

Volume, complexity and the challenge of capacity

To focus on student achievement and school leadership, principals and vice-principals must meet the volume and complexity challenges of their roles by understanding the issues, focusing on the essential and developing leadership capacity.

by Harold Krische, Carol-Ann Leidloff and John Pusic

Derek Three short years ago, Derek had completed the last of five courses in his Master's program. In particular, four courses in his Master's program had strong focus on educational leadership and further melded his philosophy of education such that a passion of the highest levels emerged. Derek was enraptured by the prospects of engaging in the essence of his learning experience within his new appointment as a secondary vice-principal. Recently, Derek was soul searching, considering how it is that his own thinking may have misled expectations that are so far from the reality of day-to-day experiences, not only his own, but of other members of his administrative team. He is wondering whether the role of vice-principal, and ultimately principal, is one that will diminish the passion that fuels his drive for excellence. He is reflecting on the Master's courses and seeking understanding of disconnect between theory and reality. He has talked to his partner about the prospects of returning to a classroom teaching position.

Anna Anna, a new elementary principal, sat at her desk. It was 6:30 pm and she was looking forward to spending time with her family yet still felt a strong attachment to that desk and all that it represented. It was the end of the first week of school. Anna had planned and led two days of professional learning with her staff, worked on fine tuning the school growth plan, engaged numerous new parents worried about their child's placement, discussed class composition with teachers, structured an orientation for new EAs, consulted with Special Education teachers about

newly arrived designated students, enquired about undelivered learning resources and twice mopped up an overflowing washroom. Anna glanced at the list of things that had not been completed. IEP meetings required scheduling and TOC arrangements were necessary for a teacher going on unexpected medical leave. Thoughts then shifted back to Jonathan, a student with Intense Behaviour, his meltdown in the hallway and the response of the safety team to de-escalate a challenging scenario. Those thoughts were soon interrupted by the reality of an 8:30 grade five class teaching assignment on Monday morning and the impromptu admin meeting called by the Superintendent for the end of day. Emails and phone messages still beckoned. Anna reflected upon her effectiveness and efficiency during her drive home.

Edward Two months into a 'new' school year, Edward was reflecting once more, not upon the thirty one years that had come before, but upon his decision to retire two years prior to his once targeted date. How was it that a lifelong passion had wilted? Moreso, there was an underlying question of character that perturbed Edward. Had commitment, determination, energy and focus yielded to the unstable political and union realities of education in British Columbia? Edward ruminated on the role of the principal. Had the gap between the role and what he had always seen as the purpose become too great? Edward continued to muse; how could he have ensured a stronger alignment between his role as principal and the purpose that must remain at the forefront?

The experiences of Derek, Anna and Edward are not unique. They represent important aspects of the volume and complexity associated with the role of vice-principal and principal. They represent mandates and directives that seemingly deviate from, or at the very least, compromise those aspects of leadership necessary to create cultures representing an engaged community, targeting excellence and supported by outstanding professional practice. They represent a significant frustration in not being able to accomplish those things that would knowingly make an important difference. More importantly, the experiences of Derek, Anna and Edward reflect the need for understanding the implications that ‘external’ forces (Fullan, 2011 and Waters & Grubb, 2004) bring for school-based leadership and components of viable action plans that embrace the essence of the leadership role. The energy and will to engage in such thinking, collaborative dialogue and difficult planning are buoyed by the educational research that consistently indicates that the leadership of the principal yields the second greatest impact on student achievement (Leithwood, 2004). In addition, where the principal supports, promotes and participates in teacher learning and development, the impact on student achievement is twice that of any other factor (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). The passion for leadership excellence required to manage the “grip of frustrated inertia” (Fullan, 2008, p. viii) is further buoyed by recognition that the principal is often considered the pivotal agent for systemic change in education.

