

**LEADERSHIP AND PROGRAM EVALUATION PRACTICES INFLUENCING  
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES**

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis first and foremost to

God

Who gave me the gift to teach, ability to learn, and inspired me to seek knowledge and understanding in all that is important and relevant in my life.

Next, to my children

Brittany and Gabriel,

For whom my desire is to pursue nothing less than excellence in their lives.

And finally to my brilliant, dear friends,

Dianne Drummond, Mary Feeney and Kimberly Gruending,

Who provided immeasurable encouragement and support as they cheered me on,

inspiring me to face the challenge of completing this research

with enthusiasm and without fear.

## Abstract

This qualitative study employed various qualitative data collection procedures to report on leadership and program evaluation practices being utilized and explored within the framework of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). The intent of this research was to highlight practices of teachers as leaders while determining the manner in which programs and initiatives are evaluated. Document review, a written questionnaire, and personal interviews were conducted to focus on the perspectives of school administrators and teachers involved in AISI projects. Patterns and themes were identified that illustrated the attitudes and opinions of Alberta teachers and administrators with regard to the leadership strategies employed. These included ensuring the development of vision, mission, and improvement planning at the school level; emphasizing the importance of collaboration and teamwork; and promoting valuable organizational learning through the development of professional learning communities (PLCs). The evidence strongly suggests that Alberta teachers and administrators advocate the continuance of AISI in the province. There is some indication that both teachers and administrators are excited, although somewhat overwhelmed, by the protocol put in place through AISI. The study reveals various strategies that administrators employ to affect the sustainability of school improvement projects.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

The success of any program or initiative depends on supportive relationships among stakeholders and leadership; these relationships are vital to sustainable school improvement. This study reports on leadership strategies that espouse teachers as leaders, and also describes what evaluation processes are employed to determine how Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS I) programs and initiatives are retained or terminated in schools.

Leadership and program evaluation practices are explored within the AIS I framework and will focus on the perspectives of school administrators and teachers involved in AIS I projects. From this point of view, strategies and practices surrounding leadership that influence sustainable change are illustrated. Additionally, participants provided insight regarding how AIS I projects are currently evaluated, and what measures they believe would provide a more complete and accurate appraisal of them.

Insights are reported through analysis and synthesis of qualitative data obtained from participants. This research complements current literature (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Bedard & Aiken, 2005), while providing informative insights from those at the heart of AIS I -- Alberta school administrators and teachers.

### *Impetus for Study*

Many elements are important components of sustainable school improvement. These include building capacity among staff and support in all levels of a learning organization (Deal, 1990; Gibb, Gibb, Randall & Hite, 1999; Hayes, Christie, Mills & Lingard, 2004; Lambert, 2002; Molinaro & Drake, 1998), and developing collaborative relationships by utilizing distributive or transformational leadership frameworks

(Leithwood et al., 1999; Gibb et al., 1999; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Polite, 1993).

Lambert (2002) remarks that, “Instead of looking to the principal alone for instructional leadership, we need to develop leadership capacity among all members of the school community” (p. 37). Lambert explains that improvements under ‘old,’ formal models of one-person leadership are difficult to sustain; the improvements often lose momentum or fade away when the principal leaves. Leaders, along with purposeful monitoring and evaluation of the progress and effectiveness of projects and programs implemented, are integral to the process of innovative, sustainable change. The intent of this study is to illuminate the role of leaders and evaluation practices which contribute to sustainable school improvement.

*Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)*

The mandate and vision of the Alberta government is to develop the best educational system in the world in response to the ever-increasing demands of globalization and competition in the world market. This vision contributed to the birth of AISI in 1999, a representation of the commitment of the Alberta government to their investment in public education. AISI has manifest as a collective partnership between the provincial government and Alberta school authorities. The Alberta government designated \$68 million annually for Cycle 1 (2000-2003), investing \$204 million for school improvement projects during this cycle (Alberta Learning, 2004, p. v). Cycle 2 of AISI transpires from 2003 to 2006.

The intent of AISI has been to provide direct funding for local school projects particular to improved student achievement. These projects are developed and designed by individual schools to ensure their unique needs are met. AISI fundamentally supports

and encourages collaboration among teachers, parents and the community to introduce innovations and creative initiatives based upon local needs and circumstances (Alberta Learning, 2004, p. 6). AISI is characterized by partnership, catalyst, student-focused, flexibility, collaboration, culture of continuous improvement, evidence-based practice, research-based interventions, inquiry and reflection, building capacity and sustainability, and knowledge (pp. 6-7). This describes a multi-faceted, cutting-edge approach to school improvement initiatives never before attempted or implemented in the history of Alberta's educational system.

#### *Implications*

As demands continue for increased accountability in education, it is more important than ever for educational organizations to collaborate and develop programs, projects and strategies for sustainable school improvement. AISI provides an action-research based model that greatly assists and facilitates this process, enabling educators to identify best practices and strategies to support their efforts. As educators and the public accept the notion of continuous improvement to facilitate sustainable change, the vision of AISI - to develop long-term sustainable school improvement, may come to fruition. This study complements the vision and goals of AISI by highlighting school leadership practices and program and project evaluation methods congruent with school improvement and subsequent student achievement and learning.

#### *Statement of the Problem and Research Questions*

To glean the most applicable information for this study, the main research question posed is this: What leadership and evaluation practices do school administrators

and teachers employ that influence and affect the sustainability of school improvement projects under the AISI umbrella?

The framework for this research is built on the following themes and sub-questions:

A. School Mission, Vision and Improvement Planning

1. To what degree has a shared vision been developed within the school?
2. How are school priorities and goals set?
3. How was the school improvement project conceived?

B. School Culture

1. How are relationships between formal leaders and staff members described?
2. How does the culture of the school influence and affect school improvement?

C. Building Capacity and Commitment

1. What practices build capacity and commitment to ongoing school improvement?
2. How are school improvement decisions made?
3. How have lead teachers participated in the school improvement project?
4. What are the perceptions of how well the improvement project has taken root within the school community?

#### D. Professional Learning, Growth and Supervision

1. How are professional growth plans aligned with the school's three-year plans and improvement priorities?
2. How are best practices shared amongst the staff? How does the staff share best practices?
3. How are expectations for performance shared with the staff?
4. What types of instructional support are available within the school?

#### E. Organizational Learning

1. What important lessons learned in Cycle 1 have been applied to Cycle 2?
2. What conditions are present (or absent) that may affect organizational effectiveness?

#### F. Evaluation Practices

1. What processes do administrators employ to evaluate improvement initiatives and new programs?
2. To what degree are teachers and paraprofessionals involved in program evaluations?
3. Who is involved with decisions regarding retaining or terminating an existing program or initiative?
4. Are current program and project evaluation methods sufficient in determining a program's worth?

*About the Author*

I was born and raised in rural Saskatchewan, receiving the majority of my elementary and secondary education in a small school that served a hamlet and the surrounding farming region. In 1987, I entered the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan pursuing the elementary education route. In 1992 I received my Bachelor of Education degree with specializations in the education of exceptional children and language arts. I had taken advantage of a pilot project at the University of Saskatchewan that allowed me to complete the core classes for the Masters of Education of Exceptional Children program as part of my undergraduate degree. These classes granted me recognition as a certified special education teacher and also gave me B-level test examiner qualifications.

My teaching career began in the fall of 1992 when I accepted my first contract as a resource room teacher in a small band-operated school in rural north-central Saskatchewan. This position gave me valuable insights into early literacy and reading instruction as this particular reserve community had adopted the Reading Recovery intervention model as developed by Marie Clay. My teaching history is a mosaic of positions ranging from grades 1 through 12, with a solid early literacy and special education foundation, sprinkled with tidbits from regular classroom situations here and there. At the time of completing this research, I am working in Spruce Grove, Alberta, as a full-time special education teacher with the Parkland School Division No. 70 of Stony Plain, Alberta.

To this study I bring a certain philosophy about education; specifically, that schools need to function with a certain amount of order in order to achieve maximum

effectiveness. From my perspective, effective leadership (at all levels) is valuable and necessary in schools. Having taught for over 10 years, my most valuable experiences were those in which leadership was supportive of staff and students alike. Additionally, my best experiences were ones where teachers supported one another and were encouraged and trusted to make various decisions affecting both students and staff.

A firm believer that two heads are always better than one, in my view educators incur the most affective improvement of conditions in schools for students when they work together towards common goals. An idealist, my focus always revolves around the best interests of students and striving to obtain win-win situations for all involved. I believe that there are many variables that impact student learning, and that learning is life-long, not something that only happens in schools. As an educator, my job is to impart a dedication to lifelong learning within students in addition to curricular knowledge.

To this study I bring what I describe a neo-traditional perspective that views leadership as vital to the heart of a learning organization, but fashioned in a less hierarchical, more collaborative manifestation than past perspectives. I believe that teachers possess a wealth of knowledge of what is best for their students, but have previously lacked the forum in which to impart that knowledge, partially due constraints imposed upon them by traditional leadership models. My hope is that not only students, but, the entire educational system, will benefit from the move towards recognizing teachers as the leaders they truly are.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

The literature is reviewed in several sections: educational leadership, organizational change and school improvement, organizational learning, and project and program evaluation. Each section will briefly review what I found to be the most current and relevant research and outline the implications the literature provides for this study.

With changes to the underlying foundations and principles of our society, schools have been facing unique challenges. Educational demands have increased, and as a result of these changes, schools have been subjected to intense scrutiny. Increased pressure on schools to meet the demands of modern society has prompted researchers to examine the education system to determine what practices schools should retain, revitalize or discard. Simultaneously, researchers are attempting to identify innovations that provide evidence of effective and sustainable school improvement.

Current literature suggests the impact of leadership on school improvement efforts is great, and that leadership style may promote or impede these efforts (Deal, 1990; Gibb, et al., 1999; Hayes et al., 2004; Lam, 2004; Peterson, 2002; Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1995; Tarter & Hoy, 2004). For this reason, it is vital to determine the most effective leadership strategies. Consequently, a large portion of this study is devoted to identifying effective leadership practices that concur with current research, and to illuminating other trends previously unlit.

The purposes of initiatives such as AISI would be compromised without suitable evaluation of programs and projects; their effectiveness and value could not be clearly ascertained. As Guskey (2003) recognizes, "Assessments can be a vital component to our efforts to improve education" (p. 10). Hence, it is equally important to utilize the most

useful and efficient program and project evaluation methods at our disposal. In doing so, we may identify programs and projects that provide the most valuable instructional methods and techniques for enhancing student achievement. Paying close attention to appropriate and effectual evaluation methods provides valuable insights for school improvement at all levels, from local community schools to government organizations. Identifying and implementing effective evaluation methods provides constructive information for all stakeholders involved in attempting sustainable school improvements.

#### *Research on Educational Leadership*

This section discusses the body of literature surrounding educational leadership practices, specifically emphasizing traditional models and transformational frameworks in order to draw comparisons and illustrate relevance. The transformational model has been adopted as the conceptual foundation of this study upon consideration of the work of a variety of authors who have made key contributions to the current understanding of effective educational leadership.

#### *Traditional Models*

Theories of educational leadership have traditionally reflected an industrial top-down, managerial approach “characterized by central values of power and control” (Gibb et al., 1999, p. 2). This style of leadership provides those in formal leadership roles (superintendents, principals, vice-principals) with authority, power and a certain degree of control over subordinates (teachers, support staff, etc.). This model encourages dependency on authority figures for direction and decision-making. Deal (1990) believes efforts to improve our schools have failed because educators continue to choose strategies based on past models that no longer work or suit the needs of educators in the present

situation. This sentiment is supported by Lambert (2002), who argues, “The old model of formal, one-person leadership leaves the substantial talents of teachers largely untapped. Improvements under this model are not easily sustainable” (p. 37). Lambert believes that the weaknesses inherent in formal, one-person leadership models have sacrificed quality learning for all students. Industrial leadership models further reduce school improvement efforts because “They are based on inadequate management premises and a theory of leadership that has reached its limits” (Sergiovanni & Moore, 1989, p. 208). These models ensure only minimal levels of commitment and elicit nothing more than “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay” (p. 208).

It is important to consider the pitfalls to a transactional approach. According to Lam (2004), “The downside of this approach is that it is highly dependent on a ‘model one theory-in-use’ which emphasizes unilateral control of situations, rationality (suppressing feelings), and advocacy of one’s position” (p. 306). Lam considers the transactional approach to encourage single-loop learning where “the outcome is primarily aimed at improving what they have already known and no new grounds are broken” (p. 300). Such learning does not promote fundamental organizational change. The transactional style may promote the effective and efficient operation of an organization, but “It does not develop in followers the level of trust, loyalty and enthusiasm that is associated with transformational leadership” (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1997, p. 2).

Leithwood et al. (1999) reiterate that transactional models do not promote fundamental change, observing that transactional practices “do little to bring about changes in the organization” (p. 29). Organizational change does not occur because a transactional model “focuses on basic and largely extrinsic motives and needs”

(Sergiovanni, 2006, p. 162), which ensures only minimal levels of commitment of followers. According to some research, traditional leadership approaches equated with position and power may not be the most suitable for school settings (Leithwood et al., 1999; Sergiovanni & Moore, 1989). DuFour (1991) describes a top-down approach to leadership as being “the process of persuasion and example by which an individual attempts to influence a group to take action that is in accord with the leader’s purpose or the shared purpose of all” (p. 15). For these reasons, its application, as a whole, has been rejected for the purposes of this study.

#### *Transformational Frameworks*

The shortcomings of transactional approaches have encouraged educational researchers and leaders to seek new leadership practices more conducive to fundamental organizational change and school improvement efforts. These aspects of organizational change are intricately interwoven in schools and cannot be denied. The transformational model is highly responsive to the foundational requirements of this study, as it “has the potential to tap higher levels of human potential, to build commitment, and to motivate followers, with improved consequences in both satisfaction and performance” (Sergiovanni & Moore, 1989, p. 208). The transformational approach appears to be the best ‘fit’ for the context of schools, which are “complex social organisms held together by a symbolic webbing” (Deal, 1990, p. 2) and have political, cultural and human resource realities resulting from these interactions.

Various authors describe how transformational leadership strategies and styles, based on motivational theory, are conducive to guiding change and innovation in schools while improving student learning (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann, 2002;

Leithwood et al., 1999; Marlow, Kyed, & Connors, 2005; Mulford, Kendall & Kendall, 2004; Silins & Mulford, 2001). The concept of transformational leadership has evolved from the work of many influential authors (Gibb et al., 1999; Hayes et al., 2004; Lam, 2004; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Tarter & Hoy, 2004). In another example, “Bass and his colleagues define transformational leadership as including charisma or idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 29).

This is not to throw the baby out with the bath water and totally disregard all aspects of traditional leadership approaches. Leithwood et al. (1999) recognized that some transactional leadership practices should be included in the model, as defined by three dimensions: “contingent reward; management-by exception; and a *laissez-faire* or ‘hands off’ form of leadership” (p. 29). These dimensions still hold value and have their place in leading schools. However, Leithwood et al. take leadership to the next level through a transformational approach that involves direction setting, redesign of the organization, and the development of people involved. Mulford and Silins (2003) describe a transformational focus that includes individual support, structure, culture, vision and goals, performance expectation and intellectual stimulation. Seven specific dimensions of transformational leadership are described as:

Building school vision; establishing school goals; providing intellectual stimulation; offering individualized support; modeling best practices and important organizational values; demonstrating high performance expectations; creating a productive school culture; and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions. (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 9)

These dimensions are highly integrative, and the concepts are supported by research (Gibb et al., 1999; Hayes et al., 2004; Lam, 2004; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Tarter & Hoy, 2004). Mulford and Silins (2003) conclude that leadership that makes a difference in schools is transformational and distributive, while Gibb et al. (1999) describe it as 'sideways leadership' or 'leading from the middle', which involves looking to colleagues, rather than authority figures, for direction. These approaches give teachers more voice in making decisions, empowering and inspiring them to take on more active roles in leading innovations.

Empowering teachers does not happen without trust and collegial relationships between leaders and teachers. Leaders must recognize one thing: "Personal relationships are important. Staff has [sic] to know that we consider their welfare in any innovations" (S. Tanner, cited in Castagnoli & Cook, 2004, p. 2). Mutual trust and respect are vital components of innovation implementation in schools with a transformational leadership approach. A supportive environment supports willingness to explore innovations for increasing capacities; it also provides a sense of ownership, collaboration, teamwork, action research and best practices conducive to sustainability of school improvement efforts (Castagnoli & Cook, 2004). These observations and findings support a transformational approach to leadership in schools, which inspires higher levels of commitment and capacity among organization members through empowering, respectful relationships. Tarter and Hoy (2004) identify the impact of trust levels in schools on teacher effectiveness, which, in turn, affects student achievement.

Silins and Mulford (2001) also support the paradigm shift towards a transformational model of leadership, specifying six dimensions to define the

transformational practices of the principal: vision and goals, culture, structure, intellectual stimulation, individual support, and performance expectation (pp. 4-5). Their research concurs with that of Lam (2004), Hayes et al. (2004), and Tarter and Hoy (2004). Students benefit when schools attempt to function as learning organizations, moving away from traditional leadership models based on power and control, towards one that enables others to act as leaders, while leaders also act on their own.

This paradigm shift involves the engagement of principals in sustained professional development (PD) to acquire knowledge and skills that will allow them to be effective in their efforts. Leaders must model continuous learning and emphasize the same for teachers and students. This acquisition is vital, because “System learning and improved performance depends on the increased efficacy of principals and teachers, as well as students” (Silins & Mulford, 2001, p. 5). Furthermore, teacher perceptions and subsequent student achievement are affected by leadership.

Such thinking has prompted reflection on organizational structures, as Gibb et al. (1999) point out: “The progress of collaborative paradigms of leadership is evidence that educators are emerging with their own definitions of what it means to lead in the schoolhouse” (p. 21). Modern educators understand and have their own ideas about leadership; it is time for them to stop relying on others and to invent practices applicable to their context. This attitude permeates the philosophical foundation of this study, based on the model of transformational leadership as conceptualized by Leithwood et al. (1999).

With ideology shifting away from traditional, managerial approaches of leadership in schools, it is natural to adopt the transformational leadership philosophy to

guide this research. Its multi-dimensional nature encompasses all aspects of school improvement, leadership and evaluation while effectively addressing the complexities of human relationships.

*Research on Organizational Change and School Improvement*

For schools to improve, some agreement must occur concerning what constitutes quality schooling. However, educators and political powers appear to have conflicting points of view:

Principals and teachers recognize that good schools are about more than maximizing academic achievement. Espoused theories of quality schooling underlie school plans that are difficult to translate into action because of the political pressure on schools to achieve economies of scale and perform “effectively” in terms of quantifiable and readily measured outcomes. (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1995, p. 1)

If the concept of quality schooling continues to be described in strict terms of academic achievement and student performance, educators and school leaders have a monumental task before them in approaching and achieving school improvement.

Decades of public and political pressure for large-scale school improvement have changed the face of educational leadership. Beach and Lindahl (2004) argue, “The role of leaders is not merely to administer schools; rather, it is to lead those schools to significant, large-scale improvement, while simultaneously meeting the daily and long-term learning and social needs of the students they serve” (p. 2). School improvement presents a daunting challenge for modern-day leaders who must retain an arsenal of knowledge regarding its complexities. This challenge is further compounded by the

contextual variants of individual school settings which school leaders must detect, understand, be sensitive to, develop and implement effective initiatives. Beach and Lindahl (2004) believe leaders involved in school improvement efforts would benefit greatly from having skills, knowledge, understanding and dispositions from a variety of areas, including knowledge about leadership, planning, policy, organizational change and evaluation, if their school improvement efforts are to succeed.

An organizational improvement process and the actions required to create sustainable, large-scale organizational improvement are outlined by Beach and Lindahl (2004) who describe three phases: planning, implementation and institutionalization. In the planning phase, pre-planning activities occur in which the leadership team acknowledges the need for organizational improvement and engage in proactive exploration to determine strategies for improvement. The nature of the changes required must be identified, prompting the selection of a planning approach and refinement of activities to produce the desired outcomes. The planning phase also involves identifying the capacity and willingness of school stakeholders for change, which affect the success of improvement efforts and subsequent student achievement. The implementation stage involves the actual change process and is comprised of activities necessary to initiate or effect the identified improvements. Implementation ultimately leads to the institutionalization phase, where successful initiatives are internally adopted to become permanent and fundamental to the organization. For fundamental changes or reforms to be institutionalized, the initiatives must have authentic beginnings within the organization, commitment and ownership among teachers, flexibility, adequate resources and policy alignment (Datnow, Hubbard & Mehan, 2002).

We must realize the importance of achieving institutionalization because “The initial success of a school-improvement initiative does not insure its continued impact on a school” (DuFour, 1991, p. 50). If school improvement efforts are to be truly successful, they must be instituted in a permanent manner, such that they become a regular part of school life. Once successful strategies, projects and programs have been identified, “The objective is simply to establish the program as part of the routine of the school” (DuFour, 1991, p. 51). Initiatives need to become a normal part of the school’s functioning, occurring naturally and without great conscious effort as part of the daily activities, routines and protocols of the school.

Lam (2004) echoes the importance of internalizing initiatives and describes the departure from existing routines by changing fundamental values as being “double-loop learning” (p. 300) vital to school improvement efforts. Lam describes its significance: “If individuals pursue ‘double-loop’ learning, the fundamental values of all existing procedures will be subject to further reflection and the likely solution will be a complete departure from existing routines” (p. 300). Lam suggests that the outcomes of school improvement efforts should be “stored in various formats for written records and become the organizational repertoire, or memories, for dealing with similar future events” (p. 300) and that it would be beneficial to create official records for guiding future actions to which employees and stakeholders can refer. Such records would act as a guide to help ensure the continuation of improvement initiatives adopted by the school.

Tarter and Hoy (2004) set out to determine how key elements of school organization explain student achievement, as well as teachers’ assessment of organizational effectiveness. Tarter and Hoy contend that their conceptualizations of

enabling school structure (ES), culture of trust (CT), overall effectiveness (OE), socioeconomic status (SES), collective efficacy (CE) and politics are variables that “fit together and complement each other; they simultaneously contribute to a quality school” (p. 550). Their research renders interesting, useful information regarding the multiple inter-related variables that influence student learning and achievement.

An enabling school structure, as described by Tarter and Hoy (2004), is a hierarchy that facilitates and guides members, where principals and teachers work as colleagues while retaining distinctive goals through formalization (written directions) and centralization (locus of decision-making). The concept of enabling school structure complements the transformational leadership model. Alternately, Tarter and Hoy describe a hindering school structure as a hierarchy of rigid compliance and coercive formalization. It includes close supervision and strict control, where “The power of the principal is enhanced and the latitude of teachers is diminished” (p. 540) as teachers do what they are told. This hindering school structure most closely resembles traditional, managerial-style organizational prototypes.

School culture affects efforts for organizational change. According to Tarter and Hoy (2004), school culture is grounded in the notion of trust, a set of shared beliefs about school faculty; essentially, the extent to which teachers believe they can trust their students, colleagues, administrators and parents. A culture of trust (CT) is important as it affects leadership style, organizational health, teacher commitment and general school effectiveness. Culture is also related to organizational performance. A culture of trust “frees teachers from ‘looking over their shoulders’ and worrying about parents and administrators, enabling them to focus on the work of the classroom” (Tarter & Hoy,

2004, p. 543). A culture of trust, free of debilitating politics, supports collective efficacy, which in turn affects student achievement.

Tarter and Hoy (2004) found that all school performance outcomes were related to these variables. They determined that collective efficacy (CE), an indicator of teacher motivation, and the development of an enabling school structure (ES), which demonstrates administrative support, are most closely connected to student learning. Hence, "Highly motivated teachers in a structure of support directly improve student learning" (Tarter & Hoy, 2004, p. 549). Silins and Murray-Harvey (1997) also believe that students' attitudes, learning and involvement were positively influenced by teachers' positive perceptions of curriculum, teacher and school culture. A culture of trust (CT) informally supports collective efficacy (CE) and, therefore, is vital to school improvement efforts that focus on student achievement.

