

**PLEASE UNDERSTAND ME:
EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES
THAT INCREASE GRADUATION RATES**

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to examine how leadership strategies and practices contribute to student retention and sustained improvement in student graduation rates. The issue of students' success and graduation is important because educational attainment is positively correlated with every single important life outcome, and high school completion is widely regarded as the minimum education qualification needed to be able to earn an adequate income in the labour market (Levin, 2006). The conceptual framework of the study was built on Leithwood's transformational leadership model: setting direction (visions, goals and higher expectations), developing people (individualized support, intellectual stimulation and modeling), and redesigning the organization (culture, structure, policy and community relationships). Nine principals, were interviewed from four zone six Alberta school jurisdictions with significantly larger than provincial average three and five-year completion data, to determine how these formal leaders relate or support leadership strategies and Leithwood's Leadership practices to positively effect retention and graduation.

Although many of the factors that impact on educational outcomes lie entirely outside the scope and responsibility of the school system, school leaders can utilize Leithwood's transformational leadership practices to increase the commitment of teachers to boost graduation rates. Leaders can and should seek to engage the support of teachers for this vision for the school and to enhance their capacities to contribute to achieving this goal. In general, leaders need to recognize the multi-faceted nature of the concept of at-risk and its affect on retention and graduation rates, and need to develop broad, multi-faceted prevention strategies and practices.

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Table of Contents

Signed Approval Signature Page.....	2
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Figures	x
CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND TO GRADUATION RATES	1
Significance of Problem	2
Research Questions.....	4
General Research Question	4
Subquestions.....	4
Definition of Terms	5
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	9
Redefining At-risk.....	9
Leadership Strategies.....	11
Leadership Practice.....	18
Practice and Strategy Relationships	21
Setting direction.....	25
Developing people.....	26
Redesigning the organization	27
Problem solving.....	27
Barriers	28

Summary.....	28
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	30
Philosophical Stance.....	31
Theoretical Forestructures	32
Participant Selection.....	32
Interviews	33
Data Management.....	34
Bias	35
Data Analysis.....	37
Implications	39
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF DATA.....	40
Description of Participants (Population)	40
Description of Participants (Interviewees)	42
Contextual Factors.....	44
CHAPTER FIVE: LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES	48
Characteristics and Factors that Lead to Dropping Out	48
Strategies that Increase Retention and Graduation Rates.....	54
Make Students Successful	60
CHAPTER SIX: TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES.....	68
General Dropout Prevention Practices	68
Setting Direction.....	72
Vision.....	73
Goals.....	80

High Expectation	86
Summary	90
Developing People.....	91
Providing Individualized Support.....	91
Creating Intellectual Stimulation.....	96
Modeling Practices and Values Important for the School	100
Redesigning the Organization	103
School Culture	104
Creating Shared Decision-Making Processes (Structure)	109
Developing and Implementing School Policies.....	113
Fostering Productive School-Community Relationships	114
CHAPTER SEVEN: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	120
The Forgotten	120
Complex Problem	123
Recovering Students	125
Implications for Policy and Practice.....	128
Implications for Future Research	131
Conclusion.....	132
References	134
Appendices	143
A: Research Graphic Organizer	144
B: Leadership Practices.....	145
C: Factors for Early School Leaving	146

D: Circumstances that Place Students At-risk	147
E: Disengagement and Protective Strategies	148
F: Symptoms of Visible Behaviors.....	149
G: Dropout Prevention Strategies	150
H: High School Completion Strategies	151
I: Categorized Dropout Prevention Strategies	152
J: Leadership Standards of Practice	153
K: Principal Quality Practice Standards.....	154
L: Participant Consent Form.....	155
M: Interview Protocol.....	157

List of Tables

Table

1. Divisional Graduation Rate Growth.....	42
2. Interviewee Characteristics	44
3. Dropout Characteristics and Factors Influencing Retention	48
4. Dropout Prevention Strategies.....	56
5. Making Students Successful.....	61
6. Dropout Prevention Practices.....	69
7. Vision Building Practices.....	73
8. Goal Setting Practices	80
9. Leadership Practices that Create High Performance Expectations	87
10. Providing Individualized Support	92
11. Creating Intellectual Stimulation.....	97
12. Lead by Doing Rather than only be Telling.....	100
13. Creating and Maintaining Shared Decision-Making Processes	110
14. Jurisdictional three and five Year Graduation Rates.....	121
15. Principal’s Conflicting Comments on Graduation Rates	121

List of Figures

Figure

1. Zone Six School Divisions	41
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CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND TO GRADUATION RATES

According to Alberta Education's mission statement, Alberta Education "ensures that learners are prepared for lifelong learning, work, and citizenship so they are able to contribute to a democratic, knowledge-based, and prosperous society" (Alberta Education, 2005a, p. 6). At present however, only 67% of students graduate from high school within three years and 75% within five years. Distressingly these figures do not include Mennonite, Native, or Métis students, whose rates are easily 15% lower; nor do they include students that drop out of school before they enter grade 10 (Alberta Education, 2005b). It would appear that Alberta schools are failing to meet the needs of a large segment of the student population and are not developing the full potential of every child. Simply put, "too many children are falling through the cracks" (Alberta Teachers Association, 2002, p. 68). This is unacceptable in today's society where the consequence of dropping out is a future with limited job prospects. Without young people who have completed their studies, Alberta will not be able to acquire the highly skilled workforce it needs (Alberta's Commission on Learning, 2003).

Fortunately, Alberta is on the forefront of educational improvement and is utilizing multiple strategies to maintain student enrollment and assure graduation for Alberta's youth. Some of these strategies are formal directives from the government, while others are contextual and initiated by school leaders and school divisions. Furthermore, policy makers need to listen to students for they "provide insight into the nature of learning" (Alberta Teachers Association, 2003, p. 13) and corroborate the fact that learning also depends on relationships with teachers and peers. One such strategy is Alberta's alternative schools where teachers "meet the needs of students who either

cannot or will not pursue their education in traditional high schools” (Housego, 1999, as cited in Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 1).

In this study I looked at the strategies that contribute to student success from a leadership perspective and ascertained how school leadership contributes to student retention and sustained improvement in student graduation rates (see Appendix A). Qualitative data was analyzed and trends identified. Research on educational leadership is a broad field and encompasses a multitude of leadership styles and effective leadership concepts. Traditionally research has focused on the school principal as leader while more recent changes on the view of leadership and the role of the school administrator have shifted to a more distributive approach that also includes teachers as school leaders. This study incorporated the concept of distributive leadership and explored the direct and indirect influence principals exert on their schools including strategies directly influenced by formal leadership, those undertaken by team leaders, and those undertaken by those influenced by formal leaders and team leaders.

Significance of Problem

The Alberta government, like the rest of Canada, aspires to possess the best education system in the world. To achieve this vision, the Minister of Learning expects school boards to be accountable and uses national and international assessments in addition to the Ministry’s own data to report on its achievements. Indeed, Alberta’s achievement results are impressive. Not only do Alberta students have the highest achievement within Canada, but they also scored the highest in reading and were among the top three in science and mathematics on the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment tests. Alberta

continued to achieve excellent results in 2003 when they again scored the highest in reading, improved from third to second in mathematics, and ranked fourth in science (Alberta Education, 2005c). Furthermore, in 2004, Alberta students significantly outscored their Canadian counterparts on the School Achievement Indicators Program science assessment conducted by the Canadian Council of Ministers of Education (Alberta Education, 2005c). Unfortunately, Alberta's pursuit for excellence has come at a price. As provinces raise standards, implement more *rigorous* curricula, increase high-stakes testing, and place greater emphasis on obtaining high scores, they are paying the price in higher dropout rates. In contrast, Prince Edward Island has the lowest academic level within Canada but the highest graduation rate (Ross, 2005). If provinces are to increase graduation rates, they need to find a way to do so without lowering standards or academic achievement.

Alberta's high school completion rate is far less impressive than its achievement record. In fact, with the lowest completion rate in Canada, one quickly wonders if the government's goal is being met. A provincial graduation rate of 67% should warrant massive reform, especially considering some school division three-year completion rates were below 20% (Alberta Education, 2005b). Nevertheless when the completion rates for individuals aged 24 to 35 are taken into account, Alberta has traditionally posted an impressive 87 to 90%, 1% below the national average (Alberta Education, 2005b). Such figures would seem to indicate that although youth may prematurely leave school and presumably enter the workforce many will eventually return to complete their education even during Alberta's booming economy.

Rather than making value statements about provincial and jurisdictional completion rates this study aims to determine how school leaders can positively influence high school completion rates. This will be a timely contribution to the provincial context of public education as Alberta Education pursues the attainment of achieving the Alberta Commission on Learning (2003) recommendation number eleven (ACOL # 11): “develop and implement a comprehensive, province-wide strategy with the goal of ensuring that 90% of students complete grade 12 within four years of starting high school” (p. 61)--a recommendation the Ministry of Education has recently pushed to the top of its priority list.

Research Questions

The framework for this research is built on Leithwood’s transformational leadership model (see Appendix B).

General Research Question

What practices and strategies do school leaders use to influence student retention and graduation rates?

Subquestions

1. What strategies do leaders utilize to help bolster student retention and graduation rates?
2. How do formal leaders relate or support these strategies to setting direction (visions, goals and higher expectations)?
3. How do formal leaders relate or support these strategies to developing people (individualized support, intellectual stimulation and modeling)?

4. How do formal leaders relate or support these strategies to redesigning the organization (culture, structure, policy and community relationships)?

Definition of Terms

At-risk students – In this case, *at-risk* means students who are in danger of failing to complete their education with an adequate level of “skills and self esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and inter / intrapersonal relationships” (Sagor, 2004, as cited in Smink & Schargel, 2004, p. 6). These students face greater risk of low educational achievement and have a greater potential of dropping out of school because they “either cannot or will not pursue their education” (Housego, 1999, as cited in Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 1) and could include, but are not limited to, students with issues including: learner deficiencies, lack of school readiness, sexual activity, drug or alcohol addiction, poverty, judicial issues, probationary requirements, sexual abuse, transience, poverty, geographic location, bullying, discipline problems, mental or physical health issues such as depression and anxiety, literacy challenges, limited English proficiency, economic disadvantage, religious and cultural beliefs, attendance issues, lack of empathy and lack of motivation, is at least 1 year behind the expected grade level for the age of the individual, and has dropped out of school in the past.

Graduation rates (Completion Rates) – High school completion rates are based on tracking first-time grade 10 students for a period of three and five years. They are calculated by dividing the number of high school completers by the number of

students in grade 10, adjusted for attrition. When determining completion rates, the following categories are identified and included in the calculations:

Grade 10 Cohort – comprised of grade 10 students who can reasonably be expected to complete high school and for whom the government of Alberta has a responsibility to educate.

High School Completers – students included in the grade 10 cohort who have completed high school within three and five years of starting grade 10. It should be noted that graduation differs from completion because students can achieve high school completion status through a variety of means including the attainment of an Alberta High School Diploma, High School Equivalency Diploma, or a Certificate of Achievement (Integrated Occupational Program). Students are also classified as high school completers even though they are non-credentialed if students left school without a credential, but have earned credits in courses that enable them to continue into post-secondary or industry training. Although technically different from one another, high school graduation rate and high school completion rate are used interchangeably in this study.

Continuers – students, who were included in the grade 10 cohort, did not complete high school, and are still registered in school.

Leavers – students who were neither identified as high school completers nor continuers, less attrition.

Attrition – attrition is made up of the number of students who have left the province or are deceased and is based on estimates provided by Statistics Canada.

In-province movers are defined as students who completed, continued, or last attended high school in a jurisdiction other than the one where they started their grade 10 year. These students are attributed either to the jurisdiction where they started grade 10 or where they finished depending on where they received the most credits or were last enrolled (Alberta Education, 2005b).

Leadership – The ability to influence people and/or events around them with or without having a formal leadership designation to structure activities and relationships (Yukl, 1994, as cited by Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999 p. 6).

Leadership Practices – Strategic approaches that focus on the teacher so that they influence students to remain in school and graduate. Although there are numerous practices that may be said to be effective, this study specifically looks at Leithwood's transformational leadership model as the scaffolding for student success.

Leadership Strategies – Strategic approaches that focus on the student and influences them to remain in school and graduate. Although there are numerous strategies that may be said to be effective, this study specifically looks at retention and graduation as the key indicator for success.

Micropolitics – The interplay and use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups.

Transformational Leadership – is about building a unified common interest between leaders and followers thus increasing commitments and capacities of organizational members. It is conceptualized along the following eight dimensions: 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, developing structures to foster participation in school decisions (National College for School Leadership, 2003, pp. 12-15).

CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this section, the body of literature pertaining to at-risk and educational leadership practices and strategies will be discussed. Particular attention will be given to current trends in leadership since the objective of the study is to see how these trends pertain to at-risk students so that these students, who are in danger of dropping out of school, are retained thus increasing high school completion rates.

Redefining At-risk

There is no universal definition of what it means to be at-risk or which students should be given the label (Robinson, 2004). Historically, definitions have incorporated three components: academic achievement, student motivation, and predicting risk. The most prominent of these is not succeeding academically. These students are often deficient in basic academic skills and experience a repetitive cycle of academic failure (Bracey, 1997; Levin, 1988; Swanson, 1991; Taylor, Barry, & Walls, 1997, as cited in Robinson, 2004). At-risk also refers to student motivation, and rightly or wrongly, educators use the term to predict student academic success or failure. Educators must be cautious when identifying characteristics that lead to students being labeled at-risk, for it is impossible to predict absolute academic outcomes and the label might suggest that students are predestined for failure with no hope of educators influencing success (Swanson, 1991, as cited in Robinson, 2004). Frymier and Gansneder (1989) suggest that being at-risk is a function of what happens to a child, how severe it is, how often it happens, and what else happens in the child's life (p. 142). Rossi (1994) concurs and asserts that no child is inherently at-risk; rather they are placed into at-risk situations by external disadvantages (as cited in Robinson, 2004, p. 6). If educators support the concept

that at-risk conditions are obtained and not inherited, then that support provides hope for working with these students.

The decision not to complete high school is a costly one and should not be taken lightly. Not only is the probability of falling into poverty 3.5 times greater for dropouts than high school graduates, but also dropouts make 30% less in their lifetime, than high school graduates (Human Resources Development Canada, 2000). Statistically, dropouts have more difficulty finding employment; the unemployment rate for high school dropouts is typically twice as high as it is for graduates (Bowlby, 2005). Those fortunate enough to find employment are often paid less than graduates; 45% of minimum wage earners are high school dropouts compared with only 3% of college graduates (Times Magazine, November 22, 1999, as cited in Smink & Schargel, 2004). Furthermore, young couples, only one of whom was a high school graduate, saw their earnings fall on average by 15% to 20% between 1980 and 2000 (Morissette & Johnson, 2004).

The cost associated with dropping out of school is not just financial since education is also positively correlated to lower mortality rates, and decreased requirements for medical access (Wolfe & Haveman, 2002, as cited in Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003). School disengagement and grade retention are two factors that lead to students dropping out and have also been associated with child abuse and low self-esteem (Melter, 1994, as cited in Public Health Agency of Canada, 2000). Furthermore, estimates of the total monetary rates of return to society for high school completion are also considerable, 17% when comparing graduates to those that dropped out (Human Resources Development Canada, 2000). Not surprisingly, dropouts are 15%

more likely than high school graduates to have received government assistance at some time (Adair, 2001, as cited in Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003).

Lack of education is also related to crime and incarceration. Dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to commit crimes in their lifetime and have a higher likelihood of being sentenced to prison (Catterall, 2001, as cited in Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003). Essentially 50% of drug offenders and 85% of prisoners do not have a high school diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003; Smink & Schargel, 2004). In the United States for example, a 1% increase in high school graduation rates would actually save \$1.4 billion in taxpayer costs associated with incarceration (Lochner & Moretti, 2001, as cited in Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003). As citizens we cannot allow schools to fail to meet the needs of students for the costs are simply too great to ignore.

Leadership Strategies

In order to determine whether leadership practices and strategies meet the needs of at-risk youth, thus increasing retention and ultimately high school completion rates, one needs to understand: (a) the characteristics of those who drop out of school, (b) why they are dropping out, (c) what is being done to keep them from dropping out, and (d) what is being done to provide support and assistance to those who have dropped out. Higgins (1995) and Rumberger (1987) indicate that early school leaving is a process of disengagement and not an event brought on by a single incident. This process often reaches a crisis stage during grade eight to nine (Richardson, 2004). Engagement is a multi-dimensional construct “encompassing student behavior (e.g., attendance, participation); cognition (e.g., value of education, relevance to future, self-regulation);

and psychological experiences (e.g., a feeling of belonging at school, and relationships with teachers and peers)” (Morse, Anderson, Christenson, & Lehr, 2004, p. 2) all of which are important in school success. When principals promote best instructional strategies, they foster academic engagement of students and contribute to student success.