Within this context, Derek found

his stark experiences aligned with the recognition that “for principals to devote more time and attention to the improvement of instruction, their jobs will need to be substantially redesigned.” (Leithwood et al, 2010, p103) His efforts to engage colleagues in conversation around his ‘conflict’ exposed daunting prospects rivaled by equally exciting potential. Spurred by collegial interactions, a dialogue focusing on ‘courage’ as a key attribute of leadership, and the associated notion of calculated risk taking, Derek began

intense exploration of how he might best approach the myriad challenges impacting his role and a possible redesign of the components of that role. His understandings of the inextricably intertwined, symbiotic relationship between *Leadership* and *Organizational Management* guided his thoughts. Inherent in his action was a sense of ‘Moral Stewardship,’ “the essence of the work of principals and vice-principals” (BCPVPA, 2007, p 6).

Derek, Anna and Edward’s questions relate to the work of all prin-

Guiding Responsiveness to Leadership Challenges

Leading schools effectively and efficiently

- How do I focus on what is essential to increasing student achievement?
- How do I distinguish between what is important and what is essential?

Educational leadership

- How do I recognize effective strategies to ensure education leadership remains at the forefront of thinking, planning and doing at the individual, school-based, district and provincial levels?
- What networks and/or resources do I draw on when faced with volume and complexity challenges?
- How do I build and develop sustainability in educational leadership?
- How do I plan for collaborative time in support of educational leadership?

Leading with balance

- How do I focus on professional growth and engagement in my learning in the face of leadership challenges?
- How can I create boundaries so that my personal life is not overwhelmed by professional demands and obligations?

Actions

to keep leadership at the forefront

- **Share your knowledge, experiences and responses to the impact of volume and complexity challenges.**
- **Identify the essential and determine what can be taken off the table.**
- **Build leadership capacity to maintain focus on student achievement and to promote meaningful succession planning.**
- **Ensure that leadership proficiencies are a significant part of your professional growth plan.**
- **Demonstrate courage and calculated risk-taking as part of your leadership growth.**

principals and vice-principals. They are indispensable questions that solicit meaningful reflection and engagement. These difficult questions force people to think for themselves and to create their own solutions to problems. Such questions require a reconciliation of differences, critical analysis and also collaborative dialogue as part of a process that will yield creative opportunities. Moreover, these questions promote an alignment of thinking, vision, resources and action beyond what was previously necessary. The questions reveal the paramount need for efficiency and effectiveness along with enhanced leadership capacity in response to the urgency driven by a myriad of societal and educational demands. There may be no better starting place to frame appropriate questions to guide responsiveness to the challenges of volume and complexity facing principals and vice-principals (see *Guiding Responses to Leadership Challenges*, a sample of

intentionality of purpose.’ If we understand the implications that outstanding leadership has for student achievement, then direct intervention is needed to address significant barriers to these outcomes. Keeping educational leadership at the forefront through individual goal setting, vision development and collaboration will help ensure development of a proactive position and reduce the potential for further ‘leadership alienation.’ An individual approach can be both mindful of bigger picture thinking (and expected in demonstrating leadership) but can also limit some of the frustrations associated with matters outside the control of principals and vice-principals. When an individual approach extends to include elements of collaborative design, systemic influence is possible and even likely. Individual goal planning, specific to leadership development and demonstration, affords alignment opportunities thereby facilitating ef-

some guideline questions, page 15). Nonetheless, the *intuition* of leadership practitioners in education, combined with the directions afforded by educational research, ought to provide solid foundational premises for targeting the volume and complexity pressures.

To begin such an essential task, one requires ‘in-

efficiency and effectiveness.

How does one now shift from abstract notions to a semblance of a concrete game plan? To facilitate such transition, the authors have designed a schematic framework that guides and facilitates focus on educational leadership (*next page*) with intentionality of purpose. The central component of the schematic illustration, “*Keeping Educational Leadership at the Forefront*,” conveys what we know about change implementation and processes that promote successful growth and development of goals or targets. Represented sequentially are the essential considerations necessary to reach desired outcomes. Thinking, reflection and planning are guided through a sequence of five bubbles moving clockwise from *Leadership Vision* through to *Targeting Skill Sets*. The bubble headings were selected to accentuate alignment opportunities for priorities that exist or ideally need to exist while reflecting on important contextual elements and at the same time yielding the ability to be intentional about professional practice that represents the highest leadership standards. The bulleted items displayed in the bubbles are intended as examples of possible considerations. Ideally, the bulleted items represent the reflection and interaction process of the individual and provide the most appropriate considerations and contextual needs. The framework contains possible focus areas that are not intended to be all-encompassing. Such a framework can neither be prescriptive nor limiting of the critical or creative thinking associated with the leadership domain. This framework would ideally meld with, and support, a professional growth plan, while facilitating personal re-

flection and professional dialogue.