Silins and Murray-Harvey (1997) observed, "Reasonably strong and stable relationships have been found between internal school process factors such as Leadership, School Effects and Student Effects which incorporate a number of the key factors commonly associated with successful schools" (p. 1). They suggested the presence of two key factors: 1) purposeful leadership and 2) teacher involvement in curriculum planning (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1997). Transformational leadership practices were also identified as integral to the internal processes of the school (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1997). Other researchers and authors have suggested the need for more collaborative and collegial leadership styles, which build capacity and teamwork among staff (Castagnoli & Cook, 2004; Dawson, Swain, Johnson, & Ring, 2004; Gibb, et al.,

1999; Hayes et al., 2004; Leithwood et al., 1999; Molinaro & Drake, 1998; Tarter & Hoy, 2004; Townsend & Adams, 2003a).

With vast quantities of research and information available, it is important to comprehend the scope and depth of knowledge required of leaders who have the duty of undertaking organizational change. Leaders must realize that

Weak knowledge or skills in any of the components of the general process may threaten the success of an overall improvement effort. The leadership team's inability to integrate the various knowledge bases into a coherent conceptual and practical whole may also threaten that success... [Additionally,] the Organizational Improvement Process must be adapted to the uniqueness of each situation. (Beach & Lindahl, 2004, p. 21)

The information and knowledge base on school improvement is extensive. Considering the everyday demands and responsibilities placed on school leaders, one can comprehend how intimidating it is to expect them to be proficient in all aspects of school improvement processes. Hence, to facilitate school leaders' understanding and subsequent practices in the field, it is vital to develop a synthesis of relevant, accessible research and information surrounding organizational improvement (Beach & Lindahl, 2004).

#### *Research on Organizational Learning*

Leithwood et al. (1999) describe organizational learning (OL) as being a "multi-level phenomenon [which] takes place in many different organizational 'units'" (p. 165) along a continuum. The continuum spans from individual learning, to learning in groups or teams, to learning collectively as an organization. Silins and Mulford (2001) point out,

“[Authors like] Argyris and Schon (1974) have characterized a learning organization as one that learns, readily adapts to change, detects and corrects errors and continually improves” (p. 3). It is imperative that schools address fundamental structural changes to enhance organizational learning because “Traditional structural arrangements in schools, particularly high schools, have long been recognized as impediments to change and the collective learning required for continuous improvement” (p. 3). This sentiment reiterates the need for reflection and a serious reappraisal of the very foundations of the education system.

Silins and Mulford (2001) have discovered a link between organizational learning and student performance. They believe it is critical for schools to function as learning organizations to positively affect students’ learning outcomes as they discovered “The level of system or organizational learning in the school impacts on students’ participation and engagement with school, and their learning” (Silins & Mulford, 2001, p. 2). To take school improvement efforts seriously, bearing in mind their impact on student achievement, leaders must work to enhance conditions in their schools so that they may evolve into effective learning organizations.

A school’s capacity for organizational learning can be affected by a number of factors and conditions. Probst and Buchel (1997), cited in Silins and Mulford (2001), identify three categories of conditions favorable for the development of a culture of organizational learning: knowledge, ability and intention. The degree to which these conditions are present will influence the degree and capacity for organizational learning to occur in a school. Marks, Louis and Printy (2000), cited in Silins and Mulford (2001) describe a number of characteristics that determine a school’s capacity for organizational

learning; specifically, “school structure, participative decision-making grounded in teacher empowerment, shared commitment and collaborative activity, knowledge and skills, leadership, and feedback and accountability” (p. 3). It is important for school leaders to equip themselves with knowledge about organizational learning to maximize their efforts to develop schools as learning communities to positively effect student learning and achievement.

Schools must undergo an evolutionary transition to become learning organizations. Lam (2004) describes this process in terms of three distinct stages: germination, transformation and perpetuation (p. 302). The germination stage occurs at a fairly personal level where individual members pursue new knowledge and information. There is little or no evidence of collective learning at this point. As the organization moves into the transformation stage, leadership is particularly important as leaders are now beginning to think more at the systems level, to acquire new knowledge and information. By giving staff access to vital information, leaders enable them to become more involved in the governance of the school. In the perpetuation stage, the school is beginning to institutionalize changes by developing forms of official records to guide future actions. Lam (2004) recognizes the complexities of the internal conditions of schools, acknowledging that organizational learning is not achieved quickly, but slides along a continuum upon which a school may experience progression and regression, depending on its internal conditions.

Leaders face a complex process in attempting to develop their schools into ones actively engaged in organizational learning. However, the transformational leadership

approach provides an effective framework to guide them in their quest for organizational change and school improvement.

#### *Research on Project and Program Evaluation*

The term 'evaluation' is typically associated with student testing and the giving of grades. However, in education evaluation can perform a wide variety of functions. Evaluation may be employed to diagnose, revise curricula, make comparisons, anticipate educational needs, and determine if educational objectives have been achieved (Eisner, 2002). Diagnostic techniques are those most closely associated with student learning, while a variety of other approaches are used to address curriculum, program and project evaluations. Methods that focus on program and project evaluation were reviewed for the purposes of this research.

The recent accountability movement has been marked with the increased use of high-stakes, externally imposed standardized tests in attempt to evaluate educational programs and research projects, including AISI initiatives. Quantitative methods are necessary but, in themselves, cannot adequately evaluate programs and projects that are largely qualitative in nature. Townsend and Adams (2003c) suggest that, "If schools are to be held more accountable for student learning, educational reform should be based on internally empowering models, rather than externally interrogative" (p. 4). A balance of evaluation strategies must be employed as reliance on any single method provides incomplete evidence of the effectiveness of a program, method, innovation or product. Program and project evaluation should be treated with the same regard as other forms of research. Hence, evaluators must follow certain procedural principles, acknowledge their own bias, and take steps to ensure the reliability and validity of their findings.

Townsend and Adams (2003b, 2003c) describe several approaches to evaluating educational initiatives and to determine their respective utility, it is important to distinguish their differences. Conventional, quantitative evaluations maintain their efficacy, but educators recognize the restrictions of solely relying on purely measurable outcomes. Datnow et al. (2002) suggest that high-stakes accountability systems can actually work to inhibit reform efforts. There is a growing awareness that not all aspects of learning can be quantified, shifting the emphasis away from strictly quantitative processes, towards ones more democratic in nature which seek to engender self-improvement and capacity-building (Fetterman, cited in Townsend & Adams, 2003c). Balanced, multi-dimensional approaches to evaluation fit nicely with transformational leadership as they embody collaborative processes involving all stakeholders, placing emphasis on multiple ways of knowing.

Evaluation is a useful strategy for identifying improvement or change. To maximize its effectiveness and fullest potential, evaluation should not be used for the sole purpose of making judgments, but should also revolve around the improvement of curriculum and instruction and be relevant, functional and useful to these purposes. Appropriate evaluation practices should enlighten those involved and act as a guide for improvement. Guskey (2003) acknowledges that assessments can be important components for improving education but warns that we will miss the most powerful benefits of assessments if their use is limited to ranking schools and students. He suggests that assessments can be a powerful tool for school improvement, for “When teachers’ classroom assessments become an integral part of the instructional process and a central

ingredient of their efforts to help students learn, the benefits of assessment for both students and teachers will be boundless” (Guskey, 2003, p. 10).

In sum, it is important that measurement, assessment and evaluation strategies be identified early in planning for school improvement. This will ensure we are cognizant of the evidence required to determine if objectives are being met and how we may identify that evidence. Additionally, no single model or approach to evaluation should be considered superior to another; it is important to employ a balance of strategies to glean the most useful information pertinent to efforts to improve schools and influence student achievement. Four models of evaluation are described which constitute a balance of strategies and approaches for those embarking on a journey of school improvement.

#### *Summative Evaluation*

Educators and the general public are most familiar with summative evaluation methods. The summative approach is typically quantitative and embodies the scientific tenet that what one intends to evaluate can be measured and quantified in some manner. It denotes the long-standing, traditional concept of evaluation comprised of grade scores, scales and other forms of numeric data. The purpose and function of summative methods are to provide information on the efficacy of a product or method, typically *after* the product or method has been employed. A summative approach to evaluation attempts to answer the question, did this product or method do what it was designed to do? Summative evaluation lets the learners know how they did, while illuminating for teachers whether students learned what was intended. Summative evaluation is also one means of judging the worth of a program at the end of program activities (Bhola, 1990), often leading to the development of general conclusions.

### *Formative Evaluation*

Often more complex than its summative counterpart, formative evaluation is typically conducted while a program or project is ongoing, either in the developmental or implementation phases. Formative models add a dimension of adaptability to evaluation, permitting intelligent changes to be made with the idea to identify and remediate problems before the program or project is concluded (Tyler, Gagne, & Scriven, 1967). This provides a distinct advantage over the sole use of purely summative measures: ongoing changes for program and project improvement can be made prior to their conclusion, to determine what should have been done differently. Stake, cited in Thiel and Feeney (2005), further clarifies the difference between summative and formative evaluation: “When the cook tastes the soup, that’s formative; when the guests taste the soup, that’s summative” (p. 1). This remark also illustrates how the methods, used in conjunction, may complement each other and bring about a desirable outcome. One is not superior to the other but works complementary to the other to ensure the very best product or outcome is developed.

### *Empowerment Evaluation*

Also known as “improvement-based evaluation” (Posavac & Carey, 1997), empowerment evaluation (Hopkins, 1989) involves the use of evaluating concepts, techniques and findings. Empowerment evaluation has gained prominence in recent years as it provides an effective model of evaluation that serves the needs of stakeholders and provides valuable information while acknowledging alternative viewpoints (Posavac & Carey, 1997).

Empowerment evaluation complements transformational leadership theory, as it embraces self-reflective practice through a democratic process with a goal of fostering self-determination, self-improvement and capacity building (Fetterman, 2002). It is non-judgmental, cooperative, and collaborative in nature and potentially provides internal motivation for participants. Participants conduct their own evaluations with the assistance of outside evaluators who act as coaches or facilitators. Empowerment evaluators are not in a power role, but only that of an assistant or advocate for change as warranted by the data collected (Fetterman, 1997). Empowerment evaluation as a means of evaluating without threat to people, often a great challenge in program evaluation (Posavac & Carey, 1997).

Everhart and Wandersman (2000) have suggested empowerment evaluation as a tool for reducing barriers of insufficient ownership and capacity. Fetterman (1997, 2002) believes it encourages a culture of learning. Additionally, it is “a means of introducing research methodology and prevention science in a manner that is consistent with local values and beliefs (thereby increasing community ownership), and facilitates the mobilization of school and community resources (thereby increasing capacity)” (Everhart & Wandersman, 2000, p. 177). These concepts are notably related to effective leadership practices and school improvement initiatives, although there may be evidence that the empowerment model is, in itself, adequate to satisfy all stakeholders. However, in conjunction with other strategies and methods, the empowerment model can greatly complement efforts to achieve sustainable school improvement.

### *Generative Evaluation*

The term “generative evaluation” (Davis, Kemis & Johnson, cited in Dawson, Swain, Johnson & Ring, 2004) evolved in describing a system-wide evaluative journey undertaken by an Alberta school jurisdiction to assess the effectiveness of key components of its system (Townsend, 2004). It is formative in nature because it occurs as projects and programs are being implemented, making immediate changes as issues arose. Generative evaluation describes an evaluation process that emphasizes

Multiple ways of knowing, the learning of all participants, value of relationships, mutual trust and respect that is purposefully linked to established mission statements, principles, goals and values; transparency and accessibility of process, timely and ethical use of new knowledge created through the process, project pace and internal ownership of the process and results. (Townsend, 2004, p. 5)

Generative evaluation is an approach that employs various processes related to systemic change. Its goal is to simultaneously evaluate programs while invoking systemic improvement through the collaborative efforts of implementers and educators, involving multiple data collection methods while emphasizing accountability, impact and effectiveness (Kemis & Lively, cited in Dawson, et al., 2004). This process is deemed rigorous and relevant to all stakeholders and is “currently being implemented to promote systemic change in...teacher education programs” (Dawson, et al., 2004, p. 490).

### *Summary*

No single approach to evaluation is considered superior to another, and it is important to ensure we do not fall into the trap of relying solely on any one method. Summative measures are valuable to educators in bringing them to conclusions regarding

projects and programs, enabling them to make valuable judgments about their worth. Summative measures may be used in conjunction with formative or generative processes, which would include a wealth of information gleaned from qualitative data. Additionally, employing aspects of empowerment evaluation methods invokes self-reflection necessary for on-going learning. Of equal importance is the generative evaluation process, which has the power to incur systemic change.

Considering the complex dynamics of schools, and in light of the transformational leadership model, a balance of evaluation processes and methods is deemed the most appropriate manner in which to assess school improvement efforts.

## Chapter 3. Methodology

### *Rationale*

Methodology plays an important role in determining the outcomes and subsequent analysis and interpretation of research. Thus it is essential to determine the particular methodology most suitable for the research project at hand. Heck and Hallinger (1999) have identified three major frameworks for approaching research on school leadership: positivist, interpretive, and critical contextual. A review of these frameworks provides the rationale behind the decision to study leadership through a personal, contextual approach via qualitative methods.

### *Positivist Frameworks*

The positivist framework relies on a structural-functional, or rational, lens of viewing knowledge. A traditional research approach, it perceives “organizations as closed systems whose purpose was to maintain equilibrium as they strove to accomplish set goals or purposes” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 144). This is a managerial-style methodology which holds a technical-rational view of leadership. The Instructional Leadership model was developed under this framework and “portrayed the administrator as ‘hip-deep’ in instruction” (Cuban, quoted in Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 145). Critics of positivism say its leadership focus on curriculum and instruction is better suited to the study of business, observing that this approach overlooks significant dimensions of school leadership like outside influences or the leadership of staff other than the principal.

### *Interpretive Frameworks*

Interpretive approaches include political-conflict and constructivist perspectives on leadership.

#### *Political-Conflict Perspectives*

The focus of the political-conflict perspective is the way competing interest groups in a school and its community jockey for power. The political-conflict perspective has also been described as “micro-politics,” because it focuses on the political dimensions of role relationships. Researchers adopting this perspective tend to examine how leaders function in these situations and “view power relations between teachers and administration as complex and multidirectional” (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 146). Proponents of this perspective believe that power and political relations exert influence on such relationships in schools. Tarter and Hoy (2004) view politics in a negative manner arguing that politics tend to benefit individuals or groups at the expense of the organization. They also hypothesize that school performance decreases as illegitimate school politics increase.

#### *Constructivism*

Constructivism is the ‘sense-making’ research orientation, which examines how leaders help others create meaning and make sense of their work, role and participation in schools (Heck & Hallinger, 1999). Role theory falls under this perspective as researchers have attempted to study how construction of leadership roles and behavior is shaped by the influence of organizational norms and values. Heck and Hallinger (1999) point out, “The strength of the constructivist approach is in illuminating that which is little known or hidden from view” (p. 147).

### *Post-modernist and Post-structural Perspectives*

Postmodernism and post-structuralism have recently developed perspectives in the study of school leadership that deconstruct the scientific knowledge base of traditional theory. These perspectives suggest it is not possible to study the inner life of subjects without imposing some form of subjectivity. Proponents believe that all research is filtered through a variety of lenses, such as gender, class and ethnicity that influence the researcher's construction of the study's text (Heck & Hallinger, 1999). These perspectives have connections to existentialism, which denotes the utter subjectivity of the human experience. Post-modern and post-structural perspectives assist researchers to identify the limitations they possess. Enhancing awareness of these biases highlight the importance of striving for complete objectivity throughout the research process.

### *Critical-contextual Frameworks*

Sometimes referred to as the 'emancipatory' research orientation, critical-contextual frameworks offer critiques of social relationships, including the influence of gender and ethnicity. This orientation often addresses how these relationships contribute to social reproduction. Concerning leadership, the critical stance questions how school leaders endorse and reinforce existing social arrangements in society (Heck & Hallinger, 1999) -- in other words, the phenomenon of social reproduction. Social change is the epicenter of the critical perspective and it provides a broad, open approach to research. Critical-contextual frameworks have begun to reveal not only societal and cultural inequities in power and social relations, but also the complexities of leadership. This perspective provides information that reveals relevant implications for leadership practice. It also allows for the analysis of complex human relationships, such as those

found in schools, and the impact of those relationships on efforts towards improvement and change.

*Summary*

Each perspective brings value in viewing and approaching research. Every school consists of complex dynamics, with constant interplay of various elements from each perspective discussed. Schools must be managed; hence one cannot completely deny positivism. There are also role relationships with a political flavor existing in schools; hence political-contextual perspectives have their place. Constructivist views cannot be ignored, for they offer valuable insight into leadership roles and behaviors. And one can hardly deny the imposition of subjectivity and the tendency to filter research through one's unique lens, giving weight to post-modern and post-structural views. Finally, the critical-contextual perspective offers insight into social relationships, obviously present in schools. Each and every perspective offers valuable insights; thus, none was chosen over another, but rather elements of each are recognized as contributing to this research.

#### Chapter 4. Qualitative Research Description and Design

“Qualitative research is any research that relies primarily or exclusively on qualitative measures” (Trochim, 2001, p. 152). Trochim (2001) further elaborates upon qualitative measures as being

any measures where the data is not recorded in numerical form, [including] short written responses on surveys; interviews; anthropological field research; video and audio data recording; and many other approaches, all of which are characterized by a non-numerical format. (p. 152)

The illustrative, contextual nature of this study lent itself best to qualitative methods, as the vast majority of data collected was narrative.

This study fit Charles and Mertler’s (2002) profile of descriptive research well, with a qualitative design whose purpose is to “show status by first describing and then, to the extent possible, interpreting present and past situations, conditions, behaviors, interactions and trends...[which may]...satisfy a desire to gain increased knowledge about the phenomenon of interest...[and]...may frequently provide a basis for decision-making” (p. 265). Trochim (2001) defines the purpose of qualitative research as “to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participant’s eyes” (p. 162). These descriptions embody the purposes of this study, further reinforcing the rationale behind utilizing a qualitative methodology. Further supporting this rationale is that the study is structured by a variety of research questions, with data obtained being subjected to logico-hypothetico analysis.

### *Qualitative Methodology*

With a variety of qualitative research methods available, this study utilized individual interviews, questionnaire completion, focus group participation and document review. Questioning was done in a careful, planned manner where participants or informants were questioned directly (Charles & Mertler, 2002). Related to questioning is the personal interview, “organized around a predetermined set of questions but allows the questioner to provide encouragement, ask probing questions, and request additional information” (p. 39). The researcher recognized that mannerisms, encouragement and requests for clarification could influence respondents, so every effort possible was made to maintain a neutral, consistent tone when personal interviews were conducted.

The use of focus groups often elicits information that other methods may overlook. These groups can possess a dynamic which triggers trains of thought and encourages dialogue, as they draw on the diverse and varied experiences of participants. Because “The group dynamics and the benefits that Focus Groups offer to research and research participants illustrate some of the major reasons why educational researchers should consider using Focus Groups as a strategy for examining the social world” (Williams & Katz, 2001, p. 5). Specific guidelines for conducting focus groups, as outlined by Williams and Katz (2001), were followed. This included maintaining focus on the research purpose, ensuring the group was skillfully moderated, designing an effective interview guide, ensuring the group consisted of appropriate participants, and results were analyzed (Williams & Katz, 2001).

### *Research Subjects*

To complement data gathered in the online survey of teacher and AISI coordinators' experiences with cycle 1 (Bedard & Aitken, 2005), data was collected from three north-central Alberta school districts. One was a large urban district, one a large rural district and one a small independent. Specific demographics concerning the subject sample are illustrated in Appendix A. Figure 1 illustrates participant demographics expressed as percentages, which includes focus group participants, questionnaire respondents and personal interviewees.

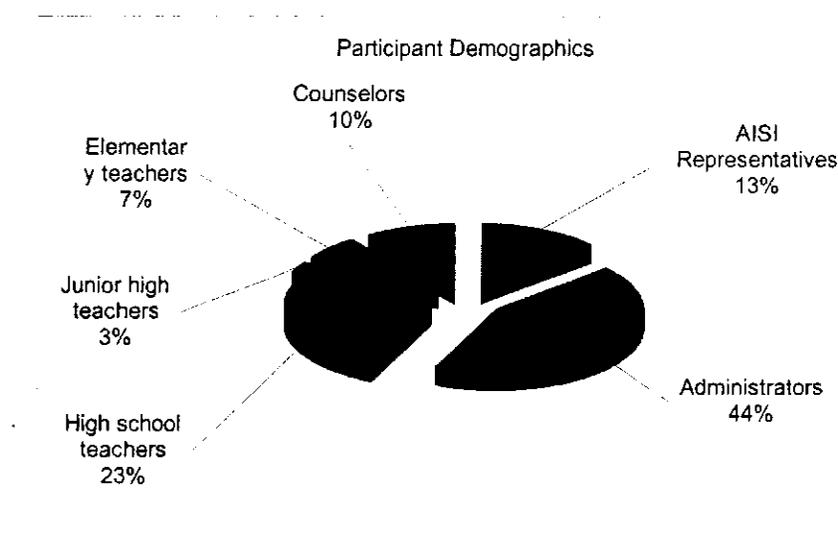


Figure 1. Participant demographics expressed as percentages.

### *Participating School Districts*

The first jurisdiction, referred to as District 1 for the purposes of this study, consists of 17 schools in both urban and rural settings and serves a student population of 7,308. It has a professional population of 411 teachers and 204 support staff, all having been involved with AISI projects in some capacity. This district previously implemented

eight AISI projects in cycle 1. District 1 indicated that consensus of all 17 schools was achieved in choosing and developing the umbrella project for the cycle 2.

District 1 identifies schools' needs through student data from which administrators determine AISI themes. The development of AISI projects evolved from analysis of this data and subsequent discussion and consensus among various stakeholders, including staff and parents, to determine what themes best represented the area of school improvement most needed at individual school sites. Staffs were asked to achieve consensus regarding general themes they felt best represented critical areas of school improvement within the district. Administrators then selected specific AISI themes representative of school improvement most needed in their schools. The division AISI coordinator and superintendent of schools coordinated AISI conversations throughout the process with central office staff involved in developing strategies to meet the needs of learners. Lead teachers and administrators wrote AISI project proposals, presented to trustees for final approval.

The second jurisdiction, referred to as District 2, consists of 84 schools employing over 3000 staff members, serving in excess of 32,000 students. Each AISI cycle has consisted of large umbrella projects conceived at the district level and passed down to schools for the development of specific strategies and sub-projects to meet the overall goals and objectives of the larger project.

District 3 was a small, independent First Nations school. Though this district is not involved in AISI, it has embarked on a number of school improvement initiatives which are comparable.

### *Participants*

A total of nine personal interviews were conducted, with only one participant not involved in AISI projects. Demographics included six teachers (two at the elementary level, and four high school, including one counselor and one student support teacher), one high school principal, and three other administrators (two vice or assistant principals and one principal). One focus group was conducted consisting of an AISI coordinator, three administrators at the pre-school to grade nine levels, and one grade 7-9 teacher.

Questions mirrored the main research question and sub-questions, revolving around identifying common school characteristics and administrative practices contributing to staff perceptions regarding their empowerment, roles and involvement in leadership. Participant responses were analyzed to determine commonalities and trends that both enhance and impede their capacity for leadership and influenced their perceptions of school improvement outcomes.

Two groups were targeted to form the sample for interviews and focus group, namely teachers (including lead teachers and AISI coordinators) and school administrators (principals and assistant or vice-principals). Questionnaires were also utilized to obtain a more uniform sample and anecdotal notes and responses to AISI Project Annual Reports (APARs) from District 1 were subjected to document analysis. Only data pertinent to leadership practices promoting teacher leadership and effective program and project evaluation methods have been included. Information irrelevant to these concepts, even within interview and focus group contexts, was not considered for analysis or included in the findings of the study.

The intention was to include as many of the 102 schools as possible in the sample, keeping realistic expectations in mind. Through the data collection process, 28 schools were represented. Although the original target was to complete 15 to 20 interviews (devoting approximately one-third to administrators and two-thirds to teaching staff), various limitations and constraints were imposed on the study by the participating districts, reducing the number of interviews completed to nine. However, 22 participants completed the written questionnaire, with seven of these respondents participating in personal interviews. With only one exception, all interviewees had been involved in past and/or on-going AISI projects to some degree. For examples, their involvement may have been in project planning, design, delivery, implementation or evaluation. The objective was to interview participants with varying levels and diversity of experience, to acquire a good cross-section of opinions and observations. Specifics concerning participant demographics are illustrated in Appendix A.