In 2000, Alberta Learning incorporated school completion into its business plan and included a goal to increase high school completion rates from 70% to 75%. They met with 22 focus groups, consulted with a panel of experts, and reviewed the literature. A year later they published a compilation of the factors associated with early leaving (see Appendix C). These factors are remarkably similar to the findings from other research such as Wells (1990) (as cited in National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2004) (see Appendix D), and Morse et al. (2004) who go one-step further and not only describe the warning signs of disengagement but the preventative strategies (see Appendix E). It is important to note that while any one factor does not indicate that a student is at-risk, combinations of circumstances increase the likelihood. School leaders must therefore not only implement strategic strategies to prevent the dropout phenomena, but monitor students for the warning signs of disengagement if they desire student retention (Morse et al., 2004). In contrast to readily apparent warning signs social risk factors are often excluded, because these students come from middle and upper socioeconomic status families and do not need physical resources. (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989; Franklin, 1994; Metz, 1993, as cited in Robinson, 2004).

Although there is no consistent profile that would describe a student at-risk of leaving school early potential dropouts tend to be retained in the same grade, have poor academic grades, have poor attendance, receive suspensions and or expulsions, often fail

exit examinations, and feel disengaged from school. They are more likely to come from low socioeconomic status families with uneducated parents. These students tend to: be involved in passive activities, adhere to deviant norms, exhibit behavior problems, be arrested more frequently, and exhibit psychological vulnerability (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997, as cited in NDPC/N, 2004, p. 2). Indicators such as academic failure and lack of ability are accurate indicators of high school failure. Repeating a grade for instance is the strongest in-school indicator of who will leave school early. Shockingly, 90% of dropouts have been retained for at least one year (Madden, 1989, as cited in Smink & Schargel, 2004). Not surprisingly, students with special learning needs are among the highest risk students for not being school completers (Richardson, 2004). Frymier & Gansneder (1989) propose that retention is the only major risk factor imposed on students by schools and that all major remaining factors have more to do with where students live, what their parents are like, or how they feel about themselves (as cited in Robinson, 2004, 8).

These factors are not gender specific, although some impact one gender more than another. For example, five-sixths of children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder are boys. Boys are also 3 to 5 times more likely than girls to have a learning and/or reading disability (Richardson, 2004). This may be partially due to the fact that the development of language skills is often slower in boys and the fact that negative peer pressure significantly impacts their desire to read. In fact, failure in reading is often the critical self-esteem event in a boy's life and often leads failure to graduate (Richardson, 2004). Caution must be taken when considering whether these factors indicate a student is at-risk because derogatory

mislabeling of students may lead to lower teacher expectations (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990, as cited in Robinson, 2004, p. 6)

Students that are disengaged from school often exhibit behaviours that have an underlying symptom (see Appendix F). Behaviours such as low participation in school activities and low ability level leads to low self-esteem, problem behaviors, and alienation from school (Wells, 1990, as cited in NDPC/N, 2004, p. 1). Schools can therefore reduce dropout by encouraging student involvement and ensuring all students are able to participate. Participation of students needs to go beyond cocurricular activities and include a focus on effort and improvement since participation builds connections to school, fosters positive relationships, and improves school performance (Morse et al., 2004, p. 5). Cognitive engagement could be further increased by providing students with opportunities to partake in the decision-making processes and regulate and direct their own learning, for when students feel they are in control of their learning, they are more motivated, take responsibility, and strive for positive results (McCombs, 1984, as cited in Morse et al., 2004, p. 5). In order to be successful at retaining students and increasing graduation rates, interventions must address all the behaviours and symptoms as the precipitating factors that lead to student dropout are often interrelated.

As one can see, there are many salient factors that lead to disengagement and eventual school dropout. Schools need to implement interventions designed to address the alterable variables such as situations and experiences within the school environment that aggravate feelings of alienation, failure and dropout (see Appendixes G and H). They also need to address the factors external to the school environment that weaken or detract from the importance of school completion (Lehr, 2003). To help schools to address these

factors and related prevention strategies, Smink and Schargel (2004) not only catalog dropout prevention strategies, but have also organized them into four categories (see Appendix I).

Flexible scheduling would not only meet students' attendance needs, but help them to stay on track for graduation by allowing the re-teaching of material not grasped and providing extra help strategies to get all students to meet the same high course standards. Additionally, middle grades and high schools should teach students the "*habits of success* essential for becoming independent learners – time management, literacy, and study" (Bottoms & Anthony, 2004, p. 8).

To encourage the implementation of these strategies, divisions need to set specific accountability goals for raising achievement and increasing the high school completion rate, and ask each school to develop a continuous improvement plan with specific strategies for achieving these goals. Schools should not just strive to raise standards and hold students accountable; they need to implement intense programs of extra help in reading, mathematics, and science. Further research into the dropout phenomena and ethnographic studies of successful schools also reveal more strategies that may be utilized. In order to be successful, schools need to value all students, provide at least one person in each student's life who is committed to the success of that student, and create a focus on enhancing student connections with the school (Bottoms, 2005, p. 8). Policies should also be reexamined to determine their impact on high school completion. How do age requirements, Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED) exams, and assessment requirements affect student retention? Are provincial accountability indicators balanced?

Do they give an equal emphasis to raising achievement and holding youth in school? Do they recognize schools' efforts to keep struggling at-risk students in school?

It is important to realize that school completion encompasses a broader view than simply preventing dropout. Schools should focus on student strengths, meeting individual needs, building student skills, and addressing core issues associated with student alienation and disengagement (Lehr, 2003). By recognizing the factors that cause students to become disengaged from school, leaders can create strategies that decrease the likelihood that students will drop out. Making literacy across the curriculum a major focus and integrating standards within daily instruction through revised course syllabi, classroom assignments, and assessments aligned with these standards will develop students' abilities as independent learners and is paramount to the success of students. Some leaders feel that not allowing students to participate in the graduation exercises if they have not passed all requirements motivates them to want to graduate. Conversely, other leaders believe strongly that allowing students to participate even though they will not fulfill all requirements is a major factor in motivating them to remain in school (Bottoms & Anthony, 2004). Whatever the strategy, one needs to ensure that it shows evidence of effectiveness. Since there is no one factor within the school context that promotes or prevents student engagement, school leaders must be attentive to: teaching methodologies; curricula; school culture; relationships between students, teachers, administrators, and parents; the physical structure of the school; and discipline and recognition policies and procedures (Stipek, 1996; Yair, 2000, as cited in Morse et al., 2004). It is also not likely that a program developed in one school can be successfully implemented in exactly the same manner at another school since local talents, needs and

interests of students, and available resources will differ (McPartland, 1995 as cited in Lehr, 2003). Rather than simply imitating successful programs, leaders should be focused on identifying key components that occur across programs that are effective in promoting school completion (e.g., persistence, relationships, monitoring progress).

Middle grades and high schools need to establish generic strategies aimed at getting students to meet the course standards that have historically been set for our best students. Principals and teachers must create school environments that allow all students to believe that they matter. In such a school, the message is conveyed that all staff have confidence that each student can meet high standards and that they are willing to go the extra mile to assist students to meet those standards (Bottoms & Anthony, 2004, p. 8).

How the province defines the term *dropout* and how it collects, calculates, and reports related data will also have a bearing on how to approach and address the issue. To meet externally imposed accountability requirements leaders unwittingly create a system where it is beneficial for schools to encourage students to dropout of school so that their achievement results look more favourable. This includes outdated discipline policies that utilize out-of-school suspension despite absence being a strong predictor of dropping out (Rumberger, 1995, as cited in Morse et al., 2004). Educators must do whatever it takes to ensure equity and excellence in our schools, for they cannot continue to work for some students and not for others.

Identification is a useful concept because it may allow educators to prevent future problems through present action. Our challenge then is to identify individuals where the identification leads to improvement and creates an educational environment where students embrace learning, remain in school and achieve.

Leadership Practice

Bob Dylan's immortal words, "*the times they are a changing*", not only ring true for the protest movements of the 60s, but also for today's changing role of the principal. Now more than ever, students are in danger of failing and being left behind. School leaders need to change to keep up with the changing social and organizational context of schools if educators are to reach these at-risk students, and prevent them from losing hope and withdrawing from school before they acquire a diploma. Only through change can leaders meet the needs of these students so that they not only complete high school, but also become able to successfully enter society's highly skilled work force.

In addition to knowing which strategies prevent the dropout phenomena, school leaders should have an understanding of the concept of leadership in order to implement successful change. One does not need to be able to define leadership in order to understand the concept. In fact, there has been a vast quantity of literature generated on the concept of leadership without an agreed upon definition of the word itself (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 5). Most definitions of leadership seem to link it to influence, indirectly suggesting that it is a process which leads to the achievement of desired purpose, and involves inspiring and supporting others towards the achievement of a vision (NCSL, 2003, p. 8). Cuban (1988) makes a distinction between leadership and management by connecting leadership with change while sharing Dimmock's (1999) view that management is sustaining efficiency and effectiveness (as cited in NCSL, 2003, p. 9). Leithwood et al. (1999) concur with this distinction but emphasizes that leaders need to "adopt a *bifocal* perspective" (p. 14), and incorporate both concepts into their practice, a claim supported by Bolman and Deal (1997) and Glatter (1997) (as cited in NCSL, 2003).

Hodgkinson (1991) indicates a further distinction by differentiating between management and administration, in agreement with Kotter (1990) who states that leadership is qualitatively different from both management and administration. Gronn (1999) however, believes that the difference is at best rubbery, while Codd (1989), Evans (1999), Greenfield and Ribbins (1993), and Smyth (1989) all claim that education and administration have “traditionally had very little to do with one another” (as cited in Ryan, 2000, p. 1). It would appear that like most concepts in the social sciences, the definition of leadership seems to be “arbitrary and very subjective” (Yukl 1994, as cited in Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 5). Whatever the distinction, one thing is certain, for at-risk students to be successful schools require a leader whose vision places priority on meeting the needs of all students in addition to creating and maintaining a smooth efficient and effective operation.

Leithwood et al. (1999) attempt to summarize leadership within six models: instructional, transformational, moral, participative, managerial, and contingent, and differentiate these based on the purpose for which leaders exercise their influence (pp. 17-19). Other authors have indicated that Leithwood’s list should be expanded to include post-modern and interpersonal leadership as well (NCSL, 2003, p. 20). Sergiovanni (1984) takes a completely different approach to leadership and indicates that there are really only five forces that define the term including: technical, human, educational, symbolic, and cultural, while Bolman and Deal (1997) discuss only four: structural, human resources, symbolic, and political. Dimmock and Walker (2002), on the other hand, acknowledge eight leadership elements: collaboration and partnership, motivation,

planning, decision-making, interpersonal communication, conflict, evaluation and appraisal, and staff and professional development (as cited in NCSL, 2003, pp. 24-25).

During the 1960s and 1970s, principals were largely managerial leaders and implemented government initiatives. By the mid 1980s, the emphasis shifted to instruction, specifically teachers' behaviours that directly affect the growth of students (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 8). Instructional leaders focus on changes in core technology, vital to reform, but often fail to change *standard operating procedures* vital to the survival of the change. The concept of instructional leader also fails to acknowledge the size and complexity of secondary schools and administrative practice within these schools. Large secondary schools simply have too many teachers and too much complex curriculum for school leaders to be an instructional leader with expertise in all of the pedagogical content knowledge (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 25).

Elmore (2000) indicates that for sustainable school improvement to occur, schools require informal leaders at all levels of the organization. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) concur by conveying the importance that shared leadership and decision-making play in supporting student learning and organizational capacity (pp. 2-3). This form of leadership, known as participative leadership, emerged in the context of site-based management and focuses on the decision-making process of the group, with the goal of increasing accountability and efficiency and the hope of an eventual pay off for students.

During the 1990s, the standards-based reform movement partly materialized out of Leithwood's transformational leadership, which was adapted from Burns' research in the 1970s. These standards forced school leaders to examine what was going on in classrooms given that they were held accountable for student performance. During this

time, school leaders became responsible for the initiation of change, not just the implementation of change and principals began to enlist support from teachers and other stakeholders to partake in identifying and attending to school priorities (NCSL, 2003). With the advent of the learning-centered principal came a shift from focus on teaching (instructional leader) to a focus on learning (Dufour, 2002). Transformational leaders tend to focus on the commitments and capacities of organizational members to continually improve their practice.

Although one may get the impression that the different leadership styles are distinct from one another, this is not the case, as there is considerable overlap. Furthermore, the changes in leadership styles have not necessarily been sequential. In fact, one can still find leaders that operate within each of the different styles, while other leaders shift styles as contexts dictate. Leaders need to start looking at their practice and address the problem of early school leavers. Leaders need to change their practice and influence their school so that they create an environment that not only meets students' needs but also ensures their success.

Practice and Strategy Relationships

Although there is no agreed upon definition of leadership, how it is defined does frame how people participate in it, and for this reason most studies are grounded primarily in one leadership style and utilize that style to explore leadership strategies. This study utilizes Leithwood's transformational definition of leadership as its theoretical scaffolding. The concept of transformational leadership is not only widely accepted, but it also takes into account the influence leaders, both formal and informal, have on at-risk students and high school completion rates. Transformational leaders have a clear

direction and bring about change via a united school vision that is also regularly articulated. Such leaders establish school goals and high performance expectations that are regularly demonstrated to ensure teacher competence. Leadership strategies which ensure students and staff are intellectually stimulated, and that there is adequate support for students as well as teachers. They provide and expand professional development opportunities, and ensure that organizational values and best practices are modeled (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 37).

An important aspect of Transformational leadership is its emphasis on higher commitment and moral purpose. Fullan (2005) indicates that leaders who sustain change focus on moral purpose, recruit good teachers, train and develop leaders, and increase teacher ownership. School improvement should be about building capacity within schools and creating a productive school culture that contains structures that foster participation in school decisions (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 83). Such broad involvement with reflective practice leads to innovation and student improvement (Lambert, 2003). It also generates social trust, which creates a context of “predictability, stability, assurance, and *safe ground* that can support genuine public conversation [as well as] critique, . . . and examination of taken-for-granted assumptions” (Smylie & Hart, 1999, p. 3). When teaching and learning is discussed, leaders should insist that student learning is at the centre of these conversations and decisions.

Only through an inclusive approach can schools achieve unified commitment to school goals. With commitment comes sharing of responsibility, increased meaning and understanding of content, representing high moral values, and greater understanding of change which leads to greater adaptation and more students success (Hord, 1997).

Students, staff, and other stakeholders ought to work cooperatively to implement community decisions. Furthermore, community values need not only be protected, but also communicated. Schools have got to develop reciprocal relationships with these stakeholders to secure support and resources (Lambert, 2003). Leaders need to establish a safe and caring environment, be open to possibilities, and take risks (Patterson & Rolheiser, 2004, p. 3). Such motivational processes elevate teachers' aspirations for their work and inspire higher levels of commitment. This is essential because it is practically impossible to construct sustainable conditions that generate productive learning for students when they are nonexistent for teachers (Sarason, 1990, p. 145). If teachers' aim is to help students become lifelong learners by cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the capacity for inquiry, then school leaders must provide the same condition for teachers (Sergiovanni, 1996 as cited in Hord, 1997, p. 18). Joyce, Wolf, and Calhoun (1993) indicate that the strategies that focus on specific outcomes related to student learning enhance student outcomes more than external pressure to identify non-specific goals such as: *improving exam results* (author emphasis); drawing on theory and research; recognizing the importance of staff development; and regularly monitoring the impact of policies and strategies on teacher practice and student learning (as cited in Hopkins, 2002, p. 5). Shipman and Murphy (1996) espouse six standards of practice all school leaders should possess to be successful (see Appendix J). Alberta Education is also currently engaged in developing leadership quality standards (see Appendix K). Aitken and Bedard (2003) also maintain that leadership standards improve learning conditions for students, and facilitate change. These authors go so far as to endorse educating school leaders based on Shipman and Murphy's standards.

Schools are not factories and successful students are not produced via an assembly line. This approach may indeed even be harmful to at-risk students whose needs seem to be more personal and care-oriented. Furthermore, major educational reform will not come about through uniform application of policy. Rather one must possess a repertoire of skills because leadership is “exquisitely sensitive to the context in which it is exercised” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 4). All leadership strategies should have a human behavioral element to them for the reform research strongly suggests that improving teaching and student learning has less to do with structural changes in schools than with changes in what occurs within those structures (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996). As such, leadership becomes vital for the successful implementation of dropout preventions strategies. This is not to say that these strategies do not include the concept of management since it is only through the implementation of school policies that leaders deal with efficient effective organizational arrangements. What has been shown, however, is that leadership seems to be a vital ingredient for student success since leaders are capable of enormous influence over their schools. When student success is studied, one notices that there are normally successful leaders present and that despite social context, internal politics, and external pressures, these leaders seem to adopt similar well balanced styles and practices (Barker, 2001, p. 1). Be that as it may, their influence is mediated through teachers, seeing as teachers are the individuals that have daily contact with students.

