsible for developing the budget. It is more than just making it balance. It is necessary for it to reflect the direction you want to take the school. Any expenditure should be able to withstand the scrutiny of being filtered through your school goals. The same can be said for the timetable. It is not enough that it works. The timetable must reflect the philosophy of the school to maximize the advantage for students. Provincial and divisional expectations can range from administering provincial tests to implementing philosophical or program changes. These must all be done while demonstrating optimism and enthusiasm. If a principal just “goes through the motions.” it will be picked up by the rest of the community and have a negative effect on the outcome.

Looking past these tasks, there were a number of other needs to be addressed. Most of them are supports to increase the level of safety and security for students. Previously, the school had never supplied students with a reasonable lunch option. We were able to implement a lunch program that offers healthy options for students. This convenience keeps a number of students from crossing the street to the local confectionary. The confectionary and park behind it are occasionally the site of unfavorable activities.

The concession also allows us to deal with the growing number of students who were not having their nutritional needs being met. Often we found students who were missing meals. This has obvious implications on a student’s demeanor and performance. Any member of our leadership team could have access to the food necessary to nourish students
who were in need. Initially, it appeared this was an unnecessary service, but once students knew they could come to us for food, we found a number of students were regularly in need of assistance.

We also increased the number of activities to take place during the noon hour. We now have intramurals, jazz band, chess club, computer club, math help, homework club, SRC, PACERS, School of Rock, and a variety of school activities centred on the school calendar. When I started at the school, we only needed three classrooms to house the approximately 70 students who stayed for lunch. We now need to open ten rooms in order to provide seating for the approximately 250 students who remain on campus during the noon hour. Next year we will be expect parents to give students permission to leave school grounds during the lunch hour. This is one more way of ensuring parents know what is happening during their child’s day.

It was necessary to tweak the existing fire drill procedures to improve communication, accountability, and efficiency. We had to create evacuation procedures for other health threatening issues. These were non-existent. We were also missing protocol in regards to an intruder. I had already implemented a procedure where the only unlocked doors were the main entrance. This was something that previously did not happen. It was important to develop a plan to deal with the situations that our schools must now protect themselves against. Although there was some resistance based on convenience, it was widely agreed that we needed to implement such a procedure to safe guard our school community.

Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context

According to provincial calculations, our school is running at 132% of capacity. 420 students are working in a school that was designed for approximately 320 students. This
creates a number of other issues. Our science, art, and home economics rooms double as homerooms. Our computer room has been eliminated in favour of portable computers. We schedule 78 periods of physical education in a 42 period schedule. Our stage and a small meeting room are booked as classrooms.

Based on the increase in population, it was necessary to make some adjustments in order to continue to meet the needs of the school community. One of the first priorities was to increase the number of homerooms. Currently, there were 15 homerooms one of each of the grades. I requested, and was granted, an extra form for each grade. This would take our total to 18. This diminished the class sizes from 28-29 to 22-24 students.

I was also able to hire an additional five teachers that were necessary to accommodate this increase in homerooms. Now, the problem became space. We didn’t have the room. I made a request for three portable classrooms in order to house the additional classes. The Saskatchewan government granted our school the addition of two portables. Although this was a much welcomed addition, it was not enough room.

We created an outdoor physical education component to alleviate the stress on our gym, but this has still created a tight situation. Next year we will be utilizing the college gym during their down time. This will allow us to meet the needs of our physical education program.

My situation is common in Lloydminster. Our division is in dire need of a new school. I had the opportunity to host a meeting with the education minister to discuss the space issues within my school.

Over the course of the last two years, I have taken an active role in the activities of the division. I volunteered for the position of chairperson of the administrators group. I
continue to be a part of the Assessment committee, the Structured Success Admissions Committee, the Advanced Math Program, and the Collaborative Planning Review. Having an active presence on these committees allows me to have an influence on policies and procedures that effect the division and my school.

Conclusion

I was very fortunate that my first principalship coincided with my acceptance to the Educational Leadership Program at the University of Lethbridge. Initially, I was concerned with taking on both tasks. Little did I know how interwoven both adventures would become.

It seemed very fitting that the first two courses we were directed to take were focused on school culture and leadership. I found the readings, assignments, and discussion vital to my success in my first two years as principal. It laid the foundation for what was important in moving a school forward. The readings, discussion, and internship gave me the confidence to know that my decisions were based on sound theory. It touched on all those important topics that I would find myself immersed in for the upcoming years.

The courses that followed all seemed to build on areas where I was looking next. Discussions regarding curriculum, research, management, and others all seemed to come up in a timely fashion. It mirrored discussions and directions I was having with my staff and central office personnel. The marriage between the Leadership program and my responsibilities and experiences has been invaluable to my professional growth.
References