#### *Data Collection*

Quantitative data from a province-wide survey of school administrators, AISI coordinators and teachers (Bedard & Aiken, 2005) served as background information for this study. However, the main research orientation of this thesis is qualitative. Personal interviews, questionnaires, focus group participation and document review were the main methods of data collection. Interviews were conducted in person or by telephone, according to the convenience and preference of individual participants. A balance of structured, semi-structured and open-ended questions was used to glean the most information possible through this process. Field notes were taken during interviews and

focus group, and these sessions were digitally recorded then fully transcribed to ensure accuracy of data collection.

#### *Document Review*

District 1 provided its AISI Project Annual Reports (APAR) for 2001-02, for document review and analysis. The APAR reports reviewed and analyzed included responses on several AISI projects, including elementary literacy and high school International Baccalaureate projects. Patterns of responses were identified and categorized in accordance with the purposes of this study, and contents of the document are interwoven with data from interviewees and questionnaire respondents in Chapter 6.

#### *Questionnaires*

Due to time restraints and other restrictions, one school district chose initially to participate through written questionnaires rather than through face-to-face or e-mail interviews. The format of this questionnaire is provided in Appendix B. A total of 22 respondents completed the questionnaires, which included nine administrators, six teachers, four AISI representatives and three counselors/facilitators. The questionnaire was designed around the research questions outlined in Chapter 2. Information obtained from this questionnaire was subjected to pattern and thematic content analysis by the researcher. Themes that emerged from this line of questioning are outlined in Chapter 5.

#### *Interviews*

Nine personal interviews were conducted with a variety of participants: two elementary teachers, two high school teachers, two assistant principals (one K-9 and one 10-12), and one principal (10-12). The line of questioning remained near the statement of problem and research questions as outlined in Chapter 2. The interview protocol is

included as Appendix C. These personal interviews were highly valuable to the study as they provided the researcher the opportunity to probe further and clarify information. Chapter 5 includes a summary and analysis of the themes that emerged from the interviews.

#### *Data Analysis*

Because the collected data is qualitative in nature, it was analyzed in a logico-inductive or hypothetico-inductive (Charles & Mertler, 2002) manner, with the purpose of discovering patterns. This approach to analysis engages thought processes and logic to make sense of observations. In this study, participants' responses were considered as observations. Data was summarized and organized into tables that mirrored the strategy of partially ordered displays, as demonstrated by Miles and Huberman (1994). This allowed key words within responses to be easily identified, color coded, and organized into pattern codes which "turn[ed] around four, often interrelated, summarizers: themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people, and more theoretical constructs" (p. 70). These codes were related to topics, which were subsequently scrutinized to determine appropriate clusters of categories or patterns. Once categories and patterns were identified and established, inferences and interpretations were made that would assist in providing explanations to answer research questions.

Of most interest to the researcher were strategies implemented by leaders that influenced teachers' perceptions of administrative support. These included developing and encouraging best teaching practices, professional development and collaborative, collegial relationships contributing to school improvement. Although the APAR document analysis and questionnaires administered provided important insights, the most

valuable information for this study was gleaned through personal interviews and focus group discussion. Their context allowed me to probe for clarification and deeper meanings of responses.

Personal interviews and the focus group discussion were recorded by a digital voice recorder and then transcribed word for word. These transcriptions were treated as text and subjected to content analysis. According to Trochim (2001), such analysis can be qualitative, quantitative, or both, being separated into three types: thematic analysis of text, indexing, and quantitative descriptive analysis. In this study, emphasis was placed on thematic analysis of text, which involves the identification of themes or major ideas in a document or set of documents. Taking context into account as well as the subtleties of intonation of responses as captured by voice recordings, the intense, careful examination of transcripts identified the emergence of patterns and themes in responses. These patterns and themes were compared to current literature surrounding effective leadership practices for school improvement. This comparison helped to determine those with most strength, while potentially revealing new insights for consideration. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was not utilized because themes and patterns were apparent.

### *Ethical Considerations*

#### *Confidentiality and Anonymity*

All data were collected with complete confidentiality and anonymity of participants fully upheld and guaranteed by the researcher. Interview and focus group transcriptions were closely scrutinized and edited to ensure that participant responses did not reveal or suggest the identity of the school district, schools or individuals involved in

the study. Data collection proceeded in a timely, efficient and professional manner, demonstrating sincere respect for the commitment and trust that participants had placed in the researcher and the study.

Ethical guidelines and policies as set out by the Human Subjects Review policies delineated by the province of Alberta, the University of Lethbridge, and those of the school district participating in the study were scrupulously employed and adhered to. All requests for access and permission to conduct interviews and focus groups were obtained in accordance with protocols and procedures outlined by the participating school divisions, and in alignment with the Human Subjects Review policies and guidelines. Under no other circumstances were participants approached to obtain information for this study.

#### *Limitations and Bias*

Entering both jurisdictions as an outsider posed some limitations to the study in terms of access. However, being an outsider proved advantageous, as participants were willing to be more open and candid in their responses. Written questionnaire responses posed limitations concerning response clarity and respondents' understanding of the questions posed. Because the researcher was not present to explain the study or offer clarification for this data collection activity, accuracy and depth of response were affected. Foreseeing this possibility, the researcher ensured that those participating in the written survey were invited to participate in a personal interview. Many questionnaire participants responded favorably to this invitation, and seven participated in a personal follow-up interview.

The researcher was acutely aware of bias brought to this study through her experience as a teacher and realized this experience could afford an empathetic stance in participants' favor. Taking this bias into consideration, the researcher was careful to avoid making assumptions, to probe for clarification of responses and intentionally avoid making leading comments in the line of questioning. The researcher's empathy for educators may not necessarily be an issue, as it may have helped to enhance the researcher's understanding of their responses and subsequent data analysis. Regardless, a concentrated effort was made to ensure that all aspects of data collection and analysis were approached with maximum objectivity. Because the researcher is not connected to any of the participating school jurisdictions in any way, bias and subjectivity were considered minimal. Further reducing the possibility of bias is the fact that the researcher has never been involved in any AISI projects. Impartiality was built into the design and delivery of all data collection, questioning and discussions.

## Chapter 5. Summary of Findings

This chapter contains a synthesis of data collected, including personal interviews, questionnaire responses and APAR document review. This summary has been assembled into six main categories: 1) school mission, vision and improvement planning, 2) school culture, 3) building capacity and commitment, 4) professional learning, growth and supervision, 5) organizational learning, and 6) evaluation practices. Information was classified and organized further into themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms have been assigned to each respondent, allowing their voices to be heard within the context of their experience while maintaining their anonymity.

### *School Mission, Vision and Improvement Planning*

The significance of developing a shared vision has been described as a fundamental task of leadership because it has a major benefit to stimulating change (DuFour, 1991, p. 23). This provides some rationale for asking respondents to describe the degree to which shared vision has been developed within their schools, how priorities and goals are set, and how school improvement projects have been conceived. The intent was to reveal evidence of the process of the development of shared vision, priority and goal setting, and the process of the conception of school improvement projects. Data collected revealed minimal differences between both districts, with the overall process being clearly separated into two categories: 1) district level, and 2) school level. The trend in both districts showed that extensive mission, vision and improvement plans were developed at the district level, then handed down to their respective schools. This process also occurred separately at individual schools.

All respondents indicated that the district handed down mission and vision statements and district goals for schools to follow. School staff did not appear to have had any involvement or input in developing statements and goals at the district level. The only exception was that some administrators, such as Kirby, had opportunities to attend district retreats organized specific to this purpose. In general, individual schools were free to develop their own mission, vision and goals according to their unique school community needs, but these statements were expected to align with those of the district and the province.

Although most of the priority and goal setting that occurred at the district level was 'handed down' and developed apart from administrators and teachers, at schools it involved various levels of teamwork. The main vehicle for doing so was the development of professional growth plans (PGPs). This process was typically initiated and monitored by administrators, who usually met individually with teachers to assist in their development. Priorities and goals were often set in general terms at the school level. Teachers were then expected to link their professional growth plans with the school's three-year plan, AISI projects and provincial goals (Mark; Focus Group). The degree to which professional growth plans were utilized also varied from school to school, with some administrators assigning higher levels of importance to them than others.

The conception of AISI projects at the district level was clearly a process of which teachers had virtually no knowledge and in which they had no involvement. Although administrators had slightly more awareness of how the district conceived the project, they reported that their input was limited to their suggestions made to the district. Neither teachers nor administrators were involved in the final decisions made by the

district. Teacher respondents had very limited knowledge of how the district determined the AISI project for this cycle. They had no prior awareness of or consultation in the matter, and apparently, “It was a surprise!” (Marlene). Further evidence of the lack of understanding of the district’s decision-making process was the perception that the project was conceived because “It was a matter of the stress of not having the proper requirements done and in losing funding” (Pat). This respondent also believed that the school board was approached by AISI, inquiring whether or not their district could use the money in a certain way.

All schools were given the freedom to design local projects specific to the needs to their school as long as they fell under the theme of the district AISI project. All respondents suggested that the district-developed umbrella projects were so general that virtually any school project could be made to fit. Although schools had no input into what the large umbrella project was, they were allowed to “put their own stamp on it” (Focus Group participant B). Given this freedom, most schools engaged in a highly interactive, collaborative process, which was student-oriented and involved a large degree of teamwork and self-reflection on behalf of those involved.

Administrators felt that the process of developing school mission, vision and improvement plans had been collaborative: “Staff gets together with administration to develop who we are” (William). They noted involvement from a variety of stakeholders, including staff, students, parents, teachers and administrators (Kirby). The approach to this process was both formal and informal and was most often led by administration. Some principal and district leadership teams participated in Richard DuFour leadership in-services as part of the process of educating staff and facilitating shared vision (Jane;

Kirby). Administrators noted that extensive Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been implemented, taking time and money to promote projects and utilizing PGPs to facilitate department goal-setting and overall school growth plans. Most often, goals and priorities are set by those most affected by them (teachers and administrators), since only one administrator noted they had not been set by the school as a whole.

Teachers observed that their AISI leader provided direction in outlining, evaluating and reinforcing goals and objectives for projects. They also reiterated administrators' comments that time and money were set aside to promote projects, and noted some parental and student involvement in doing so (Marlene; Focus Group participant C). They cited school goal-setting as having occurred through department meetings and Professional Development (PD) days and noted that the goals were revisited at follow-up meetings. They reported regular meetings to share and build a common vision with goals and priorities 'on the table' and out in the open for all to discuss and contribute to (APAR Report). It was clear that, at the school level, most teachers felt that goals and priorities were set collaboratively and not created in their absence or passed down and imposed upon them.

AISI representatives responding to the questionnaire noted the importance of leadership in the goal-setting process, remarking that these goals provided a vision for success for all. Kirby cited distinctive attributes in leadership as having the ability to communicate expectations for staff, and encouraging them to come on board with the leader's vision for success. Remarks pertaining to these observations indicate some resistance by staff, but there was evidence that dynamics were changing. Counselors and AISI facilitator respondents also noted the importance of communication and its impact

on these processes. They described goal setting as occurring at staff meetings, through various workgroups in departments. They reported that freedom was granted to each department to set down a vision and mission statement, priorities and goals pertinent to their group. Administration sometimes provided direction and guidance, but provided leeway to staff, particularly at outreach sites, which operate under circumstances quite unique to the regular school setting. The goal-setting process was also facilitated through relevant PD supported by administration. One survey respondent indicated that an administration team sets priorities and then communicates the main vision to staff through leadership team and staff meetings.

#### *School Culture*

The work of many authors supports the notion that school culture has an impact on school improvement efforts (DuFour, 1991; Leithwood, et al., 1999; Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1997; Tarter & Hoy, 2004). Culture is multidimensional in nature and, according to Tarter and Hoy, is heavily dependent on relationships between administration, teaching staff and students. Hence, participants of this study were asked to describe relationships between leaders and staff, as well as their observations of how school culture is affecting school improvement efforts, whether general or specific projects.

#### *Relationships Between Leaders and Staff*

Trust and collegiality were the two fundamental principles were found to affect relationships between formal leaders and staff. Respondents provided a variety of adjectives and phrases describing these relationships (see Appendix D, which includes their respective number of occurrences throughout interview and focus group data).

*Trust.* It is apparent that the number one factor influencing efficacy and rapport among relationships with staff was trust, as indicated through interpretation of the most frequently occurring descriptors (see Appendix D). The tenant of trust entailed inherent characteristics, including the administrator's level of approachability and willingness to listen to the issues and concerns of staff members (all respondents), and also that the administrator values the input of staff (Focus Group participant D; Marlene). It was clearly not enough for administration to engage simply in listening without impressing upon staff their valuation of the issues, concerns and input being shared. Administration communicated valuing of staff input by providing affirmations (Focus Group participant E), allowing and encouraging risk-taking (Marlene), and permitting staff to voice opinions and concerns without fear of repercussions (Kirby). These leaders established trust among staff by actively building relationships through collaboration, dialogue and communication, taking a team approach at all times (Mark; Focus Group; Pat; Sharon).

In a negative experience described by one respondent, the administration had no degree of trust or rapport established with staff, and were described as follows: "not approachable, cold, ignored teacher requests and had no rapport with the students" (Chris). To be in a position to establish trust and rapport, leaders need to be accessible and visible to staff and students at all times (Pat; Focus Group). This ensures their ability to engage in dialogue and to be "proactive and on top of it" (Chris).

*Collegiality.* Collegiality has been defined as "the existence of high levels of collaboration among teachers...characterized by mutual respect, shared work values, cooperation, and specific conversation about teaching and learning" (Sergiovanni, 1990, pp. 117-118). Collegiality was acutely influenced by collaborative leadership traits. This

was manifest through descriptors of administrators being collaborative, “level,” having an “open door,” being collegial, building cohesive relationships, sharing leadership, being supportive, proactive and motivational. Staff members clearly felt that collegial relationships with their leaders are important, noting that administrators should “work alongside staff” (Sharon). Another commented, “One thing about leadership is that you don’t want to work with people beneath you or above you; that you want to work with people beside you” (Kirby). Collegial relationships were also described among leaders who were supportive, valued the input of staff, engaged in dialogue and communication, shared leadership with others, and promoted an atmosphere of empowerment.

Respondents to the questionnaire shared these sentiments regarding collegiality. Administrators felt that relationships between themselves and staff were professional and collegial, describing them as positive, respectful, cooperative, collaborative and developing. Teachers and AISI representatives reiterated their comments, stating there was much collaboration and dialogue among staff. Teachers described their relations with formal leaders as strong, referring to them as “collaborative cooperation” (Questionnaire respondent 15). They felt supported by administrators and stated that relations were professional, caring and supportive. Counselors and facilitators also stated that relationships were amicable and respectful, describing administrative characteristics such as listening, being communicative and helpful. These responses support Sergiovanni’s (2006) statement, “When collegiality is high, a strong professional culture emerges in school. The norms are aligned with school purposes, contributing consistently to increased commitment and extraordinary performance” (p. 181).

In a few cases, questionnaire respondents indicated that relationships were not always collegial. One felt the relations with formal leadership were "touchy at best" (Questionnaire respondent 12). Another noted that, although some staff felt they could communicate openly with administration, others felt alienated and unable to do so (Questionnaire respondent 5). An AISI representative noted that there are not enough resources or people to do all the work with students, and teachers often feel overwhelmed (Questionnaire respondent 1). Lack of resources (both human and other) may be a factor in contributing to strained relations between administration and teachers. However, the general consensus was that relationships between formal leaders and staff were positive; obviously the vast majority felt they could approach their leaders without fear of intimidation.

#### *The Effect of School Culture on School Improvement Efforts*

When describing how school culture impacts school improvement efforts, the consensus was that there is a definite, influential link between school culture and subsequent school improvement efforts. The feeling was that there is an "amazingly high correlation" (Kirby) and that culture has significant repercussions on school improvement efforts, whether negative or positive (all participants). Respondents described a number of factors that contributed to school culture in both cases.

*Positive culture.* The general consensus was that a collaborative atmosphere, where teachers and staff have 'bought in' to the project, has a positive impact as it affects teacher attitudes and efforts towards instruction thereby impinging on student learning (William; Julie; Chris). Teachers who have done so have positive attitudes toward the initiative and tend to pull together as a team, engaging in more committed efforts. This

transforms their teaching style and commitment to unearth best practices. Teachers who are consistently in pursuit of best practices are continually self-monitoring, reflecting and engaging in assessment for learning, which, again, affects their teaching. This ultimately impacts student learning as teachers are more committed to providing the very best instruction possible for their students.

Positive, collegial relationships appear to be essential, and leaders have the responsibility to promote positive change in school culture to affect school improvement initiatives. One administrator noted that everyone in his school "buys into the vision" (William) and that the culture of the school makes for highly successful atmosphere in which each individual is valued and recognized. It was noted that the size of the school and age of community, described as being "in transition," has an impact on school improvement initiatives (Kirby). Both teachers and administrators noted the importance of staff being committed and 'on the same page' in order to develop successful school improvement initiatives (Kirby; William; Mark; Jane; Julie; Marlene). School culture must be demanding and forward thinking in order to effect change, which is requires a "visionary leader who involves all stakeholders" (William). Leaders who take a collaborative, team approach develop trusting, collegial relationships among staff, creating a positive climate conducive to learning.

Participants also noted that school culture is affected by perceptions of staff and students that they are part of the school community and team. For example, Pat stated, "It is very important that the kids feel they're part of the environment and culture and must feel like they are contributing members of the larger group." For staff, this entails working as teams in a collaborative and communal effort for school improvement,

through a “process that is transparent and, from the beginning, above-board” (Focus Group participant F). It was imperative for one participant that “Staff needs to feel they were involved. This trickles down to the student level as it affects teaching” (Focus Group participant D). Marlene notes that, “Instruction is affected by an improved team approach.” An important element is cohesiveness and focus, which must be maintained at the school level as a “tight-knit feeling of equality and inclusive practices have a positive impact” (Chris).

Although the multi-dimensional nature of school culture cannot be disputed, it was observed that school culture begins in the classroom:

[School culture] starts with the teachers in the classroom. I think they have really bought in to the whole idea of shared leadership. And, as a result, they work very hard trying to accommodate kids from varying degrees of backgrounds. So we get staff who are committed to our professional communities. They try to come up with common assessment, best teaching processes that will help improve their teaching but also improve student learning. (William)

Administrators acknowledged that teachers have the largest degree of interaction with the general student population, and therefore have the greatest opportunity to affect and impact the culture of the school at large (Kirby; William; Mark). They considered their teachers’ relationships with students to be at the heart of school culture.

*Negative culture.* There was indication that negative culture existed in some schools, and respondents who were immersed in it described its negative impact on relationships and, subsequently, school improvement efforts. They considered culture to

be negative for a variety of reasons, including strained relationships, unwillingness to change, and time constraints.

In response to the questionnaire, an administrator described staff relationships as strained, noting that formal, legitimate attempts to develop relationships were hindered by an undercurrent of mistrust and suspicion, and that this attitude limits the flourishing of culture and the attainment of goals (Respondent 6). A counselor/facilitator interviewee who described school culture as being divided between those who want to move ahead positively reiterated these sentiments and those who want things to move back to "the good old days" (Marlene). Julie, an AISI representative, who said that long-term staff often appear to be threatened by change and are upset at losing tradition, supported this comment. Although they see the culture of the school changing, resistance from those staff members cause strained relations between themselves and leadership, in turn having a negative impact on school improvement efforts. Similarly, an experienced administrator noted that a low staff turnover, resulting in the same staff in place for 15 to 30 years, has negatively impacted school culture as these teachers "pay a lot of lip service" (Kirby), limiting efforts towards change.

It appeared the most significant element responsible for developing a negative culture was time, particularly a lack thereof. A myriad of responsibilities pulling them in many directions, coupled with time constraints and restrictions, left teachers and administrators alike feeling overwhelmed:

We are running into problems and having difficulty with the management of it [AISI] because there are so many and we don't have enough time allotment. It's become an add-on for several of us and I don't know if we can do the job that's

necessary on them...I don't know if you can keep putting more on someone's plate when you can't finish off what you've got going...Nothing's ever taken away. We add on and add on but we never remove. (Mark)

This issue permeated the culture of their school as staff attitudes became negative towards district office:

[It caused a] loss of connection between some of the folks who are actually supposed to be consultants and advisors....I don't think they really understand the full throttle of what's taking place right now. So there's a gap – they're still coming out with the ideas and stuff, it's pretty difficult. Ideas are great but if you haven't been in the trenches and experienced a little bit of this stuff, it's pretty difficult. So they [staff] feel there's a gap between them and us (Mark).

Although this participant described school culture as being “open,” he observed that negativity towards central administration was having a negative impact on school improvement projects. Mark further explained that staff felt overwhelmed and forced to make choices among the multitude of initiatives set before them.

Although all participants expressed a sincere desire to collaborate and explore best practices, there often was no time to do so. Those who were the most pleased with working in teams and collaborating had leaders who created ways to build time for teachers to meet within the regular school day. Additionally, participants who were involved in larger schools, typically high school settings, described how communication, collaboration and teamwork were often hindered by the sheer size of the organization. These teachers expressed the sense that their staff was so large that they often didn't know who their colleagues were, apart from their respective departments, and noted that

they had little to no involvement with administration who were “busy handling the most important issues” (Chris) and did not have the time to delve into relationships with staff and students.

All respondents believed that the culture of the school and subsequent attempts at school improvement are intrinsically tied, inherently affecting one another. The comments of the study participants clearly illustrate how negative attitudes and inability or unwillingness to change creates a negative atmosphere, which impedes efforts for school improvement. They also outline how supportive, visionary leaders who are engaged in proactive, forward-thinking, collaborative efforts to lead teachers can create an atmosphere that motivates teachers and promotes a positive school culture conducive to improvement efforts. Therefore, it is reasonable and logical to infer that positive school culture promotes school improvement initiatives, while negative school culture impedes them.

#### *Building Capacity and Commitment*

Leaders may employ a variety of strategies to build and promote capacity and commitment among staff, an effort of infinite value concerning attempts to embark on school improvement initiatives. Current research suggests that leaders who adopt a more collaborative, collegial style of leadership tend to build capacity and teamwork among staff (Castagnoli & Cook, 2004; Dawson et al., 2004; Gibb, et al., 1999; Hayes et al., 2004; Leithwood, et al., 1999; Molinaro & Drake, 1998; Tarter & Hoy, 2004; Townsend & Adams, 2003a), creating an atmosphere conducive to school improvement on all levels. Participants were questioned about practices that leaders employ to build capacity and commitment for ongoing school improvement. They describe how decisions relating

to school improvement are made, detail lead teacher participation in those projects, and also comment on community perceptions of what is happening in their schools. Three main themes emerged through responses about practices that build capacity and commitment: teamwork, relationship building, and time provisions.

### *Teamwork*

Participants declared teamwork to be an integral factor in promoting sustainable school improvement and noted that educational institutions should move away from traditional top-down leadership styles towards those that are more collaborative in nature. Leaders must “take a team approach and involve others in decisions” (Sharon).

Leaders developed capacity through teams in various ways. It was important to ensure that staff had ample professional development opportunities, and also that they participate in Professional Learning Communities or similar collaborative teams. Professional development was common and purposeful, aligned directly with the goals and objectives of their respective school improvement projects to promote consistency and cohesiveness among staff. Leaders encouraged staff to attend professional development opportunities that revolve around the improvement initiative (Chris; William), targeted specifically to their SMART goals (William) or on any area of deficit (Focus Group participant A). All respondents remarked that professional development has an impact on school improvement initiatives and that the opportunity for staff to have input in decisions is necessary.

Additionally, staff meetings maintained a focus on school improvement and getting off-track was discouraged. In one case, staff meetings were large mixed groups that even included custodial staff who were informed of the improvement project for their

school and expected to assist in tangible ways. This approach made “everyone more responsible” (Julie). Some administrators “used staff meetings to motivate and encourage them [which] support their daily efforts on the front line” (Jane). Staff meetings provided opportunities for administration to receive input and feedback from staff, giving them the chance to brainstorm collectively and discuss their thoughts and ideas.

Another strategy to promote teamwork utilizing professional development time was to attend conferences as a whole school, or to have the entire staff visit another school that is implementing a program or initiative applicable to their school (Julie). The former afforded teachers the opportunity to interact on both professional and social levels, while the latter was particularly useful in developing professional networks of colleagues, enhancing teacher support and sharing of best practices.