A further concern is that many proposed strategies that claim to resolve the at-risk issue are episodic and address the symptoms rather than the causes. In order to successfully prevent students from dropping out, transformational leaders need to focus

on practices that endorse systemic reform. It is important to note that while leadership strategies focus on influencing students, leadership practice focuses on influencing teachers. Furthermore, the meaning of leadership does not change when qualified by the term teacher. What does differ is how that influence is exercised and to what end (Leithwood, 1999, p. 116).

Transformational leadership practices can be categorized into three main practices: (a) setting direction (vision, goals and high expectations), (b) developing people (individual support, intellectual stimulation and modeling), and (c) redesigning the organization (culture, structure, policy and community relationships) (Leithwood, 1999, p. 39). The findings from this research will show that the dropout phenomena is related to leadership practices and relates to and supports the implementation of these strategies to help bolster student retention and graduation rates.

Setting direction

Direction setting is an integral part of most definitions of leadership and a function of building a shared vision, developing goal consensus, and creating high performance expectations. "There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared" (Nanus, 1992, as cited in Leithwood et al, 1999, p. 58). Transformational leaders create vision that creates purpose, excites staff to change their practice, and relates the initiative for change to the larger social mission (Leithwood, 1999, p. 58). In order to move towards this united vision, short term goals must be agreed upon, be consistent with the vision, and compliment teachers' goals (Leithwood, 1999, p. 64). These goals need to be perceived as challenging but

achievable, clear and concrete, and short term enough to seem doable, but understood within the context of long-term goals (Leithwood, 1999, p. 137). When transformational leaders provide continual feedback, harmonize organizational and personal goals, and provide resources to meet those goals, the intrinsic value, effort, and commitment to change increases (Leithwood, 1999, p. 145). To help motivate teachers to achieve these goals, leaders should also have high performance expectations as this further assists teachers in recognizing the gap between what the school aspires to and what is presently being accomplished. Transformational leaders can accomplish such a task by espousing norms of excellence; ensuring staff are innovative, hardworking, professional, committed to the welfare of students; and granting staff the freedom of judgment and action within the context of school goals (Leithwood, 1999, p. 69).

Developing people

Transformational leaders provide support, create stimulation, and model practices that contribute directly or indirectly to the development of the teachers' dispositions, motivations, and knowledge and skills (Leithwood, 1999, p. 71). This support should be equitable, humane, considerate, and meet the personal and professional development of staff (Leithwood, 1999, p. 72). Intellectual stimulation on the other hand allows staff to reflect, can be encouraged by challenging the status quo and bringing colleagues into contact with new ideas and new initiatives, and changing school norms that constrain the thinking of staff (Leithwood, 1999, p. 76). When leaders lead by doing, become involved, work with teachers, display energy, respond productively, request feedback, demonstrate a willingness to change, and model problem solving, they also stimulate individuals to develop (Leithwood, 1999, p. 80).

Redesigning the organization

Leithwood (1999) said that most of a school's success depends on its organizational culture. This culture includes the norms, values, and assumptions shared by its members, and can be developed by implementing student-centered practices, supporting teacher professional development, clarifying the vision, reinforcing norms of excellence, using symbols and rituals to express cultural values, confronting conflict openly, using slogans and motivational phrases, acting in a manner consistent with the schools beliefs, sharing power, and working collaboratively (Leithwood, 1999, p. 84). Collaboration and shared decision-making can be achieved through the distribution of responsibility and power, allocation of staff to make their own decisions, ensuring effective group problem solving, and providing autonomy (Leithwood, 1999, p. 86).

Problem solving

Problems are situations in which there is a disparity between the current state and a more desirable state (Leithwood, 1999, p. 100). If transformational leaders want to resolve the dropout problem, they need to develop a clear understanding of the problem, relate the problem to the school's mission, and take less of a personal stake in any one solution. They need to be able to anticipate the constraints, plan in advance, respond adaptively, and not view the constraints as impediments (Leithwood, 1999, p. 104).

Within this context of change, it is implicit that additional knowledge and skills are learned and that classroom practice improves. Transformational leaders can contribute to such development by ensuring adequate time, finances, resources, and professional development (Leithwood, 1999, p. 161).

Barriers

Unfortunately graduation rates do not tell us about the quality of the education students receive, nor does it indicate whether students are responsible healthy citizens that have a fundamental understanding of how the world works. School improvement is about raising student achievement through a focus on the teaching-learning process and the conditions that support it. Conflict, which is often avoided at all costs, can be important and beneficial in this process because it can foster discussion, which often leads to growth. As with all change, one needs to recognize and be able to overcome the barriers to successful implementation. Barriers to change include: lack of financial resources, effective communication, administrative support, teacher support, direction, role definition, and adequate time. If leaders truly want to develop teachers' leadership potential, they can do so by strengthening the culture of the school. This can be done by developing a shared purpose, using bureaucratic mechanisms for sharing and mutual problem solving, creating opportunities to learn from colleagues, reinforcing key norms and expectations, and using symbols and rituals to support values.

Summary

Leaders play a pivotal role in the success of a school and the success of its students. As such they need to engage in leadership strategies and practices that improve curriculum and instruction given that the effect on students of leadership is primarily mediated by teachers. Leadership needs a purpose and should include change for the better if students are to remain in school and graduate. Transformational leadership comes closest to such an approach and is a powerful stimulant for improvement due to its

focus on the following dimensions: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This section focuses on the philosophical and personal orientations that influence the development of the research questions, the methodology or philosophical approach, the method or technique used to generate the data, and the approach used in the interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, it provides the rationale for the method used to gather the data and the data's use. It concludes with a description of the study in terms of the study's population, procedures used for data collection, and data analysis.

Although there are multiple pathways researchers could take in to understand the complexities of human perspectives, values, and motivations, studies are typically approached with a particular philosophy or set of beliefs. This philosophical approach is normally situated within a particular paradigm and is made up of three components: ontology, the nature of the reality; epistemology, a focus on how we know; and methodology, how we gain that knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). The ontological perspective, realist or relativist, influences the epistemology, just as the methodology is related to the paradigm perspective adopted and the corresponding ontological and epistemological claims. It is vital that the methodological claims and research methods be congruent with the state of existing knowledge related to the research questions. The method should therefore only be determined once the ontological and epistemological perspectives have been determined (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). For this reason, I articulated my philosophical orientation before delving into a description of the method employed.

Philosophical Stance

My philosophical approach is strongly aligned with constructivism, which adopts relativist ontology, a transactional epistemology, and an interpretive methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 100). Ontology addresses one's belief about reality and what can be known. As such, relativists postulate that facts and principles are inextricably embedded within a particular historical and cultural setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111). This history and these cultural implications become fundamental to understanding and being able to study educational endeavours. Within the relativist paradigm I am a constructivist, and hold the view that reality is constructed and re-constructed by individuals throughout the course of their life. Congruent with the relativist's ontology, epistemologically my approach to knowledge acquisition is based on transactions that emphasize the importance of interactions, context, interpretations and subjectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111).

Mertler and Charles (2005) suggest, "education occurs too chaotically to be explained in terms of cause and effect" (p. 298). The relationship between variables is influenced by the cumulative effect of countless unidentified variables and as such creates too great a source of error. For this reason, my research was interpretive in nature and employed a non-experimental qualitative methodology. In accordance with an interpretive methodology, the main method of data collection was face-to-face interviews. These interviews were with individual principals, as described in the remainder of the methodology section. They were of a semi-structured nature and utilized a set of questions that were expanded upon by the use of probing questions and statements. The interviews were structured to try to understand the complex behaviour of

the principals without imposing any a priori categorization that may have limited the inquiry (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 366).

Theoretical Forestructures

As indicated, this study used an interpretive methodology, which focused on perception. It sought to understand events not according to the researcher's perspective, but from the participant's perspective, the emic rather than the etic viewpoint (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This train of thought argues that values are relative and emphasizes interviews as an effective way of collecting data (Jackson, 1999). It took an applied approach in hopes of bringing about a fundamental change in society by seeking out practices and strategies that increase high school completion rates, while maintaining high achievement. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to reflect with numbers, qualitative research is more characteristic of the interpretive approach and utilizes verbal descriptions and explanations of human behaviour (Mertler & Charles, 2005). Such a qualitative approach to data is typically used to answer questions about the nature of the phenomena with the purpose of describing the phenomena for understanding from the participant's point of view (Lincoln & Guba, 1989).

Participant Selection

Alberta Education publicizes high school completion rates on a jurisdictional level. Since the context of the study is Alberta, and in particular southern Alberta, southern Alberta school divisions were contacted and administrators from high schools with high graduation rates were asked to participate in the study. Prior to collecting data for the study, principals were provided with a complete description of the study, including: an explanation of the purpose of the research; a description of the procedures

used and time commitment involved; an explanation of the voluntary nature of the research; and an assurance of confidentiality to all aspects of the research. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at anytime without reason. Furthermore, they were provided with an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss any aspect of the research. Each participant was provided with an information letter and an appended consent form containing the names and phone numbers of appropriate contact people (see Appendix L). Additionally, outreach school administrators from southern Alberta school divisions were also asked to participate in the study to further explore why students are not graduating, why they are dropping out, and what is being done to reclaim them so that they may graduate. Higgins (1995) and Rumberger (1987) indicate that early school leaving is a process of disengagement and not an event brought on by a single incident. This process often reaches a crisis stage during grade eight to nine (Richardson, 2004). Therefore, middle school principals were interviewed to more fully explore the research questions from an earlier perspective. Incorporating outreach school and middle school principals also allowed for the collection of a cross sectional approach with regards to divisional leadership strategies and practices that are being utilized to increase retention and graduation rates.

Interviews

The study was comprised of four administrators from *traditionally structured* high schools, three administrators from outreach schools, and three middle school administrators within southern Alberta. A protocol for interviews was developed using 13 questions so that the potential for bias and subjectivity within the study was reduced. If interview questions were not fully addressed by the response, neutral probes that

encourage additional information, and follow-up questions were used. The interviews were guided by the following ethical principles from the Tri-Council Ethics Framework and express the common standards, values and aspirations of the research community across disciplines that constitute ethical research: respect for human dignity, free and informed consent, vulnerable persons, privacy and confidentiality, justice and inclusiveness, and balancing harms and benefits (see Appendix M). Interviews were guided with the utmost attention to promote impartiality and were audio-recorded and transcribed. During the interviews, administrators were questioned about their beliefs on how school leadership influences student graduation rates and what leadership strategies and practices ensure high school completion for all students, with particular attention given to those at-risk (see Appendix M). The course of questioning identified general themes and leadership strategies and practices that increase graduation rates. Interviewees' perceptions of strategies and practices were coded and analyzed for commonalities and trends.

Data Management

All individuals were assigned a letter to designate the type of school that they are employed by: H, for high school; M, for middle school; and O, for outreach school. Each individual was also assigned a number that follows his or her letter for future identification (e.g., H-01, H-02, M-01). Subsequent to being audio-recorded, interviews were reviewed and noteworthy comments were transcribed to enrich the data. A school type file was created with transcripts numerically organized according to individuals' number. This transcribed data was analyzed to look for patterns and trends and grouped into themes. As themes emerged from the data, further files were created that contained a

copy of pertinent data from individual files. Organizing data in this fashion allowed it to be analyzed from multiple perspectives.

Bias

Through the field portion and analysis of this research, any knowledge and assumptions about leadership strategies by the author was balanced with the data. When discussing leadership, the author was mindful of the interviewees' own preconceptions and judgment of the lived experience of the educational subjects being described. Constructs were elicited and refined through the interactions between the interviewer and respondents using open-ended interview questions. Probing and clarification for further information was utilized to further elicit and refine responses. Audio-recording and transcribing key sections remove the likelihood of overlooking such influences, as paraphrasing was reduced.

While the worth of quantitative research is determined primarily by assessing its reliability and validity, the worth of a qualitative study is ascertained by assessing its worthiness (Elder & Miller, 1995; Krefting, 1991; Leininger, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertler & Charles, 2005). As qualitative researchers we should be seeking to understand social phenomena and represent it in a transparent and credible fashion. In qualitative research, reliability and validity are often explained in terms of credibility, fittingness of the data, auditability, and confirmability (Mertler & Charles, 2005). Similarly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stipulate four criteria that can be used to determine the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility parallels internal validity and addresses the inquirer's success at providing assurances that the presentations and reconstructions are congruent with

those of the participant's views. It can be enhanced via prolonged engagement; triangulation of sources, method, and theory; peer debriefing; and referential checks. Care was taken to include an appropriate amount of direct quotes in the findings so that readers will see that interpretations follow from the findings. Transferability parallels external validity and addresses the issue of generalization by ascertaining whether the researcher has provided sufficient information to allow subsequent readers to judge the applicability and degree of similarity of the current study to other cases where the findings might be transferred. It can be enhanced through the inclusion of thick descriptors. Dependability parallels reliability and requires the inquirer to demonstrate that the research process is logical, traceable, documented and accounts for the variability. Finally, confirmability is synonymous with the traditional notion of objectivity and calls for the researcher to establish that the data accurately represents the views of the participants and that they are not merely figments of the researcher's imagination (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114). The researcher must be cautious of omission as well as statements of commission. Both dependability and confirmability can be assured by establishing corroborating audits: recorded, reduced and analyzed raw data (Hubermans & Miles, 1994, pp. 429, 439). To further ensure these measures of validity the researcher maintained a reflective journal for the duration of the entire research process that chronicles the process, thought, and interpretations throughout the research.

Authenticity is the qualitative term for validity and is more relational rather than methodological. It includes: fairness, the extent to which researchers solicit and represent respondents constructions and values in a balanced manner; ontological authenticity, the extent to which participants' own constructions are enhanced as a result of being in the

study; educational authenticity, the extent to which participants are made more aware of the constructs of others; catalytic authenticity, the extent to which action are spurred on by the research process; and tactical authenticity, which refers to empowerment of participants as a result of the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114).

Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously with analysis guiding subsequent data collection. This constant comparative method, an inductive approach that “blends systematic data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling” (Haworth & Conrad, 1997, p. 221) was utilized to allow for modification according to the advancing theory. Thus, newly collected data was compared with previously obtained data in an on going fashion to further refine theoretically relevant data (Glaser, 1978). Glaser and Strauss (1967) discuss the constant comparative method in terms of four stages: (a) the comparison of incidents by categories; (b) the integration of categories; (c) the delimitation of the theory; and (d) the writing of the theory.

Once transcripts were prepared, coding the link between data and theory began. Such coding entailed breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data for the purpose of theory generation. Words, phrases, and paragraphs were analyzed for meaning. Meaning units were derived of the data by asking questions such as: What is being communicated here and what does this mean (Glaser, 1978)? Pseudonyms, instead of names or numbers, will reference all discussions so that anonymity and confidentiality are maintained.

Schools are not closed systems. Consequently, leadership behaviours are buffered by mediating factors, often external, beyond the control of the school. Compound this

with the fact that different interest groups within the school community vie for power (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 145) and it becomes even more difficult to analyze the impact leaders make. As a result, school leaders more often establish conditions that support school improvement and impact distributive leadership rather than bringing about direct intervention strategies. Qualitative research is inductive and conclusions and themes emerge through the course of data collection and analysis. Caution was brought into play during the analysis, for leaders may speak idealistically and describe what they intend and believe rather than what is. Sergiovanni (1995) cautions that even if schools adopt innovations, there is no assurance that they adopt more than just the name. Schools often adopt innovations that are not implemented or, are fashioned so that they are not different from the way things were and thus the change is hardly noticeable. It is my intention to fully explore the strategies in hopes of not only determining what leadership strategies are effective but how leadership strategies avoid such superficial implementation.

Conclusions were drawn from the qualitative data, as were relationships between responses from the initial research questions and sub questions. Visual illustrations such as tables and figures are limited since the research is based on a small number of participants and thus the data will not be quantified (Jackson, 1999, p. 17). All findings are anchored in educational research, illustrating trends and concepts found in the literature and showing support for widely accepted constructs of leadership and effective leadership strategies that increase graduation rates.

