

the CASS CONNECTION

Spring 2023

The official magazine for the College of Alberta School Superintendents

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Opening Doors
and Expanding
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The official magazine for the College of
Alberta School Superintendents
Spring 2023

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Message from the President

Dr. Scott Morrison | College of Alberta School Superintendents

cannot help but to reflect on how sophisticated system leaders need to be when attempting to, as our magazine's theme suggests, *open doors and expand opportunities*. Doing something yourself is relatively easy. You learn, you implement, you continually reflect on the impact of your practice, and you respond as necessary. System leaders have a much more daunting task than an individual making personal change to their practice. System leaders must determine how dozens, even hundreds, of individuals will learn, implement, reflect on the impact of their practice, and respond as necessary. Moreover, system leaders must consider how to create a sense of purpose before any of the aforementioned steps can reasonably succeed, and they must consider how to scale their initiatives well-beyond their immediate reach.

System leaders engage in complex work, and, on behalf of the College of Alberta

System leaders engage in complex work, and, on behalf of the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) Board of Directors, I applaud all the system leaders and others who contributed stories of practice for this publication.

School Superintendents (CASS) Board of Directors, I applaud all the system leaders and others who contributed stories of practice for this publication. These stories serve as ostensive definitions for our Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) competencies that are sometimes ethereal and challenging to define simply. By reading these submissions, you will see examples of how, among other things, to lead learning, provide visionary leadership, and build relationships.

We thank the contributors as their work is a complement to CASS's continuing education program, assisting all our members in meeting the SLQS. Let us continue to learn from and with one another as we endeavour to create school divisions that are excellent places for students to learn and staff to work.

Dr. Scott Morrison
College of Alberta School Superintendents

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Message from the Chief Executive Officer

David Keohane | College of Alberta School Superintendents

Celebrating Thoughtful and Adaptive Leaders

Tony Schwartz, author of *The Way We Work Isn't Working*, has discovered that the tendency for many executives who are pressed to get results and address demands for change is to do more, get bigger, and go faster. If not approached with the right kind of deliberation, those leading school systems can fall into the same trap. In K-12 education, resolving the learning gap post-COVID has become a significant moral imperative for school authorities and the pressure that has rested upon system leaders to do something, do it immediately, and do it boldly has been very real.

Determining how school authorities will open doors and expand opportunities for students and staff requires a thoughtful approach; one that is not leveraged by getting more out of people but appeals to what Schwartz has called the four core elements of satisfaction and productivity – namely the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual elements that abide within students and staff. Since at times, the spiritual reference can be easily narrowed, I would expand it to include a discovery of the “why” of the work, including a search for meaning within it.

Therefore, we can all learn from the six stories of practice within this Spring 2023 edition of *The CASS Connection* and in particular, how their efforts to get meaningful outcomes occurs through positioning basic human needs as leading indicators of success. Collaborative approaches complemented with student-centric focuses on wellness, inclusion, and planning for implementation and change, summarize a common theme that runs throughout each article.

As Dr. Jordan Tinney has reminded us through his recent leadership discussions with the College of Alberta School

Superintendents (CASS) members, technical fixes require something else to make their mark in our school authorities. They need to be accompanied by the establishment of “new ways, new networks, new knowledge, and the ability to be vulnerable, flexible, and yet steadfast in the resolve to find a way together.” No story in this edition forsakes the togetherness of people adapting to discover better outcomes for each other and ultimately, for students.

Our CASS membership continues to grow through the implementation of our

practice standards in a post-COVID context, and therefore, I extend appreciation to all leaders for being thoughtful about how to meaningfully influence outcomes by harnessing the energy of staff and students so that the quality of the experience leads all change endeavours and is adaptive to emerging circumstances. Please join with me in celebrating six stories that currently demonstrate such promising practices.

David Keohane

College of Alberta School Superintendents

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Collaborative Professional Learning Cycle at Fort McMurray Public Schools

By Annalee Nutter and Scott Barr, Fort McMurray Public School District

Fort McMurray Public School District (FMPSD) is a learning community based on a foundation of strong professional learning opportunities and collaboration amongst staff. We believe in lifelong learning for all staff and realize that a data-driven, proactive plan on how to accomplish that is key to ensuring the largest impact on our staff and students. By ensuring we use both the Teaching Quality Standard (TQS) and the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) as the foundation of our professional learning planning, we aim to set up our staff for success.

Our Board has prioritized opportunities for professional learning for staff by allocating time within the school calendar for several years (11-13 days per year). This collaborative professional learning time has allowed staff to build knowledge and skills to address students' diverse learning needs.

