LEADERSHIP IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: A PERSONAL JOURNEY TO IMPACT STUDENT LEARNING

SCOTT BRANDT

B.A., UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA, 1989
B.ED., UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY, 1993

A Capstone
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
of the University of Lethbridge
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF EDUCATION

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA

JULY 2006
LEADERSHIP IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: A PERSONAL JOURNEY TO IMPACT STUDENT LEARNING

SCOTT BRANDT

Approved:

______________________________  ________________
Supervisor: Name, Ph.D.                Date

______________________________  ________________
Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies and Research in Education:  Date
Rick Mrazek, Ph.D.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family. To my wife Kari, it is with all my heart that I say thank you. For the past 2 ½ years you have supported and encouraged me through this journey. You were patient when I was busy reading or writing, you were understanding when I was away during the summers, and you were always by my side when I was feeling overwhelmed. Without your love, I never could have finished my Master of Education. You are my best friend, and I love you!

To my children, Jenna, Nicole and Mark I love you! Thank you for the hugs and kisses. Your love is enduring and powerful. Your patience with me for the many hours I was busy doing “school work” will never be forgotten. You are all the loves of my life!
Abstract

This final synthesis paper is an opportunity to explain how my experiences in the Master of Educational Leadership program have impacted my leadership development. The program has opened a new world of leadership knowledge and theory. The internship provided practical experiences and applications allowing me to reflect on my beliefs and philosophies as a school leader. The aim of this paper is to link my leadership growth with the implementation of professional learning communities in my school.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of my mom and dad. You have always believed in me and supported all my adventures. Thank you for passing your love of learning to me and making education such a wonderful priority in my life. I am truly grateful. I love you!

To Terry and Vicki, thank you so much for your constant support. Thank you for always being there for our family. Your love means the world to me.

I need to acknowledge my good friend and colleague Jim. Throughout this program we have had opportunities to discuss, reflect, and solve the leadership challenges of the educational world. Your counsel was always welcome and truly appreciated. You made this program fun, rewarding, and an awesome experience.

I would also like to thank the many good friends I made as a result of this cohort. Dr. Aitken, Dr. Bedard, and Dr. Retelle were simply amazing. You made us work hard, self-reflect, and your compassion for leadership has impacted all of us in so many ways. What can I say about the rest of my friends in the cohort? Thank you for always being so kind and supportive. You made this program fun and exciting. Your perspectives allowed me to see leadership through a multitude of lenses. To everyone in the first ever Masters of Educational Leadership, thank you for impacting my life in so many ways!
## Table of Contents

Title Page .......................................................................................................................................................... vi

Signature Page ......................................................................................................................................................... vi

Dedication .............................................................................................................................................................. iii

Abstract ................................................................................................................................................................. iv

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................................................. v

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................................................. vi

List of Figures ......................................................................................................................................................... vii

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................................... 1

Literature Review ..................................................................................................................................................... 3

The Leadership Journey ........................................................................................................................................... 8

  Professional Learning Communities ................................................................................................................... 8

  How the Internship Informed my Leadership ................................................................................................. 16

    School Improvement Planning .................................................................................................................... 18

    School Culture for Improved Learning ....................................................................................................... 26

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................................... 41

References ............................................................................................................................................................... 43
List of Figures

Figure

1. Goal Alignment .......................................................... 23
2. SMART Goal ............................................................. 24
3. School Improvement Plan Tracking ............................... 25
4. Writing Data Graph for Grade Four ............................ 32
5. PLC Survey Data ......................................................... 36
6. Changes in the Learning Culture ................................. 38-40
Introduction

It took a number of years after graduating high school to finally settle down to what I know was a predetermined calling; teaching children. I believe it was a matter of making sure I had experienced some of the items on my list of “Things to do before I Die”. However, once I entered the school twelve years ago, this time as a beginning teacher, I knew that I had found the best place for me: in a classroom full of thriving and energetic children. I was about to start on a professional journey.

I was a classroom teacher, working with grade 2 and 3 children and knowing I had a lot to learn. It is my goal as a teacher to provide an environment where children could thrive, could feel secure enough to take risks, and where I could provide learning experiences that actively engaged students. I wanted learning to be enjoyable and meaningful for students.

In my first eight years, I experienced three different principals all with their unique attributes and styles of administration. One was very energetic, a real jokester and the children loved him. He was always very good involving staff in decisions. Another was quiet and confident in his role. He quietly went about his job, never drawing attention to himself, but always acknowledging the efforts of others. The other was a lady who ran the school efficiently; guided by her strong moral compass. She always made decisions based on what was right for children. All three impacted me. I often found myself making mental notations of things to do and not to do if one day I became a principal.

After teaching for eight years opportunity came knocking. I was about to set out on the next phase of my journey as a vice principal. The principal was a former teacher of mine in Junior High. I loved his classes. I remember him being very strict, but lots of fun. I was not too sure what he would be like as a principal, but I knew he had been at the school for over
twenty years and it truly was his passion and love. His school had an extremely good reputation around the community, and I was very excited about my new role.

My life as a new administrator was challenging and exciting. I loved teaching for half of the day and being an administrator for the other half. When I reflect back, I remember thinking that on most days, I was “flying by the seat of my pants” as I tried to adjust and digest the new demands as a school administrator. When I was in doubt I would draw on my past knowledge from my previous three principals. “What would they do?” was a repetitive question going off in my head on a regular basis. When totally stumped, I headed off to the principal and asked for some guidance. I was a new administrator learning on the job, mostly by trial and error and by doing what I had seen done!

In my third year as vice principal, our division signed up a group of administrators for The Leadership Coaching Academy; a two year ongoing conference/seminar focused on professional learning communities, effective schools, and leadership. It was during the first year of the Academy I realized I truly had a very limited amount of leadership knowledge, experience, and skills. Improving student learning was not a topic of conversation occurring at my school. It was then I knew beyond a doubt I needed to look beyond eight workshops if I was going to develop professionally as a school leader.

After the first mind-stretching summer in the Masters program, it became very apparent for the first three years as an administrator I did not have the necessary skill set or knowledge base to be an effective school leader. I realized I was a manager not a leader. I understood I had been learning to do lots of paperwork, but I was missing the big ideas!
Timing was very fortunate. As I started my Masters, our division was implementing professional learning communities (PLCs) as the vehicle for professional development across the division. For this next stage of my professional journey, I was eager to link my new found knowledge and skills from the Masters program to the implementation of professional learning communities in our school. This paper is a synthesis of the leadership journey over the past two years. It includes data and reflections on implementing professional learning communities in my school as a framework to improve students’ learning and support their moral development. The paper will address the leadership knowledge and skills I have learned in the Masters program and how my internship experiences have impacted my growth and philosophy as a leader.

Literature Review

The most important point is that everything in the education system must start and end with children and youth. Schools are not there for teachers, for administrators, or trustees. They are not for parents, for business, or for governments. They’re there for students. And the first and only criterion for judging the success of schools and the education system should be how well every child learns (Alberta’s Commission on Learning, 2003, p. 35).