Implications

The study hopes to clearly and concisely identify effective strategies that formal leaders may use so that all students experience success, including those at-risk of dropping out. The study hopes to affect sustainable systemic change to assist in the attainment of achieving ACOL # 11: “develop and implement a comprehensive, province-wide strategy with the goal of ensuring that 90% of students complete grade 12 within four years of starting high school” (ACOL, 2003, p. 61).

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF DATA

In this chapter, the findings of the study are presented and reported in three sections. The first section describes the characteristics of the population in Zone Six jurisdictions; section two provides a description of the interviewees (nine principals); and section three addresses important contextual factors that influence the study.

The purpose of this study was to examine leadership strategies and practices that increase student retention and high school completion rates. The results offer a substantial information source to those interested in addressing the needs of students at-risk of dropping out. Findings may also be of interest to those individuals who wish to increase their school or jurisdiction's high school completion rate.

Description of Participants (Population)

Alberta school divisions and their corresponding boards are organized into six zones, representing different geographic regions of the province. The researcher approached the topic of leadership practices and leadership strategies and how they positively influence retention and high school graduation from a southern Alberta perspective. The study was confined to Zone Six jurisdictions, with populations of 2800 to 8000 students. Zone Six runs south-north from the Canada/US border to Nanton, Arrowwood, Gem, and Oyen and East-West from the Alberta/Saskatchewan border to the Alberta/BC border and provides education services to approximately 45,000 students. Zone Six encompasses two urban and six rural public school jurisdictions, and one urban and one rural separate school jurisdictions (see Figure 1).

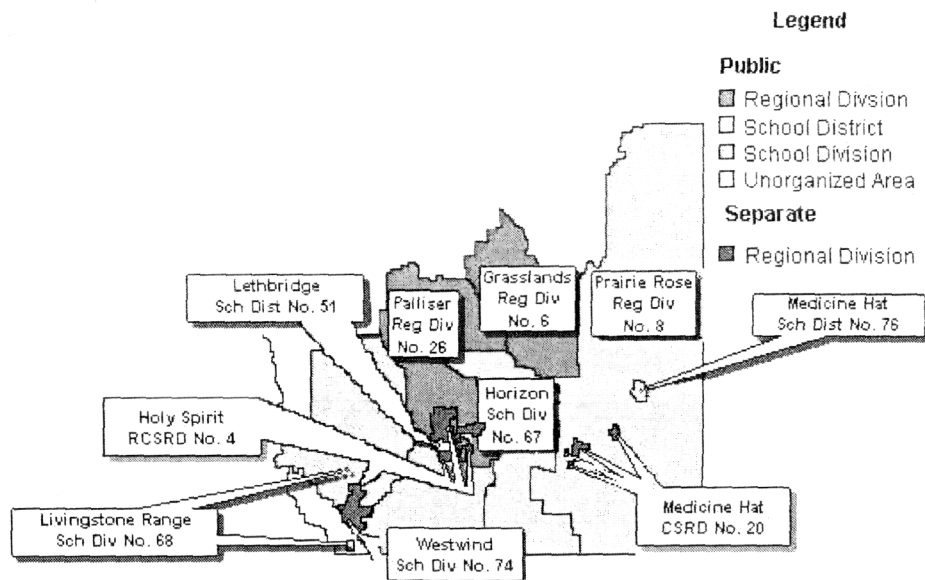


Figure 1. Zone Six School Divisions

From "School Choice," by Alberta Education, 2006, Retrieved January 8, 2006, from <http://ednet.edc.gov.ab.ca/educationsystem/choices.asp>. Adapted.

The population was further condensed by analyzing 1997 to 2003 jurisdictional high school three year completion data to determine growth in three-year graduation rates and 1999 to 2003 jurisdictional high school five year completion data to determine growth in five-year graduation rates (see Table 1). Using the growth in graduation rates data, jurisdictions whose growth rates for three-year high school completion rates were greater than 1.75 times that of the province, or whose growth rates in five-year high school completion rates were greater than twice that of the province were selected to participate in the study (see Table 1). Growth in graduation rates was used to select interviewees rather than graduation rates so that extraneous reasons for high or low numbers could be filtered out. Growth in graduation rates is a result of changes that are occurring within the boundaries of the jurisdiction, changes that had a positive effect on students and their desire to complete high school. As such it was the principals in these

jurisdictions that were selected and interviewed in hopes of discovering what leadership strategies and practices they were utilizing.

Table 1

Divisional Graduation Rate Growth

	Growth in 3 year rates from 1997-2003	Growth in 5 year rates from 1999-2003
Provincial Average	5.7	2.5
Grasslands Regional Division No. 6	-2.3	-3.8
Holy Spirit RCS Regional Division	6.7	0.5
Horizon School Division No. 67	10.0*	0.3
Lethbridge School District No. 51	11.8*	6.1**
Livingstone Range School Division	8.3	3.2
Medicine Hat CSRD No. 20	4.6	9.1**
Medicine Hat School District No. 76	-2.5	-2.0
Palliser Regional School District No.	10.1*	4.5
Prairie Rose Regional School District	8.3	1.8
Westwind School District No. 74	2.9	-0.2

Note. From "High School Completion Rates," Retrieved March 18, 2005, from

http://ednet.edc.gov.ab.ca/k_12/completion, by Alberta Education, 2005, Alberta: Alberta Education.

* >1.75 times the province's three-year high school completion growth rate

** >2.0 times the province's five-year high school completion growth rate

Description of Participants (Interviewees)

From the analysis of the growth in three year and five year graduation rates the following districts were selected: Palliser Regional School District (rural, public), Horizon School Division (rural, public), Lethbridge School District (urban, public), and Medicine Hat CSRD (urban, separate). A high school principal, a junior high school principal and an outreach school principal were selected from each division. Furthermore each school's grade composition was unique, with some schools containing grades 5 to 8, 7 to 9, 9 to 12, 10 to 12 while others contained grades 7 through 12. Due to the intended anonymity of this study only 9 principals were eventually interviewed, and their names

have been replaced with pseudonyms when referring to quotes. One was solely a middle school principal, one was a junior high/senior high school principal (although seven schools contained grade nine students), four were high school principals, and three were outreach school principals. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the participants and the size of the schools. All interviewees ranged from 37 to 53 years in age, with an average age of 46 years. Four of the nine participants were female and eight of the nine interviewees possessed a postgraduate masters degree. Only the oldest participant in the study did not possess a postgraduate credential. Furthermore, several participants possessed two baccalaureates and/or two masters degrees. The overall educational career experience of the principals ranged from 13 to 33 years, while their administrative experience ranged from 4 to 17 years. On average the principals possessed 23 years of educational experience and 10 years of administrative experience. Furthermore principals possessed an average of 2.7 administrative positions throughout their educational careers, each lasting an average of four years. Interestingly, the length of time required for principals to change the culture and climate of a school is claimed to be three to five years (Fullan, 2002). The length of time in their current position ranged from one year to nine years with an average of four years. Lastly, the schools that the principals administered ranged from around 130 students to just over 1000 students; teachers ranged from 4 to 50 with a total staff ranging from 6 to 80.

Table 2

<i>Interviewee Characteristics</i>		
	Total (N=9)	% of Total
Age:		
26 – 35	0	0
36 – 45	4	44
46 – 55	5	56
55 +	0	0
Gender		
Male	4	44
Female	5	56
Education		
Baccalaureate	9	100
Masters	8	89
Doctorate	0	0
Total Educational Experience		
1 – 10	0	0
11 – 20	4	44
21 – 30	4	44
31 +	1	11
Administrative Experience		
1 – 5	3	33
6 – 10	1	11
11 – 15	3	33
16 +	2	22
Time in Current Position		
1 – 5	7	78
6 – 10	2	22
11+	0	0
School Size		
1 – 100 students	0	0
101 – 250 students	3	33
250 – 500 students	3	33
500 – 1000 students	2	22
1001 + students	1	11

Note: Administrators interviewed according to age, gender, education, educational and administrative experience, length of time in current position and school size

Contextual Factors

Education is not an isolated event. It occurs within the context of the school, but also the family, and is embedded within a broader social structure that encompasses the

community. As such, graduation rates, and school leadership need to be understood within the context in which they occur. The following contextual factors emerged from the data and influenced not only the potential for student success but how leadership practices and strategies were implemented, utilized, and carried forth. Seventy percent of Zone Six's school divisions are rural jurisdictions composed mostly of small communities; the Cities of Lethbridge, population 77,202, and Medicine Hat, population 56,048, are the largest. Zone Six is home to the University of Lethbridge, the Lethbridge Community College, and the Medicine Hat Community College. It also contains Lakeside Packers--Canada's largest meat slaughtering plant. The plant, located in Brooks, employs over 2500 employees and in 2000 slaughtered in excess of 1,000,000 cattle, over 30% of the Canadian total (<http://www.lakesidepackers.com>). Zone Six also contains the largest Government of Canada agricultural research facilities in the country with over 350 employees, 18,000 hectares of land and an operational budget of \$25 million (http://res2.agr.gc.ca/lethbridge/organi_e.htm). Although not part of Zone Six, its geographic area surrounds the largest native reserve in Canada and is bordered, in the North West by several other reserves created when the tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy signed Treaty Seven, (Siksika, Piikani (Peigan) and Kainaiwa (Blood), Tsuu T'ina (Sarcee), the Stoney (Bears paw, Chiniki, and Wesley/Goodstoney) (Treaty 7 Management Corporation, 2005). Adjacent to Zone Six's North Eastern border one can also find the 2700km² Canadian Forces Base Suffield, the largest Canadian Forces Base and one of the largest military training bases in the world. Many of the students serviced by these reserves and many of the student from military families move on and off the reserve and base and in and out of Zone Six jurisdictions.

The economy of the area encompassed by Zone Six is primarily dependent upon agriculture and the oil and gas industry, although some agricultural processing, service industry, and manufacturing is present. As such there are labour forces that encourage students to leave school and enter the world of work. The impact of the BSE crisis and low agricultural commodity prices has resulted in a population decline in many of the smaller rural communities over the past years (Horizon School Division No. 67, 2005). These declines have made it difficult to offer comprehensive programs and services and forced many schools to combine classes and offer courses through distance learning. Though smaller schools face some unique challenges, such environments also provide advantages for the students, such as more individual attention and friendly atmospheres that are safer and more secure than are often found in larger schools. On the other hand, urban school populations have not suffered and can afford to offer International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement programs to students who want a challenge and advanced standing in university.

The number of Hutterian Brethren schools has increased significantly over the last few years due to division of colonies. Unfortunately, when colonies divide, jurisdictions incur substantial additional costs, with no additional new revenue provided. Furthermore, a substantial percent of Low German Mennonite families from Mexico and other Central American countries have moved into Zone Six in recent years (Horizon School Division No. 67, 2005). A substantial amount of effort is also exerted on educating these students even though they are transient, and do not usually proceed beyond the upper elementary or early junior high grades. Furthermore a diverse ethnic group of diverse cultures are settling in parts of Zone Six, moreover several jurisdiction profile reports not only note

that average income for individuals and families are significantly lower than the provincial average, but that the educational level of the members of their communities are also lower than provincial average. These aspects of Zone Six have profound implications for schooling, retention and graduation rates.

The instructional programs of most Zone Six schools are enhanced by counseling services that include social/emotional, educational and career counseling and by numerous extra-curricular programs that includes a variety of athletic, fine arts and student leadership opportunities. A final contextual factor is the observation that the number of special needs students has increased (Horizon School Division No. 67, 2005). Often these students' needs are complex and due to geographical location and a shortage of professionals in southern Alberta their needs cannot be adequately met.

CHAPTER FIVE: LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

This chapter addresses the strategies leaders utilize to help bolster student retention and graduation rates mentioned by nine principals whom were interviewed utilizing 13 questions found within the interview protocol (see Appendix M). The chapter is delineated into four sections: characteristics and factors that lead to dropping out; strategies that increase retention and graduation rates; making students successful; and recovering students that have dropped out.

Characteristics and Factors that Lead to Dropping Out

The major characteristics of dropouts and the factors that lead to early school leavers as mentioned by the interviewees are summarized in Table 3 and do indeed correlate with the literature (see Appendix C and D).

Table 3

Dropout Characteristics and Factors Influencing Retention

	Total (N=9)
Diverse	9
Lost/Disengaged	9
Does not meet need/Irrelevant	9
Peer and labour influences	6
Readiness	5
Pregnancy	5
Previous Failures	5
Drugs	5
Transient	5
Don't fit in	4
Family	4
Special needs	3
Pushed out	3
School size	3
Gender	2

Note. Administrators' replies to the questions, (1) What are the characteristics of those who drop out of school? (2) Why are students not graduating? (Dropping out?)

Total column is number of administrators that mentioned factor and or characteristic.

Most of the principals stressed that the students that are at-risk of dropping out cannot be categorized into one category or described using one characteristic. They felt that these students come from too diverse a background, and exhibit characteristics that are too diverse to simply be able to predict whether or not they will or will not graduate. William described his experiences, “Just when you think you have heard it all you find out that uh-uh you haven’t heard nothing yet”. Betty’s description exemplified this belief:

I don’t even think you could even put them in a box. I could pick out 10 kids right now and put them in this room and they would all look different. You would say is that a drop out? Is that a drop out? They would not even look the same. You would think why that one? Why that one? Why that one? They are all so different, so very different. You have some that are great looking girls and guys that seem to have it all together and they could be the ones dropping out. I can’t think of characteristics because just when I think I have you pegged, in walks another two and they totally don’t fit in the mold.

The factors that cause students to drop out are not universal. Each student has their own unique trigger, which leads them to make the decision to dropout. Educators need to address every student’s needs by focusing on the factors that cause students to dropout for doing so will not only increase retention but graduation as well. Although there appear to be 14 primary themes, all principals stressed that these students were disengaged from school and seemed to be lost. The student’s reasons for being disengaged varied, but ultimately their perception is that school is irrelevant because it does not meet their needs. Dave for instance shared that dropouts are not interested and not motivated in school and life in general:

These kids are directionless, hard to motivate, and uninterested. Not just in school but in anything. You don’t normally get kids who are interested in sports dropping out. You don’t normally get kids who are interested in music dropping out. You don’t normally get a kid interested in school dropping out. The kids that drop out are not interested in doing anything.

William believes that the connection critical for being successful in school is often lost because students do not value the education schools provide. William explained,

Some of them have lost a connection with either friends or school. There has been a loss of connectivity to the value that they feel that schooling is going to help them. So they look at where am I going, what are my alternatives? ... I don't see the relevance right now of high school. Some of the students look short term and they are looking at the fact that they are not going to college or university anyway. They may not be able to afford it. They have no interest in it so why am I spending my time in high school.

Cindy on the other hand believes that it is the loss of relationships that prevents students' needs from being met:

The significant reason why children drop out of school according to most of the research besides from a lack of success in previous grades is the lack of a connection with a significant caring adult in their current educational life. That does not mean that there are not caring adults but that the child does not necessarily feel connected with an individual.

Meeting students' needs is critical if they are to graduate. They need to feel a sense of belonging and see a purpose for staying in school. Betty shared her fear that this is not being accomplished successfully for the students that dropout: "A lot of them don't feel part of a group. ... Others say nobody listens to me, I am all-alone, I don't count, I don't excel in anything, I am just a nobody. No one cares about me." Noelle summarized it best when she stated, "We need to make it meaningful and relevant for them". Jane, a high school principal, feels that students who eventually dropout appear to be indifferent to school. She signified this when she stated that these students often lack affinity towards school, "I come to school. I don't come to school. I don't really care." On the other hand, Cindy, an outreach principal, goes one-step further by stating that students that dropout not only perceive that the school does not meet their needs but that other issues or factors in the students' life are taking priority. She explained,

The other factor is *so-what*. Why does [retention and graduation] matter? If the child can answer the question, why does it matter to you that you graduate? Or what is it about graduation that matters? ... If they have an answer to, so-what, then their motivation to continue on and get a certificate or diploma is higher. The child that can't answer the, so-what answer, is more likely to dropout. ... If they don't have a so-what answer, I'd like to *but* I work, I'd like to *but* I live independently, I'd like to *but* I have a drug habit, then the *but* becomes more important or more real.

The attitude and behaviour of a student's friends can also have substantial consequences for that student. Dave explains, "For some kids I think that if all of their friends drop out they would drop out but if all of their friends are here they stay here." If schools and students' peers within schools fail to meet students' needs, a student might look elsewhere to get their needs met. For adolescents the need to belong is critical in their lives. This is the reason that they can so easily be lead astray by their peers. If students surround themselves with the wrong group of peers, these peers can negatively influence the student to leave school. Noelle explains, "I had 5 students that were in a real pod. They just fed off of each other and that just spiraled them out." William also observed the effect peers can have on students:

Students will move from one school to another more than ever now. I know that from talking to other principals. We meet once a month. It is amazing how we all know the same students. They tend to go where their friends are and when their friends don't go right rather than making new friends they simply follow them and dropout.