We have worked to continuously improve our planning process to aim to provide for high quality professional learning opportunities that meet staff needs, board priorities and address student learning. Our process is called the collaborative professional learning cycle and includes division and school plans that incorporate one district professional learning development day and 13 professional learning Fridays

"We believe in continuous improvement of the professional expertise and competence of our staff."

FMPSD Beliefs – Annual Education Results Report 2022.¹

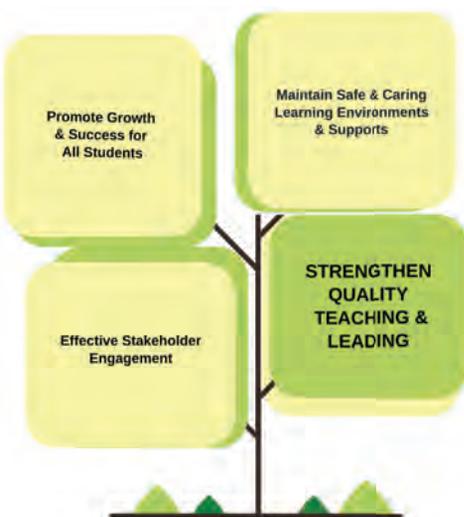
(PLF). During the 13 PLF days staff collaborate in system-wide grade-level teams and school-based instructional teams to enhance pedagogical skills and content knowledge for educating a diverse student body. Survey data consistently shares that an aspect that makes the professional learning time meaningful is the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues that occur because of the PLF days and structures.

Decades of research has identified teacher/staff quality as the most direct school-based influence on improving student learning. We know professional learning opportunities are essential to enhancing teaching practice and growth. Effective professional learning must engage teachers in opportunities that are supportive, job-embedded, instructionally focused, collaborative, and ongoing.^{2,3,4,5,6,7} Our professional learning planning is addressing this research as well as our knowledge of our local context and needs. (e.g., learning based on reviewing student learning data, collaborative school-based time provided to accommodate teacher needs). FMPSD student achievement

results for the last five years indicate that student learning has improved, a causal connection to the professional learning time being provided to teachers can be made.

School leaders work with their staff to review student learning data, identify school goals that are coherent with division focus and student learning results, and plan for learning opportunities for the year that address their local context which includes staff needs and input. Based on this comprehensive analysis, a yearly plan for professional learning is completed. Plans are shared with school communities and available for the public to share that intentional professional learning plans are in place based on student learning needs.

To know if our professional learning Fridays and professional learning plans are having an impact we continuously seek, summarize, and follow up on feedback from staff. We wanted to know, through our surveys, "How does PLF contribute to continuous improvement of teaching and learning?" A consistent set of survey questions, with data collected for the past number of years, has helped us to know if our professional learning time has supported teacher and leader practice and as a result, student learning. The information also allows us to make continuous improvements to our approaches, report to our board and assure



Fort McMurray Public School priority graphic.



Beacon Hill Public School Professional Learning Planning Cycle. Graphics courtesy of Annalee Nutter.

all involved, including our community, that time and resources spent on professional learning is having an impact on student learning. We are also better positioned to report back to our staff about follow up actions and steps for improvement and classroom supports.

Sharing our survey results through conversations with all stakeholders, and by developing a summary infographic, we have contributed to a culture that models the importance of professional growth. We believe that the intentional and thoughtful design of the professional learning Fridays, and a focus on consistently measuring impact, has created a collective efficacy focused on supporting staff growth. We communicate the value of staff learning and highlight the connection to student growth through our actions represented in the structure of PLF and sharing and acting on survey data.

Hattie described collective efficacy as “the collective belief of teachers in their ability

to positively affect students.”⁶ The FMPSD collaborative professional learning cycle has assisted our system work in contributing to improvement of teaching and learning. Next steps include a heightened focus on communications so that we can assure that the professional collaborative learning cycle and PLF days continue to have an impact on student learning. We will do this through our efforts to continuously improve based on review, analysis, and sharing survey data.

We believe that when teachers and leaders learn, then students achieve. Our collaborative professional learning cycle includes

intentional planning and design and a focus on measuring impact and supports teacher and leader growth and optimum learning for all students. ■

Annalee Nutter is Superintendent for FMPSD. She is an advocate for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit students, ensuring they have what they need to be successful, including Land Based Learning Camp.

Scott Barr is Director of HR and Administration for FMPSD and has been teaching in Fort McMurray Public Schools for 26 years now, 20 in administration.

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For more information on funding for school authorities, visit: <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/8f3b4972-4c47-4009-a090-5b470e68d633/resource/e7865589-6774-4ba8-89b5-a61ca2f36843/download/edc-funding-manual-2022-2023-school-year.pdf>.