The opening quote taken from Alberta’s Commission on Learning, signifies the importance Albertans place on education, and it articulates the expectation that every child learns and every child succeeds. Ensuring high levels of student learning is the ultimate responsibility of every school in society today. Indeed, there has been countless research, inquiry, and discussion about what schools can do to achieve this. The Learning Commission recommended all schools operate as professional learning communities as a means of continuous school improvement. Consequently, this also means school administrators must
be pioneers in learning how school communities learn and then translating ideology into practical and tangible applications.

Literature and conversations with colleagues make it very apparent many school divisions and schools have moved or are moving to professional learning communities as a framework in which teachers and staff experience ongoing embedded professional development. Astuto, Clark, Read and McGree (1993, as cited in Hord, 1997) conceptualized professional communities of learners as a process in which continuous learning is shared and acted upon by teachers and administrators; the result being, teachers with enhanced pedagogical knowledge, skills and attributes.

Hord (1997) describes professional learning communities as having five key attributes: supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, support conditions, and shared personal practice. DuFour and Eaker (1998) state there are six important characteristics of communities that learn: collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; results orientation; and shared mission, values, and vision. Although their attributes and characteristics are not identical, the similarities essentially define on-going, job-embedded professional development all in an effort to improve student learning.

The educational terminology attached to professional learning communities can be confusing and overwhelming for administrators and teachers. Dufour, Eaker, and Dufour (2005) paint a clear picture of professional learning communities. If you walked into a professional learning community, you would see groups of teachers regularly meeting during the school day to discuss and identify the essential learning outcomes. You would see teachers developing and using common formative assessments that inform student learning
and teaching practices. Teachers would be collecting and analyzing student achievement data at regular and timely intervals to help identify learning gaps. Teachers and administrators would be collaboratively setting learning goals, researching and sharing teaching strategies all with the goal of improving student learning.

Leadership plays a critical role in professional learning communities. Schools with existing professional learning community elements have leaders that see staff cooperation, trust, honesty, respect for learning, participation, cohesion and loyalty as vital elements. When these core values are established, collaboration can start to take root in the school’s culture. Ultimately the goal for the principal is to be a “leader of leaders” (Eaker, Dufour & Dufour, 2002, p. 22).

Effective school improvement and student learning is not dependent on a charismatic leader (Darling-Hammond, 1997, as cited in Dufour et. al, 2005). Professional learning communities require effective leadership though, and school administrators are still considered to be optimally positioned to get school improvement initiated and facilitated. However, once the school improvement process has been started, it is also necessary for leaders to share leadership, share decision-making, and relinquish power and authority (Louis & Kruse, 1995, as cited in Hord, 1997).

Building leadership capacity is critical to the success of professional learning communities and leadership literature is inundated with theories and research proclaiming methodology and techniques for developing leaders. Constructivists claim leadership capacity is developed when a school can maintain and sustain its school improvement course even after key leaders leave (Lambert, 1998). The concept of constructivist leadership is based on the same ideas that underlie constructivist learning: Adults, as well as children, learn through
the processes of meaning and knowledge construction, inquiry, participation and reflection. Sparks (1994) asserts that educational professional development models need to take this approach. Schools can build learning and leadership capacity when teachers would not just attend workshops where some expert passes down knowledge. Rather, “teachers and administrators will collaborate with peers, researchers, and their own students to make sense of the teaching/learning process in their own contexts” (Sparks, 1994, p.3).

Increased leadership capacity means that the principal is only one of many leaders (Lambert, 1998). School administration needs to allow staff to develop skills as leaders through broad involvement, meaningful collaboration, shared decision-making and reflective practises. Hierarchical structures have to be replaced by shared responsibility. Developing teacher-leaders through staff involvement means creating a culture where collective capacity and collaboration are valued as part of the everyday running of the school. According to Lambert (2002, as cited in Harris, 2005), constructivist leadership is not solely dependent on the leader. Barth (2002) and Elmore (2000) summarize that leadership is not so much about the formal leadership roles in the schools as much as it is with the leadership actions carried out in the school context. The reciprocal interactions and relationships between teachers collaborating together enables them to construct knowledge and meaning together thus allowing leadership skills and knowledge to be developed by everyone in the school organization.

Bell, Bolan, and Cabrillo (2003, as cited in Harris, 2005) concluded from their review of literature, student outcomes were not directly effected by leadership. However, they did find and tentatively conclude distributed leadership was more likely to affect student achievement in a positive way than hierarchical leadership. Fullan, Hopkins, Silns and
Mulford all support the fact that improved student learning outcomes are more likely when teachers are empowered by leaders and leadership opportunities are distributed throughout the school community (Harris, 2005).

Distributed leadership is not a new concept. It was first conceived in the 1950’s. Since that time, distributed leadership is finding increased support as an effective leadership style. A literature review conducted by the National College for School Leadership (2003) indicated that the concept of distributed leadership can have a variety of meanings. In fact, the term is often used interchangeably with other terms such as democratic leadership, dispersed leadership, and shared leadership.

Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) view distributed leadership practices as involving three critical components: leaders, followers, and the situation (context). In their perspective leadership emerges “in the execution of leadership tasks in and through interaction of leaders, followers, and situation” (p. 27). There is interdependency among these factors. Most importantly, the school context is critical.

Harris (2005) summarizes Spillane’s work. She views distributed leadership as characterized by collective leadership. In essence, teachers develop expertise by working together. According to Spillane, Coldren, and Diamond (2001) effective leaders understand how teaching and learning knowledge is created and disseminated in schools. This is critical to the successful implementation of instructional practices and content. Moreover, the researchers claim that instructional knowledge is not limited to those in administration or department head positions. Formal positions of authority in the school hierarchy are not necessary for leadership (Spillane et al., 2001). Rather, leadership is distributed in and amongst teachers and school administrators: informal and formal leaders.
Distributed leadership does not mean that no one is ‘captaining the ship’ nor that no one is accountable to school performance. Instead, Elmore (2000) believes distributive leaders focus their job primarily around improving the knowledge, skills and capacities of staff in the school. It involves creating a culture of common expectations. Distributed leadership means nurturing the learning community in order to create productive relationships among its members, and making everyone accountable for their contributions to the overall success or lack thereof.

The Leadership Journey

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Chinese Proverb

Professional Learning Communities

Although I had been an administrator for three years, I do not think my journey as an “educational leader” truly started until two years ago. The first steps occurred when I started my Masters and when Grasslands Division announced professional development was going to be changing. Gone were the five ½ days of school based PD and two divisional PD days that may or may not have had any alignment with the needs of our school. Instead, professional learning communities were going to provide schools with regular and ongoing, job-embedded professional development. I remember feeling excited because I had learned a little bit about the structure and theory behind the concept while attending the Leadership Coaching Academy. However, I distinctly remember the fear my school principal expressed as he did not know a thing about “PLCs”. Questions became dominant and answers were scarce. How were we going to implement something we really knew nothing about? Who was going to lead the implementation? What were we implementing?
My principal is a passionate administrator. There is nothing more important than the children; he treats each one like his own. He is a strong manager; the school runs effectively and efficiently and teachers’ needs and wants are always taken care of. Achievement test results are above provincial average because of the dedicated, skilled, and veteran staff. It is an awesome school but to say all the necessary cultural mechanisms for a professional learning community were already established was not the case.