#### *Relationship Building*

There are various ways in which leaders can promote and develop relationships among staff. Those most cited in this study were transparency, ownership/empowerment, collaboration, and listening.

The focus group determined it was important that processes are “above-board and transparent from the beginning” and that everyone is clear of what their roles and goals are. They described transparency modeled by administrators who employ democratic processes, expect negative comments at times, and encourage input and risk taking. This is clearly illustrated through an administrator’s comment:

Nobody sits there on their hands, afraid to say something... we look back, we review this, we look at the situation we’re in, we review the outcomes, we make adjustments and, “Hey, this is not working, we blew it”... Everyone feels part

ownership for it, for the successes and even for the downfalls, everyone feels, “Hey, it’s a group thing.” *No one’s pointing fingers at anyone.* (Mark, emphasis added)

Notice that this administrator made constant reference to ‘we’, candidly remarking that “There is no ‘I’ in team” (Mark), evidence of a collaborative style of leadership.

A complementary strategy employed was to value teacher input, to take advice from teachers seriously, and to listen to staff (Marlene; Sharon). To do so, administrators were available for teachers, utilizing an “open-door policy” (Kirby) and “constant communication” (Chris). Other measures taken to foster relationships included making covert efforts to “consciously give people opportunities to have fun” (Kirby) in an effort to strengthen bonding and teambuilding through social activities. This leader used PD times as opportunities for staff to interact on a social level, creating personal ties with one another and a sense of family among them.

#### *Time Provisions*

A common theme throughout responses to nearly every question posed in this study was time. It was clear that leaders who provided ample time for collaboration among staff within regular work hours had discovered the advantage for building capacity and teamwork among staff. In an earlier reference to an administrator’s remarks, it is evident that teachers and administrators alike are feeling overwhelmed with the extra duties and responsibilities they are facing. The sentiment was reiterated by a teacher who said that they “do not get release time, but it would really help so departments could work as teams – we don’t have time to coordinate with each other” (Jane).

Through focus group discussion it was revealed that collaboration time in previous years had been provided only during teacher prep times. This strategy did not go over well, and fortunately administration responded favorably to teacher input by getting creative with timetabling and building weekly collaboration time into their schedules (Focus Group). Another way this was done was to build a few extra minutes into the timetable to allow for weekly early dismissals for teachers to meet and work collaboratively (William; Marlene; Julie). Other administrators provided extra 'sub' time to release teachers for meetings. The effectiveness of this strategy was mirrored in a teacher's comment: "The biggest thing that I learned is that you have to give people some time and they'll work twice as hard. Giving them that sub time was a real win, win, win situation" (Marlene).

Whatever means a leader employed to find or make time is irrelevant; the key was to ensure its adequacy and availability during the week without sacrificing precious preparation time or expecting teachers to meet outside of regular school hours. Marlene, a seasoned veteran of teaching, wisely observed, "[This approach] gave credibility to the project and gave them [teachers] the feeling that it was truly valuable, so therefore every time you would give them some time, they would always proudly put in double... [It was] certainly worthwhile." It was clear from every respondent that time was of the essence, had the power to build capacity and commitment concerning projects, and that it is the responsibility of administration to ensure time is there for teachers to work together towards school improvement.

*Decisions Relating to School Improvement*

Concerning how decisions relating to school improvement are made, participant responses indicated that these are made on two levels: district and local school. Decisions regarding the large umbrella projects were all made at the district level without teacher input and were described as being made “top-down” (Pat). Principals indicated that administrative teams had some input in the process but were not involved with the final decisions of the board.

At the school level, there was evidence of a highly collaborative approach in which teachers were involved to a large degree. Administrators encouraged dialogue and reflection on the initiative through various forums (Kirby), ensuring all members had opportunities to be involved in the process. During these meetings staff gathered information and data; they had time to analyze the situation to make decisions collectively and proceed (William). A similar approach was described by another administrator who made decisions “from the ground up” (Mark) with all teachers being involved in departments, subsequently doing reviews of the initiative, and communicating their findings to faculty who then “hammer it out with administration” (Mark).

High school teachers also described faculty meetings as the vehicle through which information and ideas are shared with staff, who discuss among their groups to determine what would be best for the students (Marlene; Pat). In lower grades, the initiative is monitored and evaluated through weekly collaboration team meetings, where teachers track the goals and objectives of the program through team feedback sheets. These schools also engaged in reflection and analysis of strategies by working to share ideas

and best practices within schools in the district to determine the effectiveness of their approach. Also, lead teachers have assisted with decisions concerning school improvement initiatives in consultation with administration.

#### *Lead Teacher Participation*

Lead teachers have ownership, involvement and commitment to school improvement initiatives. This often includes their direct participation in projects involving everything from planning to teaching and evaluation. Lead teachers sometimes work outside of the school on committees, alerting areas of attention to administration and sometimes acting in a ‘middleman’ capacity. Although high schools did not identify the presence or involvement of lead teachers *per se*, they did communicate that faculty advisors most often worked in this capacity and were considered to be lead teachers for the purposes of this study. In elementary/middle schools, lead teacher involvement was the most direct and transparent to staff.

Two main themes materialized for lead teacher participation in school improvement projects: lead teachers need to act as liaison and communicate, and consult and support instruction.

*Act as liaison and communicate.* Most often, lead teachers act in a liaison capacity, as they are expected to disseminate information between teachers and administration, and also between the province, school district and school. In this capacity, they are proactive and often promote the improvement project through the sharing of information. They are “responsible to make things happen [by]...meeting with their staff and promoting the collaboration and developing their team goals” (Kirby). An additional responsibility of lead teachers/faculty heads is to monitor and track students, and to assist

in turn with interventions. They often collaborate with staff (Focus Group) and “review whatever information has been given to him [the lead teacher], and then we try to address it at our own school level” (Mark). Acting in this capacity makes the lead teacher an important contact person for the district, administration and teachers.

*Consult and support instruction.* Lead teachers were reported to consult with a variety of individuals, particularly at the school level with other teachers. This occurs in a multitude of ways, but most often through direct instructional support for teachers. Lead teachers are reported to assist directly through classroom instruction, teaching and modeling specific teaching strategies, and indirectly through assisting with planning, which includes helping teachers to modify curriculum and unit plans for instruction (Focus Group; Marlene). They also assist with planning by seeking both teaching and professional materials for teachers. Lead teachers also consult and support instruction by attending in-services and workshops and subsequently presenting that information to staff as a means of sharing best practices and promoting professional growth (Focus Group). Similarly, lead teachers sometimes assist teachers in developing their professional growth plans, ensuring their alignment with the school improvement goals of the district (Marlene), indirectly supporting instruction and the overall initiative.

To assist teachers in these ways, lead teachers spend time collaborating and meeting with teachers, working side-by-side with them to implement the project. Since lead teachers are the main contacts at both the district and provincial level for the projects, they are in the best position to offer assistance and advice to teachers as both liaisons and instructional supports. They maintain an influential, supportive role for various aspects of the improvement initiative.

### *Perceptions of the Project*

When asked to describe their perceptions of how well the improvement project has taken root within the school community, participants were encouraged to give as many points of view as possible, including their awareness of staff, student and parent perceptions. Two camps emerged: perceptions were deemed either unclear or, more generally, positive.

*Unclear perceptions.* Several respondents were uncertain of community or even staff perceptions of the school improvement project, and were unsure if the community was even aware of the project. One explained this lack of understanding among staff: “We had such a strong focus on our own in starting up a new school, that’s what dominated our time” (Kirby). Additional explanations were that projects were in their infancy (William); that staff are “too close to it” (Jane), and also that staff lack time to communicate about the project (Jane).

Concerning unclear perceptions in the community, lack of contact between home and school was mentioned (Chris), and also that parents were not adequately informed about the project (Focus Group). As a parent satisfaction survey revealed, “Information was lacking. The parents within the community were not receiving the information about the positive things we were doing in the school” (Focus Group participant A). Clearly a more concerted effort is needed to communicate about what schools are doing.

*Positive perceptions.* Where positive perceptions were noted, respondents indicated comments from students (Pat), improved staff attitudes towards the project (Pat; Chris), reactions from students to the project (Marlene; Mark), and input from parent council (Mark). In these cases, there was much more communication between home and

school, and students were aware of the efforts of teachers to implement the project. One school made a unique combined effort to get feedback from both parents and students through the development and creation of a video series of students, portraying their reactions and responses to the initiative. This series of videos was then played for parents during parent-teacher interviews (Marlene). In this way, the school was able to capture the essence of how students felt about the project, clearly gauging their reactions while simultaneously reporting to parents about what was going on. Parent councils have shown support for staff as they embark on professional development opportunities related to the initiative, and students are “starting to realize that we put in an extra commitment” (Mark) and appreciate the efforts that staff put in on their behalf. This particular school community has a waiting list to attend the school, further evidence of positive perceptions.

Although perceptions generally appeared to be positive, participants acknowledged that the community members were not as well-informed as teachers would like them to be and that more measures should be taken to accommodate this need. All respondents agreed that, to improve perceptions and to implement effective school improvement projects, cooperation and collaboration are needed, coupled with a willingness to change and the involvement of all stakeholders. This includes provisions for time, not only for professional development, evaluation and reflection, but also for planning and project development, and for opportunities to communicate with the greater school community about what is happening in the schools, an important part of the effort to implement and sustain school improvement projects.

### *Professional Learning, Growth and Supervision*

In an effort to discover how professional learning is addressed and how staff members are supervised, participants were invited to share how professional growth plans aligned with their school's three-year plans and improvement priorities, to describe how best practices are shared among staff, to tell how performance expectations are shared with them, and to describe what types of instructional supports are available within their schools. Interviewees and questionnaire respondents revealed that a variety of PD opportunities were available relating to the goals of the district school improvement plan.

#### *Professional Growth Plan Alignment*

The majority of respondents reported that professional growth plans aligned closely with their school's three-year plans and improvement priorities. Additionally, when developing their growth plans, teachers were asked to be cognizant of the goals of Alberta Education, their respective school division and, in some cases, issues raised by the superintendent and school board. Furthermore, personal and department/grade level team goals are often expected to be included, as are goals specific to interventions for students or the school improvement project in general. Teachers responding to the questionnaire cited the involvement of AISI leaders in the development of professional growth plans and indicated that their AISI leader often promoted professional growth and development. Counselors and facilitators stated that the superintendent's plan is incorporated into the school's plans, which in turn are included in teachers' plans. This enables cross-district congruency and alignment to occur. They also noted that professional development activities were purposeful and focused upon their school growth plan.

Three participants indicated that growth plans did not line up well and were used inconsistently, if at all. Remarkably, one participant revealed that, although PGPs were directly aligned with the school's three-year plans and improvement priorities, teachers were not directly informed of those priorities as the growth plans are prepared by their respective teaching departments (Chris). In this case, the only task for the teacher is to add an objective for personal growth. Notably, this participant was in a very large high school and had previously mentioned that administration only has time to concern itself with critical issues that require immediate attention. One administrator felt that alignment between professional growth plans and the school or district's three-year plans and improvement priorities do not truly occur but didn't elaborate on this response in the questionnaire.

#### *Sharing Best Practices*

It was found that teachers share best practices in a variety of ways, through different means involving formal and informal meetings. Once again, participants also disclosed that having the time to meet was the key factor influencing the degree to which best practices are shared among staff. This was also evident from examination of APAR reports and questionnaire responses. Interviewees indicated that meetings were better received by staff, and considered most effective, if they were held during regular working hours and did not detract from teacher preparation or personal time (Focus Group; Pat; Sharon).

*Formal meetings.* Formal meetings of various types were utilized for the sharing of best practices, including staff and department meetings, collaboration meetings, PLCs

and PD days. In each case, time was regularly scheduled outside of instructional time, to give staff members the opportunity to meld as a collective unit with a common purpose.

Staff and department meetings were one type of gathering common to all participants. These were seen as an opportunity to brainstorm, to share what does or doesn't work, to appropriate positive feedback, and to present ideas from individual professional development sessions attended by staff members. During these meetings, staff members may disseminate information they have received at in-services that they have attended individually or other information they feel may be pertinent to the improvement project or of value to other staff members. In response to the questionnaire, AISI representatives cited the use of staff meetings in an attempt to develop relationships and a better understanding to improve learning for all students. They also noted that a variety of professional development opportunities were provided for individuals, entire staffs, and collectively as districts.

Collaboration team meetings and PLC gatherings were utilized in manner similar to staff and department meetings, but with a more specific focus strictly centered around sharing best practices complementary to the school improvement initiative, restricting the possibility of unrelated matters arising in the meeting. The PLC model was also noted to facilitate professional learning, with committee and department meetings occurring regularly, both formally and informally. Curriculum committees were also described in which staff members were given the freedom to create a plan that meets their own goals within the context of assisting students. These meetings were often held on professional development days or during collaboration time built in to the monthly schedule, allowing staff to maintain uninterrupted focus on the task at hand. PD days were also used as

opportunities to bring in guest speakers or to have regular staff members share their expertise and knowledge with staff.

Administrators indicated in the questionnaire that collaborative time was regularly-scheduled for teachers each week, with extra help sometimes provided by volunteers, such as university students. Money and time were set aside to support professional development, and the focus was generally a PLC model where areas of growth were addressed with individual teachers and staff as a whole. All administrators valued continual communication and open, honest sharing among staff to develop, monitor and evaluate the success of their plans and objectives for school improvement. Department collaboration time was also cited as a source of professional learning development, in addition to PD opportunities.

*Informal meetings.* Informal meetings were another common thread among participants, with subtle variations interwoven through responses. All participants indicated that, due to time constraints and the overall busyness of the typical teaching day, the vast majority of information is shared during staff room chats. These occurred typically during recess, perhaps during prep times, or even on the playground while on supervision, that is, whenever teachers crossed one another's paths during the course of the day. They also reported making classroom visits amongst themselves to observe best practices in action and to acquire understanding of new strategies and techniques. It appeared that "whatever works!" (Chris) was the most convenient and viable option. Teachers also made visits to other schools within and outside of their own districts to observe best practices in action (Mark).

Technology was sometimes used to share best practices informally, with staff sometimes emailing one another links and information concerning approaches and methods for consideration. One school developed an electronic hard copy library on their staff shared network drive so that teachers could submit strategies and links to a common area, enabling all staff to benefit from their findings (Mark).

#### *Sharing Performance Expectations*

Performance expectations were conveyed to teachers in several ways within two broad categories, formal conveyance and informal conveyance. Responses from the participant sample were fairly equally divided between the two categories, with leaders employing various means of communication under both headings.

*Formal conveyance.* Administrators all indicated that their staffs were provided with various forms of printed matter concerning performance expectations, and most staff members were aware of these documents. Some examples included having them publicly stated in student handbooks and on the district or school web site, providing teachers with Alberta Education's *Standards of Teaching* document and providing a district-developed teacher's handbook or teaching practices guidelines specific to the purpose. In all cases, principals expected teachers to familiarize themselves with these documents and to conduct themselves in a manner that reflects the documents' content. Only two of the seven teachers interviewed mentioned being familiar with, or provided with, these types of documents. Two questionnaire respondents did not know, or were unsure of, how performance expectations were being communicated to staff.

According to AISI representatives, counselors and facilitators responding to the questionnaire, there are leadership teams or contact groups in place for each department.

Apparently, department leaders assume a lot of responsibility for communicating performance expectations to staff. Many administrators, who explained that they often use department heads to communicate performance expectations to staff members, described this practice. Administrators also indicated that handbooks were the main method of communication. Interestingly, one administrator stated that staff supervision was most prevalent for new teachers, elaborating that existing long-term staff were poorly supervised, partly due to time limits and constraints. Virtually all participants mentioned this observation.

Another formal means of communicating performance expectations was direct communication through administration-led meetings with staff to outline what was required of them. One strategy, outlined by an administrator, was that administrators often did so during the hiring process of new teaching staff, stating that teachers were hired with the understanding that they were to expect and accept collaboration (Kirby).

Administrators often used the development of professional growth plans as an opportunity to meet individually with teachers to review expectations. These plans were sometimes, although not always, developed in cooperation with administrators. However, administrators, almost invariably, monitored PGPs through individual conferences with teachers which assisted them to reflect on their growth plans.

The last formal means of conveyance mentioned by participants was a teaching mentorship program offered through the district in which first- and second-year teachers were expected to participate. Both districts utilized this method to impart their expectations to new teachers and to familiarize them with codes of conduct at the local

and provincial level. AISI representatives, who mentioned that staff tutorials supervised by administration are used to communicate expectations, noted a similar strategy.

*Informal conveyance.* Several stratagems were employed by administrators to convey performance expectations informally to staff. Administrators communicated informally with staff in large groups. Staff meetings were often used to remind staff that they must meet curriculum guidelines, and that student grades or credits earned should be improving in accordance with district goals (Pat). This information was usually outlined at length at the beginning of the school year, with reminders interspersed throughout the remainder. Sometimes reminders and remarks were made by email, although this was not a typically favored strategy for administrators, who often preferred to take a more personal approach when possible. Other administrators chose more visible, hands-on methods, such as doing walkabouts and making impromptu classroom visits, as an opportunity to “catch them being good” (Focus Group participant E) and to provide immediate, positive feedback. Administrators taking this approach were also reported to question students about the lesson objectives and outcomes to determine whether the teacher was on-track with the school’s improvement goals.

#### *Instructional Supports*

Information obtained from participants revealed a number of instructional supports available to teachers to assist with school improvement projects. Three main classifications arose, in order of degree: human resources, time and interconnections, and technology.

*Human resources.* This category was clearly the most valued instructional support to participants who acknowledged the positive impact of appropriate human resources

has in supporting instruction. Teachers and administrators outlined how valuable they are to each other in sharing strategies and offering support to one another. A variety of specific types of support personnel were listed, including special education/resource teachers, lead teachers, specialized department and content area specialists, consultants, parent and student volunteers, librarians, educational assistants, AISI facilitators, district personnel, learning support coordinators and technology facilitators. These people interact in a variety of ways that support the initiative, including sharing best practices, assisting one another in locating resources and specialized materials, devising program modifications, creating Individual Program Plans (IPPs), working cooperatively to modify curriculum and unit plans, and even developing customized teaching materials as the need arises. Their interactions also provide a forum in which to discuss issues and concerns and to work collaboratively in order to resolve them.

Although having resources in the library or learning resource center was mentioned in passing, these points were not elaborated on or highlighted as being of great importance. It may be reasonable to infer that the more valuable instructional support to teachers was to have someone readily available to assist them in tracking the resources down and discern those most appropriate.

*Time and interconnections.* It became apparent that teachers and administrators felt that having adequate time set aside for a variety of reasons was essential to support instruction. The main use of time commented on in this regard involved the implementation of PLC or collaboration team meetings which afford teachers the opportunity to engage in professional dialogue, share best practices, and focus on exploring ways to meet the goals of the improvement initiative. Given ample time, some

schools enlarged their PLCs to include schools within and even outside their district, including the creation of inter-provincial connections. In these cases, teachers were able to visit other schools to observe the strategies being implemented in similar or new programs that could benefit their own students. These types of relationships can only be cultivated with ample time and fiscal provisions in place.

PLC time was also valuable for discussing information obtained through professional development opportunities, allowing concepts to ‘gel,’ and for visualizing how concepts can translate into instruction. Teachers also expressed how time was valuable for them to effectively plan for instruction, on both an individual and collective basis. PLC time allowed them to fully concentrate on implementing their own strategies and approaches, or to devise team teaching lessons. Participants indicated that instruction is considerably supported and enhanced, given appropriate time provisions to engage in these professional interactions and activities.

*Technology.* Participants described various technological supports to instruction available to them, although access was inconsistent among schools. These included computer labs rife with educational software, some for student use that was geared towards conceptual development, while some was geared for enhancing teacher instruction. Student-geared software typically focused on core concept attainment, such as the development of reading, writing, mathematics and language skills. Software to assist with lesson implementation included titles such as Microsoft Office, which can perform a variety of functions (word processing, spreadsheet, databases and the like). There were reports of specialized software bundles for documenting student marks and progress and granting parents access to this information.

One school had access to new-age video projectors with surround sound that retract into the ceiling and subscribe to highly developed networks and servers that broadcast streamed video across the school. This particular technology was deemed of great value to teachers in enhancing instruction. Sparse use of assistive technology was mentioned, including AlphaSmart Neos, individual, highly transportable mini-word processors designed for student use. There was also some familiarity with Kurzweil, a program that utilizes simulated voices to read text to students. Users can scan any text into the program and it will 'read' it back to the students in the voice of their choice, at the reading rate of their choice, while highlighting the text as it is read, in the color of their choice. Teachers also manipulated settings on computer programs (i.e. changing cursor size, blink rate, etc) to support instruction for their students (Focus Group).

#### *Organizational Learning*

For evidence of reflection and learning between AISI cycles, participants were asked to detail important lessons learned from Cycle 1 which may be applied to Cycle 2, as well as what conditions were present (or absent) that influence organizational effectiveness.

#### *Lessons Learned*

Three main topics emerged concerning the topic of lessons learned from Cycle 1 which may be applied to Cycle 2: (1) time, (2) consistency, commonality, collaboration and commitment, and (3) reflection, awareness, assessment and evaluation. With a large number of variables to consider, a natural overlap among themes has occurred.

*Time.* A resounding consensus occurred surrounding the need for more time to be made available for the successful implementation of school improvement initiatives. All

respondents felt they, the students and the project were being short-changed through imposed time constraints related to fiscal and human resource shortages. One administrator stated:

Well, we know that it [AISI] works, okay. The only thing we're finding is that we – again, I don't want to sound like a broken record – but we need more time; if we really care, then we need to put our money where our mouth is and our ideas are. (Mark)

The need for more time was cited repeatedly as a critical element for the execution of collaborative and reflective processes deemed necessary to implement effective school improvement projects. Time is needed for them to interact with one another, engaging in professional dialogue and reflection, planning and developing programs, seeking best practices and explore programming options. It was highlighted in an earlier response regarding school culture, where the participant expressed exasperation:

I don't know if you can keep putting more on someone's plate when you can't finish off what you've got going...I mean, we're going to try to do the best we can with it, but...it just can't be another add-on. And that's what it's come to, is being another add-on. And we just don't have the time. (Mark)

Marlene, an experienced teacher, stated, “The biggest thing that I learned is that you have to give people some time and they'll work twice as hard.”

Additionally, educators found that the constraints of time force them to choose between what they have to do versus what they would like to do for their students. For example, a teacher commented that the constraints of time force questions:

What is my real job? And right now my real job is to educate students the best that I can and to work with them as much as I can. And sometimes other things that come are the priorities of somebody else; I'm sorry, I can't fit it into my day...If I had family and kids, so much of this stuff that I was doing for the school, with the kids, would be out the door. Sorry, I don't have time. (Focus Group participant B)

Responding to the questionnaire, administrators identified the need to continue what was started to ensure successful growth and improvements, stating there are many decisions to be made, programs and activities to establish, making it easy to "gloss over" (Respondent 9) improvement initiatives. They indicated the need for time to be available especially for AISI representatives, who are becoming overwhelmed and overburdened by program expectations additional to their other duties.

Teachers reiterated administrators' sentiments regarding the need for time and the sense that AISI representatives are overwhelmed by additional expectations. They also learned that they might need to realign some objectives that have not reached anticipated goals. One teacher respondent noted that it is important to 'read' personnel and acknowledged the complexities of large-scale improvement projects. This respondent also commented that the journey is important as well, noting that satisfaction is achieved in many different ways.

Responding to the questionnaire, AISI representatives, counselors and facilitators also expressed the need for more time to be dedicated in order for school improvement efforts to be effective. They described that the lack of time available to pursue projects inhibited their potential for success. The need to align curriculum and adjust courses to be

more applicable and meaningful to ‘at risk’ students is great and time-consuming. Similarly, they need time for exit interviews and follow-up, connecting with individual students, tracking attendance and progress to help students succeed and working with professional staff on IPPs and life goals for students. Teachers and administrators state clearly that, to be effective in their efforts for school improvement, more time is necessary.

*Consistency, commonality, collaboration and commitment.* Participants learned that it is vital to strive for consistency within the district regarding the both staffing and the implementation of projects. Because individual schools were doing separate and distinct projects, consistency was jeopardized when staff changes were made between schools. The discrepancies created confusion for staff and impinged on the effective implementation of the project, as expertise, knowledge and understanding concerning the project left with staff members. Staff moving in and out had to re-learn what was going on, sometimes leading to unfinished business and the dropping of projects between cycles (Focus Group). This phenomenon had an adverse affect on staff attitudes, as they wondered what happened to the project on which they had previously worked so hard, ultimately leading to disillusionment and loss of commitment towards new projects.