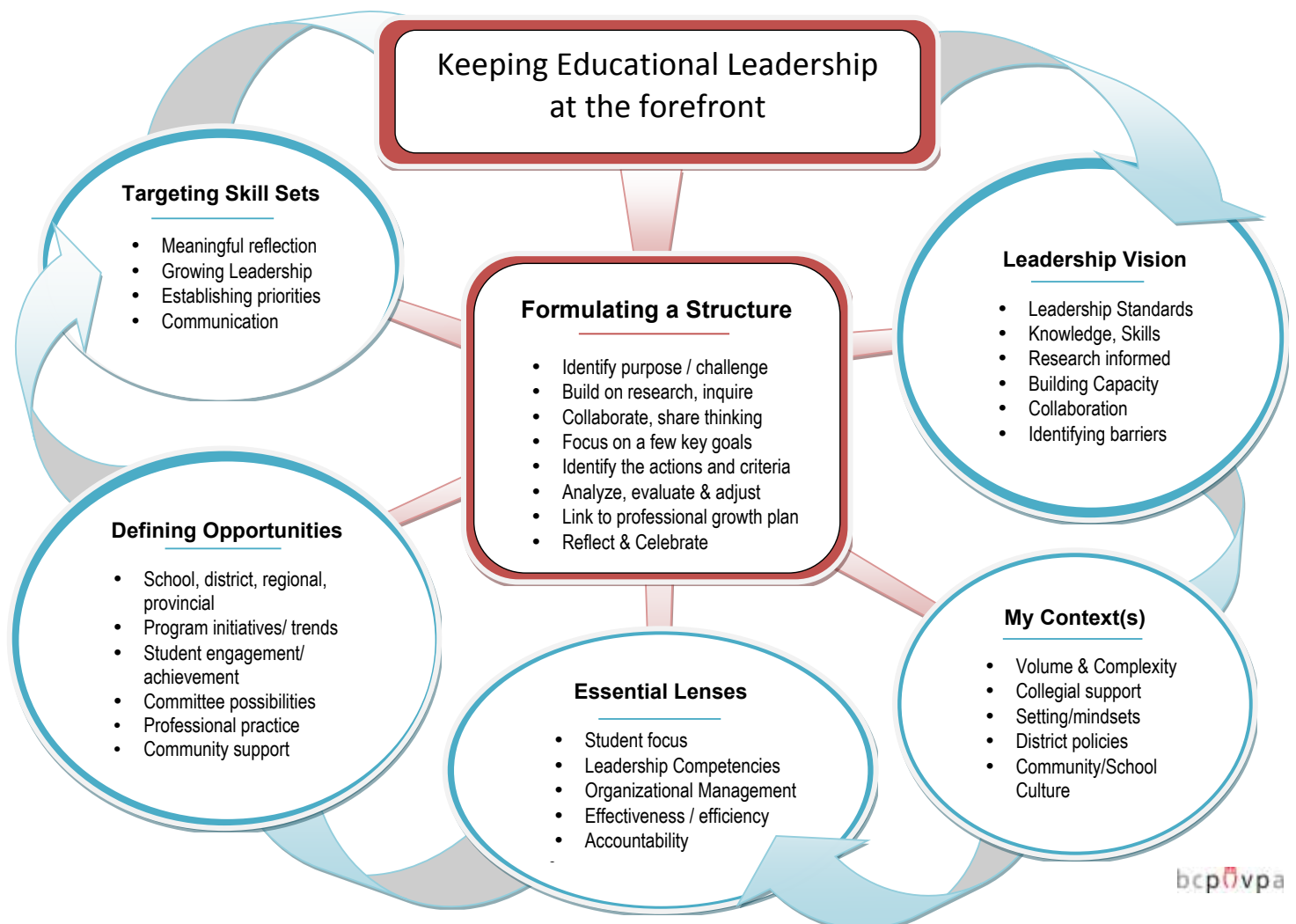
The bubble headings were also selected to support movement from thinking and reflecting to planning and then doing, for it is the learning through action that will bring the greatest rewards and knowledge. The bubble, *Targeting Skill Sets*, directs the intentionality of purpose. It emerges from the learning the leadership attributes or skill sets that ameliorate components of the volume and complexity challenge (Wiseman, 2010). A series of “how” questions quickly emerge. How does one distinguish between everything that is seemingly important and the truly essential (Grubb, S. & Waters, T., 2004)? Even if the essential is