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Implementing a District Wide Wellness Framework:

A Universal Strategy to Support Student Mental Health

By Leanne Timko and Greg Masterson, Calgary Catholic School District

At Our Lady of Lourdes School, we are specially focused on supporting students with behaviour, mental health, and trauma issues. The work of implementing a district-wide wellness framework started with one school psychologist, Claire Malcom. How would she be able to explain attachment style, core beliefs, and emotional safety to a team of administrators, teachers, and educational assistants whose primary training and focus was on curriculum delivery?

She started to see that a therapeutic framework would identify student mental health needs and assist educators with understanding why the students were not available or ready for learning, and implemented a framework based on Dr. Ricky Greenwald's "Child Trauma Handbook." The result was a multi-disciplinary approach where each professional understood their role in supporting students

with severe mental health and trauma presentations to be safe enough to learn and brave enough to try.

The Calgary Catholic School District's (CCSD) Learning Services Behavior Team started to implement this therapeutic framework into other congregated behavior and mental health programs across the district. The common framework challenged educators to view behaviour and dysregulation issues through a different lens, and thus they were more open to exploring different strategies to create an emotionally safe learning environment.

Our staff is looking to understand how to best support our students so they can reach their full potential. There are multiple resources, strategies, and supports available to schools, but we were faced with the question of how to develop a wellness framework accessible to teachers, administrators, support staff, and mental health professionals who all come with their own set of skills and language.

There has been a lack of understanding about where their role ends and where a mental health professional's role begins. However, we determined that having a trained mental health professional supporting each school is critical to bringing structure to this framework as it is implemented at each school. To do so, we applied for the Mental Health in Schools Pilot grant, which will ensure there is at least a half-time mental health professional in each of our buildings.

The CCSD Wellness Framework calls for schools to create a learning environment where all students feel safe enough to learn, and brave enough to try. It is scalable to include as many or as few supports that a student may need on their journey. The outside of the triangle demonstrates that students are supported by a variety of influences in and out of the school, each contributing to their unique story.

The inside of the triangle illustrates the progression a student needs to go through

The graphic features the Calgary Catholic School District logo in the top left. The main content is a 2x2 grid of colored boxes (red, yellow, blue, green) surrounding a central circular emblem. The emblem contains a cross with a heart and is labeled with 'FAITH FORMATION', 'STUDENT'S SUCCESSES', 'INDIGENOUS EDUCATION', and 'WELLNESS'. Each quadrant contains a list of priorities. At the bottom, there is a quote and attribution.

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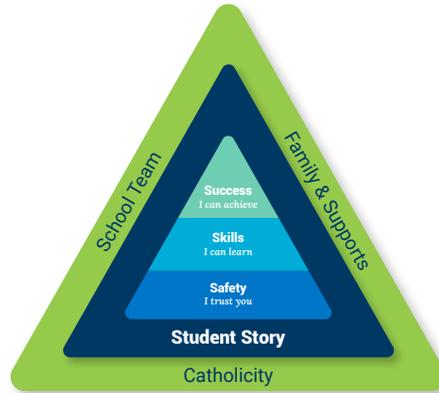
Living and Learning in our Catholic Faith, so that students, centred in Christ, realize their full potential.
The Board of Trustees 2022-2023 Priorities. Graphics courtesy of Leanne Timko.

to achieve “success.” This framework can be differentiated and customized for individual student need. Success for a student with great trauma or significant mental health may be that they are ready to try learning. For other students, the success may be graduation. The key is that every student needs to feel safe in order to build skills and realize success.

Most staff will live in “safety.” Safety is comprised of two different but equally important components. **Physical safety** is in the control of the adults, as it includes safe places to learn and play. **Emotional safety** gets a bit more complicated. The student controls whether they feel safe enough to trust an adult. This emotional safety is rooted in positive, authentic relationships with teachers and educational staff. When a

student feels emotionally safe, trust in school staff increases, hypervigilance decreases, and the student is ready to learn.

When students are ready to learn, the wellness of the entire school community



The Wellness Framework.

improves, and school staff can focus on the many facets of teaching and learning. The implementation of our Wellness Framework is a work in progress and will continue to evolve as we gather evidence of the impact on teaching and learning. ■

Leanne Timko is the Director of Learning Services, Diverse Learning, for the Calgary Catholic School District. Diverse Learning includes Psychology, Special Needs, Behavior, Mental Health and Wellness, Therapy, Counseling, and Kindergarten.

Greg Masterson is the Supervisor of Learning Services for the Calgary Catholic School District. He also oversees CTS/CTF, Dual Credit, and the Hockey Canada Skills Academy.