Another learning was that, for the sake of consistency and commonality, it is important to choose staff who share the same vision and are “on-board” with the initiative (Kirby), a factor that contributes to the level of buy-in and subsequent commitment to the initiative. A teacher described the reaction when staffs were introduced to the initiative:

Teachers kept thinking – oh, my gosh, there’s no way we can do this. You know, the students won’t do this, that kind of thing. And, other schools that we had

talked to had encountered the same problem, and they said it was so difficult for those that didn't buy in and so, my concern was (ha), "Okay, you know what, if that's a concern, then maybe we should have to apply for our jobs!" (Julie)

This is noteworthy because, as Kirby pointed out:

You have to build the capacity for this to become self-propelling, basically, that it will self-perpetuate; we made a strong effort this time to take a little bit more in terms of the planning process as to how to utilize the budget.

Staff committed to the project will not only put in a stronger effort but will also be more receptive to making sacrifices in other areas in order to "wean [themselves] from the money coming in and yet continue the program" (Kirby). Another teacher described she had learned that it is meaningful for all staff to be completely focused and working toward a common goal:

Well, I really think that the fact that the whole school was working to one goal...Now the focus has become so clear that everybody's working on it, including the counselors, including like if the custodian is outside and he sees there's kids out there and they shouldn't be there, well, he's gone out and says, "Hey guys, come on back in." (Julie)

Obviously staff members had no illusions about the goals of the initiative and their roles and responsibilities in meeting those goals.

*Reflection, awareness, assessment and evaluation.* As a result of the dialogue that was opened with the development of PLCs in Cycle 1, one school division noted increased reflection on practices influencing school improvement, particularly concerning a move towards a more collaborative model of professional interactions:

[The PLCs from the first cycle] open[ed] the doors and allowed for conversation and dialogue and the sharing of ideas. And, even bigger, what I see in the schools...is the collaboration and the time you've given, it gives teachers also time to reflect on practice. And I think that's the critical piece we've always been missing. So moving from professional learning committees where you open it now and it's a dialogue of conversation, you start to do the other piece, where you're sharing best practices but you're also reflecting on best practices, or on practice, period. (Focus Group participant A)

Reflection on practice was previously a missing element in the lives of teachers, and the added focus that resulted from the dialogue generated from Cycle 1 prompted seasoned teachers to take a closer look at how they were approaching instruction, as one veteran teacher admitted, "I'm using a lot more techniques than I was before [Cycle 1]. You know, I've been teaching for a long time, and after awhile you get kind of stale. So this was kind of a refreshing thing for me" (Julie).

Participants from District 1 who described the effects PLCs had on increasing their reflection on practice experienced another spin-off from the processes that occurred in cycle 1, as illustrated:

We were pretty individualized in the first cycle, more so as school, and whereas in this cycle I find that, because we had a bigger umbrella project that we could fit under, we've done a lot more collaborating between schools, too, we've done a lot more talking than we did the first time. Because the first time around it's kind of like you did your own thing and you stuck to your own school, and you didn't care what the school across town did, as much. (Focus Group participant D)

This comment is dual-edged as it is, in itself, evidence of self-reflection while also a lesson learned and being applied in Cycle 2, as teachers realize they are moving away from their traditional profession of isolation towards a modern version of collaboration.

Interviewees felt that they were now more informed and aware of AISI, and that its workings and attitudes are changing as people see that the changes being made may actually be sustainable (Kirby). Further, it was noted that more evaluation and assessment were being done of both students and programming than ever before (Julie).

In sum, all respondents indicated that time factors and constraints have potentially inhibited projects and efforts to initiate effective school improvements. It is clear that ongoing communication and tracking of students are necessary to facilitate improvement processes. Teamwork is essential to the ongoing success of these efforts, and adequate time and human resources must be provided to facilitate school improvement processes. Without time and resources, there is potential for employee burnout, development of negative school culture, both detrimental to building capacity and commitment for change. The potential result of these constraints is a negative impact on school improvement efforts.

#### *Conditions Affecting Organizational Effectiveness*

Participants were asked to describe any conditions they believed were present (or absent) that may be affecting organizational effectiveness. Three themes emerged: relationships, time and budget restraints.

*Relationships.* All respondents referred to the effect that relationships have on the effectiveness of their organization. Two sub-themes emerged from their descriptions: attitudes, collaboration and teamwork.

*Attitudes.* The most commonly cited issue was the presence of negative staff attitudes, whether towards the project, other personnel, or both. Two administrators described how their staff had negative attitudes towards district office as they felt that district personnel were 'out of touch' with what's going on in the schools (Mark; William). Mark described:

They [staff] keep talking about the gap between the school, the teachers, the consultants...most people [in district office] have been away too long. And things have really changed since this first cycle of AISI to the second cycle...If you've been in the trenches, you see things a lot different than someone who has been downtown pushing ideas and hasn't had the experience of being in the classroom for the last three years.

Furthermore, the principal described how teachers are committed to the project, but that "Now it's gone so far to the right on us that we don't know if we can keep up the pace without burning out" (Mark). He elaborated that teachers were saying, "I don't want to do my job 16 hours a day" (Mark). They felt overburdened with the multitude of initiatives being passed down to them from district office. Mark has witnessed a trend that young teachers having only been in the profession a few years find the expectations unrealistic. He described how they quickly consider leaving the profession, even though they expressed, "I wanted to teach but I don't want to do all these other things."

Other observations related to attitude were described by Kirby, an experienced administrator who recognized the importance of hiring like-minded staff who have the same level of buy-in and share the vision of the school. The importance of this aspect was reiterated by other respondents, such as Marlene, who stated that working in teams is

important, but "When you get a non-team player at a level, it really makes the group dysfunctional; it really makes the whole group fall apart." Part of the issues surrounding attitude appeared to be linked to an unwillingness to change, as described by Jane: "We need a big shakedown; too many people have been here too long and are in a rигht." This feeling is similar to that of teachers with negative attitudes towards district office, as reported earlier.

One teacher made an interesting observation about the effect that nepotism, or favoritism, has on organizational learning. She noted that nepotism negatively impacts staff relationships as it creates different levels of accountability among staff, variable expectations, and inconsistency. This ultimately leads to strained staff relationships and inhibits people from committing to projects for fear of bearing the burden alone (Sharon).

*Collaboration and teamwork.* All respondents indicated the importance of establishing relationships among staff, which are conducive to collaboration and teamwork. An experienced teacher remarked, "I think working together in groups of staff has got to be the most positive thing" (Marlene). Another stated that the value in doing so is that, "It's making everybody responsible" (Julie). The focus group also described how their administrators have taken a more collaborative leadership approach that has increased conversation, dialogue and sharing, not only among staff members but also between schools within the district.

*Time.* Participants indicated that more time was required for them to engage in collaborative processes, stating that teamwork was important for the success of projects. For the most part, participants did not believe they had enough time to effectively engage in these processes. Time constraints were negatively impacting staff attitudes toward

projects, and some administrators like William said that too much overtime was causing teacher resistance as their workloads related to extra projects was getting too high. William indicated this was leading to burn-out among staff and a loss of commitment to improvement initiatives.

*Budget restraints.* Several respondents noted that budget restraints had an impact on organizational learning as they affect both professional development and human resources. Funding issues affected the amount and type of professional development opportunities available to teachers; financial restrictions limited their ability to attend and access adequate opportunities. Some schools were forced into positions where they needed to choose between discontinuing a project by cutting out dollars in other budget areas and preserving projects they believed in but could not afford to continue without AISI support (Kirby). Others found themselves looking for "a creative way to deal with that problem [losing project funding] that doesn't cost us more money" (Chris). Although budgetary restraints taught schools to "wean ourselves from the money coming in" (Kirby), when they had not done so in the first cycle and projects were discontinued, teachers felt as they'd been given "kind of a heavy hand" (Kirby). This affected their attitudes towards the project, and subsequently the effort they put in for new initiatives.

#### *Evaluation Practices*

To acquire information regarding how schools determine whether an AISI project should be retained, modified or terminated, participants were asked to describe processes employed to evaluate improvement initiatives and programs. They were also asked to describe the degree to which teachers and paraprofessionals are involved in program evaluations, and who is involved in making decisions regarding retaining or terminating

existing programs. Additionally, participants were asked to state their opinions whether current program in project evaluation methods were sufficient in determining a program's worth, in an effort to reveal ways in which program evaluation may need to be improved.

#### *Processes Employed*

The processes employed by administrators to evaluate initiatives fell into three categories: data analysis and reflection, surveys and anecdotes, and none employed/unknown.

*Data analysis and reflection.* Most respondents described a heavy reliance of program evaluation on analysis of test results. The school districts consistently placed a strong emphasis on gathering data, formally reviewing and analyzing results, and monitoring for improvements in provincial achievement tests (Kirby; Mark; William; Julie; Focus Group). Although most respondents indicated that other strategies and processes were employed in conjunction with test result reviews, one counselor indicated that administration and department heads at her school look at nothing apart from provincial achievement test results (Jane). Administrators responding to the questionnaire indicated that data is gathered and shared district-wide through the schools' AISI representatives. They examine baselines, high school completion rates, diploma exam results, and the number of students taking courses, seeking evidence of success rates and overall improvement based on this data and on information gathered by administration, department heads and school council. Teachers mentioned the use of quantitative data from progress report updates on AISI students, particularly pass/fail percentages.

Typically a great amount of reflection and analysis was spent to derive meaning from test results, and districts often imposed other types of standardized tests and data

collection in addition to provincial achievement tests. Administrators took time to discuss what the data meant regarding how students were doing, to determine why some teachers' results were better than others', and to analyze and discuss what they were doing right and wrong (Kirby). Other data compiled included completion rates, diploma results, surveys, marks and attendance, which were duly scrutinized and reviewed to determine strengths and weaknesses in programming (Mark; Focus Group; Marlene). Mark mentioned how this analysis often included reflection about practices and assessments and formal reviews to determine whether goals were met; formative evaluation and assessment *for* (rather than *of*) learning was done, in which the goal was to identify deficits, search for best practices, and make changes as needed:

We look directly at reviewing diploma results, we looked at completion rates of diplomas, how many completed their diplomas. There's a review of diploma results and then that goes down to the subject areas, or the faculty, and they break it down into their departments where they ask you to review questions, what questions went well, what didn't go well, where can we get the best practice? Hey, you're my buddy, you're teaching the same subjects as I do, your students did better on those questions, why? What were you doing that's different from what I did? So we're learning from, you know, best practices, from one another, that kind of continuous evaluation and re-evaluation and changes. Change is a constant here. (Mark)

The focus group held similar sentiments, outlining how their district administers standardized tests of their choosing and takes time to analyze their findings and to reflect on their implications for best practices.

*Surveys and anecdotes.* All respondents indicated that administrators evaluated initiatives by soliciting feedback from parents, teachers and students. Satisfaction surveys geared towards those specific audiences were the main method of collecting this data and were initiated at both the district and school levels. Although no respondents offered insights as to what the district did with the information gathered from their surveys, it was clear that surveys originating from the schools were discussed and analyzed at length, with results translating into action. For example, one school determined from its annual parent satisfaction survey that parents were lacking information about the project. The school realized it needed to raise awareness by communicating more clearly about what the improvement project entailed and took immediate action to do so.

A variety of methods were utilized to evaluate programs; some evaluations were based on annual APAR reports, staff satisfaction surveys, and collaboration binder notes (Focus Group), as well as yearly self-imposed checklists and evaluations (Marlene). One teacher indicated that administrators directly questioned her in order to evaluate a project, because she worked more closely than anyone else with the students involved in it (Pat).

*None employed/unknown.* Interestingly, three participants -- including an administrator -- indicated that, as far as they knew, administrators did nothing to evaluate the project. One teacher noted that administration does not bother to evaluate or check into it at all, unless administrators themselves are being questioned about the project (Pat). One principal admitted he had never evaluated an initiative, saying, "You know, I haven't. It's interesting; the only time I've been asked to evaluate was last year, with the completion project. Other than that, I've never really been asked to evaluate" (William). Another teacher was simply unsure of what processes administrators might employ to

evaluate the project, stating simply, “I don’t know exactly how they go about evaluating it. I just assume that it’s more of a communication thing. But I’m not positive” (Chris). Obviously this does not refer to communication with teachers!

*Degree of Teacher and Paraprofessional Involvement*

Responses to the question posed regarding to what degree teachers and paraprofessionals are involved in program evaluations indicated that, overall, teachers and paraprofessionals were involved to a large degree (Focus Group; Chris; Marlene; Mark); however, some respondents stated that they were involved minimally, if at all (William; Pat; Sharon). In all cases, references to their involvement related only to school-based projects and not the larger district-developed umbrella project, about which all respondents indicated teachers and paraprofessionals had no input whatsoever.

Schools that involved teachers to a large degree in evaluating programs described this as occurring at through participation in surveys as well as through faculty and staff meetings (Kirby; Mark; Chris). In the former, the annual district-imposed staff satisfaction surveys were considered a forum:

Staff has the opportunity to say ‘this is what I think is being done right and what’s not being done right.’ And so we talk about those at our last staff meeting. It’s not like its every month, but we made an effort to three times last year sit down and evaluate how we were doing. What I is that we are doing right, what is it that we need to work at, are we who we say we are? (Kirby)

In the latter, Chris feels that teachers are involved to a large degree because, “There is an awareness that you’re going to be listened to and that you are asked what’s

going on.” During these meetings, teacher input was taken seriously. In another case, Marlene responded that teachers have been involved:

[Teachers have been involved] quite a bit, because they [teachers] had a great say in the evaluation process that we [lead teachers] use, and we have adapted things that they said that haven't been working, “Okay, how else can we do it?” So they've had a lot [of input].

Julie described teachers being involved in program evaluation through PLCs where they developed and monitored the project and made changes throughout the year to reflect the needs of the students. This is clearly evidence of assessment for learning and ongoing project evaluation. The focus group indicated that all staffs were involved to a large degree:

We take the time to go over the results (standardized test results) and survey results with the staff; they have a huge input as to what our goals are going to be for the next year and the next cycle. (Participant A)

In one response stating that teachers and paraprofessionals had little to no involvement in evaluating school-based programs, William, an experienced administrator, stated, “You know what - I don't think they are, really.” This opinion was supported by Pat who candidly replied; “Teachers? No, nobody does!” This was atypical, in light of other interviewee and questionnaire responses and document review.

#### *Decisions Regarding Project Retention or Termination*

Describing who is involved with decisions regarding retaining or terminating an existing program or initiative, responses were clearly divided into two camps. Program

decisions depended on whether one was referring to the district-developed initiative or to the school-based projects.

*District-developed initiatives.* As described earlier with regard to evaluating projects, it was clear that decisions regarding retention or termination of the district project rarely included administrators and teachers. Kirby responded, “We don’t have any choice - it’s going to stay until it’s over” (Kirby). William stated, “In the end, you know, it’s a very large political body. And you know, with the so-called experts there, they seem to make those decisions.” These comments were also supported by Pat, who said those making the decisions were “those funding -- if their job is getting the money to the high school, [they] would determine it.” The focus group, comprised largely of administrators, backed up these comments:

When it comes to some of the decisions, there’s going to be things from the district office that says – these are your choices, this or this – choose. And you say, “We want this one.” So, we were in the decision-making process, but were we? (Participant E)

When this response was paraphrased to the focus group for affirmation whether they were communicating that they are involved in decisions regarding what they’ve been doing at the school level, but not necessarily in decisions concerning initiatives that may be coming in the future, the group agreed that this was an accurate appraisal. They did not believe they had any control or influence over what decisions the district would make concerning umbrella projects. A questionnaire respondent indicated that only the school board determines whether a project continues, and this position was supported by another

questionnaire respondent, who stated that projects are more a district initiative than a school one.

*School-based projects.* Decisions to retain or terminate projects developed at the school level were typically made by all staff members through a highly collaborative team approach (Focus Group). Kirby, an administrator, described:

It probably starts with me, but it's never done solo. There's ample opportunity for the staff to bring it up, to initiate it, but most of the discussion will be at the leadership council or the department heads and the administration.

Kirby elaborated:

[There is] someone whose job it is to handle all the AISI projects for our district to do the liaison work, to meet with people. There are steering committees for each project, then there are reports done with the high school principal meetings [and] the AISI reps meet on a regular basis. So there's an awful lot of communication and collaboration.

Mark described a similar process in his school: "We decide as a faculty, something has to give somewhere. And, you know, our administration style is definitely a team approach. If something's not working, we have to make adjustments".

In other cases, lead teachers had an integral role in assisting with project decisions. Marlene described how a team of lead teachers would work together to compile and analyze data surrounding their project:

And then we presented to staff in a report. And if they disagree with it or whatever (we did in the first year), we made some changes. Last year they were happy, so we have some adaptations along the road.

Pat indicated that decisions regarding school-based projects "would be a team discussion" and that "for sure the teacher would be a big part, and administration." Although having never been faced with this situation, and therefore unsure of who would be involved, Chris felt it would be reasonably safe:

Assuming that it would probably be us as a staff who would be able to decide. And not directly, but have input on that decision, you know, so they [administration] would get feedback from us and then it would be dealt with from their level.

However, this was an assumption, not a certainty. The focus group unanimously agreed that everybody, including administration, teachers and paraprofessionals, would be involved in those decisions as a team, and also considered parental input as communicated to them through parent council.

Jane and Julie both indicated that only administration or department heads made program retention and termination decisions, and teachers were not involved at all. It was clear to Julie that, if it came down to making a final decision, "Then we go top down. It would be the admin team. And it would probably be to funding, more than anything; if the funds dry up - it's just a very political thing, that's what happens." She also believed that, as a teacher, she would have no input.

#### *Sufficiency of Current Project and Program Evaluation Methods*

Participants were asked whether they believed current program and project evaluation methods were sufficient in determining a program's worth, and were invited to provide suggestions for improvement in the event that they believed more could be done. Responses were made in reference to the larger AISI project.

The feeling was virtually unanimous that current methods were insufficient, with the exception of two administrators' responses. One believed that the district AISI representative had adequate dialogue with the provincial government and interactions with the project steering committees to sufficiently evaluate the initiative (Kirby), while the other was simply unsure (Mark). The remaining participants' responses fell into two categories: (1) what they felt was the cause of insufficiency and (2) what they felt would improve evaluation of the initiative. They deemed the cause of insufficiency to be over-reliance on standardized tests and marks. Participants described the need for qualitative data as a potentially powerful means of improving evaluation of AISI projects.

*Over-reliance on standardized tests and marks.* Participants described concern over the emphasis being placed on the use of PATs and standardized tests to evaluate AISI initiatives. They did not dispute the validity or value of such data. As Marlene remarked, "I think what we're doing is valid [but] as teachers we have a feel for what the kid's saying. But we can't include that because it isn't quantitative." Marlene also believed, "It [evaluation] isn't just about numbers." This sentiment was also expressed by Jane who said, "We are only looking at a test in grades 3, 6 and 9 – I don't think it's fair" and Julie, who stated, "It isn't just testing results, as far as I'm concerned, anyway. I think it's overall how you see the change in the student." Pat also agreed that there was more to the success of a program than test results: "That's the main focus right now. And I don't think it's very effective; I think we need the opposite." Another observation (Julie) further illustrates a danger in relying on test results to determine the worth of the initiative: "Not every child can achieve - we still have lots of groups that fall through the cracks."

The focus group provided the most elaboration on the use of provincial achievement tests to evaluate AISI initiatives. Their concerns were multifaceted and included the degree of emphasis placed on provincial achievement tests. They described how projects do not necessarily lend themselves to PAT results: "They're just a snapshot of the kid's day in the life of grade 3" (Focus Group participant D). They also mentioned that results are being compared incorrectly. One participant expressed:

I believe in accountability, but what does accountability look like to give us the data we need to continue to do school improvement? And I don't think the PATs do it. And if you further analyze the PAT 's, how many of those questions actually speak to the outcomes of our programs? And not only that, what about now great 2, 1, 4, 5, 7, 8 and then 10 and 11, they don't do PAT 's, so what measure are we using for those guys? (Participant C)

Additionally, although the focus group participants say their provincial achievement test results have not improved, they "know good things are happening" (Participant A) in their schools. Their concerns over provincial achievement test analysis are illustrated in the following comment:

The only thing we forgot was, how good were our grade 2's to start with? what we should be actually doing is, if you want to know where there's improvement, find out where your grade two and is at the end of that year, and see if they improved. You may actually be down, as far as your achievement... so when we look at it and say well we didn't do very well because our grade 3 results are down from last year, we never looked at the kids. We shouldn't be looking at the grade nines that are leaving to go to grade 10. I should be looking at the grade sixes that

are coming into grade seven. We don't have a baseline. Our baseline is the group that's gone through. And that's the problem. (Focus Group participant B)

*The need for qualitative data.* All respondents who believed that current evaluation methods are insufficient suggested more qualitative data should be included in efforts to evaluate school improvement initiatives. Participants believed that, “It would be more valuable to include some qualitative stuff – we need to be more human-oriented and not so numbers-oriented” (Jane), and that “There has to be an expansion, a more case-by-case analysis” (Pat). Focus group participants expressed a desire to include more qualitative information:

How can we have an effective kind of evaluation process that says those kinds of things – to trust the gut response and outlook of the teacher, administrators and what they see? And how do you measure there's been an improvement in differentiating for instruction? How do you do that? You do that by telling the story...but you can't measure it, so they make you go back and find the data...and it always has to translate to improvement in student achievement. (Focus Group participant A)

Julie described how an initiative should include measures to consider the overall change in the student: “You know, from wanting to work and to value education. So there's the test results, and they might have improved in that sense, but did they improve as a person?” This comment illustrates a differing opinion about what constitutes achievement.

Participants described a wide variety of qualitative information they believed would be useful to evaluate the success of an initiative, including student and parent

testimonials and responses towards the initiative; teacher anecdotes and observations regarding student's academic, personal, social and emotional growth; student work habits, value and attitude towards learning; student self-monitoring and self-assessment data; and the intuitive responses of teachers regarding students. These things are admittedly difficult to quantify and express, but participants considered them to be an integral component of the worth of the initiative.

Some questionnaire respondents admitted that they did not really know how projects were evaluated. One went so far as to say, "It is futile to evaluate them if the resources to sustain them are insufficient to continue to meet the needs" (Respondent 15), reiterating the same feelings of exasperation that other participants experienced when funding was cut for cycle 1 projects. This respondent stated further that we cannot rely on statistics only and suggested that a balance of qualitative and quantitative analysis be employed to fully evaluate programs and projects.

#### *Summary*

Evaluation practices typically involved the analysis of a variety of quantitative data, including PAT results, standardized tests, completion rates, surveys, marks and attendance. Satisfaction surveys were often conducted to obtain feedback from parents, teachers and students alike. However, in some cases, no processes were employed, or teachers and administrators were not aware of how projects were evaluated. Though the degree of teacher and paraprofessional involvement in evaluating projects was generally considered high, this was only in relation to school-based projects. Teachers and administrators were not involved to a large degree (if at all) in evaluating district-based projects. Decisions concerning project retention or termination were made differently for

projects originating from the district versus those developed at the schools. Teachers and administrators did not believe they had any real input, control or influence over decisions about district projects. In contrast, they described a highly collaborative, team approach in making project decisions at the school level. Overall, participants agreed that current project evaluation methods were insufficient, as they believed there was an over-reliance on standardized tests and similar quantitative data. Educators believed that project evaluation would be enhanced with the addition of qualitative data. They described qualitative measures as being more 'human-oriented', saying qualitative data could capture the overall student change (i.e. academic, personal, social and emotional growth) that quantitative measures could not.

## Chapter 6. Analysis

Analysis of the research findings is presented in this chapter, along with discussion of the implications of the data collected. Data were analyzed in a logico-inductive manner and are organized first according to the research topics explored, and second by themes and patterns that emerged through participant responses.

### *School Mission, Vision and Improvement Planning*

“Would you tell me please the way we ought to go?” asked the teachers.

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the leaders.