Rather than not placing an emphasis on school, some students place a larger priority on finances and have their immediate needs met or their desire for money met via work. Such desires for immediate gratification may lead to the devaluing of school. Corey revealed that, "Kids are drawn away, they leave school because they have something else to go to. They may choose to work or are drawn away to help with their

family income.” Often these students’ decision to work seems short sighted by the adults in their lives. Noelle provided an example,

Students often quit to work small pidley jobs, never anything big. Nothing you want to do for the rest of your life. No, I can’t say that. I had one girl that missed the second part of her English exam. I just about bawled. The student said, “I want to be a waitress. That is what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

While some students simply want money to fulfill minor wants others feel they cannot financially afford to stay in school. They need to live alone, to get away from their parents’ restrictive rules and/or abuses. This short sightedness often restricts students from realizing that they cannot afford not to go to school. Leaving may seem like the quick solution but the students’ lack of education will restrict future success. William’s claim that labour market opportunities have a strong impact on student retention and students’ overall education is supported by Levin’s (2004) research. William shared his views:

The last couple of years, students have been dropping out because of the dollars they can get in the workforce. ... They can start working without a diploma. We are finding that a lot of the trades’ people are pushing that right now. They are not even worried about the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) students. They are by-passing RAP and hiring students right out of high school. They are saying we will train you right on the job don’t worry. There are a lot of jobs. The gas industry is huge here.

Although educators feel responsible for their students, society is not exempt from students’ failures. William contended that,

We must keep in mind that we are just a mirror reflection of what society is. If society does not have any loyalty or commitments, if they are chasing the all mighty buck, if they are trying to get two of everything, then our students pick up on that.

Another factor that prevents students from graduating is lack of readiness on the students’ part. This factor is closely related to irrelevance in that some students are

emotionally not ready to focus on schooling and do not connect with the benefits of obtaining an education. Corey alluded to the lack of readiness in most early school leavers:

I think when they are 25 they get it but when they are 16, 17, or 18 they don't seem to have that global long term picture of what we are trying to do for them, and they do when they are older.

Noelle has also seen students that were not ready for school. She described one student and indicated that when he became ready he returned to finish his studies, "I do have one gentleman who dropped out and went to work but now he is saying 'I need to come back. I can't chop wood for the rest of my life.' Now he knows, now he is ready".

It is evident from the principals' comments that students, and their reasons for dropping out cannot be reduced to one factor. Although the principals focused more heavily on student factors, leaders must not forget about family, community, and school factors. The interviewees' dialogue with regards to the diversity of factors and the effects and outcomes these factors create shows the true resiliency of today's youth. The reasons that students opt to drop out more often have to do with the number of factors, the severity of these factors, and the frequency of occurrence of these factors than with which individual factor the student is exposed to. The support systems in place and/or the support systems that the student perceives to be in place to help the student deal with and overcome these factors further complicates the dropout issue to such an extent that it becomes extremely difficult if not impossible to predict which student will or will not graduate. It also becomes difficult to fully understand why some students dropout and others remain in school. William noted, "It surprised me which students sometimes

dropout and when. We had a student last year who was a very good academic student who was in grade 12 and quit in May.”

What can be concluded from the literature and the principals’ responses is that each factor brings students one-step closer to withdrawing from their school and their formal education. Principals and teachers do not however know which factor will be the final factor that forces the student to opt out of school. Whatever the factor, one thing is certain. If the factor is not addressed it takes the student one step further along the pathway that leads away from graduation; one step closer to educational failure and withdrawal from schooling. Dropping out is a process not an event and educators must address all the factors that cause, and/or speed up that process for education is far to important for our children to simply watch it slip away. Rather than focusing solely on identifying at-risk students and addressing these critical factors in an attempt to retain these students, schools should be focusing on ensuring that they are addressing the needs of all students. Cindy encapsulated this idea when she stated, “you could build a profile based on a whole bunch of characteristics. However, each one is unique, and thus the profile is ineffective.” Educators must focus on all students and work towards achieving success for all if they are to increase retention and graduation rates.

Strategies that Increase Retention and Graduation Rates

Overwhelmingly, the interviewed principals indicated that the students that are at-risk of dropping out are a top priority for their school’s administration and significant amounts of time and resources are being allocated to ensure their success. Jane shared what she does to ensure she is aware of academically at-risk kids: “I monitor the report cards and look at every report card and look at every issue and look for trouble spots”.

When asked if she truly spends a lot of time focusing on at-risk kids she passionately stated:

Do you know how much time I spend all day every day with those kids? How much of my work focuses on them. I spend most of my day, not everyday but most days seeing those kids, checking in with them. 'I have not seen you for a while. How are you?' How much of my time I sit with them in conversation, sit and listen.

Barney indicated that he not only spends time on addressing students' needs but that he includes his entire administration when it comes to at-risk students:

Our admin team is very actively involved in each and every student in that we try and find every means to find out what buttons to push for that student. It takes a lot of time. I mean I am just coming from a meeting with a student and a parent and we have to meet again afterwards. But the payoff is huge because these are youth that are in a real delicate position in their lives.

Some interviewees felt that the negativity of labeling students as at-risk and using strategies to prevent dropouts is an incorrect approach to the dropout issue. They felt all students have the potential to be at-risk in some way, at some time, and that the strategies that prevent dropouts from dropping out should be utilized and accessible to all students as they are effective strategies that enable students to succeed. Cindy remarked, "Even the title rubs me the wrong way; *Dropout Prevention Strategies*. Why don't we call them strategies for successful course completion?"

Principals consistently acknowledged the necessity of meeting students' needs in order to ensure student success. They identified multiple strategies; these are listed in a specific order (see Table 4).

Table 4

<i>Dropout Prevention Strategies</i>	
	Total (N=9)
Individualized Support (Academic)	9
Communication	9
Individualized Support (Emotional)	8
High expectations	8
Program Flexibility (support)	6
Modify program (support)	6
Focus on kids	6
Attendance, Wanted, Respected, Safe	5
Identify and track	5
Good staff, Importance of school, relevance of work	5
Smaller classes and schools	4
Positive role models	4
Transition program	2

Note. Administrators' replies to the questions, (1) What strategies do the professional staff, influenced by either your leadership and/or the leadership of team leaders of the school, use to increase graduation rates?

Total column is number of administrators that mentioned factor and or characteristic.

When it comes to meeting students' needs, every principal stressed the importance of ensuring academic needs are met. In fact, all principals felt that meeting academic needs was one of the teachers' primary responsibilities. Kate explained how her school ensures students' academic needs are met:

We try to meet their needs educationally. I think we do a good job of identifying them, ... and realize that you are not going to fit a square peg into a round hole. ... We structure their school life a little differently so that they can experience success with what they have.

Cindy's school goes further than addressing students' academic needs. She supports Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and feels students basic needs need to be met before academic needs can be successfully addressed. She shared how her school addresses meeting basic needs. She explained,

Another strategy is our food and nutrition program because one of the reasons kids don't stay in school is because they have to work and make money so that

they can eat or live independently. Things that make kids successful in school include having enough sleep, and being nourished efficiently. They need food, clothing, shelter, and a caring person in their life. Basic essential needs and so we tried to provide them with food. There is food here free anytime of the day, when they come in they can eat. ... We have a trade in clothing program that is done discretely. This is a warm shelter and we are open till 6 pm year round.

Meeting academic needs is about ensuring programs and strategies are in place to address deficiencies and minimize negative influences. Corey described the intervention program his school has adopted to specifically put plans in place to ensure at-risk students' academic needs are being met:

We have a pyramid of intervention where we run a failure report every 6 weeks. Probably not the best term for it but that is what it is. The names of kids that are not succeeding in their classroom are submitted to all the department heads for their department meetings for two reasons, one is to see where they are having difficulty, and the other to see with who the kid and is making a huge connection. This way staff can find out what is going on and what is working in other classrooms.

As Corey's comment indicated, staff should communicate with one another and with parents for only through communication can educators determine where deficiencies are and implement collective approaches to address them. All the participants of the study stressed communication. Another strategy that most of the principals shared was based on the belief that success is a partnership and that all students must have a connection with a significant caring individual outside of their family if they are to succeed. This belief is supported by the literature (Levin, 2004; Vitaro, 2006). Noelle used an example to clarify this point:

We will do whatever we can to ensure that they get the added resources and the support system that they need in place. We have one fellow that came back that we never thought would get a high school diploma. We thought he would only get a completion. ... He found people that connected with him specifically. It is finding those people that work.

Furthermore, Betty gave an example that showed the extent her school is prepared to go to make sure her students know they are cared for. Betty's example also shows the length her staff are prepared to go to find a niche where students can connect with positive adults:

We had one student who was just not interested in a thing but always wanted to write music and download music. The long hair and attendance was just such an issue. We kind of dangled a job shadow in front of him. You keep coming and we will let you do this job shadow at Kregger's Music. ... It totally worked for him. He was thrilled. One day he was cleaning around the guitars and the guy showed him a few things and he showed the guy a few things and now he has a part time job and he is helping with lessons. He is a very quiet kid but now comes to school and works. He loves it and this is totally his area and it is a huge breakthrough for him.

Central to the provision of connecting with students and forming caring relationships that meet student needs is the notion of emotional support. Society is constantly changing and students are in the midst of this change. Their futures are long and for many, unclear.

This uncertainty often creates tension and anxiety and if educators are to address students' academic needs, these emotional needs need to be addressed. Corey stressed the importance of meeting these emotional needs:

We have a counseling department that works incredibly close with kids that are having problems. We keep going back to the kids that are having difficulty. We have told our teachers over the last 3 years that your practice is always going to be assessed on the success of your kids. It is not going to be judged on your mark book, or how well you plan.

Cindy provided more details on how to go about meeting emotional needs. She explained,

We make sure that every child has a significant caring adult that they can connect to. We are on a first name basis with all our kids and we have an advisor program. It is who they communicate with, who they see weekly, who does weekly follow ups with them and the home if they are not living independently. ... We do follow up if they don't show up. Their advisor tracks them down. We miss you, we care

about you, we want you to come back, we want you to be successful, those are the messages we give all the time.

Dropping out of school is clearly related to students not having a strong personal relationship with at least one adult in the school (Audas & Willms, 2001, as cited in Levin, 2004). Corey stressed that taking the time to talk to kids shows that you care. He explained,

Whenever you talk to kids about what is going on, they know that someone is caring. I think the main strength of our school is that there is somebody in this building, more than just somebody, that cares about the kids and that has a relationship with the kids from an advisor stand point, not necessarily a teaching standpoint.

Noelle concurred and also described the importance of forming relationships:

We personally talk about our kids. We go through their schedules with them and talk about what their courses are doing and how they are doing in their courses. The personal touch and I really believe in that. They know that we care about them. That hand on their shoulder, it is that hand on the shoulder. When I'm mad they know that I am mad. I'll bring them into my office and say, 'You know why I am mad.' '*You care*'. 'Yes I do.' So that is the biggest thing.

While forming relationships can be difficult, Noelle indicated that her staff were easily able to form them because of her school's small size. "I would say that is our key factor. We are small, we know all of our kids, and we phone them. You know we have telephone conversations. We email them, everything communication wise". Sometimes the ability to form relationships is impeded due to a students' lack of attendance. Barney explained,

Getting them to come into the school. Getting them to be here, I think is the big one. In fact that is one of the school's goals. It is our first goal. If we can get them to come, get them to make that contact that is big, because once you get that they will start doing something. They will bond with one of the staff, ... we have to have a bond there or else we are going to lose the student. ... You have to bond with them and make this feel like a home for them, come on in this is you place, it is a place where we want to make you feel like it is yours and we respect you and you respect us.

Connecting with students must be the focus of all the staff. Students must also be one of the primary components in determining the outcome in decisions. Dave shared this view, “Anytime it comes to making decisions for convenience versus what would help students. I would like to think that we make the honorable decision. ... I think that we are fairly consistent in that and when you do that in all your dealings you know that it is a priority.”

Finally, Cindy maintains that these strategies should be utilized with all students not just the at-risk ones. What makes the difference between effective and ineffective schools are direct strategies such as teachers teaching for mastery; curricula that is relevant to students’ present and future needs; authentic assessment practices; democratic classrooms where students contribute to rule-making and governance; rational, humane, and consistent behaviour management techniques; warm, approachable, fair and supportive teachers, and a range of ways of being successful are made available to students (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999, as cited in Levin, 2006).

Make Students Successful

Cindy indicated that leaders must understand the problems students face before they can attempt to fix them. She also stressed that society places too much responsibility on fixing its problems on the school. Furthermore, leaders give themselves too much credit if they think they can solve society’s problems because educators have little control over a child’s life outside of the school. Cindy revealed,

First we need more information. Why are they not graduating? Here is the wealthiest province and we have kids dropping out. What are the factors that are preventing them from being successful? We have to determine what it is that is causing them to dropout and then lets put some programs in place. It might have nothing to do with the school. News flash it has to do with the child’s life situation. Low SES level, they are pregnant etc. There may be lots you can do in

the school, that has a little bit of influence but you have no control over the child's life out there.

It is evident from the research and this study that successful leaders must utilize a plethora of leadership dimensions, employ an assortment of strategies and focus on a multitude of factors to prevent students from dropping out. Factors for retaining students are as diverse as the reasons students are at-risk. When the principals were shown a list of 36 strategies, William described student diversity as follows (see interview protocol, Appendix M),

I would see that there are a lot of things in here we touch base on or that we do at different levels and different degrees. It is hard to say that this is absolutely something that we do all of the time. There are so many diverse needs out there and with the diversification of the student no approach can be standardized

The principals indicated that they utilized all of the strategies from the list to varying degrees and at various times for various students. When asked about strategies to ensure student success the principals categorized them into three main themes (see Table 5).

Table 5

Making Students Successful

	Total (N=9)
Relationships and Connections	9
• Focus on Kids	9
• Focus on Staff	9
• Focus on Family and Community	9
Programming	9
Accountability (Tracking and Communication)	9

Note. Administrators' replies to the questions, What do you need to do to make students successful?

Total column is number of administrators that mentioned factor and or characteristic.

The principals indicated that relationships, programming, and accountability were the three most important factors for ensuring student success. Relationships were stressed because they allowed the creation of connections among the following groups:

administrators, teachers, teacher and student, and the school and family and greater community. When healthy relationships exist, programming becomes easier to implement and accountability becomes not only easier to ensure but easier to report. Cindy indicated that students also felt that relationships were one of the most important factors:

We have interviewed and asked them what do you think is the coolest thing about your school. What is the best thing? Without exception they would say the relationship we have with our teachers. ... One of the ways we can prevent kids from dropping out is by reducing the gap between the teacher and the learner. We should be reducing the gap not to prevent dropouts but to make a good learning environment.

Building relationships is about reducing gaps. Corey shared how he goes about creating relationships and reducing gaps:

You need to be there for them, care for them. I have 1000 kids in the school and when they have a birthday I go in their classroom and sing to them. ... Kids will come to me when I miss them.

While Betty did not describe how she created relationships with students, she certainly shared her views on their importance:

Listen to and support students. Should that not be number one? Don't you have to do that in any school? If you don't do that then what do you have. ... You have lost them. It does not matter what you do after that point you have lost them. You have got to listen to kids. You have got to support kids, without that you don't have anything.

Jane concurred, "You better make sure students make a connection with school. You have to make it personal. They have to make it personal." Relationships and connections go beyond the school to include parents and the community as a whole. Such relationships need to be meaningful and relevant or they will become strained, fade, and be difficult to reestablish. Kate explained,

We try to increase parental involvement. In elementary school it is different because you will have parents come in and read to the kids but at the middle school many are reluctant because they thinking that they don't know enough. We are finding less and less parental involvement. They may want to come in for 20

minutes at the beginning of the day but that may not accommodate the timetable. We need to determine what end we are trying to reach. Ultimately the question is are we simply trying to increase their involvement or are we attempting to make a difference in students' lives? Is it a means to an end or an end itself?

Noelle's school desires parental involvement, however parents are often too busy working, consequently, there might be less and less time to be involved in their children's lives. Noelle stated, "We cry for parental involvement but there is so much apathy right now. A lot of it was the fact that it was an affluent agriculture community and when agriculture got hit hard with BSE etc we saw people bow out." Corey talked about the African adage; *it takes a village to raise a child*:

Our counseling program is extensive because we have the school resource officer and we have Alberta mental health who comes in once a week. We have child and family services who comes in Thursday afternoons, we have Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) who comes in Monday afternoons. And so there is a lot of agency supports out there not just our counseling teams.