A school’s culture has a tremendous impact on life and learning in the school. Barth (2002) contends that culture has more influence on student learning than departments of education, superintendents, school boards, principals, teachers, and even parents. The culture that existed when I arrived could be best described as a friendly school where children, staff and parents are important. Staff are very loyal and cohesive. Cooperation, teamwork and a family atmosphere are all key components. The culture was firmly supported by traditions, collegiality, trust, and confidence. Caring, humour, and staff appreciation solidified the culture. Hoy and Miskel (2001) view *The Community* as a school with a nurturing environment stressing that people support each other, under the guidance of the principal who acts as the community leader. The use of Hoy and Miskel’s term *The Community*, for the most part, conceptualizes the essence of my school’s culture. However, there was also a culture of hierarchy (Hoy and Miskel, 2001). The principal has a strong sense of pride of the smoothly and efficiently functioning of our school community. Top-down decisions and directives are part of the culture. It was evident to me that our school had a positive cultural foundation from which to build; however, I came to learn of aspects of our school needing to undergo a cultural shift if professional learning communities were going to take seed in our school.
The first summer in the Masters program shed light on many aspects of leadership and culture. It became very apparent for a learning community culture to exist it was going to require a change in the “way we do things around here” (Barth, 2002, p.6). I needed to find ways to slowly address what Barth refers to as the “nondiscussables”. I felt there was a need for more distributive leadership and a need to build on the internal capacity of staff members. I could see the vast and diverse strengths in our staff and realized there were amazing opportunities to build leadership capacity. We needed to revisit our vision and substantiate our values. I knew we needed more involvement in decision-making. Learning, both student and staff, needed to become our main priority. We needed to reinforce high learning expectations for all, build our pedagogical knowledge base, and allow teacher leaders to lead. As a leader, I felt overwhelmed by the task.

When I first came back from my summer at university, I knew I needed to get information into the hands of my principal. I made copies of documents and articles. I photocopied descriptions of effective schools and professional learning communities and I put all of them on the principal’s desk. I wanted the information to speak for itself. I realized I was the one on staff with most of the background on learning cultures. In order for professional learning communities to be successful in our school, the principal and I needed to be able to speak openly, honestly, and from a common knowledge base. I believe this was a critical step.

The next step was to establish a PLC Leadership team. Effective schools research supports the need to have a core school improvement team as the keystone to improved student learning (Lezotte, 2005). Eaker, Dufour and Dufour (2002) refer to this team as the “guiding coalition” (p. 61). The team consisted of the school principal, me, a division one
teacher, and a division two teacher. The principal and I decided to approach two very strong 

teacher leaders. One was heavily involved in professional development in our division and 

the other was a member of the Masters cohort. These teachers were integral to creating a 

professional learning community in the school. Their professional development and 

leadership knowledge provided our leadership team with diverse perspectives and 

background. If we had any real hope of selling the benefits of professional learning 

communities and making them a sustainable part of our culture, distributing the leadership 

was fundamental.

Distributed leadership can involve all members of the learning community. It creates 

shared responsibility, shared commitments, and learning community ownership. According to 

Fullan (2002), “Sustainability depends on many leaders, and thus, the qualities of leadership 

must be attainable by many, not just a few” (p. 11).

Developing a professional learning community was a daunting task. No one on our 

PLC leadership team had ever been involved in a cultural transformation of this magnitude. 

Our teachers were very used to traditional professional development platforms. This was a 

new way of thinking about adult learning and a new way of thinking about student learning. 

During one of our first leadership team meetings, we were trying to conceptualize an 

implementation plan. How were we going to lead this cultural shift? Eaker et al. (2002) 

acknowledge there is no step-by-step plan. Each school has its own context and we needed to 

make our plan fit our school.

Our plan was to move slowly. It was not our intention of overwhelming staff. Having 

just completed a summer in the Masters program, we decided to use a similar strategy used 

by our professors. We were going to share the learning; a collaborative book study. The
principal bought new copies of *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities* so each staff member would have their own copy. We then divided the staff into teams. Each team was assigned a chapter to read and discuss. Their goal was to learn the framework and concepts of professional learning communities and present their learnings to the rest of the staff. Posters and artifacts were made. The presentations were exemplary. We decided to start a PLC bulletin board to show our progressions and successes.

Based on presentations, staff learned the importance of a shared mission and vision. They understood the impact of and need for group protocols for meetings, feedback sheets reporting on the team’s focus for the meeting, and agendas for the next meeting. Each of these became required from each grade level team. These became artifacts and documents that would be collected and organized in a PLC binder representing the year’s journey and growth.

The next phase of our plan was to align our school structures. Teachers and educational assistants were put into grade level teams. Our learning support teachers consisted of another team. We had heard that some schools in our division were not including their educational assistants in their PLC community. Our leadership team discussed this at length. Effective schools research shows these staff members are key contributors to school culture and in fact are extremely important in the learning success of our students (Lezotte, 2005). In our minds, if we were going to develop a true community of learners we could not ignore our assistants.

In professional learning communities teachers operate as team members with time routinely designated for professional collaboration (Hord, 1997). The staff decided to meet Wednesday mornings from 7:30 am to 8:30 am as a collective group. This sometimes meant
the whole staff would be involved in meetings, and at other times it meant grade level teams would have time to meet. This structure proved to be flexible to meet both sets of needs. We were the only school in the division to schedule our PLC meetings before school. Staff decided that morning meetings allowed us to come fresh and focused. It alleviated the after school hustle and bustle due to clubs, sports, parental meetings, and family commitments. On average it worked out that in most months our staff (teachers and support staff) would meet three times for professional development purposes and one time for staff meeting and school management purposes. Additionally, once in a six day rotation, grade level teams were provided half an hour of grade level collaboration time when I would take the students from each grade level for 30 minutes. I used this time to introduce students to the monthly moral virtue themes and do character education activities based on the virtues. This time was embedded during the actual instructional day as recommended by Hord (1997) and proved to be very effective.

Once many of the structures and protocols of PLC’s were developed it was time to revisit and reformulate the mission, vision, and value statements. The original statements were initially developed during the 1995-96 school year when schools were first required to develop three year improvement plans. It had been ten years since their development. Over that time, there have been staff changes and changes in priorities directed from central office.

The original mission statement is brief and memorable. Additional clarifying sentences are included to explain what the statement means in terms of learning and how this mission statement will be carried out. This is reinforced with a motto statement. Over the course of time and with changes to staff and divisional goals, the PLC Leadership team believed it was critical to have current staff reflect on this mission. What does this statement
mean to us today? Is this statement still our mission? Does the mission statement allow us to incorporate recent divisional goals? If we still believe in this mission statement, does it still reflect our vision?

Again, the vision statement was 10 years old. Vision, according to Kouzes and Posner (1987) “is an ideal and unique image of the future” (p. 85). When schools decide to create a vision statement, they are in fact looking to the future and establishing what it is important to the individuals and collective body of the institution.

The vision stated the primary purpose of education is the optimal development of each individual. The vision statement did not elaborate what “optimal development” meant. Leadership needs to be aware that often official vision and goal statements are viewed by staff as Alberta Education necessities but really of no direct influence for their immediate and daily work (Leithwood, Janzti, & Steinbach, 2003). We believed the vision statement needed to be more purposeful allowing staff to individually and collectively internalize the overall school purpose. “Good vision statements appeal to the heart and mind, command loyalty, provide emotional attachments, and provide orientation for specific action” (Schlechty, 1997, p. 63).