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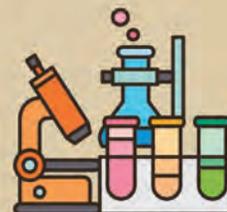
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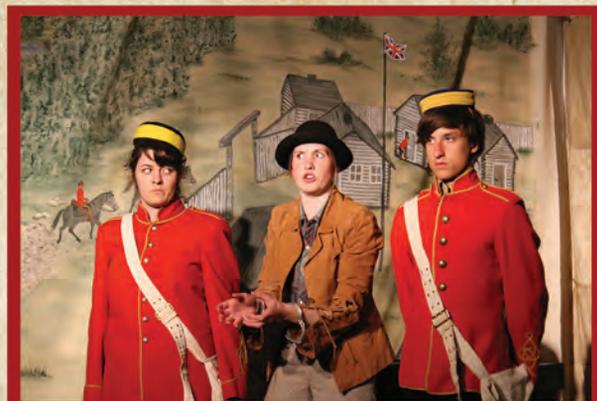


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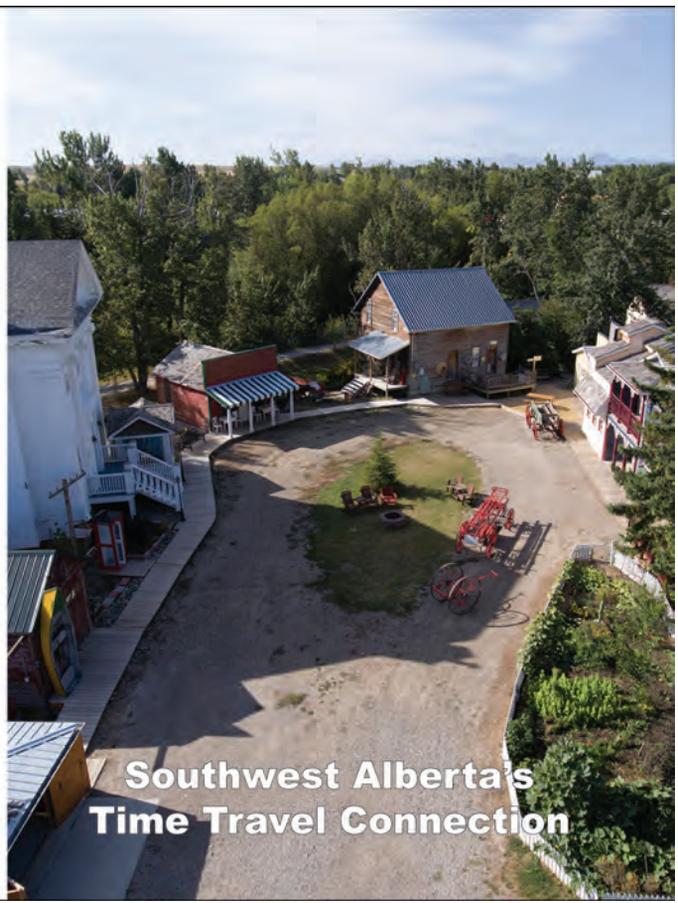


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Identifying the “Big Rocks”

By Pamela Guilbault,
Lakeland Catholic School,
and Kurtis Hewson,
Jigsaw Learning

Lakeland Catholic School’s journey with system implementation of Collaborative Response is explicitly connected to our “big rocks:” the priorities that we have established. It is about leveraging the crucial interplay that occurs between the how, the what, and the why, and reflections of ‘what now and what next’ that support leaders aligned with key priorities for system improvement.

The impetus began pre-pandemic when we were engaging in annual data analysis. Leading this, we felt frustration, which recurred annually as we analyzed the jurisdictional data. The anticipated growth in our results was not evident, so we began to investigate why that was.

After analysis, we determined that we needed to start at literacy, numeracy, student wellness, and engagement foundations. These formed the body of our divisional education plans, and despite our best efforts, we were not seeing upward growth.

A different approach was necessary. Since the big rocks, or our “what,” were not changing, we began to look at the “how.” It became clear that our staff were skilled, determined, and student focused, but their work was isolated when supporting students. Professional learning communities, although well intentioned, did not have measurable goals. Student services meetings were siloed, and case conferences reactionary. Collaboration was not aligned around key issues for students and school improvement. We required coherence.

We planned for system coherence using a three-year implementation cycle with Jigsaw Learning. Our end goal was to proficiently use Collaborative Response as the division framework to organize priorities and support students at all levels of our organization.



Conversations sparked between teachers, principals, and other staff members as they engaged in student focused collaboration aligned with division and school priorities.



Lakeland Catholic staff engage in deep conversations centred around Collaborative Response during the Division Opening Day. Photos courtesy of Pamela Guilbault.

Engagement Matters

Moving forward, we knew that we were not implementing another initiative but rather were implementing change. We understood the need for clear goals. We capitalized on the learning disruption, using it as an opportunity to examine established system structures. We looked at how we were accomplishing the “big rocks” with the accompanying implications. “Accepted practice is not necessarily best practice” was a phrase that we used to start conversations and engage staff in dialogue around pedagogy for improvement.