“We don’t much know where...” said the teachers.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the leaders. (adapted from Carol & Edens, 2000)

Fortunately, the above was not the attitude of teachers or leaders encountered, though it provides a clear illustration of the importance of having a clear direction in which to proceed. This study revealed that mission, vision and improvement planning were clearly developed to a large degree at the both the district and school levels. This level of development is an encouraging finding when considering that “One of the major benefits of developing a mission statement is the fact that it stimulates change” (DuFour, 1991, p. 23), mirroring the exact intent of AISI, the districts and schools involved in AISI projects. Bearing the benefits of mission and vision statement development towards stimulating change in mind, and understanding that institutionalized, second-order change is integral to initiating sustainable school improvement (Beach & Lindahl, 2004; Leithwood et al., 1999), it is important that districts and schools alike realize that “The contribution to change has been described as the fundamental task of the leadership

function” (DuFour, 1991, p. 23). Hence, the evidence that school districts and their respective schools are engaging in the development of school mission, vision and improvement planning processes to a large degree is promising concerning efforts towards improvement.

The findings indicated some lack of knowledge or understanding towards how district office developed school mission, vision and improvement plans, which may be regarded as highly disconcerting or irrelevant, depending upon one’s perspective. There is room to consider that staff at the school level may attach little or no value to mission and vision statements handed down to them from the district, as DuFour (1991) points out:

In order for a vision to guide and motivate the people within an organization, it must grow out of their needs, hopes and dreams. The members of the organization who will be asked to embrace and “own” the vision should play a role in drafting it. (p. 17)

This position is also endorsed by Leithwood et al. (1999).

However, because none of the respondents expressed resentment, animosity or other negative attitudes towards district-developed statements, I believe participants agreed and identified with them to a large enough degree to accept and attach value to them. DuFour (1991) points out that, “It is simply not possible to carry out the other tasks of leadership unless the leader has a clear sense of where the organization is going and how it is going to get there” (p. 16). Therefore, it is reasonable to apply this principle to the district that takes responsibility to guide school staff in the direction identified through its mission and vision statements.

Importantly, at the school level there was a clear sense of communicative, collaborative processes that involved both teachers and administrators to develop school mission and vision statements as well as goals for improvement. Collaborative processes are important in this case, as “[Principals] should not attempt to develop a vision for their schools unilaterally. Education is very much a collective endeavor, and commitment to a particular vision cannot be obtained through edict or coercion” (DuFour, 1991, p. 17). For DuFour, formal vision should emerge from “sustained, collective staff deliberation” (p. 61).

All the outstanding requirements for successful processes in developing shared vision, priority and goal setting in the conception of school improvement projects were present in the data. These included staff being actively involved, with leaders who understood the importance of collaboration to promote these processes, ensuring that statements are created, truly shared and understood by the team. Active staff involvement provides staff ownership of the vision and goals set before them. In addition, it has this effect:

[It attaches] personal agreement with the importance of those directions, a sense that the directions have considerable value or moral weight, and motivation to develop whatever new capacities might be required to successfully progress towards them. Organizational directions acquire such authentic meaning only through processes that are relatively extended, and that permit individual reflection, as well as dialogue and discussion among school members. (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 70)

This quote offers further insight into the importance of collaborative efforts at the school level to develop mission, vision and goals for improvement, which “depends on decisions and actions at the school site” (DuFour, 1991, p. 7).

#### *School Culture*

The results of this study clearly indicate the significant dependence of school culture on relationships. The dynamics not only between administrators and staff, but also within staff and between staff and district office, influenced attitudes and relationships, affecting school culture. Of particular importance was the ability of the principal to establish and develop positive relationships, as DuFour (1991) points out, “It is up to principals to promote a productive climate within their schools” (p. 29). Tarter and Hoy (2004) found these dynamics ultimately affect both instruction and student learning, an observation supported by the research of Sparks (1987), cited in DuFour (1991), who states, “Students have found unanimously that organizational climate is critical to the success of change efforts” (p. 29).

In this study, relationships within the school appeared vital to the integrity of the improvements being undertaken. Responses reveal two important aspects requisite to the development of positive, effective relationships between leadership and staff, namely trust and collegiality. The responses of participants in this study illustrate a reciprocal relationship: “When the principal supported the teachers and respected teacher professionalism and teacher expertise, the teachers generally returned trust and respect” (Sinden, Hoy & Sweetland, 2004, p. 472). Principals in this study established trust by maintaining approachability; expressing a willingness to listen; valuing the input of staff; being accessible, visible, and proactive; providing support and affirmations/ and

encouraging risk-taking behaviors. Sinden et al. (2004) list several of these attributes as important factors in the development of an enabling school culture. They include other behaviors, such as being professional and open, professional and supportive, manifest through being respectful, supportive, utilizing multiple perspectives in decision-making, and being flexible in the interpretation and application of rules. All these characteristics were present in the leadership relationships described by participants and suggest the strong presence of a positive, enabling school culture.

Collegiality was also of high importance, described within the teacher-leader dynamic through expressions of collaborative, level relationships, open-door policies and cohesiveness of staff. The significance of this dynamic is explained by Sinden et al. (2004):

The cohesiveness and work ethic of their faculties rewarded these principals...Constant two-way influence and encouragement developed common expectations that were part of the school culture. In turn, the culture strongly influenced behavior and kept staff together in stressful situations. (p. 472)

Maintaining collegial relationships has clear implications for school improvement efforts, as staffs are more inclined to pull together to back one another when the need arises. Other illustrations of collegial relations were described through the sharing of leadership, leaders being proactive, motivational, working alongside staff, being respectful, cooperative and developing. They mirror the tentative generalizations about principal behavior in enabling schools, which include empowering teachers; sharing decision making; being reflective and mindful, open and authentic; treating teachers as professionals; and promoting autonomy (Sinden et al., 2004, p. 476).

*The Effect of School Culture on School Improvement Efforts*

Unsurprisingly, teachers and administrators alike emphasized the significance that school culture has for school improvement efforts. Respondents in this study clearly described the existence of two cultures, positive and negative, both inherently tied to relationships. Their insights must be taken seriously considering the ripple effect these cultures have on staff; negative cultures have the potential to ultimately taint capacity and commitment, in turn affecting teacher attitudes and efforts, and ultimately, student learning. When we reflect on the natural, rational understanding that we reap what we sow, clearly it is vital to make whole-hearted, concerted efforts to maintain a positive school culture, impervious to the increasing stress and demands facing modern educators. Nor is it arduous to perceive the corresponding effect caused by an insidiously negative culture. Leaders must strive to ensure, at all costs, that cultures of schools are positive, and shaped by vibrant relationships and strong rapport among students and staff alike.

*Positive culture.* When describing aspects of positive culture, participants talked about collaborative settings where staffs were committed to the initiatives and projects in their school. They had visionary leaders who employed “low centralization [which] diffuses decision-making among many participants” (Sinden et al., 2004, p. 463) by means of shared leadership practices. Staff were engaged and involved in making decisions; their input was valued and seriously considered by administration. Their expertise was utilized and trusted in developing local school improvement projects. Leaders encouraged the pursuit and communication of best practices, and provided processes and avenues for self-monitoring, self-reflection, ongoing learning and dialogue. These leaders clearly understood:

The relationships among adults in schools are the basis, the precondition, the *sine qua non* that allow, energize and sustain all other attempts at school improvement. Unless adults talk with one another, observe one another, and help one another, very little will change. (Barth, 1990, p. 32)

*Negative culture.* Although there was only one instance of negative culture directly described and disclosed in this study, various respondents made allusions and ascribed attributes to it; hence, the picture was painted clearly and lessons for leaders are implicit. Negative culture has undercurrents of mistrust and suspicion, typically fueled by strained relationships, rigidity of staff unwilling to change, and a sense of being overwhelmed by a multitude of responsibilities and the constraints of time. The impact of negative culture cannot be ignored; it has the power to poison the entire school, making it difficult for teachers to maintain their enthusiasm and, “For some, the result of negative culture was to leave their school” (Myers & Goldstein, 1997, p. 117).

#### *Building Capacity and Commitment*

One cannot understate the deep value of capacity and commitment of staff to school improvement efforts. Leithwood et al. (1999) argue that, “Perceived capacity or self-efficacy increases the intrinsic value of effort and contributes to the possibilities for a sense of collective capability or efficacy on the part of a group” (p. 139). Study participants clearly stated this concept through their responses, demonstrating the constitutional value attached to the presence of capacity and commitment within staff. This study sought to understand the methods conducive to building capacity and commitment in schools by probing for practices employed by leaders, investigating how decisions are made to retain or terminate initiatives, determining how lead teachers are

utilized, and revealing community perceptions surrounding efforts toward school improvement.

*Practices Employed by Leaders*

Practices leaders employed to build capacity and commitment with staff were numerous, falling into three main categories: teamwork, relationship building, and time provisions. There is some natural overlap between these three themes, although each has distinctive characteristics and value.

*Teamwork.* Leaders promoted teamwork in numerous ways: developing collaborative teams, professional learning communities, and staff meetings; ensuring the alignment of PD opportunities with professional growth plans; and promoting inter-school networking and relationships. These leaders recognized the importance of building a culture of collaboration:

[A culture of collaboration will] encourage the exchange of ideas and endorse mutual problem solving, thereby providing rich opportunities for the exercise of teacher leadership, and suitable motivation for potential teacher leaders to develop their capacities. (Leithwood et al., 1999, pp. 131-132)

There is much value in developing a collaborative culture, synonymous with the enabling school structure described by Sinden et al. (2004):

Teachers feel confident and are able to exercise judgment and power as professionals. Enabling centralization is flexible, cooperative and collaborative...School administrators in such structures use their power and authority to help teachers that design structures that facilitate teaching and learning; in brief, they empower their teachers. (p. 464)

This approach to school improvement promotes teacher leadership, in that teachers “work with colleagues to shape school improvement efforts and take some lead in guiding teachers towards a collective goal” (Harris & Muijs, 2005, p. 5). As a result, a sense of ownership, pride and commitment develops among teachers.

The strategy of ensuring alignment of professional development opportunities with teachers’ professional growth plans is also important in facilitating growth in the intended direction. Ensuring PD alignment is of particular value so learning is purposeful and directed, seen as useful and not a waste of precious time. Additionally, aligned PD opportunities contributes to the sense of being a team, as staff are learning and growing together to achieve the goals and objectives of the school, affording cohesiveness, common language and comprehension of the tasks set before them.

Edwards (2003) attaches great value to the professional networking of teachers; the participants of her study described this as being the most useful learning they had engaged in. This kind of teamwork, facilitated through collaborative processes like the development of inter-school networking, contributes added value to efforts to move along the continuum towards school improvement. Ansell (2004) observed that this type of collaboration offers the potential for “pooling expertise and resources between other more ‘successful’ schools [and provides] the opportunity to share knowledge and understanding [which] is especially valuable in helping to build capacity” (p. 21). In addition, solutions for improving and sustaining schools must “reduce competition and increase collaboration between institutions” (p. 26). This practice breaks down barriers between schools, bringing teachers out of the traditional model of isolation and ultimately increasing professional discourse and the sharing of best practices.

*Relationship building.* The significance of relationship building was addressed earlier with respect to school culture, and the same concepts apply towards principals' efforts to build capacity and commitment. The concepts are inextricably intertwined. Respondents emphatically stated the need for transparency of their leaders, and there was consensus that "openness was key" (Edwards, 2003, p. 17). The fact that participants would mention valuing transparency indicates their perceptions of the integrity of their leaders. Transparency and subsequent leader integrity perceptions are in direct correlation with the high emphasis placed on trust mentioned earlier when discussing school culture. One administrator in the study expressed building relationships through empowerment and ownership where staffs assume responsibility as a team for successes and failures alike: "No one's pointing fingers at anyone" (William). There are clear implications in terms of "teachers' perceptions that the interpersonal climate of the school, provided by leaders and teaching colleagues, is a supportive, caring and trusting one" (Leithwood, et al., 1999, p. 142).

The study found that teachers placed high value on leaders who listen to teachers and value their comments and input. Such leaders must be available and approachable. They must listen with the intent to understand or, engage in *emphatic listening*, which is "reflecting on what a person feels and says in your own words. It is not listening to advise, counsel, reply, refute, solve, fix, change, judge, agree, disagree, question, analyze, or figure out" (Covey, 2005, p. 110). Listening emphatically communicates to the speaker an attachment of value to what they are saying, which was crucial to the participants of this study. Sinden et al. (2004) found that the accessibility of authorities to teachers is

valuable and necessary, as is informal, two-way communication; principals need to be professional, open, respectful and supportive of teachers (p. 473).

*Time provisions.* Participants were clear that they were most impressed by leaders who understood the critical importance of ensuring staff had time to collaborate, plan, engage in professional dialogue, and share best practices. Moreover, they indicated how imperative it is that such time be provided within regular work hours. Teachers did not want to give up their preparation times or have these processes occur after school hours. This finding concurs with Edwards (2003) on the effectiveness of leadership groups:

The allocation of time for the leadership group to plan, evaluate and discuss performance was a high priority. In one case, the [principal] found difficulty in arranging time away because of how his members viewed their working hours. The problem was overcome by allocating a substantial period of time during the workweek. Such allocations of time found barriers in schools where the leadership group had *teaching commitments*. (italics added, p. 18)

I find the time issue of particular interest as it holds ramifications for the development of teachers as leaders, and the subsequent effectiveness of their efforts to pursue practices conducive to school improvement. If time constraints were viewed as barriers among leadership groups, especially concerning those who teach, how much more this holds true for teachers assuming leadership roles additional to regular teaching duties. The implication is clear: if we want to encourage teachers to share leadership, time must be allotted during the regular workweek for them to do so effectively. Such time provisions will prevent the assumption of shared leadership from being perceived a

burden, rather than as the empowering and effective strategies for school improvement that they are.

*How Decisions Relating to School Improvement Are Made*

As with the development of vision, mission and improvement plans, decisions concerning school improvement projects again depended on the project's roots of origin. Participants clearly believed they had little to no input in what initiatives were adopted by the district, nevertheless being involved in decisions concerning them. The involvement of administrative teams was reported as minimal, having no effect on final decisions of the district. Inversely, decisions regarding projects developed at the school level were clearly made through a team approach, "from the ground up," as described by one principal. This observation was supported by the comments of every other interviewee who described collaborative processes involving all staff on making decisions surrounding the school-based projects.

The contrast is interesting, and its recurrent nature prompts careful thought and consideration. The long-term implications of the continuance of this disparity cannot be ignored, especially considering the observations of Leithwood et al. (1999) that district-level conditions can have a significant impact on teachers' commitment to change, and that districts should "directly foster those conditions in the school associated with teachers' commitment" (p. 148). Districts taking a top-down approach cannot expect collaborative cultures to flourish in their schools. On the other hand, "A collaborative district culture is likely to make it much easier for school staffs to move toward a more collaborative school culture, creating, in turn, context beliefs supportive of restructuring initiatives" (p. 148).

### *Lead Teacher Participation*

Lead teacher participation in school improvement projects was high, with multifaceted roles that combined aspects like liaison and communicate and consult and support instruction. In either capacity, lead teachers operate within the realm of shared leadership, as they provide numerous avenues of support and leadership for the improvement initiative.

*Act as liaison and communicate.* Lead teachers often have the monumental responsibility of being the interagency ‘middle-man,’ disseminating information between provincial, district and school level representatives and authorities. Their role as teacher-leaders in this instance is crystalline, requiring the possession of a host of leadership attributes, particularly intra-personal and interpersonal capacities (Ansell, 2004). Lead teachers were proactive in promoting the initiative, ensuring that vital communication lines were open between various stakeholders within the initiative. They were also important lifelines for teachers concerning news and developments at the provincial level that affected their projects.

*Consult and support instruction.* In this role, lead teachers may be seen as specialists or consultants on whom teachers may rely for expertise and knowledge. Acting in this capacity is a valuable role for lead teachers because they “could be encouraged to share that expertise with colleagues, thereby enhancing the overall quality of learning enjoyed by all students. Enhanced collaboration could also support other areas of activity, such as leadership” (Ansell, 2004, p. 22). Often lead teachers who acted as consultants and supported instruction could be described as having a ‘mediating role’ (Harris & Muijs, 2005) in which they are “important sources of expertise and

information...able to draw critically upon additional resource and expertise if required and to seek external assistance” (p. 5).

It is noteworthy that lead teachers were not attributed one specific role over the other by participants; it was clear the roles cooperatively co-existed, intertwined and inseparable from each other. Lead teachers were viewed as a major source of support for teachers while functioning in either capacity: “They work with colleagues to shape school improvement efforts and take some lead in guiding teachers towards a collective goal” (Harris & Muijs, 2005). Lead teacher involvement in school improvement initiatives was highly interactive, supportive and valued by staff that sometimes attributed more credibility to them than formal leaders.

#### *Perceptions of the Project*

An investigation into the perceptions of the community about how well the school improvement project has taken root unearthed a division regarding perceptions; they were either generally positive or simply unclear. In both instances, a fair effort to collect data (typically from satisfaction surveys) was undertaken by both the district and schools at the conclusion of various projects. Those reporting positive perceptions indicated the presence of high levels of communication between home and schools, and also among staff. Thus it is no surprise that the cause of unclear perceptions appeared to result from communication breakdown between parents and schools as well as among staff.

I would have preferred to find the co-existence of positive and negative perceptions rather than that of positive and unclear because the former condition implies the existence of appropriate communication and feedback mechanisms, while the latter indicates deficiencies. If districts and their respective schools wish to generate positive

perceptions, or at the very least appropriate adequate feedback from staff, students and community, the lines of communication must be open.

Additionally, summative evaluation should not be relied upon. Districts and schools that advocate assessment for learning and recognize the value in on-going, formative evaluation for their student learning must implement similar practices in attempting to obtain feedback from the community. A formative approach would afford changes and alterations to be designed as needs arise, rather than at project conclusion as with summative measures. I am certain the district that realized (at the end of the year) how parents did not know what good was going on in their schools, would have appreciated having that red flag waved much earlier. This information would have allowed them to make adjustments and communicate this information much more clearly than they had.

#### *Professional Learning, Growth and Supervision*

This section of the study focused on professional learning and staff supervision through a line of questioning that revolved around professional growth plan (PGP) alignment, sharing of best practices and performance expectations, and what instructional supports were available to staff.

#### *Professional Growth Plan Alignment*

The importance of establishing vision, mission and improvement plans have already been discussed and have a close link with professional growth plans as their alignment is crucial in clarifying the common direction in which staffs are heading for school improvement. Leithwood et al. (1999) describe this interdependency: "Vision building, culture building, developing consensus about group goals, intellectual

stimulation and individual consideration made substantial contributions to teachers' change initiatives" (p. 64).

PGPs are an important vehicle in planning for school improvement: "Developing a consensus on goals focuses organization members on what will need to be accomplished in the short term, this year, in order to move towards the vision" (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 64). The importance of ensuring the alignment of goals with those of the province, district and school is demonstrated through an American study (Cassada, Stevens, & Wilson, 2005):

The improvement efforts in Hanover County Public Schools demonstrate that student achievement gains and school improvement depend on strategic planning and goal-setting at the district level as well as a commitment to district goals at the school level. Through Hanover County's focus on students learning and alignment of curriculum and instruction with district objectives, we are meeting accountability mandates and moving toward the goal of leaving no child left behind. (p. 4)

The study in Hanover County described a complex, multi-level process of goal alignment and their positive affects on school improvement efforts. If the perceptions of Cassada et al. (2005) are accurate, it is reasonable to believe that, since the majority of participants of my study reported a close alignment of their PGP goals with those of the province and board coupled with the existence of group-developed goals, these educators are on the right track in moving towards improvement as they develop common direction and purpose related to the initiatives and goals of the province, board and school.

Participants also included personal goals in their growth plans, which have “energizing qualities...independent of the specific content of these goals” (Leithwood et al., p. 137) which “have very strong direct effects on context beliefs and weaker but significant effects on capacity beliefs” (p. 145). However, Leithwood et al. make a distinction regarding personal goals – they must be part and parcel with the adoption of the organization’s goals, not personal goals likened to individual interests such as ‘I will learn a new language’ or the like. The implication of respondents was that their personal goals were most likely related to personal interest rather than that of personal adoption of the organization, which is what fosters teacher commitment.

Remarkably, few participants who indicated poor alignment and inconsistent use of growth plans were employed in very large high schools with several administrators. Interviewees described them as being extremely busy tending to ‘more critical’ issues, alluding to behavior problems with students, dealing with parents and similar crises. Sinden et al. (2004) discuss the difficulties facing leaders associated with large schools, and demonstrate how smaller schools are more conducive for effective leadership practices. This phenomenon appears to be the main issue for schools in this study who are struggling with alignment of plans and general accessibility of their leaders.

#### *Sharing Best Practices*

It has been found that “A linchpin for moving individual learning to organizational learning is dissemination” (Collinson & Fedoruk Cook, 2004, p. 313). The sharing of knowledge, skills and insights is achieved when a “collaborative exchange of ideas in which differing perspectives are aired and understanding is shared” (Shaw & Perkins, 1992, quoted in Collinson & Fedoruk Cook, 2004, p. 313). My research revealed

that the dissemination of knowledge and sharing of best practices occurred in two main contexts among teachers, formal meetings and informal meetings. These practices afforded teachers venues to exchange a variety of information related to best practices in support of the school improvement project at their schools, valuable time spent when one considers that “Teachers find the dissemination of other teachers’ knowledge to be one of the most useful sources of learning” (Collinson & Fedoruk Cook, 2004, p. 315). In all cases, having the time to meet during the school day, regardless what forum, was critical to staff. Having adequate time to meet is a valid expectation and concern as reflected through the findings of Seashore Louis et al. (1996), quoted in Harris and Muijs (2003): “The more successful schools teachers were given more time to collaborate with one another” (p. 14).

*Formal meetings.* Formal meetings to share best practices were of various types, including staff, committee and department meetings, collaboration meetings, PLCs and often occurred during PD days. Study participant comments revealed that, as they participated in the team-oriented processes of sharing best practices, their “collaborative relationships build trust, which is essential to the exchange and development of ideas” (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997, p. 199). Considering the impact of trusting relationships has on improvement efforts, “It is crucial therefore that teacher leaders work in collaborative teams in order for them to make a mark on the school” (Harris & Muijs, 2003, pp. 12-13). All the formal meetings participants described in this study provide a potent means of establishing deep, trusting collegial relationships among professionals.

It is important to providing on-going, regularly scheduled opportunities for teachers to gather to share best practices through avenues such as PLCs: “The argument

for building professional learning communities is compelling because of the impact on school and classroom improvement” (Harris & Muijs, 2003, p. 8). Also, “Teachers need more opportunities and sustained opportunities to discuss teaching and learning in order to know and appreciate the views and strengths of their colleagues” (Collinson & Fedoruk Cook, 2004, p. 328). These meetings affect working relationships, influence capacities to teach, shape and define the culture of the school, ultimately impacting student learning and efforts for school improvement. Professional learning communities must be cultivated and sustained because “Professionals talking about practice, designing and evaluating curriculum and research without hierarchical considerations has led to innovative, successful programs” (Marlow et al., 2005, p. 7). The cultivation and sustenance of PLCs mirrors the intent of teachers and administrators of this research.

*Informal meetings.* This study revealed informal meetings as the main vehicle for sharing of best practices, largely due to time constraints experienced by extremely busy teachers. The types of informal meetings teachers of this study engaged in included chatting over recess, staff room encounters, sharing during supervision time on the playground, through sporadic classroom visits and sometimes through inter-school visits to observe programs and strategies being implemented. Although these meetings are invariably important to teachers, it was disconcerting to find them the main forum cited, as these informal meetings rarely afford the valuable time required to dialogue and reflect, thus limiting the depth of any exchange. The constant pressure of time in these types of interactions only allow for superficial sharing of best practices, denying teachers the opportunity to engage in deeper, reflective discussions. The research of Collinson and Fedoruk Cook (2004) also suggested the most important influence on learning and

sharing was time. They, too, found that “Teachers constantly felt the pressure of time and noted that most exchanges during the day occurred ‘on the go’” (p. 327).

Inter-school visits were classified as informal meeting times because they were sporadic in nature and not necessarily planned for all staff throughout the year; more often than not these visits involved a select few teachers or administrators who heard about one strategy, program or another, and decided to make an inquiry. Although this study found networking practices to be in their infancy, its presence was encouraging because “Inter-visitation and peer networks are designed to bring teachers and principals into contact with exemplary practices” (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 1069).