The belief statements were listed as seven core values established by parents and staff. Many of the current beliefs used ‘should’ statements. These are not articulated as behaviors or commitments. Staff must be dedicated to these values if they are truly seeking to become the school community they envision. Our values will determine our behaviors. According to Hulley and Dier (2005), “A school’s values provide the criteria for asking the questions and searching for the answers that will make a difference to school culture and student achievement” (p. 83).
Visionary leadership was one area that I knew I needed to develop as a leader. I honestly felt the collaborative processes our PLC Leadership Team set up were instrumental in developing a shared mission and vision; and the collective values (commitments) of our future. Reeves (2006) claims vision statements can build trust when the shared vision becomes a blueprint for school improvement rather than “public relations baloney” (p. 36). The challenge facing our professional learning community is to make our vision our blueprint for improved student learning. It will require commitment, collective capacity, and a clear path of how to get there.

With many of the structural and foundational components of our professional learning community underway, staff were antsy to do something that would impact their classrooms. Peterson, McCarthey, and Elmore (1996, as cited in Hord, 1997), caution that “while school structures can provide opportunities for learning new practices, the structures, by themselves, do not cause the learning to occur” (p. 60). During our ED 5500 class Dr. Aitken continually stressed the importance of looking at data. In the past, looking at data was not a routine part of our culture. Analyzing achievement data was more often considered a task because it was expected by Central Office, but rarely did it change our practices. This time I wanted it to be different.

Increased student academic achievement is a strategic component of the divisional three year plan and our school improvement plan. With this goal in mind, all teaching staff analyzed grade 3 and 6 achievement test data. This data illustrated that over the past five years our writing scores were consistently lower than our reading scores. From this analysis, staff recommended that writing become a focus. It was agreed that this would be a school wide approach with specific grade levels looking at their needs. We had heard that many
schools in the division had taken a very different approach. These schools did not have a specific school-wide focus, rather each grade level focused on their own area. This meant in some schools, a multitude of foci were being addressed including: reading, math, science, social studies, character education, or the fine arts.

Our staff decided because this was new to all of us, we would be better served by having a common school focus and goal. The theory being; vertical congruency in which all grade level teachers focused on improving student writing would have greater long term impact than having just our grade three and six teachers work on writing in isolation. This strategy supports Effective Schools research. School improvement is more successful when the school as a whole focuses on one particular area. There is a need for school-wide conversations in order to create alignment both within grade levels and between grade levels (Lezotte, 2005).

_How the Internship Informed my Leadership_

In my previous four years as a school administrator, I had been largely responsible for coordinating the school’s special education program. Throughout the courses in this Masters program I have learned the value of many new concepts and theories and their significance in the role of leadership. The plan for the internship involved taking leadership ideas and synthesizing them into an established school culture. My internship focus was essentially broken down into three components: school improvement planning, school culture, and educational management. My goal in the internship journey was to experience areas of leadership not yet part of my role and to put some of the many ideas and theories of leadership into practices helping our school moved ahead in developing a learning culture.
The philosophical reasoning behind choosing school improvement, school culture, and educational management as my internship foci was because I believe that the three areas are very interconnected and dependent on one another. Improving schools can only be supported when we have the cultural, structural, and knowledge mechanisms in place. Professional learning communities represent a cultural shift in the mode of operation of schools. Essentially we are shifting from a traditional school culture of teacher isolation and hierarchical leadership to a learning community culture of collaboration and distributed leadership. The driving purpose of professional learning communities is school improvement through ongoing, job-embedded professional development. My goal was to ensure an established link and alignment between our school’s three year improvement plan and our professional learning community’s foci.

I don’t believe an effective leader can separate the processes of leadership and educational management. In my mind they coexist and flex with the tasks of developing the optimum environment for student learning and collaborative school culture. In other words, how the school organization gets “managed” is part in parcel of the school culture. If collaboration is important then management tasks will be carried out in such a way that stakeholder involvement is a critical component. If learning is important to the vision of the school; budgeting decisions will be shared in order to optimize funds for student and staff learning. If ongoing regular professional development is important then collaboration time will be embedded into the instructional day timetable. Management of the organization must still ensure a safe, efficient and effective learning environment.

The next part of the synthesis paper will provide an illustration of my leadership journey through my internship experiences.
School Improvement Planning

Educational three-year plans are essentially the guiding force for Alberta Education, provincial school districts, and schools throughout Alberta. These annually updated plans provide the focus, direction, strategies, and measures for accountability to student learning. The question that begs to be answered is; do the mandated plans become true working documents leading to school improvement and improved student learning?

Past personal experience leads me to believe in many schools the three year plan is a hoop schools jump through once a year to satisfy Central Office administrators and Alberta Education requirements. As a classroom teacher, I was superficially involved in plan development each spring. A copy would be given to each teacher only to be filed away and never discussed, revisited, or measured in any meaningful way. I couldn’t have told anyone the mission, vision, or values written in the plan. I most definitely could not have described the goals we were working towards as a means of making our school better. I was not even aware that an Annual Educational Results Report (AERR) was required addressing the success and improvements resulting from the three year plan.

When I became an administrator, I was assigned the role to lead the development and drafting of the school three year plan. I too, followed what I had experienced and knew. Essentially I would draft the plan with staff reviewing and providing changes, additions, or deletions. This process would occur in mid-May during one of our staff meetings. Afterwards, each staff member would get a copy, file it who knows where and never revisit or track its implementation. The plan would be submitted to Central Office and not looked at again until next May when the process started all over.
As I progressed through this Masters program, I started to learn the value and essence of visionary leadership, collaboration, student learning, and alignment of provincial, divisional, and school goals. The first summer, while in Education 5630, I realized I never really understood the importance of mission, vision, belief and goal statements and the leader's role in facilitating and maintaining a vision of learning.

We spent a lot of time discussing and articulating how educational leaders can impact change. Without a clear vision of our true purpose, without a true understanding of our collective values and commitments, schools can not focus their efforts and energies on school improvement and student learning. Having said that, I have come to learn schools improve and become better places for all children as a result of changes in behaviours, and not just because our staff has developed mission, vision, and value statements. It is the effective school leader who can take a traditional school, as I described earlier, and facilitate its cultural change to a learning community willing to face their shortcomings and take ownership of the things that need to happen to make a school where Every Child Can Succeed!

Although I believe, I had already been reflecting on the inefficiencies of our plan and its development process prior to the internship, the Masters internship gave me an opportunity to analyze how effective our plan was at driving school improvement and how effective our leadership was at sustaining our vision. I looked at its developmental process, the mission/vision/belief statements, the goals and outcomes, strategies and measures, and resource allocations. As part of the internships, I started to track the strategies our school actually implemented or didn’t implement as a means of school improvement.
Three year plan development process. As previously described, our three year school improvement plan was essentially drafted by me. Stakeholder input was minimal. Parental involvement was never really considered. Staff would review the plan and provide changes, additions, or deletions. This process would occur in mid-May during one of our staff meetings and afterwards, each staff member would get a copy.