Jane too, indicated that the whole community is needed to support student success. She also stressed that community involvement will be more likely to occur when the principal is involved in the community. She illustrated,

I sit on community boards. I try to have some partners out there for selfish reasons. So that if I need something I can phone them. I have an avenue to lobby AADAC for more counseling time or through FCSS I have an avenue to say that we need that teen specialist or I need access to early intervention services.

As table 5 indicated the other two factors that ensures student success is programming, which includes superior curriculum and instruction and accountability, which includes authentic assessment. This means that teachers are aware of and utilize the latest research on effectiveness. Cindy shared here views on the latest research on curriculum and instruction and its effect on student success:

I did my masters on why kids leave school and why they drop out and what are proactive interventions strategies. That was some time ago and we have not

learned very much new but we have made strides in providing alternative programs and learned about brain research and the stuff we have learned about adolescent development in brain research we have not yet adopted into our school system. We need to take what we are learning about brain development and brain based research and making our schools better. That is the next step.

Instruction is vital for students to succeed. Students need quality instruction not easier objectives if they are to have their needs met. They need to be motivated with relevant curriculum. Jane stressed this viewpoint,

Making the most of instructional opportunity is my hill to die on. ... I'm fundamentally opposed to lowering the bar. I meet very few kids who can't do the work. I'm picturing the 30-2 class. Those kids can do the work. The problem is motivation and work ethic and commitment. Those are bigger problems than the curriculum.

Once superior programs are in place educators need to be accountable. Schools need to track students, and communicate concerns and successes with the appropriate stakeholders. Corey described how the first step in accountability is being informed:

Every teacher on the first day of class is given a copy of the Individualized Program Plan (IPP) for all of the kids in their class that have an IPP. How can you help students to succeed if you don't know their needs?

Corey also discussed that tracking was about being informed about what components of programming are and are not working. He explained, "We track students like crazy here or at least we try to. Always focusing on best practices, on being better all the time so that kids succeed."

Jane concurred with Corey on the importance of knowing how students are achieving:

I track instruction and achievement; I know how every kid is doing in every subject area. When you go through the report cards you get a really good sense of who was doing what and where they were doing well and where they were struggling.

Teachers have always done *assessment of learning* but current literature from the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) and others now focus on the importance of *assessment*

for learning and authentic assessment. Corey shared his viewpoint on authentic assessment:

Kids by their very nature don't want to fail. If you want a kid to fail start handing out zeros. They just withdraw, just like you would if a professor gave you a zero because you are a day late. We sometimes cause kids to withdraw with our old practices. I really believe that if you work with kids and you're fair with kids you give them marks when they show proof of learning and if it is a day late it is a day late.

Authentic assessment includes using professional judgment. It is about people, not numbers. Teachers need to know how and if students are meeting outcomes as well as which outcomes they are deficient in and they need to communicate this information to students and parents. Doing so allows students to know which outcomes they have achieved, where they need assistance, and allows teachers to implement plans to facilitate achievement of lagging outcomes. Corey corroborated the importance of professional judgment:

Teachers are professionals. If after they are all done they think a kid is an 85 but they work out to a 77 give them an 85. Alberta Education does not like that but that is what happens when you have a very gray world and you put black and white people into it. It absolutely does not mesh. I would love to sit down and talk to them about why those marks don't have to be exactly right. If you go to the doctor with cancer you are going to get six different treatments from six different doctors because they are professionals. Well teachers are professionals; let them use their professional judgment.

Schools need to address all students' needs and focusing on instruction increases students' academic achievement. Furthermore, it achieves Alberta Education's primary goal, "High quality learning opportunities for all" (Alberta Education, 2005a, p. 6). Jane illustrated this viewpoint, "Making the most of the instruction targets all of the kids. To me that is our bread and butter."

Interestingly several principals extended the notion of accountability to encompass not only the school's role and responsibility to the child, family, and community but the parent's and child's role and responsibility in the child's education. Dave illustrated this in his statement, "There has to be a measure of self-accountability. It is easy to forgive all sorts of things but kids have to take a little bit of self-responsibility." Parents need to take an active role in schooling. They need to stress to their children the importance of schooling and the responsibility their child has. Students need to be self-motivated, self disciplined, and they need to take personal responsibility for their education if they want to ensure their needs are met. Dave provided an example of how parents can stress the importance of schooling:

There are many subtle ways that you get the message out to people that school is important. Like when it comes to paying your school fees. The message you try to give to parents and kids is that this is important. It is \$0.75 per day but it is important. I talked to a parent and they said, 'Well I really don't want to pay the fees.' I replied, 'Well it is \$0.75 a day and if you are destitute I understand but there is a message that you are giving to your kid.' It is a far better message to say 'you know what. I am unable to do this because I paid your school fees because it is important that you get a good education.'

Corey also stressed accountability, "Every kid in this building is held accountable when they screw up. They know where the bar is. They know that they are going to be held accountable for their actions." William believed that,

It goes back to the parents; we try to ensure that there is a lot of communication with parents. That the teachers communicate if the students are having difficulty or missing classes. Communication is first and foremost for if students are successful in school they tend to stay in school.

Furthermore, Williams accentuated parents' role in their child's education:

We need to put the primary focus on learning back on the parents. I believe that we have allowed parents to abdicate their responsibility of parenting. It is too easy to not want to go through that fight and say no to your son or daughter and give in. I have been there as a parent and I see and I hear more and more often that

parents are saying I don't know what to do anymore. I just don't want to fight with him. How can you help? My son is being bullied on the Internet. You are the parent you have control over the Internet at home. Do something. Well how am I going to do something? I think that we are taking the onus on. We are taking too much on. It is very stressful to take on more of the parenting role, and without consistency at home it reduces the successfulness.

Another part of accountability goes beyond graduation. Are schools successfully preparing students for the workplace? For society? Betty explained,

Setting goals after graduation is very important. So many of these kids' though focus on day-to-day events. Some might see far enough ahead to get that diploma but they don't see beyond. We try and get them to see where they are going.

Principals are starting to question the responsibilities society has placed on schools. Not only the amount of responsibility but the responsibilities themselves.

William illustrated this viewpoint.

I just made up a list of new initiatives that came out in our district for administration for this year. We have 14 things that have been added to our plate but nothing has been taken off our plate. Initiatives like daily physical activity (DPA). We know it is good but where do the parents come in? Why does that have to be a school initiative?

Kate the middle school principal summarized the issue best when she stated, "Clearly we are trying to put round pegs in square holes in the school and it is not working. Many have not been successful in school. They may be managing to get by but educators are clearly not addressing something."

CHAPTER SIX: TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

This chapter opens with a general discussion about leadership practices from the perspective of nine southern Alberta principals. Following this discourse the chapter delves into providing a description of Leithwood's three primary components of transformational leadership: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization. It delineates how the nine principals felt these components can be implemented and how they relate to retention and high school completion rates. While these are listed as separate categories, it should be recognized that any particular initiative may include activities in several categories and that a leader may be involved in several different approaches simultaneously.

General Dropout Prevention Practices

Principals' responses to the question, *what practices do you, the formal leader of the school use to increase graduation rates*, correlated with Leithwood's transformational leadership model (see Appendix B). The study's participants identified the three factors of setting direction: vision, goals, and high expectations, and the three elements of developing people: individualized support, intellectual stimulation, and modeling. However, the interviewees only mentioned two of Leithwood's four redesigning the organization features: culture and structure. The practices that the principals discussed in response to the question: *What practices do you the formal leader of the school use to increase retention and graduation rates* are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6

<i>Dropout Prevention Practices</i>	
	Total (N=9)
Communication	8
Individualized Support (Professional)	6
High expectations	5
Intellectual Stimulation	5
Mission, Vision, Goals	5
Culture	4
Structure	4
Individualized Support (Emotional)	3
Model	3

Note. Administrators' replies to the questions, What practices do you, the formal leader of the school, use to increase graduation rates?

Total column is number of administrators that mentioned factor and or characteristic.

It is interesting that community relationships were not mentioned since youth do not separate their lives from their educational and career choices and decisions. In fact “most issues for at-risk kids come from outside schools” (Lankin, 2006) yet most solutions are educational. Consequently it seems that parents and society are absolved from educating youth. Although this research focuses on what leaders can do to increase retention and graduation rates, leaders must remember that the solutions outside of school must be brought forward. Dropping out and disengagement are not exclusively a failure of the school system.

Communication between individuals within the school and between the school and home was the only practice extensively mentioned by the principals that was not specifically covered by Leithwood. Although communication was the most mentioned practice, it can be viewed as a process for implementing Leithwood's leadership elements. Communication can be used to express one's vision, goals, and high expectations. It can also be used to intellectually stimulation staff, and show staff that they are supported. Additionally communication can convey structures and policies that

are effective for building community relationships. To implement leadership practices that have a positive effect on at-risk students and increase student retention and high school graduation rates, leaders must be effective at communication. School leaders, teachers, and parents must know what is being done, what needs to be done, for whom it needs to be done, who is doing it, and when and how it is being done.

William illustrated what sorts of things are communicated in an attempt to meet students' needs, "We have in-servicing ... to make sure that everybody is aware of our at-risk students, their triggers, and what follow up we need to do." William also indicated that it is the staff's responsibility to communicate with principals because teachers are more likely to have a sense of which students are struggling. He explained,

We need to know what is going on outside of these offices. That is where the staff is involved. They are really in the pulse, in the front lines and they will see students who are in need of help or misplaced or in the wrong stream and they know that they have to relay that message.

Communication is like a finely oiled machine. Every school employee, like every component of the machine, has a job to do. Kate explained, "Trying to keep the lines of communication open needs a team approach. Everyone has his or her job to do." Cindy concurred, "It is the balance between people and process; policy and procedure."

Individualized support for teachers is the second highest practice that principals mentioned and includes practices such as: encouragement; praise; providing guidance, resources, expertise, and money; and instilling feelings of hope. Corey explained that letting the teachers know leaders are there for them matters, and that being visible is the first step:

I have 50 classrooms and I am in every classroom everyday unless I am tied up at the board office or something. 95% of the time I am in every classroom. Even if it is just to say hi to a couple of kids or to say hi to the teacher. We do things around

here that focus on the kids and the teachers know that. ... The bottom line is that we are all in this together and we are trying to be better every single day. We don't buy into the process that what we do is good enough. It is never good enough.

Dave is also in classrooms on a daily basis, offering suggestions and providing feedback to teachers. Dave conveyed the message that what teachers do is important by taking time to visit classrooms. He explained,

We are in the classrooms so much on an ongoing basis that if I don't go into someone's classroom they will say, 'Are you mad at me?' We have a good idea as to what is going on with our kids. We are able to do that because it is a priority and because of our size.

Providing support for curricular and instructional improvement is critical, irrelevant of whether this professional development is in house or outside of the school, it needs to be brought back to the class and impact student learning. Intellectual stimulation and high expectations are crucial to increase retention and graduation rates. Jane elaborated,

What you do is important and you better be doing everything you can to make sure the kids in your class are succeeding. High expectations and continued learning on their part is paramount. If there are any resources they need, with in reason, or professional learning that they need I will try to support it, but the expectation is that they keep their classroom fresh, that they transfer it to something positive for kids. At our staff meeting on Wednesday I offered them a half-day of PD time to go work with somebody else. One of the fears I have of high school teachers is that they become isolated. ... Sometimes they just need to go broader and look at new ideas and reflect on their practice. I have had one person take me up on my offer but I am hoping more will. Teachers need to get out of the building and need to see how others are doing it; they need to have professional conversations.

Dave also has high expectations of teachers:

I just got the final marks. So I will go through and talk to a lot of my teachers and say you know what, you have 25 kids and 12 failed. Something is wrong. I don't know what, but lets find out because you need to do something different. ... You need to reassess how things are done.

High expectations are one thing but how do they impact learning and graduation? Do students truly rise up to meet the challenge or do they simply submit to failure? The answer to that question lies in the expectation itself. Is it realistic? Is it achievable?

William reflected on these questions:

It is fine to set the bar high, but you have to be realistic about it. Are we setting that bar at an achievable standard? I don't think we are. We are going to see more and more students struggling, and more teachers burning out. I think there are more and more things coming down the pipeline in terms of raising that bar.

Ninety-eight percent of parents say graduation is important, yet only 67% of students in Alberta graduate (Barr-Telford, 2006). This discrepancy is alarming. Parents, leaders, and teachers need to start communicating the importance of schooling and leaders need to encourage and provide opportunities for teachers to communicate with teachers about which students are having difficulties and where these students are experiencing difficulties. High expectations are only half the story. The other half is ensuring that teachers and students have the supports in place for students to succeed. Students do not drop out, they fade out, and without communication principals and teachers won't see the fading till they have vanished.

Setting Direction

Besides influence, direction setting is a basic trait of most definitions of leadership and is a function of building a shared vision, developing consensus on goals, and creating high performance expectations (Leithwood, 1999, p. 55). If schools are to increase retention and graduation rates then the school's leader needs to set the direction to achieve these goals. Leaders need to have a vision that meets at-risk students' needs. They need to set goals and have high expectations so that all students can succeed. Leaders must not forget that schools are places created for students to succeed, and that

student failures might lead to disengagement, which might lead to disenfranchisement and dysfunctional behaviour. Whatever the direction leaders set, they must never underestimate the problems associated with at-risk students.

This segment discusses the findings and literature related to the research question: How do formal leaders relate or support leadership strategies that help bolster student retention and graduation rates to setting direction (vision, goals and higher expectations)? The findings are presented as three distinct categories that correlate with Leithwood's notion of setting direction.

Vision

“There is no more powerful engine driving an organization towards excellence and long range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared” (Nanus, 1992, as cited in Leithwood, 1999, p. 58). Creating and sharing a vision is the key to school success. Leithwood cites eight predominant practices at the school level that are associated with vision building (see Table 7).

Table 7

Vision Building Practices

Providing colleagues with an overall sense of purpose
 Initiating processes that engage staff in the collective development of a shared vision
 Espousing a vision for the school
 Exciting colleagues with a vision of what they may be able to accomplish collaboratively
 Clarifying the meaning of the school's vision in terms of practice
 Clarifying the relationship between external stimuli for change and the school's vision
 Assisting staff to see the school's vision in terms of the larger social mission
 Communicating vision to staff, students, parents, and school community

Note. From "Changing Leadership for Changing Times," by Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R.,

1999, Buckingham: Open University Press. Adapted

The principals interviewed in this research discussed most of these aspects in terms of increasing graduation rates. Dave, for instance, indicated that their vision guides the

school. He stated, “Everything we do ties into our vision. We have a consistent way we operate so that we are all pulling in the same direction.” While Kate indicated their vision, “gives the staff a sense of hope”, William was more specific and connected vision to learning and teaching. He explained,

It instills a desire to look at ways to improve. How can we do better in terms of test results? How can we do better in terms of satisfaction surveys? How can we do better in terms of engaging students? How do you know that we are effective? First of all you have to believe that you are all in it for the right purpose, that you are in it for the kids, and that schools primary purpose is learning.

All of the interviewed principals had a clear vision for their school and were able to describe their vision. Additionally, all the interviewees used the word *we* when describing their vision. They talked about it as a collaborative effort, something that was created by principals, teachers, counselors, office staff, and classroom assistants and that everyone bought into the vision. They were also able to describe how the school’s vision increased student success, retention, and graduation rates. Kate described her vision and the purpose of her school:

It all comes down to values. What is our job? Is it just educating the kids? We believe we are not just educating, that is why we chose the word shape. We believe we are shaping the kids of tomorrow today, shaping the affective as well as the cognitive, teaching the whole child, believing that you have to know the whole child in order to help them succeed.

Change cannot be easily implemented from the top down. For change to be successful it needs to be a collaborative venture and be guided by a vision that staff participated in creating, have taken ownership of, and believe in. Kate reiterated this form of vision when she espoused, “It is the whole staff’s commitment. We all formed the words. We even created a diagram that symbolizes it.” For change to be successful and for teachers to learn and improve their practice so that students’ needs may be met

leaders need to create opportunities and avenues for staff to come together and engage in the visioning process. William described this creative process further:

We took everyone, support staff, janitorial staff, everybody. We had a retreat where we had 77 of our 80 staff present. We talked about the effective parts of what a good vision is all about. We took Dufour's research and broke it down into six categories: community partnerships, students, all students, school climate, personal, and curriculum and instruction. Everyone provided input into where we should be going.

A vision unites the staff in a common purpose. It cannot simply be a phrase or sentence that is on a wall. Schools need to use it as a guiding light and refer to it when decisions are made. As William spelled out, "The key is that it does not disappear. We are taking the bullets in our vision and regularly asking the staff. How do we know that this is happening in our school? How do we know that we are trying to live up to our vision?" Noelle concurs and also stressed that,

Visioning is ongoing and is constant work. Constantly reading, looking, and finding out what is affecting kids. Listening to what other people are discovering and looking at the jar that is constantly swirling. It needs to be a team approach, a collaborative endeavour.

