Leading High-Performing School Districts

Nine characteristics of effective districts and the leadership practices that achieve them

By Kenneth Leithwood and Catherine McCullough

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SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE LARGELY INVISIBLE and of little interest to the public, except when conflicts among trustees, or between trustees and community groups, generate media attention. School closings, student busing policies and teacher professional development days are examples of issues that predictably attract such attention. While some of these high-profile issues do affect students, the primary work of district leaders to improve the learning and well-being of students is a mystery to most members of the community. The public tends to attribute what students learn exclusively to the very visible schools, teachers and principals with whom they have direct contact. Districts are just not on the public radar – and that makes them politically vulnerable organizations.

Despite their lack of public visibility and political vulnerability, high-performing districts make important contributions to the achievement and well-being of students...
Some analysts argue that school districts ought to be assuming much more leadership for determining the future directions for their schools.

- broadly shared mission, vision and goals
- a coherent instructional guidance system
- job-embedded professional development provided for all members
- use of evidence to inform decision making
- learning-oriented improvement processes
- a comprehensive approach to leadership development
- a policy-oriented board of trustees
- alignment of policies and procedures with district mission, vision and goals
- productive relationships (internal system and school, parents, community groups, ministry)

In addition, estimating the effects of these district characteristics on students, the study team calculated the effects of both “Professional Leadership” (directors and superintendents) and “Elected Leadership” (chairs or superintendents) on the other district characteristics. Results indicated that both sources of district leadership had moderate to strong effects on most district characteristics. Professional Leadership had consistently larger effects than Elected Leadership on all but two district characteristics.

The main product of this study, “The Characteristics of High Performing School Districts,” was included as the district portion of the Ontario Leadership Framework, intended as a guide for school district improvement.

The “Strong Districts” Initiative

While the nine district characteristics are what needs to be developed by senior leaders, how to develop those characteristics was captured in Strong Districts and Their Leadership, a paper commissioned by CODE. Using evidence from many sources, this paper provides a more detailed account of the nine characteristics of high-performing districts and also synthesizes existing evidence about the practices and personal leadership resources of “strong” (high-performing) district leaders.

A key finding is that each district characteristic develops in response to a handful of specific leadership practices. While the total number of practices identified is relatively large, it reflects both the extent and complexity of the work done by strong district leaders (see Figure 1, p. 28).

Underlying almost all strong senior leadership practices are a small number of personal leadership resources. While most are described in the Ontario Leadership Framework, Strong Districts and Their Leadership added two more practices especially relevant for senior district leaders: proactivity and systems thinking. The full paper describes...
these personal resources and explains why they are part of strong district leadership.

**Developing district leadership capacities**

After the publication of *Strong Districts and Their Leadership*, considerable effort was made to introduce its contents to system leaders across the province. Some of the province’s senior district leaders had already begun to use the strong districts framework as a guide for assessing their own districts’ progress and planning for future improvements. But in order to expand use of the research to a substantial majority of districts, a more programmatic opportunity was needed. So CODE, IEL and the Ministry of Education endorsed a proposal to create and field test stand-alone professional development modules aligned with each of the nine characteristics of strong districts. Completed in the spring of 2015, each of these modules includes an agenda, a set of slides summarizing relevant research and either two or three case studies. A total of 23 cases were prepared, many of them including video interviews with senior leaders about their cases.

**Next steps**

A new study, slated to begin in January 2016, is aimed at deepening our understanding of how district leaders can be as strategic as possible in their district improvement efforts. These efforts as a whole illustrate what can be accomplished in the interests of students when policymakers, senior leaders, and researchers engage in authentic and respectful collaboration aimed at a common goal.

**NOTES**


2. For example, Coleman and LaRoque, “Reaching Out”; Leithwood and Louis, *Linking Leadership to Student Learning*; Chingos et al., *School District and Student Achievement*.

3. For example, Coleman and LaRoque, “Reaching Out”; Leithwood and Louis, *Linking Leadership to Student Learning*; Chingos et al., *School District and Student Achievement*.

4. An Effect Size statistic was used to report these results. Even variables with weak effect sizes may be practically consequential depending on costs; multiple variables with weak effect sizes can add up to strong effects. These results are the direct effects of districts on students even though the effects of district characteristics are mediated by many other school and classroom conditions not measured in the study.