Based on what I learned in the master’s course, specifically ED 5632, 5631, and 5500, I formulated a new developmental plan. I wanted more collaboration and community involvement. I wanted to distribute leadership opportunities and empower staff to take the professional development reigns of the plan, and I wanted staff to construct their own knowledge of the importance of the plan in fostering and guiding student learning and adult learning. It was a foundational process to engage staff in continuous learning.

All staff, including teachers and support staff were involved in collaborative teams that worked through achievement data, survey data, provincial and divisional goals, strategies, and measures. These PLC teams were each assigned a provincial/divisional goal and essentially drafted the school goals, strategies, measures, and targets for their respective area. Finally, each team presented their goals, strategies, and measures for school-wide review, revision, and approval.

The School Advisory Council (SAC) and parents were provided with input opportunities at the May SAC meeting. In addition, all members of the SAC were extended an invitation to be part of the school improvement planning meetings. Although the parental suggestions and feedback were exceptional at the SAC meeting, we unfortunately had no SAC members attended any of the meetings.
My job became that of facilitator. I prepared the materials and outlined the procedures. I took the final drafts from each team and prepared them into a comprehensive school improvement plan for submission to Central Office. I wanted to be a “leader of leaders” in the development process and not be solely responsible for the plan. In reality, school improvement needs to be “everybody’s business”, not just the principal’s or vice principal’s (Aitken, 2005, p.1).

*Three year plan goals and strategies.* When I analyzed the school improvement plan I noticed a problem. The plan was lacking the structural alignment of the provincial, divisional, school, and personal goals. Specific school goals were not aligned with the three general divisional goals. In addition, there was no mention of how individual staff aligned their individual growth plan goals for the year. These divisional, school and professional growth goals should have alignment and must drive the professional development portion of the school improvement plan.

Another area that really stood out was the lack of specific school SMART goals for each of the provincial/divisional goals. I realized that the current goals were too general and too difficult to assess or measure. The divisional goals needed to be translated into measurable performance standards that focus on desired outcomes. A direct result of including SMART goals would be a link to accountability. Specific staff would be listed as responsible for implementing the strategies for improved student learning.

The plan included strategies and performance measures for each school improvement outcome; however the structural layout of the plan made it extremely difficult to link goals to strategies. I believed it would be easier to track the measures if they were included in their
appropriate outcome and modified into a table format showing multi-year results and the current target.

During my internship, it was my goal to restructure the layout of the school improvement plan and get alignment of goals including provincial, divisional, school, and professional (see Fig.1). Moreover, I assisted PLC grade level teams developed SMART goals to drive the reflective loop: analyze data, set goals/strategies/targets, establish a baseline, implementing pedagogical strategies, assess for learning, set new goals/strategies/targets, adjust pedagogical strategies, and assess for learning (see Fig. 2). I also started tracking the implementation of school improvement strategies as laid out in the plan. The strategies were tracked all year long and shared with staff at PLC and staff meetings. Tracking provided a real time analysis of our strategies. It made the school improvement plan a working document and kept it from being filed away and ignored (see Fig. 3).

As a culminating activity for the school improvement internship, I drafted a school improvement plan for the 2006-07 school year. This plan became the template for the actual 2006-07 three year school improvement plan that was done in May 2006.
### Fig. 1 - Goal Alignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provincial Goal</th>
<th>Division Goal</th>
<th>School Smart Goal</th>
<th>Professional Growth Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Quality Learning Opportunities for All</td>
<td>Implement consistent proactive character development programs and expectations during the school year.</td>
<td>By year-end 85% of students, parents, and staff will agree/strongly agree that the character education program has created a caring and safe learning environment.</td>
<td>Each staff member will decide how to best implement this growth area based on their knowledge, skills and attributes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence in Learner Outcomes</td>
<td>Academic achievement results will increase each year by 1% in relation to the 5 year average in each Provincial Achievement Test over the next 3 years.</td>
<td>Increasing student writing achievement. Refer to the grade level SMART goals.</td>
<td>Each staff member will decide how to best improve the knowledge, skills and attributes pertaining to this goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly Responsive and Responsible Jurisdiction</td>
<td>Develop a professional learning community culture and implement effective professional learning teams within each school</td>
<td>By year-end 85% of staff will agree or strongly agree with each statement in the PLC survey.</td>
<td>Each staff member will decide how to best implement this growth area based on their knowledge, skills and attributes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Provincial Goals ⇒ Division Goals ⇒ School Goals ⇒ Professional Growth Plan Goals**

\[
\downarrow \quad \downarrow \quad \downarrow
\]

Division PD Goals ⇒ School PD Goals ⇒ Personal PD Goals
Fig. 2 – Grade 6 SMART Goal for Writing Achievement

**EASTBROOK GOAL – Increasing Student Writing Achievement**

**SMART GOAL**
Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time bound

Eastbrook School will increase students' ability to write effectively by the end of the 2005-06 school year.

**Strategies**
How will we reach our goals?

- Term story writing simulations will occur in grades 2 to 6 using procedures similar to achievement testing.
- Development of school-wide writing exemplars and grade level rubrics.

**MEASURES**
Tools we'll use to determine where students are now and whether they are improving

- Common grade level story writing rubric for term writing simulations.
- 2006 grade 3 and 6 Achievement Test - LA Writing (1% on the 5 year average).
- Grade 3 LA Achievement Test - story writing
- Grade 6 LA Achievement Test - story writing

**TARGET**
The attainable performance level we would like to see

- March Target - 60% of students will be at the acceptable or above acceptable level
- June Target - 75% of students will be at the acceptable or above acceptable level
- Grade 3 – 89% of students will be at or above the acceptable level.
- Grade 6 – 89% of students will be at or above the acceptable level.

**Target**
45% of students will achieve the excellence level for conventions of writing.

- Decrease from an average of 11.25% of students below acceptable to 6% of students below acceptable for conventions of writing.

**Grade level profile for February simulation results**

- Grade level profile for June simulation results

- Decrease unacceptable level to 40% by March
- Decrease unacceptable level to 25% by June
- Increase above acceptable level to 8% by March
- Increase above acceptable level to 10% by June
Outcome 3.2: The school demonstrates leadership and continuous improvement.

3.2.1: Eastbrook Goal: Developing a PLC culture and implementing effective Professional Learning teams.

School strategies for the priority:

- All staff will attend the September 2005 P.D. which will introduce developing moral intelligence (Michelle Borba). All staff (teachers & support staff) attended the 1 day professional development session led by Dr. Borba. This session introduce all division employees to moral intelligence/character education. 7 staff members will attend second session for school planning with Borba.

- Staff will meet weekly for one hour to develop and enhance PLC. Staff meet every Wednesday morning from 7:30 am to 8:30 am. All meetings are PLC meetings except the last Wednesday of the month. This meeting is a staff meeting more geared to the management of the school. Grade level teams meet for ½ hour every 6 days to collaborate on grade level items.

- Maintain a resource section in the Staff Workroom so all staff can access information on PLC. The school purchased a staff set of Building Moral Intelligence.

- Recruit a variety of staff to attend PLC related workshops and conferences. 3 staff attended Character Education 2-day workshop.