Professional networks are a powerful means for teacher sharing and learning:  
[They] engage school-based educators in directing their own learning, allowing them to sidestep the limitations of institutional roles, hierarchies, and geographic locations, while encouraging them to collaborate with a broad variety of people – socially, ethnically, institutionally, and so forth. (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997, p. 193)

Further reasons to be encouraged to find examples of networks forming between schools are the advantages they pose in creating purpose and direction, building collaboration, consensus and commitment, creating activities and relationships and building blocks, providing leadership through cross-cultural brokering, facilitating and keeping values visible, and by providing a means of dealing with the funding problem facing our educational systems (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997). Schon (1997), quoted in Lieberman and Grolnick (1997), makes another important point: “Ideas build network members’ interest and participation – ideas that are themselves transformed by the

participants and fed back into the network” (p. 199), illustrating the reciprocal relationship between sharing and learning for teachers.

### *Sharing Performance Expectations*

Participants in this study reported having experienced some form of formal or informal conveyance of performance expectations. Administrators typically initiated both methods, although sometimes they delegated this responsibility to leadership teams and department heads. Administrators gave out handbooks and other printed documents related to professional practice to teachers, expecting them to review the materials and act accordingly. Interestingly, few teachers indicated they were familiar with, or even having ever received, these documents, which calls their value into question. Participants described the use of professional growth plans, but there was evidence these were utilized inconsistently throughout both districts. The majority of the time expectations were communicated through informal processes like staff meetings (which sometimes only served reminders about meeting curriculum guidelines) rather than other facets of performance, and the odd ‘walkabout’ in which principals popped into teachers’ classrooms.

There was no real protocol described by participants of either district, providing a large degree of flexibility for communication at the discretion of administrators. Virtually all interviewees indicated the majority of communication about performance expectations were directed to new staff, whether first and second-year teachers, or simply new to the division, while existing staff members were generally expected to ‘know.’ None of the study participants were new teachers; in fact, they were all quite experienced. Yet they were largely unfamiliar with documents outlining expectations, reported inconsistent use

of PGPs and could not consistently or clearly articulate protocol for communicating performance. Two implications emerge: either the communication of performance expectations is not a high priority for administrators, or administrators believe that, “Teachers are the professional experts on instruction and that the collective discernment of faculty members [is] our best source of wisdom” (Rooney, 2005, p. 88). Either way, it begs the question of accountability and staff supervision in schools, as one cannot assume that all teachers past their third year of experience fully comprehend the task set before them.

#### *Instructional Supports*

Participants described their perceptions of instructional supports as being divided among three categories, in order of relative importance: Human Resources, Professional Learning Communities and, Technology.

*Human resources.* Participants cited a wide range of human resources as being integral instructional supports, from teachers with varying degrees and types of specializations, including special education and content areas, to consultants, technology facilitators, coordinators, district personnel, librarians, and even parent and student volunteers. This evidences the importance of shared expertise: “The underlying idea behind all these forms of interaction is that shared expertise is more likely to produce change than individuals working in isolation” (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 1070). It is also no surprise that human resources provide the most intensive instructional support to teachers since “Teachers see each other as the primary source of useful ideas” (Collinson & Fedoruk Cook, 2004, p. 314). The strong perception and wide variety of human resources acknowledged as instructional supports illustrates how “Teachers continue to

extend their teaching repertoires with a potpourri of ideas culled from any available sources” (p. 315).

*Professional learning communities.* PLCs were discussed quite extensively in the previous section concerning sharing best practices, and have emerged as a central theme within the context of instructional support. PLCs afford an important opportunity for educators:

[They encourage us to engage in] collaborative conversations [which] call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private – goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers – individually and collectively. (DuFour, 2004, p. 9)

As before, participants tagged the effectiveness of PLCs with a qualifier regarding time. The high value attached to time for the effective implementation of PLCs, which ensure teachers engage in adequate dialogue and planning processes: “Time needs to be set aside teachers to meet, to plan and discuss issues such as curriculum matters, developing school-wide plans, leading study groups, organizing visits to other schools, collaborating with HEIs, and collaborating with other colleagues” (Harris & Muijs, 2003, p. 14). These activities fall under the umbrella of PLCs. Participants of this study clearly valued the interactions and learning gleaned from PLCs, but felt they were not being given adequate time to maximize their effectiveness.

*Technology.* Participants discussed varying types of technology as instructional supports, with the use of instructional software the most common ground among them.

However, the specific type of technology is not important, but rather “how the technology is integrated with the instructional program” (Bennett, 2003, p. 22). Educators must ask themselves, “Are students using technology in ways that deepen their understanding of academic content and advance their knowledge of the world around them?” (p. 22). Although this study did not necessarily reveal whether the use of technology is achieving this goal, the implications are there as one considers the effect of using supports such as word processing software, portable word processors and assistive technology like Kurzweil:

[Studies have shown that] word processing supports reading-writing connections, and process writing; computer technology supports motivation to read and write... Other studies have found that computer and networked technologies positively affect students’ writing fluency, attitude towards writing, quality and quantity of writing, and social environments for writing. (Asselin, 2001, p. 49)

The potential for effective utilization of technology is there, but the findings of this research indicate the use of technology lacks cohesiveness and continuity among schools, with some having more technology at their disposal than others. Teachers identify technology as being a support; however, as Bennett (2003) points out, “To ensure that technology dollars have an impact on students, staff and the community, districts and schools must develop a thoughtful technology plan” (p. 22), one which creates a vision and involves all stakeholders. The lack of patterned, cohesive responses concerning technologic supports among participants employed within the same school districts suggests the technology may not be reaching its fullest potential, or maximum impact on instruction.

### *Organizational Learning*

#### *Lessons Learned*

A variety of lessons were learned in cycle one which educators felt could be applied to cycle two, which fell into three categories: time, consistency and reflection. Participants clearly felt that time, again, was a critical element that affected their ability to plan and implement projects, align curriculum, and to do their 'real jobs' of educating students. Clearly, "It is finding time for the other activities in the series – collaborative planning, substantive decisions, professional development – that keeps [teachers] and [their] colleagues struggling" (Adelman & Panton Walking Eagle, 1997, p. 92).

Consistent with the findings of this study, Adelman and Panton Walking Eagle also discovered that teachers need time to plan and practice, develop curriculum, turn policy into practice, be a teacher, share successful practices and to sell the innovation.

It is important to note the struggle described by participants. Other researchers have found that, "As the quantity of the new program increased, the quality of the implementation for each program decreased" (Adelman & Panton Walking Eagle, 1997, p. 95). This very dilemma forced some schools in my study to pick and choose among projects, calling into question what is happening in other schools across Alberta. Clearly it is more feasible to define a reasonable number of initiatives that educators can realistically implement, than it is to overload them with numerous ones they cannot. Reducing projects to a manageable number would assure the quality and integrity of projects is maintained.

Inconsistency of projects between schools posed problems for implementation as staff moving to different positions often had to re-learn what was going on. Some

projects suffered with staff changes, as expertise was lost with staff movement. This problem illustrates the need for consistent, district-based professional development, inter-school networking and communication to promote congruency of projects, thereby reducing the impact of staff movement on projects.

The establishment of effective PLCs was one learning that participants clearly communicated having a critical role in allowing them to reflect on practice, which was noted as previously being the 'missing element' (Focus Group participant A). Again, it was imperative that adequate time should be set-aside for teachers to engage in the PLC process, which was discussed at length in previous sections of this study.

Funding issues were highlighted as participants described the need to become creative with their budgets, often picking and choosing between projects to ensure adequate finances were available to continue those deemed important to individual schools. This learning was a direct result from the discontinuance of AISI dollars for projects ending with cycle 1 which educators felt were valuable and wished to maintain through cycle 2:

Implementing change is a gradual process rather than a direct adoption process.

The transition is pervasive and requires change in almost all aspects of the organization, including roles, structures, rules, and practices, as well as the knowledge and skills of the participants. (Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1994, quoted in Wan, 2004, p. 858)

This observation, coupled with the findings of my study, illustrates it would be wise to provide continuing AISI funding to allow districts to carry successful projects

over from year to year. Continuous funding for successful projects would afford students the opportunity to experience the fullest potential and impact of AISI.

#### *Factors Affecting Organizational Learning*

It was found that a number of variables affected organizational learning, both restraining and motivating in nature. These were characterized through attitudes, collaboration and teamwork, and budget restraints. The variables existing within each category did not act in isolation, but rather were intertwined, interacting and impacting one another. Participant responses illustrated “the importance of time, attitudes and relationships on the process of learning and sharing; and the complexity of motivating and restraining factors on organizational learning in schools” (Collinson & Fedoruk Cook, 2004, p. 325). It is impossible to isolate the impact of individual variables, as they constitute complex, inseparable dynamics.

*Restraining factors.* Restraining factors were described through variables falling into categories of attitudes, time and budget restraints, sharing the most overlap in terms of inter-variable impact. Negative attitudes were described by participants who felt overburdened and overwhelmed by the number of projects and initiatives being ‘handed down’ by district office (Mark). The sense of being overburdened (partially due to project overload, and partially due time constraints) caused animosity towards district personnel. Teachers felt district staff ‘out of touch’ with what was happening in schools, insensitive to what were perceived as excessive demands placed on them. Additionally, as projects were completed in the first cycle and AISI funding discontinued for them in the second, teachers were irritated that they were forced to either pick and choose among successful projects, or to get creative with their budgets in order to maintain them. Facing forced

choices like these adversely affected teacher attitudes towards pursuing further learning as they felt it was senseless to commit time and energy to projects destined to be dropped. Other studies have shown how this sense of disillusionment and powerlessness is detrimental to organizational learning, since “Teachers’ perceptions and attitudes also influenced learning and sharing” (Collinson & Fedoruk Cook, 2004, p. 327).

*Motivating factors.* Motivating factors were present within the theme Collaboration and Teamwork, where participants described the positive impact of shared responsibility and increased professional dialogue. The presence of such motivating factors is a valuable condition when one considers that, “At the heart of an organization’s capacity to change is the individual and collective learning of its members” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 215). This dialogue and learning most often occurred during PLC time where best practices were shared among colleagues, illustrating a type of synergy which results in innovation and invention, new and better solutions, transformed relationships and the appreciation of diverse perspectives (Covey, 2005). The findings of this study show that teachers valued this time, and were learning and reflecting from one another while developing a shared language and understanding. Shared language increased team learning since, “Without a shared language for dealing with complexity, team learning is limited” (Senge, 1990, p. 268).

#### *Evaluating School Improvement Initiatives*

This research found that administrators employed several processes to evaluate local initiatives. These processes fell into two main categories: the data analysis and reflection category consisted largely of the review of PATs and district-administered testing, while the surveys and anecdotes category was devised of staff, student and parent

satisfaction surveys regarding the initiative. Additionally, one third of those interviewed reported evaluation processes were not employed/unknown, of which one participant was an administrator.

Concerning involvement on evaluating initiatives and making decisions regarding project retention or termination, there was once again disparity between decisions being made regarding district-developed initiatives versus school-based projects. It was again found that there was no involvement from teachers and paraprofessionals concerning evaluation or retention/termination decisions of district-developed initiatives. On the flipside, a high degree of involvement, utilizing collaborative, team-based approaches, was reported to both evaluate and make retention, modification or termination decisions of school-based projects. Spite this involvement in decisions surrounding school-based projects participants were not content with the manner in which initiatives were evaluated at any level. This discontent, coupled with the fact that a significant number of respondents had no idea how initiatives were evaluated, indicates the need to make serious improvements in all aspects of program evaluation processes. These must be clearly defined and consistent for all educators involved.

The implications of these findings are expressed through the near-consensus of interviewees that current program evaluation methods are *insufficient*, as the majority of respondents consistently expressed concern over the emphasis on PATs and their desire to see the use of more qualitative measures to evaluate initiatives and make program decisions. Their concerns are highly legitimate:

[These educators] have increasingly recognized that score level test results are strongly influenced by a variety of factors outside of a school system's control.

These include student family background, family income, and community factors. If policymakers want to isolate the difference that schools and educators make in student progress, they need to look at year-to-year score gains, or value-added measures, as part of a high stakes accountability system. (Greene, Winters & Forster, 2004, p. 1140)

This very insight was revealed by the educators in this study through the comments of the focus group, as discussed in Chapter 6. Their concerns about the comparison of dissimilar student cohorts is valid in observing this does not accurately measure growth from year to year: “Students will often improve on state-mandated tests, sometimes dramatically, but the improved scores will not influence the schools [adequate yearly progress] status because those students’ scores don’t cross the proficiency point” (Popham, 2005, p. 84). Participants expressed the value of PATs, but their comments reveal the need for districts to consider adding a dimension of value-added models of evaluation:

[Such models] do not look only at current levels of student achievement. Instead, such models measure each student’s improvement from one year to the next by following that student over time to obtain a gain score. The idea behind value-added modeling is to level the playing field by using statistical procedures that allow direct comparisons between schools and teachers – even when those schools are working with quite different populations of students. The end result of value-added assessment is an estimate of teacher quality. (Doran & Fleischman, 2005, p. 85)

Participants expressed a professional desire to be accountable for student achievement, but were rightly concerned about the manner in which PATs are analyzed because they are not comparing like cohorts of test-takers. This approach reflects neither student achievement nor teaching quality. Their desire to see the system change so that cohorts are compared against themselves from year-to-year is valid and feasible. As Greene et al. (2004) point out, “Looking at year-to-year score gains is a value-added approach, telling us how much educational value each school added to its students in each year” (p. 1130). It may be worthwhile to consider the addition of a value-added component to analysis of achievement test results, whether analyzing them locally or provincially. Although not the solution to evaluation in itself, a value-added dimension would improve the manner in which scores are utilized at all levels.

Darling-Hammond (2004) presents a thorough analysis of the inherent danger of reliance on standardized tests as this approach unfairly holds schools with dissimilar student populations and resources to similar standards:

More successful outcomes have been secured in states and districts...that have focused on broader notions of accountability, including investments in teacher knowledge and skill, organization of schools to support teacher and student learning, and systems of assessment that drive curriculum reform and teaching improvements. (p. 1047)

Darling-Hammond (2004) suggests an interesting paradigm shift in using achievement test results to make decisions surrounding professional development for teachers, thereby increasing their capacity to teach effectively, subsequently boosting

overall student achievement and learning. An investment towards improved teaching may very well be the most rational manner to improve learning for all students.

Another concern expressed by participants was what actually constitutes achievement, that overall growth must be considered and reported, and that success can be defined in many, not necessarily quantifiable ways. They were clearly communicating that, as Fink (2000) argues, “To the teacher in the classroom, success is not an array of disembodied statistics on tests of questionable utility; they judge the efficacy of a change initiative on whether it can be adapted to their individual context” (p. 8). Teachers have a strong desire to ‘tell the story’ of what is going on in their individual contexts as they are reaching and teaching students from all walks of life. Their story is not being told by standardized tests, whether those are fairly and accurately compared or not. In addition, Casas (2003) makes the following point:

The use of standardized testing flies in the face of cognitive psychology, the foundation of many of the current teaching and learning theories being advocated in today’s teacher preparation programs...The student’s understanding of the constructivist approach to teaching and learning is assessed by standardized testing, an assessment tool rooted in behaviorism. (p. 1)

It is no wonder that educators are disturbed by the current emphasis on provincial achievement tests to evaluate their initiatives and determine the effectiveness of their efforts while evaluating them from a paradigm which conflicts with their approach to instruction.

### *Key Findings*

Analysis of data collected resulted in 20 key findings, which encompass all aspects of this research:

1. School mission, vision and improvement planning are developed to a large degree in districts and in schools.
2. Mission, vision and improvement plans, as well as decisions for school improvement, involved little to no teacher and administrator input at the district level, while at the school level plans are made in a highly interactive and collaborative manner.
3. School culture is shaped by relationships among stakeholders, having a significant impact on school improvement efforts. Trust and collegiality are critical components of positive relationships. Negative relationships impede school culture.
4. Time constraints negatively impact school culture as they fuel negative attitudes.
5. Teamwork, PD alignment, collaboration and sharing of best practices are important strategies for leaders to employ for school improvement.
6. Relationships have a significant impact on capacity and commitment.
7. Adequate time provisions are imperative to maximize the effectiveness of collaborative processes.
8. Lead teachers operate within the realm of shared leadership.

9. Unclear perceptions about projects reveal that communication among stakeholders must be increased; formative evaluation may assist in this process.
10. PGPs are adequately aligned for school improvement, but personal goals need to be readdressed.
11. Best practices are most often shared informally, lacking depth of exchange.
12. Deficits exist in the sharing of performance expectations for experienced teachers.
13. Human resources are the most valued instructional support for teachers.
14. Technology is used inconsistently among schools.
15. Educators learned from cycle 1 that time, consistency and reflection are necessary for successful project planning, implementation and evaluation.
16. Restraining factors (attitudes, budget restraints and, time) and motivating factors (collaboration and teamwork) affected organizational learning.
17. Program evaluation needs to be addressed in more depth.
18. A value-added dimension to PAT analysis may be in order.
19. A paradigm shift may be required that uses PAT data to drive district PD decisions.
20. Teachers believe that success can and should be defined in ways that are not quantifiable, calling for the addition of a qualitative dimension to program evaluation.

## Chapter 7. Conclusions

In setting out to determine what leadership and evaluation practices school administrators and teachers employ that influence and affect the sustainability of school improvement projects specific to AISI, it was evident that transformational leadership practices provide a solid foundation on which to build. Additionally, this study revealed the need to address the issue of how AISI projects are evaluated as educators feel their voice is not being heard through the current use of provincial achievement tests.

The information gleaned from this research illustrated strong support for the adequacy of the model of transformational leadership, while revealing a variety of implications for leaders at all levels striving to produce sustainable change in Alberta schools. The complexity of human relationships emerged as the main dynamic in developing sustainable change. These dynamics cannot be effectively addressed through traditional, industrial based models, which do little to create fundamental, second-order change. The critical need for leaders to hone their inter- and intra-personal skills to approach the complicated task of creating trusting, collegial relationships with staff for positive, enduring affect was key to project design, implementation and evaluation.

Also, in most areas investigated, the common threads affecting capacity and commitment to change were relationships and time, which had a ripple effect on every aspect and level of the school organization. Leadership practices complementary to the transformational model were revealed, which effectively develop positive relationships and impact school culture. Motivation for improvement was intrinsic to participants, and all were working in pursuit of common goals. This motivation for improvement is in direct correlation with the transformational leadership model that provides leaders with a

sound theoretical framework under which to address the complexity of human relationships and develop intrinsic motivation among staff. The transformational model provides leaders with practices that lead to fundamental, institutionalized change, while promoting action research and a commitment to lifelong learning and a continual striving for improvement, as was evidenced in this study.

Some authors, such as Gronn (2003), warn of a potential 'hero paradigm', describing this as "the notion that a hero figure will 'turn around' a poorly performing or under-performing organization... This popular shorthand rhetoric attests to the presumed potency of individually focused, transformational-style leadership" (p. 17). There was no evidence from this research that remotely hinted at the existence of this 'notion,' and I think this is due the short sight of equating a transformational leadership model with anything that has an individual focus. Furthermore, Ansell (2004), Leithwood et al. (1999), Mulford and Silins (2003), Silins (2001), and Tarter and Hoy (2004), to name only a few, provide solid evidence that the transformational model is effective for 'turning around' struggling schools.

The transformational model's promotion of teacher leadership is a unique component that intrinsically motivates and ultimately builds capacity and commitment vital to school improvement efforts. Many aspects of the transformational framework were examined through the data collection process and were carefully examined for their potential impact on participants. The results of this research clearly indicate highly favorable responses and perceptions of staff working with leaders and in school contexts that operate within the parameters of the transformational leadership framework. It is

therefore concluded that the transformational model was highly effective as a framework for analysis for this study.

### *Implications for Leaders*

The findings of this study pose a variety of implications for leaders at all levels of educational organization. Given the tension experienced between the district and school staff of District 2, implications for leaders have been separated into those for district-level leaders and also those in schools.

*District leaders.* There was a clear difference in attitudes toward district office between participants of District 1 and District 2. Although neither district included teaching staff in creating mission and vision statements, project conception or decisions regarding program retention and termination, District 1 staff expressed no animosity towards district office personnel. This lack of animosity was likely because educators believed district personnel took their input seriously and responded when teachers had issues. For example, after receiving teacher satisfaction survey results and finding teachers were upset at having their prep times used for collaboration processes, the district responded by promptly changing school day schedules to allow for collaboration time within regular working hours and without sacrificing preps. Teachers also appreciated the support of district personnel and viewed district office staff as valued members of their team.

Oppositely, participants in District 2 school staff projected an, 'us versus them' attitude, clearly holding negative perceptions towards district office. School staff felt district personnel were 'out of touch' with what was going on, not having 'been in the trenches' for some time. Participants were overwhelmed with the number of initiatives

being 'handed down' to them. These attitudes reveal strained relations between district office and school personnel and these perceptions were damaging at the school level as they permeated staff and school culture, creating a negative atmosphere, affecting staff and students alike.

Although the direct effects on schools of leadership at the district level is minimal, it is noteworthy that "Their work created many of the organizational conditions giving rise to quality education, particularly through its contribution to the improvement of school-level administrator effectiveness" (Musella, 1995, p. 225). The implications for leaders at the district level are clear: they need to make a stronger effort to develop positive, collegial relationships with administrative and teaching staff, and they must get into the schools to gain understanding of what front-line personnel daily face. District office personnel have the opportunity to be excellent sources of support for schools from the outside, and it is imperative they understand this point:

You need to use external people in such a way as to say to the school, "You are ok. I am going to empower you to sort this out." External people need to build capacity in the school, not stifle it. (Ansell, 2004, p. 15)

District office must develop relationships with school personnel that eliminate the divisive mentality, providing support for schools and promoting teamwork at all levels. In a nutshell, they must move away from a top-down managerial approach towards a more collaborative style as fashioned by transformational approaches.

Districts operating within a top-down system will have a difficult time promoting collaborative models in their schools; this creates tension between district office and school staff that ultimately interferes with the development and implementation of

improvement initiatives. This tension impacts school culture, which clearly affects attitudes and subsequent efforts towards change. Capacity and commitment are sacrificed by teachers who are exhausted and overwhelmed by unrealistic expectations set before them, which they perceive as having district origins. This circumstance cannot be ignored: “Teachers’ commitment to change is subtly but significantly influenced by district-level conditions” (Leithwood et al., 1999, pp. 147-148). This is clearly observed through the responses of participants in this study who resisted change initiatives initiated by their district. As Musella (1995) observed, “There is growing support for the position that the chief education office in school systems ought to provide the type of leadership necessary to change the culture in ways that lead to greater organizational effectiveness” (p. 227). Hence, if school jurisdictions are serious about implementing long-term, sustainable improvement and wish to promote leadership that will create an atmosphere conducive to these efforts they must be considerate of their school personnel, and should also adopt complementary leadership models, leading by example.

*School leaders.* Setting the disparity between district office and school staff aside, there are a number of lessons for leaders pursuing a transformational approach, particularly concerning Relationships and Time. These variables were at constant interplay, virtually inseparable, and had the ability to affect all variables in any direction, whether positive or negative.

### *Relationships*

The power of relationships was implicitly woven through all aspects of this study. I found that the development of trusting, collegial relationships was integral to all aspects of school function and climate. To draw on the power of relationships, leaders need time

– time to spend with staff on all levels, both socially and professionally, and also time to give staff the opportunity to interact and dialogue with one another. This study reveals that leaders must level the playing field and include teachers in decisions affecting them, also supported by Marlow et al. (2005):

Minimizing notions of status and maximizing mutual decision-making produce a more effective relationship and acknowledge each partner's abilities and contributions. Thus, conscious effort must be made to design activities that provide benefit to all participating parties. (p. 1)

Leaders at all levels must be acutely aware of the power they hold in developing trusting, collegial relationships, and must engage in professional practice conducive to them.

Participants of this study revealed a number of practices leaders can and do employ to develop trusting, collegial relationships. These most commonly included approachability and availability, a willingness to listen and valuing input, working alongside staff, sharing leadership, being supportive, proactive and respectful, providing affirmations and encouraging risk-taking, and, importantly, providing safe forums for teachers to express themselves without fear of repercussions. Teamwork was also clearly important to all stakeholders, and collaboration was imperative, regardless of what form it took. PLCs were considered to be highly valuable but, over and over again, participants cited how the restraints of time affected their efforts to engage in collaborative dialogue and share best practices. Clearly leaders must cultivate excellent relationships with their staff while also ensuring there is adequate time for these meetings to occur.