## 9 Practices of Strong District Leaders

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<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Specific Leadership Practices</th>
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| 1 Establish broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person | • Ensure that a transparent visioning/direction-setting process is carried out  
• Consult extensively about district directions as part of the process  
• Spend sufficient time to ensure that the mission, vision and goals (directions) of the system are widely known, understood and shared by all members of their organizations  
• Articulate, demonstrate and model the system’s goals, priorities, and values to staffs when visiting schools  
• Embed district directions in improvement plans, principal meetings and other leader-initiated interactions |
| 2 Provide coherent instructional guidance | • Adopt a service orientation toward schools  
• Align curricular goals, assessment instruments, instructional practices and teaching resources  
• Insist on ambitious goals for teaching and learning  
• Advocate for attention to the best available evidence to inform instructional improvement decisions  
• Expect schools to focus on needs of individual as well as groups of students  
• Encourage staff to be innovative within the boundaries created by the district’s instructional guidance system |
| 3 Build district and school staffs’ capacities and commitments to seek out and use multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions | • Use data from all available sources to assist decision making in the central office  
• Insist on the use of the best available research and other systematically collected evidence to inform decisions wherever possible  
• Encourage collaboration in the interpretation and uses of data  
• Build system’s capacity and disposition for using systematically collected data to inform decision-making  
• Provide training for principals and staff on the use of data and research literature to sustain decision-making  
• Model evidence-informed decision-making to school staffs  
• Ground interactions with, and advice to, trustees in sound evidence |
| 4 Create learning-oriented organizational improvement processes | • Require improvement processes to be evidence-informed  
• Set a manageable number of precise targets for district school improvement  
• Include school-level leaders in decisions about district-wide improvement decisions  
• Create structures and norms within the district to encourage regular, reciprocal and extended deliberations about improvement progress within and across schools, as well as across the system as a whole  
• Develop and implement board and school improvement plans interactively and collaboratively with school leaders  
• Create structures to facilitate regular monitoring and refining of improvement processes  
• Acknowledge provincial goals and priorities in district and school improvement initiatives  
• Allow for school-level variation in school improvement efforts |
| 5 Provide job-embedded professional development | • Provide extensive PD opportunities for both teachers and school-level leaders, most of it through some form of learning community or on-the-job context  
• Use internal system networks as central mechanism for the professional development of school-level leaders  
• Align the content of professional development with the capacities needed for district and school improvement  
• Require individual staff growth plans to be aligned with district and school improvement priorities  
• Hold staff accountable for applying new capacities by monitoring the implementation of school improvement plans |
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| **6** Align budgets, personnel policies/procedures and uses of time with district mission, vision and goals | • Align the allocation of resources with district and school improvement goals  
• Align personnel policies and procedures with the district’s improvement goals  
• Align organizational structures with the district’s improvement goals  
• Provide principals with considerable autonomy in the hiring of teaching staff  
• Expect and assist schools to allocate instructional resources equitably |
| **7** Use a comprehensive performance management system for school and district leadership development | • Use the best available evidence about successful leadership as a key source of criteria used for recruiting, selecting, developing and appraising school and district leaders  
• Match the capacities of leaders with the needs of schools  
• Provide prospective and existing leaders with extended opportunities to further develop their leadership capacities  
• Develop realistic plans for leadership succession  
• Promote co-ordinated forms of leadership distribution in schools |
| **8** Advocate for and support a policy-governance approach to board of trustee practice | • Encourage trustees to focus on district policy and the achievement of the district’s goals and priorities (policy governance model of trustee practice)  
• Encourage participation of the elected board in setting broad goals for its use in fulfilling its policy-setting and policy-monitoring responsibilities  
• Regularly report to the board progress in achieving these broad goals |
| **9** Nurture productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders | **Internal district and school staffs**  
• Develop communication systems and processes throughout the district to keep all members informed  
• Develop open, accessible and collaborative relationships with principals  
• Encourage reciprocal forms of communication with and among schools  
• Promote high levels of interaction among all school leaders, driven by a shared sense of responsibility for system improvement  
• Create structures to facilitate reciprocal forms of communication, resulting in deeply interconnected networks of school and system leaders working together on achieving the system’s directions  
• Buffer schools from external distractions to the district’s and schools’ priorities and goals |
|  | **Local community groups**  
• Routinely consult with community groups on decisions affecting the community  
• Encourage staff to participate directly in community groups  
• Demonstrate the importance the district attaches to its community connections |
|  | **Parents**  
• Hold schools accountable for developing productive working relationships with parents  
• Influence the work of schools toward fostering improved educational cultures in the home environments of their students |
|  | **Ministry of Education**  
• Develop/maintain high levels of engagement with provincial department/ministry of education  
• Engagement with department/ministry is frequently proactive rather than only responsive  
• Make flexible, adaptive use of provincial initiatives and frameworks, ensuring that they contribute to, rather than detract from, accomplishing system goals and priorities |