- Annually rotate staff involvement with the PLC Leadership Team. A new division one teacher and a new division two teacher were rotated onto the PLC Leadership Team. Both of these teachers attended PLC workshops/conferences last year to help develop their understanding of PLCs. PLC Leadership Team added three new staff members with one being a Support Staff member.

- Student involvement through activities such as:
  - Student Council initiatives for school spirit. Student council developed year long plan for school spirit day activities. Student council works toward showing school wide movies. Greater involvement of council — announcements, character education judging. March of the Penguins shown to all students as finale for the Walk to the South Pole.

- Red indicates tracking during Term 1
- Green indicates tracking during Term 2
- Blue indicates tracking during Term 3
School Culture for Improved Learning

As stated earlier in the paper, implementing professional learning communities in our school was the start of a cultural transformation. This transformation was impacting leadership, professional development, data use, professional growth plans, collaboration and collective inquiry. Professional learning communities are tightly tied to the school improvement plan. In fact they provide the structure and support for leaders to interactively engage staff in the processes and the dialogue necessary for sharing, planning, and analyzing professional development that impacts student learning.

As professional learning communities became the professional development structure across the division and in our school, I began to realize that professional development is a complex process. Crystal clear was the overall significance of improving student learning and character through professional development means and practices that are contextually relevant to each school’s unique needs. I learned the importance of alignment. Are we all striving for improved student learning and character at the various levels - provincial, divisional, school, and classroom?

During the Master’s courses, we spent time talking about professional growth plans. We discussed the importance of understanding how teaching and learning knowledge is created and disseminated in schools and how it is critical to the successful implementation of instructional practices. Efforts were made to highlight the critical necessity of organizational structures and school cultures conducive to job-embedded professional development. I learned staffs need opportunities to: collaborate, peer coach, reflect on pedagogical practices, and build leadership capacity.
To be successful, school districts are required to strategically plan an alignment of resources, policies and goals. District leaders need to establish a common vision of what characterizes effective PD practices across the district and within schools. If divisions, schools, and collective staff truly desire to improve and enhance student learning, it requires a willingness to investigate, research, and study the needs of our students. There must be a willingness to accept our weaknesses, a desire to alter our behaviours and beliefs, and aspirations for staff to make the necessary commitments to grow professionally.

Whatever framework professional development uses there are a number of principles that need to be considered. Professional development: (1) nurtures the leadership capacity of staff; (2) focuses on all staff members but makes teachers central to student learning; (3) focuses on individual, interpersonal, and organizational capacity building; (4) incorporates best practices and research in teaching, learning, and leadership; (5) promotes job-embedded continuous inquiry and improvement; (6) enables staff to increase pedagogical expertise, competencies, and knowledge; (7) is collaboratively planned; (8) requires resources and time; (9) is based on a clear long-term plan; and (10) is evaluated by its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning which in turn guides future PD (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). These professional development principles link and align with the structure of professional learning communities as described by Hord (1997) and Eaker et al., (2002).

Initial school data from the division survey “Collaboration at our School” established a baseline indicating that many characteristics were missing from the culture of the school. As well, data indicated that most staff did not understand what a professional learning community was. The professional development goal quickly became clear.
“This staff development not only must affect the knowledge, attitudes and practices of individual teachers, administrators, and other school employees, but it also must alter the cultures and structures of the organization” (Sparks and Hirsh, 1997, as cited in Dufour and Eaker, 1998, p.255). There was a need to establish some sort of plan to guide PLC implementation. We were not prepared to just let it happen haphazard. The plan was instrumental in developing strategies for PLC implementation and providing a means of evaluation.

With a foundation based on the principles of learning communities, staff began to “put into practice” some of the theoretical PLC concepts by implementing them into the other school improvement goals. As the structural and organizational framework continues to develop, staff started to develop the knowledge, skills, and attributes necessary to improve student writing results and provide effective character education.

Our writing focus was based on the 3 key questions of PLC’s. 1) What do we want students to learn? 2) How do we know that they have learned it? 3) What do we do when students are not learning?

**What do we want students to learn?** Our journey started when our division held a day long professional development session specifically focusing on assessment. The Alberta Assessment Consortium led the day with lead teachers from each school guiding each group through the process. What became very apparent from this PD day and the achievement test analysis was the lack of common understanding among our own teachers in terms of writing expectations, processes, and assessment. It was obvious we had never had the important conversations about this specific area of our curriculum and through our PLC meetings we
would be able to discuss, debated, and understand this component of teaching and student learning.

Our PLC leadership team posed a question to staff concerning – what writing outcomes are covered in your grade? Surprisingly, we found out that most teachers could not articulate the writing outcomes. How can we effectively teach and expect students to meet the required outcomes, when we can not explain what the kids are expected to do in terms of writing? The next step was to have teachers determine the essential writing outcomes in their grade level.

At this point, grade level teams looked at the program of studies. Their goal was to sort, organize, and create a document containing user friendly language of the general and specific outcomes related to writing. During this process, administration came to realize a few teachers did not have up to date program of studies or could not find them, indicating that following and knowing the program of studies was not always happening. It was evident this was an area as administrators we must to do a better job.

As a result of our discoveries, all teachers were given a deadline for updating all the components of the program of studies. Internet links were provided and staff were given instructions to update subject outcomes and any illustrative examples if they accompanied the outcomes. In addition, all teachers were required to update long range plans to include new outcomes, changes to evaluation procedures, and timelines. Grade level teams used their job-embedded PLC time to collaborate and get these essential documents current. In early November administration checked all teaching staff for up-to-date program of studies, illustrative examples, and long range course outlines.
Each grade level shared their writing outcomes with all other grade levels. Each staff member was given a binder specifically designated for writing. Staff filed a copy of all documents, examples, and artifacts. It was the intention to have a binder created for any teacher, new or experienced, that could be referenced to assist in the process of improved student writing. This process allowed knowledge to be distributed between the various grade level teams. These artifacts (boundary objects) and routines (boundary practices) became common throughout the year as a means of ensuring vertical congruency (Spillane et al., 2001).

*How do we know they have learned it?* As grade level teams finished their essential writing outcomes, the PLC leadership team asked the grade level teachers to start researching and developing a story writing rubric. The rubrics developed by Alberta Education for the grade 3 and 6 story writing were the models in which rubrics should follow in order to maintain similar format and expectations. Staff researched samples of rubrics from the CAMP resources, AAC, websites, and 6+1 Writing Traits but were allowed to develop the expectations and language appropriate for their grade level, keeping in mind expectations above and below and the need for congruency and alignment.

Once each grade level completed their story writing rubric, these artifacts were once again shared with all other staff members and put into the writing binders. Many grade levels also used their grade level PLC time to develop assessment rubrics for other forms of writing including paragraphs, research reports, letter writing, and poetry.

Using information attained from our PD day with the Assessment Consortium, grade level teams developed story writing exemplars with a marking rationale reflecting a variety of levels of work based on the criteria from the assessment rubrics. The purposes of these
exemplars were two-fold. One was to provide teachers with examples to assist in assessment expectations. Secondly, the exemplars were to be used with students. By looking at examples of poor, good, and great writing students will be able to differentiate the qualities of poor, good, and great writing and self-reflect on how they can improve. These samples will allow teachers to illustrate what is important and thus allow students to build mental models of what success looks like. Once again, the exemplars from each grade level were shared with all staff and put into the writing binder.