Engagement with staff also revealed frustrations in their ability to effectively meet

mounting student needs. This engagement validated our decision to adopt Collaborative Response. Staff were ready to be part of the solution.

Year one: ready, aim, fire

Lakeland Catholic’s historical culture of collaboration had readied the staff for the transition to Collaborative Response, so we built on this skill set. We recognized the vital role of school administrators and worked to empower the school teams. The principals selected their leadership teams at each school site to provide a system for teacher collaborative support.

The expectation was that these leadership teams would share the learning they acquired at divisional leadership learning days to build out school-based understanding and capacity. To accomplish our overarching goal of all staff proficiency, this was non-negotiable. Through the model of layering quarterly division leadership professional learning days, with monthly school collaborative team meetings, we built system wide capacity.

Year two: data and evidence considerations and learnings

In year two, we needed to focus on data and evidence. We started by implementing division wide screeners in literacy and numeracy. We realized we were great collectors of data but needed improvement in analyzing the data to create student growth. It was important to use common standardized and normed screens to ensure that staff were able to have conversations with colleagues about the data they collected, with shared understanding around the screener, and implications for teaching and learning.

We created a division wide data collection system that ensured access to data at the classroom, school, and division level. The use of data became liberating and motivating. As we embraced the belief that data opens conversations, our administrators and teachers started asking the vital questions of “now what at OUR SCHOOL and in MY CLASSROOM?” It was important to engage in a continuous cycle of reflection and action regarding implementation. With the support of Jigsaw Learning, we survey our entire staff annually to determine the shifts in mindset that occur.

Year Three: Continuum of Supports

The purpose of collaboration is for staff to be able to answer the question “so what are we going to do about it?” once they had the data.

The continuum of supports affords staff the opportunity to extend and enrich their instructional toolbox to answer this question. Leveraging a defined process was important for ensuring that all voices were heard and that the resulting continuums were robust. The divisional level leadership regarding the continuum of supports was once again in the “how” rather than in the “what.” The “what” had to be co-created by those working most closely to students. School staff engaged in this process at defined divisional learning days and refined them throughout the year in school professional collaboration. These continuums are living documents that are annually reviewed

for relevance and improvement to align to best practice and student needs.

Transformation is never a checklist

Seven years ago, we spoke with Michael Fullan about creating coherence at Lakeland Catholic. When we look back at that time, we realize that we didn’t fully understand the implications of that one conversation: the full extent of the changes that were necessary to align the “big rocks” for results that demonstrate equity, achievement, efficiency, and success. Now, through experience and opportunity to dig into our system, we understand what he meant.

When we began, we projected three years for implementation; now, Collaborative Response is integral to Lakeland Catholic Schools continuous system improvement and never finished. We still have work to do to meet those initial goals, but our staff are no longer working in isolation, and student growth is evident. Their understanding around supporting students has changed from “me to we.” This is powerful, and this is coherence. ■

Pamela Guilbault is the Superintendent for Lakeland Catholic School, and Kurtis Hewson is the Lead Learner/Co-Founder of Jigsaw Learning.

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Inspiring a Supportive and Inclusive Education System

By Loriann Stienwand, Foothills School Division, in relation with Krystal Abrahamowicz, Nicola Golby, and Dr. Meg Miskolzie



As a school authority leader for Foothills School Division, I was proud of the continuum of supports and services we had developed in our system. I believed we were focused on ALL the right things—that is, until the one day, listening to Dr. Dianne McConnell at a College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) session, I realized we weren't.

I had committed the last 20 years of my professional life to learning and leading for inclusion. Yet what I had missed until Dianne's session was the critical question, "What experience do students/staff/families have in your presence?" Leading change primarily at the *knowing* and *doing* level, I had neglected holding *being* in the same regard as pedagogy and expertise.¹

No matter how committed we are as leaders to purpose, we can't address what we aren't aware of or don't know.

A human-centered, conceptual approach to change and improvement in leading an inclusive system is foundational for systemic and sustainable change. This approach requires leaders to step into their power at three levels: belief, intellect, and behaviour.

I had conversations with three Alberta school system leaders to understand their experience of using the conceptual framework of *being-knowing-doing* found within *Implementing a Continuum of Supports and Services: A Resource Guide for School and School Authority*

Leaders.¹ Calling for more than the application of structures and systems, this resource calls on leaders to address adaptive challenges¹ of inclusion through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, and habits. The account of each leader shows how they leveraged the resource to step into their power to open up possibilities, learning, and ways of responding in advancing an inclusive education system.

