Placing System Learning at the Heart of System Leadership

By Kurtis Leinweber, Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, Dr. David Townsend, Alberta, British Columbia and Australia, and Dr. Marilyn Chaseling, Southern Cross University, Australia

FFCA high school administration with the freshman students at their orientation.

Foundations for the Future Charter Academy (FFCA) serves 3,500 kindergarten to Grade 12 students in seven campuses; four elementary campuses feeding two middle campuses, which in turn feed one high school. As Alberta's 43rd largest school division by student population, we strive culturally to be "one school."

Like other jurisdictions, we have our challenges. Our inaugural high school's Fraser Institute rating (2005) was 4.4/10—that put us at number 221 in the province! Our student demographics have shifted significantly too. Now, 32 per cent of our high school population is coded English as a Second Language (ESL). Also, we have seen a sharp increase in the number of students requiring specialized learning and social-emotional supports.

Yet, in the face of these challenges, we have managed 12 years of continuous improvement. While we recognize the limitations of the Fraser rating system, our 9.2/10 rating in 2017 is one indicator of our growth.

This article describes how some of our current system's leadership structures, methods and processes help us build current and future leadership capacity. To achieve effective system leadership, we:

- Use an all-campus leadership council for system decision-making;
- View key system-leadership roles as fluid, and
- Follow a collaborative-inquiry learning methodology that supports a regular, focused process of generative-dialogue conversations.

These place the leadership of learning at the heart of our system leadership work.

Commitment to collaboration

At FFCA, we are committed to a culture of collaboration and distributed leadership—everyone is responsible, in some way, for the education of every student. Structures and processes are in place to support this culture. It is sought during staff recruitment and developed through our work in teams throughout our jurisdiction.

Formal leaders actively seek and embrace the contributions of staff at all levels when decisions are to be made, and staff value the importance of frequent communication and collaboration as they learn together.

Leadership-of-learning site visits

At the heart of our learning culture is a collaborative inquiry methodology using generative dialogue as the conversational process for "how" we learn and work together. Three years ago, our senior leadership began monthly visits of 60 to 90 minutes to meet with the leadership team of each of our seven campuses—a total commitment of two days per month. Each visiting team is made up of the superintendent, deputy superintendent a university researcher, and at least one system coordinator, principal or associate principal from another campus.

Our Coordinator of Instruction described these visits as "a means for bringing us together, allowing us to know what is happening in campuses, what they're trying to investigate and to learn, and how we can support this." Monthly visits provide opportunities for personal

contact, reflection, advice, support and celebration among all our educational leaders.

Generative dialogue

Each campus leadership team uses a professional growth plan and the collaborative-inquiry process of seeking answers to guiding questions, to guide and inform their professional practice, and determine the extent to which they are achieving their goals. In each meeting, external team members respectfully solicit answers to the questions which form the foundation of the *generative dialogue* conversation:

1. What have you done since our last visit, specific to your team or individual goals?
2. What have you learned from your efforts?
3. What evidence do you have which informs your learning or what data would you like to share?
4. What will you do between now and our next meeting, specific to your goals?
5. What support do you want or need from the district or from other sources?

In these meetings, the emphasis is on listening carefully, appreciating the work of others, valuing the evidence of practice, and constantly exploring more effective ways to promote the learning of adults and students alike.

As staff teams within campuses have become more successful in their own learning initiatives, they have been increasingly invited to share their work with the visiting team. This further enhances the celebratory and relationship-building dimensions of the process. Campus leaders and teacher teams have shown growing appreciation for the richer structures and processes. These have given them more voice and validation. Team meetings are increasingly characterized by openness, sharing, thoughtfulness and a focus on evidence.

The central office team – fluid partners in learning

The relationship between system and campus leadership plays an important role in enhancing the collaborative culture at FFCA. Our central office educational leadership team consists of four team members of which two are seconded from campus leadership positions (principals or associates) for a three-year period. These positions are referred to as "coordinators"—an intentionally non-hierarchical term. They are process, not decision, focused, playing a distinct role in coordinating and facilitating the learning and work of campus and system leadership teams. This egalitarian structure helps promote collaboration amongst system and campus leadership.

The fluidity of personnel through the coordinator roles also does this. A principal who previously served as a coordinator described the experience as having, "equipped me with a deep understanding of why and how things work, making me more committed and better able to connect the work of our campus to the common system vision."

Also contributing to the collaborative learning culture is the role of modeling by central office personnel. As with campus teams, the central office team is visited monthly for conversations by the university researcher and a group of campus administrators. These visits allow campus leaders to gain insight into the goals, guiding questions,

strategies and measures of success on which the central office team is working. This transparency helps build trusting relationships between system and campus leadership, which is further supported by our process for system decision making.

System decision making by an all-campus council

An established framework provides guidance for how system decisions are made. As previously stated, system coordinators do not have authority over campus leaders. Moreover, rarely do the superintendent or deputy superintendent make unilateral decisions. A campus principal described our superintendent's work as "being excellent at asking questions, wondering and working through things with us. We never feel he's telling us what to do. He's just right there with us figuring it out."

Our Admin Council, comprised of all campus and central office administrators, follow a process of consensus building for issues of policy or practice that impact multiple or all campuses. Building consensus takes time with difficult decisions requiring many conversations. Nevertheless, grounding the dialogue in our guiding principles enables us to come to consensus on most issues. Even when we don't, we each learn from the different perspectives amongst us. So, on those rare occasions when the superintendent or deputy is required to make the final call, greater commitment to those decisions ensues.

Promising outcomes

By engaging in the aforementioned structures and processes, we are learning what best improves our system leadership at all levels:

1. Operating as a non-authoritarian organization (as much as possible) with a fairly flat leadership structure takes time, but builds coherence, commitment and capacity.
2. Seconding central office leaders, for limited terms, from a group of experienced campus leaders provides legitimacy, supports internal continuity, and builds capacity.
3. Engaging in continuous leadership-of-learning through regular collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue ensures that all team members have a public and active commitment to their own professional growth. Moreover, it contributes directly to enhanced trust and respect across the system.

In the words of our superintendent, "collaborative learning is a key part of our organizational fabric through which we prepare our current and future teams to lead together." ■

Kurtis Leinweber is the Deputy Superintendent at Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, where he has served in various leadership roles for 21 years. FFCA is a public charter school located in Calgary, Alberta.

Since retiring from the University of Lethbridge's Faculty of Education in 2014, David Townsend has continued his involvement in leadership initiatives with schools in Alberta, British Columbia and Australia.

Marilyn Chaseling is an academic at Southern Cross University, Australia. Her research interests include school improvement initiatives in both Australia and Canada.