Betty depicted how her school keeps their vision at the forefront of everything they do:

We constantly talk about our goals and vision. At our staff meetings we talk about them, review them. Where are we? Where are our goals? Where are we at with the vision? Where are we at with students? What are our feelings with where we are? Where do we go from here? We talk students all the time. We talk strategy. ... I don't want to be a top down person, I want them to give me their ideas because this has to be a team deal and it is so easy for me to come down and say this is what I want but I don't want it to only be from me.

As William stated earlier, "the key is that it does not disappear", it cannot go away nor can it be static. A school's vision needs to change as the school changes. Williams clarified this idea further, "Our vision statement is flexible and can be modified. We are not going to say what a great vision statement and put it aside."

Leaders and the entire school staff need to espouse the vision. The entire staff needs to support it, adopt what it means, and be advocates on its behalf. Cindy explicated,

Basically our vision is *Reaching Out to Learn and Learning to Reach Out*. We live it, by reaching out to learn via our professional learning community (PLC). We are constantly in a learning mode ourselves, we have a book club, and we read books and share books and then talk about what we have learned. ... We help our staff know how to reach out to learn, and it filters to our students.

A vision should excite colleagues about what they may be able to accomplish collaboratively. Noelle expounded, "Evidence shows that change can't take place from the top down. It is a collaborative approach. If you don't have your people on board who honestly believe and care about kids and are passionate about kids you are going to lose them. If we all believe, we will succeed." Vision needs to provide guidance and should clarify practice both in terms of programming and instruction. Kate provided an example to support this,

The decisions that are made in school are all about what is best for students not what is best for teachers or staff. We just recently had to fill a temporary position, and interviewed four candidates. ... If we took a look at the whole school, two of those three would have fit into the school better. This position however was working with at-risk students and we ended up hiring the other candidate because we felt that they would be better able to serve those students.

To provide guidance, a vision must be effective, achievable, and assessable. William disclosed some of the data his school looks at when evaluating their vision:

How do we measure our vision? Well the curricular part we can measure by the data that is being provided, data like the provincial achievement tests (PAT) and diploma exams, the number of students achieving acceptable standard and standards of excellence on exams, the number graduating, and the number receiving the Alexander Rutherford Scholarship. The non-curricular you judge with surveys and survey results and by keeping an ear open for the pulse of the school, by determining what is happening in your school body, what your parents are saying, what their concerns are, and what school council has for issues or does not have for issues. There is a lot of communication and data that is involved.

As a leader one must weigh the relationship between external stimuli for change and the school's vision. This means taking what is happening in students' lives into account. Kate explained,

We communicate our vision; we attend to the whole child, we realizing that if something is happening at home we need to be aware of it, as much as we can be. Treating each kid not equally but equitably, knowing that they don't come from a great background.

There are a multitude of factors that place students at-risk and only by being flexible can educators meet these students' needs. Betty supported this with an example,

Sometimes kids come in treating you like a piece of dirt. You need to remember that it is just a defense mechanism for them because they have been hurt so many times. Don't prove them right. They deserve the best of everything you can give them. Sometimes it is really hard to do, especially if they don't drop that attitude but you need to be patient and take their circumstances into account.

Once principals and teachers recognize and understand the factors affecting students they can start to address students' needs and start to make progress towards increasing retention and graduation rates. Leaders need to look at all the factors without prejudice. Only then can leaders see the true effect of these factors on students. For example, being withdrawn may place a student at more risk of dropping out than an aggressive student, yet Alberta Education policies dictate that the student who acts out receives support. Leaders need to look closely at students' needs and implement supports where they are needed not where they appear to be needed.

Leaders need to assist staff to see how the school's vision fits into the education systems' larger social mission. Leaders need to encourage teachers to connect with kids, create relationships, create positive high expectations, and provide opportunities for meaningful participation. These ideas are important as Jane explained.

I want my teachers to like being with kids and I want them to make relationships and form connections with kids. They need to be approachable and personable, energetic, enthusiastic, passionate, and they need to deliver quality instruction. I want them to treat each other well and I want them to learn so that kids succeed.

A school's vision that takes the larger social mission into account needs to be communicated to staff, students, parents and the larger school community in order to become the bedrock on which the school's decisions are made. School leaders and administrators can start this process by making it visible. Cindy described the location of their vision statement, "There it is, on the wall, and it is on the wall in every room." Kate also explained how they made it visible. "On a basic level we placed a painting on the wall; it is the very first thing you see when you walk in the door. There is also a really big mural in the gymnasium and we have it on our letterhead." This alone is inadequate. It needs to be more than simply a statement on the wall. It needs to be communicated verbally and constantly used to make decisions.

Visioning is one of those obscure ideas that many educators have a tough time comprehending. Leaders often think that once they create a vision that their school will miraculously change due to that vision. This is not so. It is an arduous process that involves time and effort. Time to communicate the vision, to create acknowledgement and acceptance of the vision, and time to utilize the vision to foster change. Leaders are only leaders if they have followers and followers do not follow simply because there is someone leading the way. Furthermore, leaders must be going the right way and need to convince followers that they are worth following. Principals are hired to be leaders and must create relationships with their staff that foster visioning and common directions for growth if they want any hope of influencing change. Jane shared her thoughts on the difficulties of visioning:

You implement the vision through dialogue and conversation. I think you have this grandiose vision of being a principal and that you will have all this power and you just make things happen. It is all nonsense. The only way you can make things happen is if you have a one-on-one connection with the bulk of your staff. You work with professional adults who get paid a salary to exercise judgment every single day. Teachers will not follow you blindly, especially if there is no trust and credibility. ... In terms of implementing the vision it is mostly done via one-on-one conversations and gentle corrective measures. If you see something happen hopefully you have built those relationships where you can have that conversation without causing major staff upset. In a staff you don't want pockets of dissent or support. You really need harmonious relations.

As Jane illuminated, possessing a vision does not mean staff or anyone else for that matter will buy into it, nor does it mean staff will follow you. Leaders need trust, credibility, relationships with their staff, and involvement of staff in the creation of the vision before staff take ownership of the vision. A vision, widely shared can influence and support school improvement. With improvement comes student success and with student success comes student retention and thus higher graduation rates. Cindy summarized the effectiveness and importance of possessing a shared vision using a metaphorical example:

It certainly helps if you are all on the same train. In previous schools I have had some people on a different track never mind not being on the same train. Even if your strategies or objectives in implementing the vision vary the entire school has to have a common vision. To get this common vision you need to get people on the same track and on the same train. To do this you try to help them see what the vision is and what they need to do to get themselves to that vision and then you give them a time line. Give them resources and support to help them get there and then give them a time line. If you are not going to be on our school's train then you should find a train you are comfortable riding. We'll pull you for a while, drag your dead weight for a while but after a while we're just going to cut your box car lose and we're going to find someone else who is on our train track. If you can't help the person to get there and you have too much resistance than you either remove them from your train or they get tired of being dragged and you help them find a place that works for them.

Everyone wants to do well, but they do not all see the world through the same eyes. As Cindy indicated, people are on different trains, on different tracks, and going in multiple

directions. A common vision allows a school to find a common station that all can head towards. It allows people to set a common destination.

Goals

Once schools have a vision, and a guiding direction, they need to be able to set goals that take them toward that vision. Although Leithwood cites 10 predominant practices (see Table 8) at the school level that are associated with group, and individual goal setting, the principals interviewed in this study never mentioned the concept of individual goals. Rather they all focused heavily on group goals, and how these goals assist schools in monitoring their progress down the pathway towards retention and increased graduation rates.

Table 8

Goal Setting Practices

Providing staff with process to establish goals, and review these goals
 Expecting staff to regularly engage in goal setting and reviewing progress
 Building consistency between school vision and group and individual goals
 Working towards consensus between group and individual goals
 Referring to goals when making decisions
 Encouraging teachers to set and review goals as part of professional growth
 Discussing individual professional growth goals
 Acknowledging compatibility between group and individual goals
 Expressing one's views about goals
 Acting as a resource in helping colleagues achieve their goals

Note. From "Changing Leadership for Changing Times," by Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R., 1999, Buckingham: Open University Press. Adapted

The interviewees did however stress the importance of individual involvement in making these group goals. Noelle for instance mentioned, "Leaders have to be open to change and if they want to set effective goals that change practice they have to be created collaboratively, they can't be top down." The notion of goal setting as being a collaborative venture was consistent amongst most of the principals. Kate for instance

stated, “We establish our goals as a team. We look at what we are doing, how we are doing it and where we want to go. They are very much a team effort with lots of input from teachers. They essentially create them but we guide and facilitate the process.”

Since the purpose of goals is to set targets that lead you to your vision, it is important that the vision is referred to when setting goals to ensure they align. They need to relate back to the school’s vision and need to be revisited on a regular basis. Kate explained,

Goals are important to remind us of the vision. They should be kept in the forefront of everyone’s mind. Once we set them we revisit them every staff meeting. What is happening with the goals? What is the data saying? You need to be sharing the data with the teachers on a regular basis, instead of being something you look at twice a year.

The importance of revisiting the goals was a consistent message from the principals but how that was accomplished varied. Cindy for instance talked about the formal side of goal setting. She talked about the notion of collectively goal setting, how they are to be evaluated, and how this evaluation needs to be recorded. She explained.

We have a staff retreat every year. We revisit our objectives and ask how we are doing. Are we getting there? Are we meeting our goals? Every year we collaborate and collectively produce an annual plan. Our goals and strategies and outcomes are all outlined in this three-year plan.

Kate, on the other hand talked about informally reviewing them at monthly meetings:

We look at our goals dealing with student success in our monthly student services meetings. These include teachers, family school liaison counselors, child and youth care workers, and the administration.

The principals all stressed the importance of creating consistency between the vision and group goals. Corey for instance indicated that, “We set our goals annually and they are in line with district and provincial goals as well as our vision.” Cindy related this consistency between goals and vision to student success and asserts:

We have common goals and a common vision about graduation. Every staff helps every child to achieve success: physically, spiritually, emotionally etc. We do what we need to do as individuals and collectively to help each child. We take their roadblocks out. If food is a roadblock we give them food. If funding is a roadblock we find ways to get funding or find ways to help them find employment. If childcare is an issue we help them. ... We have a graduation checklist. If graduation is your goal we go through the graduation checklist even if they only take one course with us.

Cindy indicated that the school's goals need to be consistent with the school's vision and with jurisdictional goals. If schools are to increase graduation rates, goals need to be broader than simply academic. They need to be about student success and include emotional and social components as well since these also contribute to school leavers. Unfortunately, divisional goals are often not applicable to an entire school or all school staff. Teachers, like students, become disengaged when exposed to irrelevant ideas and when they become disengaged the likelihood of that idea becoming engrained into the consciousness of the teacher decreases. Thus if a school goal is irrelevant to the teacher its likelihood of being met also decreases. Dave stressed the importance of the entire school buying into goals in order for them to be successful. He described how his school created school goals that the entire school can pursue while still fitting within the mandate of the jurisdictional goal. Dave explained,

One of the problems is that you need a goal that everyone buys into, a goal that is meaningful to everyone, one that fits the jurisdiction's goal. Our jurisdiction has a goal that 90% of our kids will meet the acceptable level in each of the four cores. Now if I say we need to set a goal that supports this, the problem is that my career and technology studies teachers or my physical education teachers say that does not affect me. It has nothing to do with me so you core teachers get together and have fun. To prevent this, our school came up with school goals that we think would lead us to the jurisdiction goals but that everyone buys into. Goals that include student engagement, attendance, and practices that all teachers could do to foster achieving this goal. To do this we created a goal on student attachment. We collected the names of the kids that we thought were in trouble. We choose the 20 kids that were most heavily identified and we each adopted one. ... We try to create an attachment with these kids because we know that if there is an

attachment that the chance of success is much greater. Our goal became, every teacher will make a meaningful connection with an at-risk kid.

If leaders want to address student needs, having goals is not enough. Principals and teachers need to believe the goals, believe they can make a difference, and believe that at-risk students are worth saving. Cindy's school created common belief statements in addition to unified goals, both of which address the needs of at-risk students.

We believe and practice that success comes in many forms and that every person will achieve success, will experience success, mentally, physically, socially, emotionally and or spiritually. Every person will achieve success. Now that may be measured differently from person to person, but that is what we believe. We believe that for some kids that just coming through the door may be a success.

Betty specifically set graduation goals, "Our goals are quite simple. They include helping our kids to graduate, keeping them in school and getting them all to graduate. That may sound really lofty but I think we need to do that instead of getting 10% to graduate. I think we all need to say getting them all to graduate." If schools want to make a difference, if they want to meet the needs of at-risk students and increase graduation rates, then they need to set goals for doing that. They need to set goals that are revisited and assessed on a regular basis. At-risk students are often withdrawn and their concerns are often overlooked. This is especially true since the advent of provincial testing and curriculum standards, where students receive time-limited opportunities for success (Jordan, 2006). If at-risk students' issues are not seen, their problems will not be addressed, no effort will be exerted, and no change will come about.

While Leithwood's transformational leadership theory does not specifically discuss ways to measure goals, Alberta currently has a focus on accountability and thus the principals within the study did address the issue. To be able to measure goals, they need to be written properly. Corey exemplified this concept; "We make SMART goals

[strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound] for each of the bullets in our vision and we measure them to see if we are working towards them.”

Jane illustrated how she uses supervision to measure goals:

You use your most common indicators to know if your goals are successful. You use your progress reports, your report cards; you use your provincial results. Ideally you try to go into every classroom everyday. It is probably about three times a week that I get into the classrooms as opposed to five times a week. It is through my observations that I collect data. If I walk into your classroom three times in a row and the kids are working on collages or the kids are playing computer games chances are we will be having a discussion. I expect that when I walk into your classroom the kids are paying attention, being engaged, and it is productive. Even with a quick visit you can tell if it is busy work or if it is meeting the learning outcomes.

Supervision is not the only way to monitor school goals. Principals are constantly collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data. Kate explained, “We know our goals are successful from the qualitative and quantitative data.” William also utilizes quantitative data in determining his school’s goals’ effectiveness. “You measure learning from data from tests. That is not the only learning that is going on, or the only measure you use but that is the one gauge that we know is constant.” Goal assessment includes data collection and data analysis so that schools can improve practice, meet students’ needs, and make future goals. Corey explained,

If we don’t attain our goals we need to determine why. What is going on? Find the answer, and share it with the staff. We must not teach to the lowest common denominator in the classroom. Once you have your answer you may realize that you do not have to change your entire program but simply need to challenge your kids more.

When it comes to assessing goals and determining school and students’ educational improvement, leaders need to know where they started. They need to have a baseline. William explicated, “We are implementing a school review and determining our baseline. How effective are we with our policies, goals, principals of practice and our mission?”

This is my second year here and we are not really sure how effective we are. That is why we want to find our baseline.” Although William endorsed assessing and evaluating goals, he also has a concern with the process. He questioned if the goals are set at the appropriate level and whether they are even the correct goals. Are principals truly working for the benefit of students or are they looking for positive results for goals at the expense of at-risk students? Is there a priority conflict between larger group goals such as Alberta Education’s (2005a) provincial goal number 1 and 2, “high quality learner opportunities for all [and] excellence in learner outcomes” (pp.6-8)? William feels the second goal may have negative connotations for meeting the needs of at-risk students, and questions if excellence in learner outcomes truly meets students’ needs. He shared his thoughts,

We want to do better in our provincial achievement tests (PAT) and Diploma exams but we are missing the boat if we think that we should be gearing all our students towards university. History has shown us over the last 40 years that only about 20 to 25% go on to university. Yet our accountability pillars are measuring the number of students that are going to university. Why are we doing that when 60% of the kids are going into the trades? Those students that are in the trades are going to be every bit as well off financially and emotionally if they get into something they like. Yet we pressure everybody to try to achieve that standard of excellence. To me it is just bragging rights. I would rather have kids get into something they enjoy and have high school be relevant, to enjoy what they are doing. That is more important to me than to have that thing on the wall that says we are number five in the province because of our standard of excellence marks. We are fighting a double-edged sword. We have always tried to pride ourselves that we have the best education and I think we do, but we are not meeting the needs of the majority of our students because the majority of our students are not university students.