These characteristics are captured through the foundations of empowerment for teachers and administrators found by Wan (2005) who describes human and operational

factors, including psychological empowerment, empowering mentality, motivations, professionalization, trust, autonomy, information sharing, visionary leadership, emotional leadership, decentralization, information sharing and collaboration as being integral to the development of teacher empowerment and relationships with leaders. They also illustrate high degrees of collegiality, which have been found to have a positive impact on all aspects of schooling. Barth (1990) explains:

The literature suggests that a number of outcomes may be associated with collegiality. Decisions tend to be better. Implementation of decisions is better.

There is a higher level of morale and trust among adults. Adult learning is energized and more likely to be sustained. There is even some evidence that motivation of students and their achievement rises, and evidence that when adults share and cooperate, students tend to do the same. (p. 31)

Leaders who are cognizant of trusting, collegial relationships must take steps to ensure they are thoroughly versed in the psychology of human relationships, and should embark on an educational journey that will promote the acquisition and development of their interpersonal and intra-personal skills.

#### *Confronting and Changing Negative Cultures*

Where trusting, collegial relationships were not cultivated or well-established participants described the negative impact strained relationships, at any level, had on the culture of their school. Considering the wide knowledge base that describes the impact school culture has on building capacity and commitment to improvement efforts, it would be wise for leaders to employ strategies to minimize their presence and impact.

*Strategy 1: Recognize the power of relationships.* The mention of mistrust, suspicion and strained relationships further reinforces the great importance leaders must attribute to overtly developing positive, collegial ones. One of the most important functions of a leader is to improve the culture of the school (Ansell, 2004). The underlying foundations of relationships are built on trust, the key factor outlined initially regarding school culture. It would be unwise to overlook this single critical element in developing relationships. Relationships must be built on both social and professional levels to ensure bonding and a sense of community and caring among staff. Recognize professional development time as opportunities to engage in tasks that promote positive relationships at both levels.

*Strategy 2: Promote, encourage and support staff with change.* Several participants described the hindrance posed to school improvement efforts by 'seasoned' staff unwilling to change that are 'stuck in a rut,' so to speak. At first glance, changing attitudes may appear unrealistic and the temptation to 'wait it out' until those staff leave or retire may be strong. Changing attitudes is certainly a daunting task, although not impossible. Leaders faced with these circumstances must acquire and equip themselves with knowledge and depth of inter- and intra-personal skills to break down barriers and develop relationships that will afford the risk-taking associated with change. In cases like these, the issue may need to be tackled head-on with individual conferences to delve into the root of the matter. Often a paradigm shift must occur, and the first step toward changing individual attitudes is to engage in empathetic dialogue in order to determine common ground, working towards a functional relationship.

*Strategy 3: Prioritize projects and provide time.* The main issues that rose from the data were negative attitudes towards district office over the multitude of initiatives being passed to schools coupled with limited time in which to effectively implement them. Rather than imposing each and every initiative upon the staff and impregnating the local school culture with negativity and reducing commitment to zero, administration in this study worked with staff to prioritize the initiatives and choose the ones that were of highest priority for their students. This approach maintained the integrity of relationships at the school level, minimizing the impact of negativity staff might exude in the local domain. It also afforded staff adequate time to commit to the effective implementation of select, highly valued projects. They were able to do several projects effectively, rather than a multitude in a slipshod manner, all the while striving to keep the local school culture positive and intact.

*Strategy 4: Advocate for your staff.* The disparity between district office and school staff should not be ignored. Although prioritizing initiatives and providing time to approach those initiatives effectively is necessary to reduce negative culture, those are only short-term, 'band-aid' solutions to the larger issue at hand. Staff should not feel disconnected with district office, nor should staff feel that district personnel are 'out of touch' with what is going on in the schools. Leaders have a duty to advocate for both staff and students and are ultimately the liaison between staff and district office. Therefore, leaders must communicate with district office the feelings and perceptions of their staff, advocating on their behalf.

*Time*

Time – just a tiny little word, but what huge impacts it had on every aspect of this study. Whether one was inquiring about the development of relationships, school culture, building capacity and commitment, professional learning, growth and supervision, or organizational learning made no difference – the message was clear: teachers need more time. They need time to plan, time to collaborate, time to share. They need time to network, time to research, time to reflect, time to learn. They need time to teach and time to rejuvenate. Again and again, teachers expressed how they need more time.

Research supports the need for teachers to engage in all of these activities to do an excellent job. Leithwood et al. (1999), Hargreaves (1997), DuFour (1991), Sinden et al. (2004), Darling-Hammond (2004), Lieberman and Grolnick (1997), and Sagor (1997) provide a few clear examples in their work. There are no surprises here – anyone who has harkened the door of a school can easily ascertain the busyness of the atmosphere, the absolute energy it takes to teach. Do teachers have enough time to do all of these things? The findings of this study would suggest not, although there are some efforts being made to support teachers in this area. These teachers are feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, overburdened and burnt out. As Fink (2000) points out, there is a reason:

In a culture of constant change and unceasing improvement efforts, teachers become stressed and burned out. The history of innovative school is replete with evidence of ‘overreaching’ and never taking the time and ‘shifting gears’ to concentrate on consolidating change through effective policies and procedures. (p. 12)

It would be unwise to ignore the effects time constraints are posing for teachers. Participants suggested the stress they experienced, caused by time issues, was an emergent source of attrition in their schools with young, energetic teachers opting out of the profession after only a few years' experience. Participants of this study consistently and unanimously lauded the importance of their PLC time, collaborative meetings and exchanges for sharing best practices, inter-district and inter-provincial networking, team teaching, planning for improvements together, and, critically – reflecting on practice. Knowing the value of all of these activities, it is imperative that due consideration is given to alleviate the restrictions facing educators as posed by the restraints of time.

This begs the question for educational leaders and policy makers alike: how do we provide more time? A number of leaders in this study employed simple strategies like altering the minutes of their school day to allow for early dismissals, which provided regular times for teachers to meet. Some allowed portions of PD days for this purpose. Whatever strategies were employed appeared hopelessly inadequate; teachers constantly expressed a sense of being overwhelmed and not having enough time to do any task justice. The continual sense of being overburdened suggests that these strategies, albeit with the best of intentions at heart, are only superficial, short-term solutions to a much larger, long-term issue. As Adelman and Pantone Walking Eagle (1997) observed:

Incorporating time up front in the change process for teachers to study new materials, practice new instructional techniques, and weigh the possibilities of new organizational arrangements is a critically important step in successful school reform efforts, but one that is more often than not given short shrift. The all-too-common pattern in educational reform has been and continues to be a leap from a

planning phase...to an expectation of a full-blown implementation and documentation of positive results within two or three years. (pp. 107-108)

The feeling of being overburdened and overwhelmed by improvement projects implies that Alberta educators have been prematurely jumping from the conceptual stage of school improvement to the implementation stage. Hasty movement from conceptualization to implementation contributes to negative attitudes that permeate school culture, inhibiting the development of capacity and commitment. The inhibition of capacity and commitment subsequently impedes the improvement initiative being attempted:

Reform seems to have a better chance of staying on track when the pace of change and the expectations or standards that teachers set for themselves are kept reasonable. A number of the schools we studied had been working on improvement for many years. Others, however, were on a faster track and under greater external pressure to show results quickly. The latter were places where we found stress, guilt and frustration. (Adelman & Panton *Walking Eagle*, 1997, p. 108)

Hence, we must address this issue at a more systemic level and realize that the current structure is failing both teachers and students as it does not afford them ample time to teach, learn and change. Since manipulating schedules and making sporadic use of PD time is not cutting the mustard with teachers, perhaps it is time to consider larger-scale solutions. It appears that one manner in which to address this issue is to alter the school year so ample days are available to allow these important processes to take place.

An excellent example described by Darling-Hammond (2004) is of a New York school district that ensures continuous support for collaborative processes:

The district budgets for 300 total days each year to provide the time for teachers and principals to visit and observe one another, to develop study groups, and to pair up for work together. Off-site training includes intensive summer institutes that focus on core teaching strategies and on learning about new standards, curriculum frameworks, and assessments. These are always linked to follow-up through consulting services and peer networks to develop practices further. The Professional Development Laboratory allows visiting teachers to spend 3 weeks in the classrooms of expert resident teachers who are engaged in practices they want to learn. (p. 1069)

Could it be just my imagination, or does this systemic model have the potential to alleviate the huge issue of time constraints facing Alberta educators? This possibility is certainly worth closer scrutiny and consideration. Increasing the number of operational school days (*not* instructional days) would allow for continuous professional development and learning for teachers, adequate opportunity to meet and collaborate, increase time for planning and learning, and improve continuity of instruction for students. It would also afford school districts to approach sustainable school improvement in more dynamic ways. While adding an additional 100 days to the current norm of 180-200 would be extreme, an additional 20 days would provide two full days per month, certainly a step in the right direction. Hence, it is time to look at providing time in new ways; it won't hurt any school system to research, modify or adopt the successful practices of other districts, as there is no need to reinvent the wheel.

*Evaluation*

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study was the virtual consensus that current program and project evaluation methods are insufficient, and the admission that some administrators have not been asked to evaluate anything. These findings indicate that the evaluation component needs to be readdressed with more depth, and that the consideration of other perspectives and ideas of what constitutes success must be taken. Murphy and Seashore Louis, Toole and Hargreaves (1999) support this notion, saying it is “important to view school improvement from multiple perspectives and to expand the questions that have been asked in previous research” (p. 255). In school environments actively engaged in assessment for learning and various formative and generative evaluation techniques, it is a strange position and weird irony to rely on singular, summative measures such as provincial achievement tests to evaluate initiatives.

Participants believed provincial achievement data was an insufficient measure to determine the success of AISI initiatives. Although teachers acknowledge the value of provincial achievement tests to monitor and track student progress, there is strong belief that they are being improperly analyzed and that they are not enough in themselves as the results do not ‘tell the story’ of what is going on in Alberta schools. Teachers expressed a professional desire to be accountable, but did not believe that achievement tests were painting a true picture of the good work they were doing in the classroom. They also raised the question as to what exactly constitutes success, providing illustrations of growth that cannot be measured empirically and can only be evaluated descriptively, through qualitative methods.

There are several implications of these findings. Concerning the analysis of provincial achievement data, it may be wise to attempt to put in place some value-added measures which could provide a more accurate measure of student growth as cohorts are compared against themselves yearly, rather than against other cohorts. The comparison of dissimilar cohorts was the only real ‘bone of contention’ for teachers regarding achievement tests. Although it may require more effort to implement than current approaches to analysis do it would certainly create a sense of fairness and accuracy of results in the eyes of educators. Accuracy of comparisons are important because if educators do not believe programs and projects are being adequately or fairly evaluated, the potential to negatively impact capacity and commitment exists; negative attitudes towards achievement tests will permeate school culture. Negative attitudes are detrimental to school improvement efforts as has already been illustrated by the impact of negative culture in this and other studies.

Additionally, these results indicate the need and desire of educators to strike a balance of evaluation methods, particularly by making provisions for a qualitative component that does not currently exist to a great degree concerning these initiatives. The findings also imply the need to incorporate more action research in education, which would partially address the issue of a qualitative component. Action research also provides ongoing feedback to teachers about the success of their projects, allowing them to make adjustments and modifications as the need arises. Qualitative methods provide a voice for teachers to describe other types of growth in students they see which are not reflected through standardized test results, while giving more depth and richness to the overall evaluation of AISI projects and initiatives. Including qualitative data will enhance

the evaluation of programs as it allows new evidence of achievement to replace old evidence, explain discrepancies and enhance understanding of what is going on in Alberta classrooms.

Finally, another implication of these findings is the need for a paradigm shift concerning the use of provincial achievement tests, as there has been an oversight of their greater value and insights. Achievement test results provide a powerful voice to assist districts and schools in identifying areas in which they should invest in improving teaching. They reveal where the concentration of professional development opportunities should focus. Rather than viewing poor test results in one subject or another as evidence of poor teaching, results can be seen as vital indicators of the focus Alberta schools should take to plan for appropriate ongoing learning for teachers. Darling-Hammond (2004) found that schools in Connecticut have successfully utilized this paradigm shift:

Rather than pursue a silver bullet or a punitive approach that creates dysfunctional responses, Connecticut has made ongoing investments in improving teaching and schooling through high standards and high supports. Dramatic gains in student achievement (accompanied by increases rather than declines in student graduation rates) and a plentiful supply of well-qualified teachers are two major outcomes of this agenda. (p. 1063)

Changing the manner in which achievement tests were viewed, the state of Connecticut was successful in targeting areas for improved teacher learning, and this alternate approach to assessment “has enabled districts to clarify their teaching priorities and has helped galvanize district efforts to make major revisions and improvements in their reading instruction” (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 1066). This approach transforms

assessment data into improved teacher knowledge and improved student achievement. Viewing achievement test results as an assessment for learning opportunity for teachers, guides professional development and maintains accountability, while keeping educators on course for improved student achievement.

#### *Implications for Further Research*

This study suggests several areas that researchers may wish to explore in greater depth, particularly concerning relationships between district office and school personnel. The disparate approaches to leadership between school District 2 and its schools was negatively impacting efforts for change, indicating this may be a useful avenue of investigation in our quest for knowledge of leadership practices influencing school improvement initiatives. Findings also indicated minimal evidence of parental involvement as well as unclear staff supervision and performance expectation communication, of particular concern when considering the impact these factors have as revealed by other researchers, such as Leithwood et al. (1999).

The existence of unclear community perceptions suggest the need to probe for ways in which districts and schools may better communicate with their school communities and better involve all stakeholders with what is happening in Alberta schools. Also, there appeared to be some differences between leadership involvement and teacher leadership between larger schools (typically high schools exceeding 1000 students) and those of smaller schools. The implications and impacts of school size may be a valuable area of exploration as there was some evidence that leaders in larger schools were 'too busy' dealing with other issues to effectively interact with staff. It was also clear that evaluation methods, and approaching analysis of achievement testing, must

be investigated to determine innovative ways to utilize test results while including qualitative data in the overall evaluation process. And last, but certainly not least, is the cry of teachers to exact ways to provide invaluable time for them to learn, plan, collaborate and implement effective approaches to school improvement.

#### *Final Remarks*

Alberta educators and policymakers have the interests of their students at heart, their efforts being rewarded at the school level with the pursuit of excellence through transformational leadership practices. Leaders and teachers acknowledge the inherent value of these strategies as they describe the importance of developing positive school culture, working collaboratively as teams to plan for instruction, share best practices, engage in professional dialogue and reflect on their efforts. They comprehend the worth of engaging in such leadership strategies, acknowledging the need to develop relationships with staff by nurturing trust, respect and collegiality which affect their school culture and overall capacity and commitment to improvement initiatives.

If Alberta truly desires to remain on the cutting edge of school improvement in their quest to develop a top-notch education system, the magnitude of the task facing Alberta educators must be recognized. The professional judgment, expertise and voice of teachers communicate those factors they believe are inhibiting the potential to fully maximize efforts towards school improvement. The findings of this study suggest the most pressing issue at hand is a delimiting burden imposed by the constraints of time, which permeates all aspects of leadership and effective school improvement strategies. Given the degree in which time factors penetrated the very core of school improvement, the issue must be given careful consideration. It invokes the need for widespread

systemic change to effectively address the issue for long-term sustainable change, rather than superficial, short-term solutions.

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## Appendix A. Participant Demographics

<i>Focus Group</i>		
<i>Participant</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Position</i>
A	1	AISI Coordinator
B	1	Vice Principal, K-9
C	1	Vice Principal, PS-5
D	1	Vice Principal, K-5
E	1	Teacher, Grades 7-9
<i>Personal Interviews</i>		
<i>Participant</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Position</i>
Sharon	3	Grade 2/3 Teacher
Marlene	1	Grade 4-6 Lead Teacher
Chris*	2	Grades 10-12 Teacher
Pat*	2	Grades 10-12 Student Support Teacher
Jane*	2	Grades 7-12 Counselor
Julie*	2	Grades 10-12 Counselor
William*	2	Assistant Principal, K-9
Mark*	2	Assistant Principal, Grades 10-12
Kirby*	2	Principal, Grades 10-12
<i>Questionnaire Respondents**</i>		
<i>Participant</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Position</i>
1	2	AISI Representative

<i>Participant</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Position</i>
2	2	AISI Representative and Grade 10-12 Teacher
3	2	AISI Representative and Counselor
4	2	Assistant Principal Grades 7-12
5	2	Assistant Principal Grades 10-12
6	2	Assistant Principal Grades 10-12
7	2	Assistant principal grades 7 -12
8	2	Assistant principal grades 10-12
9	2	Assistant principal grades 10-12
10	2	Outreach counselor
11	2	Teacher grades 10-12
12	2	Teacher grades 10-12
13	2	Teacher grades 10-12
14	2	Teacher grades 10-12
15	2	Teacher grades 10-12

\*These participants had initially completed questionnaires and then participated in follow-up interviews.

\*\*Those who also participated in personal interviews are not listed under this heading.

## Appendix B. Sample Participant Consent Form

**PARTICIPANT (ADULT) CONSENT FORM**


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LEADERSHIP AND PROGRAM EVALUATION PRACTISES INFLUENCING  
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled *LEADERSHIP AND PROGRAM EVALUATION PRACTISES INFLUENCING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES* that is being conducted by Toby R. Thiel. Toby is a Graduate Student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions at (780) 940-3600 or (780) 960-1174. You may also contact her by email at [toby.thiel@uleth.ca](mailto:toby.thiel@uleth.ca).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Education. It is being conducted under the supervision of George Bedard. You may contact my supervisor at (403) 329-2725.

The purpose of this research project is to report on leadership and program evaluation practices which espouse teachers as leaders while simultaneously determining what programs and initiatives should be modified, retained or terminated in schools.

The topic will be explored within the framework of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) and will focus on the perspectives of school administrators and teachers involved in AIS projects. From their point of view, strategies and practices

surrounding leadership that influence sustainable change will be illustrated. Additionally, participants may provide insights as to what project and program evaluation practices are deemed most effective and practical in determining whether an AISI project should be revised, maintained as is, or eliminated entirely.

Research of this type is important because it complements the vision and goals of AISI. It will provide a form of accountability for Alberta teachers and administrators while also providing for them an opportunity for feedback and self-reflection on their current educational practices. The study will also promote collaborative, team-based processes in school improvement as well as for action research in education. It will assist school districts to identify useful strategies for the development of programs, projects and strategies for sustainable school improvement, which is based on current research.

You are being asked to participate in this study because your insights as administrators and teachers will provide the most valuable contribution in determining what strategies and practices are in place and have the most influence on school improvement initiatives in the province.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include attending one Focus Group OR participating in an interview, whether conducted personally or by email in accordance with your preference. You are not expected nor asked to participate in both.

Participation in this study may cause slight inconvenience to you, including a time commitment of 60 to 90 minutes depending on whether you choose to participate in an interview or Focus Group. All efforts to minimize your commitment will be made.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. The potential benefits of your participation in this research include contribution to the knowledge base in the area of leadership and program evaluation strategies that influence school improvement initiatives. This may potentially influence decisions surrounding the perceived success and continuation of AISI. The results of this study may also provide valuable information to you regarding leadership and evaluation strategies that are being implemented in your district and give you direction as both an individual professional and a school district regarding school improvement efforts.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be included in the study unless you indicate preference for its exclusion.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, you will be asked to never disclose your identity nor that of your employing school/school district. All protocols and procedures set out by your district, including FOIP, will be strictly adhered to.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected, as data will be kept secure at all times. Additionally, data will be scrutinized to ensure that no identifying information exists. Should any be found, it will be edited and deleted from transcripts. Upon completion of data analysis, original documents shall be destroyed by a professional paper shredding service.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others through thesis defense and presentation, and then presented to the participating school districts in an information sharing session.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee, Dr. Rick Mrazek, at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

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Name of Participant	Signature	Date
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A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

## Appendix C. Interview Protocol

## Interview Questionnaire

## Participant Information

Please check the appropriate title(s) that best describes your position:

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher (K-3)   | <input type="checkbox"/> Principal (K-3)   | <input type="checkbox"/> AP/VP (K-3)   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher (4-6)   | <input type="checkbox"/> Principal (4-6)   | <input type="checkbox"/> AP/VP (4-6)   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher (7-9)   | <input type="checkbox"/> Principal (7-9)   | <input type="checkbox"/> AP/VP (7-9)   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher (10-12) | <input type="checkbox"/> Principal (10-12) | <input type="checkbox"/> AP/VP (10-12) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lead Teacher    | <input type="checkbox"/> AISI Coordinator  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____    |  |  |

When answering each question, please refer to the guidelines of the study as outlined below to give direction to your responses. You are not expected to answer the research sub-questions individually, but to please consider them as guidelines to direct your responses. Should you require additional space, please feel free to add whatever is necessary. Point form or full sentences are fine, as per your preference.

You may email your response back (first save the document to your desktop as a word file, add your responses then email it back to me at [toby.thiel@uleth.ca](mailto:toby.thiel@uleth.ca) ) or you can print it off and fax it to me at (780) 960-1154. If you require clarification on any of the questions, please call me at (780) 960-1174.

Should I require clarification of any of your responses, may I contact you?

- Yes  No

If so, indicate your preference:

- email \_\_\_\_\_
- Telephone \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

To glean the most applicable information pertaining to this study, the main research question posed is the following: What leadership and evaluation practices do school administrators and teachers employ that influence and affect the sustainability of school improvement projects under the AISI umbrella?

The framework for this research is built on the following themes and sub-questions:

#### A. School Mission, Vision and Improvement Planning

1. To what degree has a shared vision been developed within the school?
2. How are priorities and goals set?
3. How was the school improvement project conceived?

*Please describe the process of the development of shared vision, priority and goal setting and the conception of school improvement projects within your school.*

#### B. School Culture

1. How would the relationship between formal leaders and staff members be described?
2. How does the culture of the school influence and affect school improvement?

*Please describe relationships between leadership and staff in your school, as well as your perceptions and observations as to how the culture of the school is affecting your school improvement efforts.*

#### C. Building Capacity and Commitment

1. What practices build capacity and commitment to ongoing school improvement?
2. How are decisions relating to school improvement made?

3. How have Lead teachers participated in the school improvement project?
4. What are the perceptions of how well the improvement project has taken root within the school community?

*Please describe how staff are involved in efforts to implement school improvement projects, including observations you have made regarding community perceptions of what is happening in your school.*

D. Professional Learning, Growth and Supervision

1. How do professional growth plans align with the school's three-year plans and improvement priorities?
2. How are best practices shared amongst the staff?
3. How are expectations for performance shared with the staff?
4. What types of instructional support are available within the school?

*Please describe how professional learning is addressed at your school.*

*Please describe how staff members are supervised, and how performance expectations are communicated to them. If applicable, include instructional supports that are in place for staff.*

E. Organizational Learning

1. What important lessons have you learned from Cycle 1 that may be applied to Cycle 2?
2. What conditions are present (or absent) that may be affecting organizational effectiveness?

*Reflecting upon your involvement in Cycle 1 AISI projects, please describe any insights you have which may be applied to current Cycle 2 projects in your school.*

#### F. Evaluation Practices

1. What processes do administrators employ to evaluate improvement initiatives and new programs?
2. To what degree are teachers and paraprofessionals involved in program evaluations?
3. Who is involved with decisions regarding retaining or terminating an existing program or initiative?
4. Are current program and project evaluation methods sufficient in determining a program's worth?

*Please describe how your school determines whether an AISI project is worth retaining, modifying or terminating, including what kinds of processes are employed and who is involved in those processes.*

*Do you believe current methods for evaluating these projects are sufficient?*

Yes  No

*If not, please describe ways you feel project evaluation should be improved.*

## Appendix D. Relationships Between Leaders and Staff Descriptors

Number of Occurrences	Descriptor
8	approachable
5	allowed to voice opinions
4	respectful
3	positive
3	amicable
3	collaborative
3	trust
3	level
2	built relationships
2	encouraged risk-taking
2	open-door
1	proactive
1	affirming
1	empathetic
1	authoritative
1	close
1	empowering
1	collegial
1	cohesive
1	rapport

Number of Occurrences	Descriptor
1	value input
1	open to dialogue
1	communicative
1	visible
1	humorous
1	shared leadership
1	friendly
1	supportive
1	motivational