Perhaps no one knows the importance of understanding context better than Krystal Abrahamowicz. Coordinator of Inclusion with Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, Krystal is new to her role and to her school authority. Her school authority is also new to Specialized Learning Support funding.

While some may find this triad of new contexts to be overwhelming, Krystal's opportunistic attitude shone through as she held up the written over resource that reflected her thinking. She explained how she and the other leaders in her school authority "are marinating in the knowing" Leaders within her school authority being introduced to the elements within a continuum of supports and services, have identified assessment as an area of growth. They are engaged and empowered in a new way of thinking through the continuum, which results in a flow of supports and services responsive to each learner.

As Krystal explains how she dug deeper into the document to better understand a valuable resource in her context: the leaders, it is clear that I am speaking to a masterful instructional

*The range of what we think and do
Is limited by what we fail to notice.
And because we fail to notice
That we fail to notice
There is little we can do
To change
Until we notice
How failing to notice
Shapes our thoughts and deeds*

R.D. Laing

leader. Gathering evidence through a focus on the principles underpinning a continuum of supports and services² with leaders in her system, Krystal can be responsive to their professional learning needs. Krystal is using the elements found within *knowing* to bring her closer to her context, supporting her in making decisions regarding what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply.³ Krystal, albeit new to the three contexts, is leaning into her power.

Dr. Meg Miskolzie, Associate Superintendent, could not be more committed to advancing an inclusive education system in Parkland School Division. As Dr. Miskolzie peaks eloquently about what's important in leading change and continuous improvement, Fullan's concept of striving for precision, not prescription,⁴ is ringing in my ears. She explores with me how she sees "the value in using this resource in ensuring a *beyond a program approach* is taken in supporting inclusion." While providing confidence of direction and unifying ministry legislation and policy, Dr. Miskolzie points out the resource supports her own leadership has and provides a common language to engage leaders in critically examining and reflecting on their own context.

It is apparent she holds the iterative process as highlighted in *doing* as essential in supporting leaders stepping into their power. "It's not a checklist. It's not an ok, I've done it now. It's a process."

Dr. Miskolzie is reinforcing a learning environment for leaders, providing a safe space to think,

learn and grow. She is focused on harnessing the power found in the rich commodity the division has in the minds of the leaders. "It's about finding pockets of excellence within your division and growing those. It's about finding the strengths and capitalizing on them." I am inspired as I reflect on Dr. Miskolzie's leadership in creating the conditions for *doing* and can't help but reflect again on Fullan's words of "Learning is the work."⁵

Nicola Golby, Associate Superintendent of Student Services at Red Deer Public Schools, has a diverse and extensive background supporting, leading, and empowering the full school community within an inclusive learning environment. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to talk with her.

Being newly introduced to each other, our conversation begins with Nicola in the *knowing*. "The resource took a nebulous concept and allows us to be more intentional about it," adding it moves the conversation from a special education system to an inclusive system focused on all learners.

While all of Nicola's and my conversation was rich and focused on the *knowing*, it was Nicola's thinking on the *being* that caused me pause. "Sometimes we can get caught up in

the pedagogy and knowing piece. Even when educators are equipped with the knowledge and skills, they sometimes still tend to look to others as or for *the solution*." Her realness came through as she said, "Inclusive education is so tough because it's so emotional and there are different beliefs."

Nicola's comments made me reflect on that supporting all students is a complex challenge and, at times, feeling of insecurity, helplessness, or fear may creep in. Nicola's words "We may not know... but we need to solve it together" stay with me.

In each of my conversations, the criticalness of leaders engaging in ongoing analysis of context rang true. There was no right place to start with the being-knowing-doing approach. Each place was the right place because it was based on the leaders' analysis of context.

We have great leaders in the province of Alberta who have been given the privilege and opportunity to step into their power, modeling and creating the conditions to tackle change at the levels of belief, intellect, and behaviour. The story and evolution of inclusion is ours to own and write. The pen and the power are in our hearts, minds, and hands. In the great words of

Dianne McConnell from CASS, "Come on in, we'll figure this out together."⁶ ■

Loriann Stienwand is a specialist in mental health in schools and was previously the Director of Inclusive Learning in her school division.

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Leading Learners Through a Growth Culture Lens

By Michelle Webb and Rhae-Ann Holoien, Buffalo Trail Public Schools



Buffalo Trail Public School Senior Administration. Photo courtesy of Bri Blackie.

Across Alberta, system education leaders face a huge dilemma: fueling student achievement in the aftermath of a global crisis that has left the well-being and mental health of society in a precarious state. To ask more of learning communities would seem counterintuitive when building coping skills to manage stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms top the agenda. Buffalo Trail Public Schools (BTPS) is focused on developing a “growth culture” to produce results, prioritizing well-being, continuous learning, and ongoing feedback as critical dimensions to success.