*What will we do when students are not learning?* When staff started sharing grade level exemplars, rubrics, and writing outcomes, excellent discussions occurred. Staff wondered about how consistent the rubrics were from grade to grade. Some questioned how the rubrics were used. Are we assessing for learning or assessing of learning? Questions surfaced about the process of teaching writing. How often is creative writing focused on? Which program are teachers using? Are teachers following the Blended Style and Structure program? Are portfolios being used for students to self assess their work? How is writing assessed and how are (evaluation) marks determined?

It was clearly evident that as a staff we had not talked about the concept of writing in detail. We were not talking the same language nor expecting similar things from our teachers and students. Our PLC leadership team saw the need to clarify many of these questions. The PLC leadership team met and drafted a proposal to take to staff based on priorities expressed by the staff.

If the school really wanted to respond to the needs of the students, we as a group of teachers needed to collect data. In November, we asked each grade level to conduct a creative writing simulation and mark their stories using their grade level rubric. Each grade
reported their results in terms of the percentage of students above acceptable, acceptable and below acceptable. This data was graphed for each class and grade level (see Fig. 4). All staff were given copies of their respective classroom results and of all grade levels in the school. This data gave each teacher a baseline.

Figure 4 – Writing Data Graph for Grade 4
Each grade level developed a SMART goal based on improving students’ ability to write creative stories. A combination of school wide and grade level strategies were developed. School wide strategies were developed by division levels during our achievement test analysis. Grade level strategies were developed by grade level teachers addressing the specific needs of their students based on language arts programs in their classrooms. Long term and short term measures were established with corresponding targets. Term story writing simulations were scheduled for each grade level. Each grade would conduct a story writing experience simulated on an independent writing assignment similar to writing prompts used for achievement test purposes. Each of these writing simulations would be marked using the newly developed rubrics. Results would be analyzed and graphed illustrating the number of students above acceptable level, at acceptable level and below acceptable. These results would be compared to the SMART goal and targets for each term. Strategies, measures and targets may be review, adjusted and modified.

Staff decided they needed time to share pedagogical practices of writing. A guide sheet was drafted by the two teachers on the PLC Leadership team directing each grade level in a presentation of their best practices. We wanted to discuss the many questions mentioned above.

Staff also suggested we use the rubric tool developed by each grade level to assess story writing. In addition to sharing their best practices, each grade level was responsible for sharing one writing sample that would be marked by each staff member using the respective rubric. Grade level teams would then discuss what kind of descriptive feedback would assist this student in improving their writing and come to a consensus on a mark for each of the categories on the rubric. The staff then shared and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of
the story, if the rubric was effective, types of descriptive feedback, and of course our expectations of marking.

These presentations and discussions were critical. This process was an eye-opener for staff to look at other grade levels writing and how their rubric was applied. It allowed us to really talk teaching and student learning. Without PLC’s we rarely had time to talk about specific areas of student learning and our approach to teaching. It was always left to the individual teacher or maybe a cohesive grade level team. But for such discussions to occur at a staff level were interesting, captivating, and enlightening. Professional learning communities risk becoming meaningless and superficial much like the “one day, do it to me workshop” if leaders do not find ways to engage staff in discussions about teaching and learning.

In this process, the teachers were an important source of leadership. They implemented the understanding by design methodology. They lead the discussions and provided the expertise. As Spillane et al. (2001) state, “when teachers identify other teachers as leaders, they frequently invoke the human capital of these individuals; that is the knowledge, expertise, and skill of the individual” (p.3).

Next year we have established a new PLC leadership team with new members and more fresh ideas. This team has planned for a writing specialist to spend the day with our teachers at our school in early September. We are continuing to look for ways to improve our pedagogy and validate our knowledge. We need to ensure teachers are implementing best practices and not just someone’s good idea. We are hoping to have teachers use action research to validate some the writing strategies we are learning to see if they are impacting student learning.
Changes in the learning culture. With the implementation of professional learning communities at the school, I was interested in tracking the changes in our learning culture. I conducted a staff PLC survey pertaining to alignment of our school improvement plan with professional learning communities. I wanted staff to reflect on our progress and note their understanding of our culture and its impact on student learning. The survey data and comments were very valuable (see Figure 5). Most staff believe significant steps have been made in the cultural shift to a learning community. The one survey question that remains a big challenge for me is about staff input. This cultural facet of our learning community is still very much a work in progress. As I mentioned near the beginning of the paper, there is still a hierarchical leadership element in our school and this survey questions is a good indicator of its existence.

I am very interested in tracking our writing data over the next few years. If we are truly impacting and improving student writing; achievement test results should indicate this. If we are truly impacting and improving student writing; our own data should indicate this.

Effective leaders must seek feedback and critically reflect on their practices as a leader (Reeves, 2006). Throughout the internship, my leadership skills and knowledge were being put to the test. I was interested in knowing if my leadership was making a difference and impacting student learning. Reeves (2006) believes, “Reflection is so important for leaders because of the gulf between the theoretical abstractions of academic leadership programs and the daily lives of leaders” (p. 50). I want to know if all the things I had learned in this Masters program, “the theoretical abstractions” were applicable to my daily life as a school leader. The reflections that became a part of my internship and portfolio guided my growth and provided platforms for conversations with my principal and our instructors.
Figure 5 – PLC Survey Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC Survey Statement</th>
<th>2004-05</th>
<th>2005-06</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We all have a good idea what our colleagues at the same grade level are teaching at any time</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are familiar with each other’s classroom management and teaching styles</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes at the same grade level follow substantially the same curricula</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff agree about the specific outcomes that they should expect each year in the grades</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff agree on the criteria for different levels of achievement in the grades</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues having difficulty with problem students or in teaching subject matter can access support.</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have developed some common formative assessments that help us diagnose student learning needs and revise instruction</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have developed common summative assessments that help us report student achievement.</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our colleagues share useful and best teaching practices with each other</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues meet at least once every two weeks to discuss mutual concerns or to seek answers to teaching and learning problems</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have developed some common formative assessments that help us diagnose student learning needs and revise instruction</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have developed common summative assessments that help us report student achievement.</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our colleagues share useful and best teaching practices with each other</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues meet at least once every two weeks to discuss mutual concerns or to seek answers to teaching and learning problems</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have developed some common formative assessments that help us diagnose student learning needs and revise instruction</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have developed common summative assessments that help us report student achievement.</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our colleagues share useful and best teaching practices with each other</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues meet at least once every two weeks to discuss mutual concerns or to seek answers to teaching and learning problems</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have developed some common formative assessments that help us diagnose student learning needs and revise instruction</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have developed common summative assessments that help us report student achievement.</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our colleagues share useful and best teaching practices with each other</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As I reflected on the survey data, I also reflected on some of the foundational changes I thought occurred as a result of my leadership journey. I have included the changes in Figure 6. Many of these changes came as a result of ideas and discussions throughout the masters program. For example, the change in how professional growth plans were carried out was a result of discussions in ED 5631 and reading in ED 5500. I learned staff need to align professional growth plans with school goals. Professional growth plans allow staff the autonomy to direct their individual growth based on school context and individual needs.