readily identifiable, how does one decide what you are no longer going to do and effectively communicate why? How could one work effectively to set priorities? How do we foster leadership in others such that we are building capacity for leadership locally and systemically? These are not simple questions. The necessary understandings to develop effective practices will often only emerge through continuous learning and the courage to immerse oneself into exploration.

Challenges facing educational leaders in their quest to effectively and efficiently cultivate outstanding levels of professional practice and ensure the highest levels of

student achievement have undoubtedly never been greater. The comprehension and support required for the delivery of ‘global’ and ‘digital’ competencies, that will meet or exceed the needs of our communities, our society and, in particular our students, underscore the intensity of focus on ‘purpose’ that ought to be associated with leadership roles. Without question there is a systemic responsibility to afford stronger support for principals and vice-principals in their key leadership role. This support needs to be cultivated at the post-secondary level, the school district level and the provincial levels. However, principals

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Taking this route “is not a bad thing,” Wiebe said. “It just limits them after high school.”

Some students still question the relevancy of their courses, “but it’s not hard to make it relevant,” she said. “You have to be a little more creative.”

“You can get stuck in the IRPs and that you have to follow the textbook.” Initially, she agreed, “it was like gymnastics, but it’s more fluid now. More and more, teachers are out of the textbook. It’s a learning process. I’ve watched a lot of teachers seek information from other teachers this year ... It’s not ground breaking. It’s happening in other places too.”

Newbery said the Ministry of Education’s emphasis on personalized education in the 21st Century is welcome, but offset by the reduction

in special education funding. “I’m an ever hopeful person but I’m not blind to the challenges.”

The district is developing equity indexes to allocate funding, not on a per capita basis, but to where the needs are greatest,” she added.


It’s easy to obsess about the problems, but the people of Hazelton are quick to point out the many residents who are successful artists, athletes, volunteer award recipients and members of the Order of Canada and B.C., said Newbery.

Morgan also concentrates on the successes. Following last year’s award ceremony, she said, “I would have loved to give each student an award. I think about them out in the garden and jarring moose meat. There are so many students who are

so proud, but the awards are based on academics, sportsmanship and citizenship.”


Newbery also attended the award ceremony. She was delighted to see two students playing their own “Git Jazz” compositions. “Those two guys were fabulous. It was the highlight for me.”

“There’s no quick fix, but change is always there and there’s been a lot of it here,” said Wiebe. “The relationship I have with the kids and the desire to make a difference keep me going. They have to feel good about who they are. If not, they will never be able to make a contribution to their community and their families.”

Staff and students at Hazelton Secondary are looking forward to this school year. 

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and vice-principals, individually and collectively, also have a responsibility to respond to the challenges facing educational leadership. They represent key change agents associated with exciting potential within education. The Dereks, Annas and Edwards bring significant leadership insights and will benefit from their reflection and subsequent collaborative dialogue that may include peer learning and coaching. The mere permission to engage in calculated risk-taking and to learn from resultant experiences affords significant opportunity. The ability to role model necessary leadership attributes will bode well for important conversations that need to take place around supporting and creating leadership excellence. Essential support and understanding will need to be solicited from the Ministry of Education and school districts. Most importantly, it is the intentionality of purpose that will realize the focus upon the leadership inherent in educational excellence and keep leadership and student achievement at the forefront of all that we do. 

References for this article are available on the BCPVPA website (<http://bit.ly/OSiz6L>) John Pusic is Principal at Aldergrove Community Secondary School in Langley, Carol-Ann Leidloff is Principal of Trafalgar Middle School in Nelson and Harold Krische is a Manager with the BCPVPA in Vancouver.

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