Fostering well-being to improve student learning

Almost three years to the day the World Health Organization proclaimed a world-wide pandemic, Darren Grosky, Irma School Principal, stated, “healthy staff equals improved learning opportunities for students.” Grosky’s comment echoes BTPS’ belief that well-being is an investment not to be overlooked, given its impact on organizational success. Since 2020, BTPS has allocated time for school-based Health and Wellness Champions to work with their school principals and staff to develop annual health and wellness action plans centred on daily physical activity, healthy eating, and positive social environments.

Each plan maps out dedicated time for staff to discuss wellness practices, engage in related professional learning, and share information and resources from service providers like

Everactive Schools, ASEBP, and Homewood Health. BTPS’ wellness champions also come together throughout the year to hatch wellness challenges and craft weekly wellness emails, podcasts, newsletters, and posters. BTPS maintains seven Social Emotional Coaches who provide student and family-centred programming, working directly with school staff to support student well-being and address concerns such as bullying, self-harm, and suicidal ideation.

As evidenced by BTPS’ 2022 APORI results, which indicated 87 per cent of students, parents, and staff continue to agree that the district’s learning environments are welcoming, caring, respectful and safe, BTPS’ investment in well-being is paying off and advancing its mission of maximizing student learning in a safe and caring environment, supported by a highly effective team.

Leading continuous learning

Based on the work of researchers like John Hattie and Karen Hume whose teachings demonstrates that collective efficacy is a more “powerful predictor of student achievement than socioeconomic status, prior achievement, and parental involvement,” BTPS’ senior leadership team fuels its growth culture engaging staff in mentorship, collaboration, and professional learning opportunities.

Supporting the individual needs of system and school leaders, BTPS’ Leadership Mentorship Program connects experienced principals with new leaders to meet and work through leadership scenarios together. Designed to include opportunities for active, in-depth consideration of Alberta’s Leadership Quality Standard (LQS), along with research on system improvement and related leadership issues, participants interact with their mentee individually and come together as a group twice a year.

Becky West, a principal for the Amisk School, said “One of the most powerful mentorship opportunities I’ve benefited from since becoming a principal is BTPS’ Leadership Mentorship Program. The gift of time, scheduled and honoured in our busy calendars, allows administrators to truly collaborate and learn from one another, without the feelings of guilt that often accompany reaching out for support from other very busy administrators.

Having the senior leadership team not only plan and facilitate the sessions, but also attend and participate, lends legitimacy to the program, and shows that they truly value the power of authentic mentorship opportunities.”

In breaking down the unconscious bias towards women, concerted efforts also are made towards highlighting the grit and impact of women in leadership roles. In recent years, BTPS hosted an International Women’s Day event in cooperation with Lakeland College. It also has held a book study spotlighting “Nerve: Lessons on Leadership from Two Women Who Went First.” Written by former Deans of Education from two of Canada’s most respected research universities, Martha Piper and Indira Samarasekera, the book offers candid and insightful perspectives on the dilemmas and opportunities women confront as they take on leadership roles. Both initiatives will continue into the foreseeable future.

The last three years have also seen considerable time spent coaching school leaders how to effectively work through challenging scenarios. In addition to having the senior leadership team’s one-on-one support, through BTPS’ Leadership Academy, all school leaders and inclusion teachers access Destination Leadership’s flagship program, The Expedition Coaching, to enhance their coaching, communication, and leadership skillsets.

Fostering an inclusive learning environment, Leadership for Learning was launched in the fall of 2021. It is a unique professional learning platform and offers all staff free 24/7 access to an online learning menu of topics such as Reshaping Your Staff Meeting, Tech Timesavers, Mindfulness for Everyone, and Candid and Compassionate Feedback. The platform also provided staff access to one-on-one coaching and the ability to connect virtually with others across the division.

Supporting growth through ongoing reflection and feedback

Recognizing the power of reflection and ongoing dialogue, each September, November, and March, BTPS’ senior leadership team also engages in Instructional

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A New Program of Support



The Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP) is an employee life and health trust governed by 10 Trustees. It offers a wide variety of health benefits and promotes programs that sustain healthy lifestyles and workplaces for more than 63,000 covered members and their dependants.



By Kelli Littlechilds, ASEBP

As leaders, we spend much of our time ensuring that those we support have the resources they need to do their jobs, foster healthy environments, learn, and be at their best. It's something many of us cherish about our roles. For me, the joy in my role comes from ensuring ASEBP's covered members (and employers) have the benefits, programs, and overall support they need to lead a healthy life—whatever that looks like for them.

One of the changes we made to our benefits at the end of 2022 is a great example of that joy. As you likely already know, ASEBP launched a new Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) in December 2022. After careful deliberation of EFAP options available on the market that suited ASEBP's needs, we are confident that choosing to move to our new EFAP provider, Inkblot, is and will continue to be the best choice for our covered members.