By division policy, each staff member is required to complete a growth plan, submit it by September 30th, and discuss the growth plan with school administration. It is to reflect goals based on: a self-assessment, demonstrable relationship to the TQS and take into consideration the education plans of the school, division, and Alberta Education (Grasslands Policy Handbook, 2002).

As part of the new growth plan process, staff provided written updates, at specified times, to school administration and to PLC grade level team members. The purpose is three fold. One is a measure of accountability to ensure staff are making a reasonable effort to honor their growth and secondly to stimulate staff self-reflection on the goals and the progress being made. Finally, it provides administration with regular updates so if additional support can be provided if there is a needed.

According to Fenwick (2001), administrators need to create a system of balance in which teachers’ personal goals can mesh with school and district initiatives and priorities. Structures of support and accountability are required yet there is a need to understand that flexibility and individual autonomy are essential components to increase staff commitment to professional growth plans.
Figure 6 – Changes in the Learning Culture

**BEFORE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

**Professional Growth Plans**

Staff develop growth plans at the beginning of the year based on one personal goal and one professional goal not necessarily related to school improvement plan. Staff review previous year’s plan and discuss current plan with administration prior to the end of September.

**SINCE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

Staff develop growth plans at the beginning of the year aligned with current school improvement plan. PGP reviewed with administration prior to the end of September. Staff share their PGP progress with grade level colleagues and administration three times a year (Dec, March & June) with a written update.

**Professional Development**

School based professional development occurs 5 times a year for ½ day each. School staff are divided into 4 Goal Teams – Special Education, Public Relations, Curriculum and Instruction, School Environment. Team membership rotates based on interest. Each team is responsible for planning one ½ day session. Teams meet once a month for ½ hour for planning purposes and implementation of goal team strategies somewhat tied to three year plan.

Staff meet for one hour a week each month. In a typical month this means 3 of 4 meetings are dedicated to professional development and 1 of 4 are for staff meeting and management items. Staff work collaboratively in grade level teams and collectively towards increasing student achievement in writing and implementing character development programs. Each grade level team received ½ hour of job-embedded PLC time to collaborate.
Use of Data

Data was gathered for achievement test analysis. All teachers are guided through the achievement test analysis.

Data is gathered and graphed for year end screening including reading, math, spelling, and writing. Student and classroom profile graphs are developed for multiyear data, cohort data and grade level data. All teachers actively analyze achievement test data. Grade level teams use common assessments to gather data. Smart goals are developed based on data.

Collaboration

Teachers and especially grade level teachers met when they could. This usually occurred during recess breaks or after school. Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) meetings occurred between classroom teacher and learning support teacher once a week to discuss learning needs of students.

Teacher collaboration is embedded into the school calendar through hour long PLC meetings and ½ hour grade level team meetings. Team norms have been established for effective meetings. Feedback sheets and agenda ensure focus and direction. Teams are pursuing grade level smart goals. TAT meetings still scheduled once a week to discuss learning needs of students.

Leadership

Administrators are viewed as being in leadership positions. Goal teams share responsibility and leadership; however, in most cases the leadership is reliant on the same one or two individuals in each team. Celebrations and staff meetings are dominated by administration.

Administrators are working to share, distribute and build leadership capacity. Rotational leadership positions on the PLC Leadership Team allow for staff to experience leadership and build leadership skills. PLC Leadership Team involved in various leadership capacities such as staff development and budgeting. Development of two assessment specialist on staff builds expertise and leadership in the areas of assessment for learning and assessment of learning. Increased staff leadership in celebration assemblies, and staff meetings.
**Student Learning**

Assumption that curriculum was being followed and outcomes were being met. Individual teachers were responsible for determining what students were expected to learn, determining how they will assess if students are learning, and how to respond to support students not learning. Individuals using best practices do not share with other staff members or only with select staff members (crab bucket culture).

Collaborative discussions about student learning occur with all teachers. Teachers determine the essential outcomes, develop common assessments, and set Smart goals based on data. Teachers share best practices, use research, and share information from conferences/workshops to determine effective pedagogical practices. Discussions are focused and coherent, not random and unrelated. The pedagogy of teaching and student learning is critical.

**School Improvement Plans**

School three year plan drafted by vice principal. Targets and measures were set by administration for a large variety of goals and strategies. The plan was reviewed by staff, handed into Central Office, and ignored until the next spring when it needed to be handed in again.

School three year plan collaboratively developed. Collaborative teams worked through achievement data, survey data, provincial and divisional goals, strategies and measures. Goals were narrowed to three essential areas affecting student learning. Each team drafted strategies, measures and targets for the goals. School improvement plan is reviewed with all staff tracking its implementation and changes.
Conclusion

The leadership journey over the past two and a half years has been exciting, arduous, and extremely rewarding. When I think back, I realize I really did not know much about educational leadership. I followed what was modeled for me. I learned many things from my previous school leaders but now I know the theory behind their actions. I followed my heart and made decisions on what I thought was best for children. I realize that effective leaders have an underlying leadership philosophy. This philosophy is guided and manifested by the kind of person we are. Yet, it is not enough. Effective leaders need the knowledge, skill sets, and attributes which will direct and compliment our underlying leadership beliefs.

I have learned the value of school leaders being stewards of learning. It is the purpose we are here. Our vision must become the blueprint for improved student learning. I remember Dr. Aitken’s (2005) statement, “School improvement initiatives cannot be managed by any one individual, least of all the principal. If we’ve learned nothing else, we’ve certainly come to grips with the virtues of a distributed, shared approach to leadership as the foundation for building the capacity of our schools” (p.1). We must remember we are not capable of doing it all.

I have learned the value of developing not just the human capital in our buildings but the social capital as well. We need to have collegial relationships that foster trust, integrity and moral leadership.

I have experienced and learned that differing perspectives and leadership philosophies make a strong administration team. We need overlap and compatibility, but philosophical tensions create opportunities for reflection, discussion, and growth.
I have experienced the ethical and moral dilemmas of leadership. Accountability makes us very aware of academics. But we can not forget to capture the hearts of our students and give them hope. Effective leaders are morally responsive to academics and character. We must look after academic, social, emotional, and physical needs in order to educate the whole child.

I consider this synthesis paper the closing chapter on this stage of my momentous leadership journey. I know the foundation I have developed in this program will give me the character and fortitude to continue to grow with integrity and passion. I look forward to the next phases of my leadership journey and know the relationships forged in the past two and half years have enriched my life and provide me a talented and caring support network for the rest of my teaching days.
References

https://webct.uleth.ca

Alberta’s Commission on Learning. (Oct. 2003). Every child learns, every child succeeds:
Report and recommendations. Edmonton: AB

Barth, R. (2002). The culture builder. Educational Leadership. 59 (8), 6-11

practices for enhancing student achievement. Bloomington, IN: National
Education Service.

professional learning communities. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

Eaker, R., Dufour, R., Dufour, R. (2002). Getting started: Reculturing schools to become
professional learning communities. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

Shanker Institute.

Fenwick, T.J. (2001). Teacher supervision through professional growth plans:
Balancing contradictions and opening possibilities. Educational
Administration Quarterly. 37 (3), 401-424.

http://www.michaelfullan.ca/Articles_02/03_02.htm

Grasslands Regional Division. (2002). Teacher growth, supervision and