Why Inkblot?

So, what set Inkblot apart for us? First, and foremost, the benefits their program would offer our covered members—your employees!

Over the past number of years, ASEBP has been focused on building out our mental health supports (have you seen our new *It Takes a Village* wellness hub by the way? Check it out at <https://wellness.asebp.ca>), to address the rising need for mental health supports and to make it easier for covered members to understand how they can access support in a timely manner. One of the biggest benefits of our new EFAP is the fact that Inkblot is a digital-first organization. This means, that while they do offer services in person and over the phone, their go-to, which ensures people have access to the services they need, quickly, is to connect people virtually. The mental health practitioners are all registered with their appropriate association and/or college in the province in which they operate, so no matter where the EFAP is being accessed, users will be able to find fully qualified assistance. Virtual offerings cut down on numerous barriers to access, including availability of providers in certain geographic areas, especially for more rural settings, and scheduling conflicts due to other commitments (e.g., childcare, work, etc.). The flexibility virtual appointments offer opens the EFAP to more users than ever before.

Another advantage the Inkblot program offers is its ability to match the unique needs and preference of each covered member with a counsellor who is best suited to them. This

is done through an online intake questionnaire, which asks a series of questions to get to know the challenge(s) the covered member is facing, as well as their language, spiritual, and identity preferences, and more. All this information is then used to create a shortlist of counsellors who best match their current needs. This list allows the covered member to review each counsellor's bio, credentials, and availability, and choose who they wish to work with.

The Inkblot program also offers more seamless integration with ASEBP's psychology benefits. Each year covered members (plus dependants) are provided with an allotment of hours to use for the variety of services offered by their EFAP. Once their counselling hours are all utilized, they have the option to continue seeing the counsellor they have been working with at a rate far below the national average (\$90/hour for virtual sessions and \$110/hour for in-person), then submitting a claim to their ASEBP benefits for reimbursement. With these rates, plus ASEBP's recent increase in psychology benefits (\$120/session with counsellors and \$180/session with psychologists (including provisional) or someone holding a Master of Social Work degree), covered members should receive 100 per cent coverage for these services, making them more accessible than ever before.

Full spectrum of support

As mentioned, each year, covered members and their dependants are provided with an allotment of service hours to be used

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Leadership Reviews and professional growth plan meetings with all of principals to grow and build their personal capacity and collective efficacy as educational leaders. These conversations encourage principals to reflect on their practice, set goals, and develop action plans geared towards their specific area of growth. Principals mirror these practices at the school level, hosting teacher and support staff growth plan meetings on an ongoing basis.

BTPS has come to understand that nurturing a “growth culture” to influence student success begins with inspiring those within the division to become invested in the wellness and collective efficacy of the entire learning community. By being inclusive of everyone’s needs, mobilizing teams, breaking down barriers, and modelling the desired behaviours, system education leaders can support continuous improvement, no matter the external influences. ■

Michelle Webb, Deputy Superintendent of Buffalo Trail Public Schools, brings over 30 years classroom, administration, and central office experience. She has been privileged to work with the staff of BTPS for over 10 years.

Rhae-Ann Holoien is in her third year as a Superintendent in Buffalo Trail Public Schools. She previously worked as an Assistant Superintendent in Grasslands Public Schools. She has 30 years of education experience as a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent.

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across the EFAP’s variety of services. Here is what this translates to for each individual:

- Individual counselling (four hours);
- Couples/family counselling (four hours);
- Career coaching (four hours);
- Health coaching (four hours);
- Life transition coaching (four hours);

- Legal consultations (unlimited); and
- Financial consultations (unlimited).

Services for leaders

The EFAP also offers services just for leaders. These include access to free consultations, which can be used to provide guidance on:

- Concerns related to an employee’s declining workplace performance, behaviour, or demeanor;
- Difficult dynamics between employees or within teams, such as conflict, poor communication, bullying, or harassment;
- Employee-management relationships;
- Suspected addiction concerns;
- Organizational change impacting employee morale; and
- Traumatic events affecting employees.

To book a free consultation, leaders with ASEBP benefits can call 1-855-933-0103 or email consultation@inkblottherapy.com. Services are available 24/7/365.

No matter the challenge you are facing, personal or professional, ASEBP offers services that can help. I encourage you all to investigate the ways our EFAP can benefit both you and your workplace. You can learn more by visiting, wellness.asebp.ca/efap. ■

Kelli Littlechilds is the CEO of ASEBP and has more than 35 years of experience in the health and benefits industry. As the leader of one of Alberta’s Top Employers for 2023, Kelli is a champion for personal and workplace well-being.

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