Part of William’s concern is that students do not have to graduate to be successful in the trades, and he questions the need for all students to have a high school diploma if they can get into their profession and be successful without it. Such a question, challenges the very foundation of this research as it questions whether leaders should or even need to

increase graduation rates? It also questions whether we should be changing the definition of graduation and whether higher graduation rates truly means more students are getting their needs met. It also questions whether schools are providing students the correct curriculum. Perhaps educational leaders need to reevaluate this issue and create more diversity in the educational system. More diversity would ensure all students have access to relevant curriculum that meets their needs irrelevant of whether they are going to university, college, or directly into the world of work. One has a tendency to steer clear of such controversy but conflict and controversy forces leaders to reevaluate their beliefs. It forces leaders to look closer at their assumptions, procedures, regulations, goals, and ultimately their vision and allows them to change, improve, and successfully meet students' needs. Schools need to provide students whether or not they are college or university bound, with the hope that they will succeed in life.

High Expectation

It has long been known that achievement has nothing to do with ability because attitude, commitment, and interest also have an impact on excellence. Therefore, schools need to have a vision about student success and set goals to achieve that vision because goals provide the stepping-stones toward a vision. Therefore goals need to be set high via high expectations because individuals will be more likely to rise up, and meet the challenge. Leithwood cites six predominant practices that create high performance expectations (see Table 9).

Table 9

Leadership Practices that Create High Performance Expectations

Expecting staff to be innovative, hard working professionals
 Demonstrating an unflinching commitment to the welfare of students
 Espousing norms of excellence
 Not accepting second-rate performances
 Establishing flexible boundaries for what people do
 Being clear with one's own views of right and wrong

Note. From "Changing Leadership for Changing Times," by Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R.,

1999, Buckingham: Open University Press. Adapted

The nine principals addressed all six goals, however, most chose to focus on norms of excellence, not accepting second-rate performances, and flexibility. Flexibility allows leaders to have unique expectations for unique individuals so that everyone grows because everyone is challenged at his or her level.

Jane illustrated the idea of espousing norms of excellence and not accepting second-rate performances:

You need to have consistently high expectations, not just this week but consistently high expectations. I've been in this long enough to know that the kids ultimately have a right to fail but the teacher does not have the right to give up. ... I expect staff to have high expectations for themselves and their students. Not to think we have a lot of the rift raft coming here and we don't need to worry too much. I won't tolerate that. I expect them to treat all kids like they are the cream of the crop. If you treat them as such then that is how they will respond. If you treat them like trash then you can expect trash.

Noelle stressed unique expectations for each individual that challenge them and encourage them to grow. She stated,

Even though you have high expectations it does not mean that you don't care about anything else. I have high expectations for my staff and my students. There is nothing wrong with high expectations. I do however have different expectations from one staff to another.

Dave also talked about high expectations that vary for his staff and his students:

You have to set goals for your students and your staff, you need to set a barrier in front of them and then you help them over the barrier. Your expectation should

not be that everyone gets 80% on the diploma exam because that may be unrealistic for everyone. For some it maybe that they are going to come everyday, they are going to be here everyday and do their work. You need to challenge your kids and your staff.

He goes on to state that you need to have high expectations in regards to meeting at-risk students' needs: "I have high expectations for my staff. I expect them to get along with all our kids and to know their subject area, to work hard, evaluate fairly, and ensure all students succeed." Every student in a teacher's class deserves to learn and has the right to learn. Leaders need to remind teachers of that fact and support decision that are made in the best interest of students and oppose decisions not made in the best interest of students. They need to ensure they hire qualified staff, and supervise them so that weaknesses are discovered and rectified. Leaders also need to put processes in place that support teacher growth when deficiencies are uncovered. To increase graduation rates leaders must focus on achievement. Corey shared this viewpoint,

We are going to be an effective school if kids are achieving. You are not an affective school if they are not achieving. So everything that you do needs to drive towards either getting the kids to score better or have more success. That is one of our goals, we want to be better achieving. We don't want kids to be here more often, or to behave better because when they achieve all those things happen. Achievement is our focus.

Jane on the other hand believes that you need to focus on kids in general but that you also need to reinforce their responsibility and accountability about their own learning. Jane shared her beliefs,

The two things that kids will hear me say is be nice to each other and you have to do more than just stay warm and keep dry. You need to put in your effort here and do your share and I expect the teachers to do their share as well. It means that every single day teachers need to have a class worth attending and to never become so rigid or so tight or so fearful that they are not capable of doing something different.

Noelle also supported Jane's notion of holding students accountable, but educational leaders need to shoulder a significant portion of the accountability. Leaders can celebrate the successes but they also need to recognize and acknowledge that they are partially responsible for the failures as well. Noelle stated this viewpoint,

I do remember one student that I did lose, but you know what, he had to go. He was fighting his mom about staying there; he was fighting me about staying there. It got to a point where he was going to hurt people. 'I am going to get out of here no matter what', he would say. He actually kicked a kid in the head, and that was it. I remember the deputy superintendent coming down for a meeting, and mom saying that I wanted him out of the school. She had no idea I was actually an advocate for this kid. The kid looked at mom and said, 'No mom, I want out, you just aren't reading the signs. I have wanted out for some time. She is just finally saying she has had enough and she is letting me go.'

The question is not whether to let students leave school or not, but why they want to leave and what principals and teachers could and should be doing to prevent students from leaving.

The study's participants go one step further than Leithwood's transformational leadership model in terms of high expectations. Not only did they speak openly about the need to have high expectations and how to support their implementation but they also spoke about how to determine their effectiveness. Cindy explained,

You have to have high expectations and need to model them yourself. You'll know they are effective because kids and staff reach their goals. ... You have to have professional growth plans (PGP) and staff PD plans in place. If you provide PD and you model it and you set the standard and they know clearly what the expectations are the chance of meeting those expectations increases.

High expectations is not simply about knowing what is expected but allowing your staff to improve their practice beyond the expectations. Noelle explicated,

You don't stop your people. Let them shine. Your staff are your kids. Shape them and let them go. It is what we should be modeling for our own kids. You have to accept change and teach about change and the idea of accepting change.

There needs to be consistency between a school's vision and goals and the high expectations that are placed upon the individuals within the school. More importantly, the vision, goals, and high expectations need to be revisited and modified. Kate revealed,

Our high expectations are reflected in our goals. When we made some of our goals this year, numerically the numbers were not made on sound data. Now that we are getting some of the data coming in we have realized that we are already reaching those goals so now we need to attend to these goals further. We need to revisit them and bump them up.

It is a myth that at-risk kids cannot learn; it is simply a matter of connecting with them, and engaging them and making learning relevant. Leaders need to create a system that meets their needs. It is imperative that educators reevaluate a system that solely focuses on closing the achievement gap and raising the bar. Doing so fails to meet the needs of at-risk students and will not increase graduation rates.

Summary

Setting direction is not as simple as coming up with a vision, creating goals, and having high expectations. If it was, anyone could be a principal and a leader. Leaders need to know where they want to go and how they will go about getting there. They need to know how to rally the staff to move towards the vision, and how the vision affects, or better yet, meets the needs of at-risk students. Effective leaders see the vision, help staff see the vision, and work effectively with staff to get to the vision. If schools are to increase graduation rates they need effective leaders leading our people in a direction that facilitates meeting at-risk students' needs so that they experience success, remain in school and ultimately graduate.

Developing People

Transformational leadership practices contribute directly and/or indirectly to the development of teacher's dispositions, motivations, bodies of knowledge, skills, and are required to create a set of shared directions for the school to facilitate the pursuit for improved teacher practice and student learning (Leithwood, 1999). If schools are to increase retention and graduation rates then the school's leader needs to develop his or her people by providing support, intellectually stimulating their staff, and modeling practices and values because these facets are important to meeting the needs of at-risk students. Leaders need to develop people so that students can be successful, remain in school, and obtain a high school diploma.

This segment discusses the findings and literature related to the following research question: How do formal leaders relate or support leadership strategies that help bolster student retention and graduation rates to developing people (individualized support, intellectual stimulation and modeling)? It is discussed in three subsections that correlate with Leithwood's notion of developing people.

Providing Individualized Support

Leaders need to respect followers and be concerned with their personal feelings and needs (Podsakoff et al. 1990, as cited in Leithwood et al, 1999). Doing so assures teachers that those in leadership roles will take the problems they are likely to face seriously. Such assurances increase the likelihood that teachers will change their practice. Leithwood cites twenty predominant practices, grouped into five facets that are associated with individualized support (see Table 10).

Table 10

Providing Individualized Support

 Equitable, humane, and considerate treatment of one's colleagues

Support for the personal, professional development of staff

Developing closer knowledge of individual colleagues

Recognition of good work and effort

Approaches to change

 Note. From "Changing Leadership for Changing Times," by Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R.,

1999, Buckingham: Open University Press. Adapted

The nine interviewees all focused on two facets – equitable, humane, and considerate treatment of one's colleagues and support for the personal and professional development of staff. Both ideas help support staff so that they too are more human and more caring about at-risk students. Staff which are better prepared to meet the needs of at-risk students might influence these disengaged students to succeed and thus graduate.

Equitable, humane, and considerate treatment of one's colleagues is more than just being polite. It includes physically being there when teachers need help, listening, questioning, assisting with reflection, and providing financial support to meet deficiencies. Dave shared this viewpoint, "You need to be there in terms of physical, financial, and emotional support. For example, I am very protective of the people in the building in terms of employment, and continuing contracts." Being available and accessible to staff can also be supporting. Corey shared this viewpoint, "I believe the staff feels very supported in this building. My door is always open. They come constantly. We have two-way communication that is very honest." Cindy metaphorically explained,

Individual support is about listening and loving. I know that sounds airy fairy and girly but when you listen to people and you hear them and when you love what you do and the people around you and when you love the magic that they do with children and you listen to them so that you can hear what you need to do so they can do the magic, that is support.

Professional development that supports teachers was the other major facet discussed by the interviewees. Kate for instance goes the extra mile to ensure her staff are happy attending PD. She stated,

We had two part time teachers that wanted to attend a full day conference. I did some legwork with central office so that they could get paid for a full day. It meant a lot to them that I would go out of my way to do that for them.

Corey also supports individuals but treats each uniquely and goes the extra distance to coach new staff members:

I support people differently. With newer staff I am there all the time, trying to talk about ways to manage their class, things that have worked for me or other people, and what I see in them. I give them literature on what other people say.

It is about meeting staff needs, not solving their needs. Cindy explained,

Most people want to jump in and fix that something that is broken in someone's life or relationship but then the person does not own the result. For our staff to be able to do the magic to make it magic we need to listen, care about them enough to let them do their magic, we need to take the roadblocks out and provide them with the support that they need.

Betty believes PD is one way to assist teachers to reach all students and make them successful:

I really push PD and I encourage my staff to go out and visit other classrooms and other schools. ... I encourage and push it because I feel you get so much out of it. You need to get out there because too often teachers are stuck in their own little house.

Jane also believes leaders need to remove roadblocks, and feels finances are usually the major roadblock and providing money the roadblock remover, "If they are really keen about something and need support to check it out further then you need to find that support. Most of it comes down to money; they either want time or resources." PD is an important component of PLC. If principals and teachers are to identify and resolve or at least attempt to resolve the factors that place students at risk they need to learn more

about the things that are not working. Educators need to learn more about how to change them so that students' needs are met. Leaders need to support teachers and meet their needs so that they can continually learn. William illustrated this idea,

I think PD is a big thing. Teachers have to know that these are learning centers and that learning is not only for students. I think that the development of PLC has brought about something that teachers are buying into. They need to upgrade their teaching methods and find out the different types of learning that occurs within students. You need to provide them with opportunities, and make sure that funding is there for them to go to PD and encourage them to go to PD ... you have to be willing to put some bucks behind it.

When leaders support teachers and meet their needs, students' needs are more likely to be met. School leaders need to support staff with funding and professional development opportunities in addition to praising them and acknowledging their attempts to support student success. Leaders need to demonstrate confidence in teachers' practices and recognize practices that increase retention and graduation rates. One can never go over board with genuine praise. Corey commented, "We are also very praise oriented. I don't think that you can ever do that enough." Praise goes a long way. It does not have to be a large formal process. Noelle stated that sometimes the little things leaders do, the subconscious remarks they make, or the casual things they do not even realize they do help staff; "I have a fellow on staff right now that left me a note that said thank you. I don't know what I did specifically but he said I believed in him in something that he did not know he had."

Individual support means knowing your staff. Knowing them to such an extent that you realize that the complaint they are making is not always the problem they want resolved but rather a symptom of a deeper problem. Support is assisting teachers to find the deeper problem and helping them discover a solution rather than telling them the

solution, helping them to improve, and helping them discover how to improve. Teacher improvement helps students succeed. Cindy illustrated this point,

If they come in with an issue about curriculum you say, 'I know what we can do. We'll buy a new resource book', even though you know that is not the issue. They may say, 'That is really not the issue at all.' So you say, 'If we replace the textbooks, if we bought new books now what?' 'Well then we would not have enough time', they would say. 'So what would more time look like for you?' Help them to solve the problem and provide the support they need to solve the problem, be it financial, emotional, or intellectual.

The key to providing teacher support is that you need to determine if the support is effective. Leaders cannot go around fixing everyone's problems without confirming that their fix is effective. Cindy used a metaphor to explain,

When you put an egg on to cook you have to go back and see if it is done. That is the same way you know if support is effective. It can be that simple but it is not always easy. It is as simple as going back the next day and saying, 'You know we talked yesterday. Were we able to make something happen there? Were you able to get your needs met? Are you satisfied or what else needs to happen?' You could ask this an hour later, a week later. You go back and touch base and ask and you listen again. Or you can look for it.

We need to remember that supporting teachers is ultimately about supporting students.

Kate illustrated this viewpoint,

When I sat down with the teachers and went through their PGP this year most had very good goals. I asked all the teachers, 'How did that help student learning?' and they were all rather dumbfounded. The vast majority of the teachers had never thought about how their goals were related to student learning. I wanted to plant that seed. Many had never even framed their goals in that way. ... We talked about student learning and then put supports in place.

Corey also stressed the importance of support that focuses on meeting students' needs:

If teachers are doing something that is perceived to be not fair by kids they hear about it. I don't snap at them but let them know that this is the perception. The kid thinks you hate him. You may not and he may be foolish to think that way but that is his perception so what are we going to do? Let's work together to resolve the problem so the student can succeed.

Support needs to be constant to effectively change and improve practice and student learning. This support includes understanding the change process, because change does not occur over night. William confirmed this viewpoint,

I think anytime you implement something, there will be a gradual change that occurs. Some teachers think that because we are doing this, that our marks should be up here. You can have teachers go to PD, to a workshop or conference and they will come back and that does not mean that they are going to change things drastically. They may make one or two small changes, which takes time to show up in results. A lot of people expect immediate results.

Supporting staff might lead to improved learning, which could result in student success and ultimately, increased retention and increased graduation rates. Support that improves teaching is a slow process that needs continual input from leaders, patient leaders that are prepared to wait for the pay off. William elucidated.

When we support teachers we know it is effective because they will be more satisfied. I know that is subjective but if they feel supported they are getting their needs met and it will transpire into student satisfaction and hopefully you are going to see test scores improve. I think the fallacy that people have is that as soon as you get into PLC and go to PD that there is immediate payoffs. Or when you have an Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) project that there is an immediate payoff. I think that it is an evolutionary thing. It is going to occur over time and can't be judged right away.

Creating Intellectual Stimulation

Intellectual stimulation of one's peers is to challenge one's peers to reexamine their work and to rethink how they teach (Podsakoff et al. 1990, as cited in Leithwood et al, 1999). Intellectual stimulation is related to persuading teachers that they have the capacity and support to attempt new challenges, with the goal of improving their teaching. Leithwood cites four basic practices that are associated with intellectual stimulation (see Table 11).

Table 11

Creating Intellectual Stimulation

Encourage new initiatives

Bring colleagues into contact with new ideas

Change those norms that might constrain the thinking of staff

Challenge the status quo

Note. From "Changing Leadership for Changing Times," by Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R., 1999, Buckingham: Open University Press. Adapted

Although the nine principals addressed all four practices they focused most heavily on professional development and sharing new ideas with colleagues. Distributing new ideas to staff via articles and books and sharing expertise via conversations are ways principals introduced innovative ideas. Barney shared how he goes about doing this, "I share readings with teachers. I'll have conversations about what I read in educational leadership or some other journal, or other books and articles from colleagues masters programs." Kate, too, shared readings,

I talk about good articles and some teachers will say photocopy the article for me. We have a subscription to Alberta Middle School and Educational Leadership and have informal discussions about articles and discuss how we could adopt or implement new practices so that students' needs are met better.

It is not enough to provide teachers with readings. Leaders need to provide relevant readings that provide meaningful information and facilitate decision-making. Corey explained, "I just put an article in everybody's mailbox about sleep and the effects of sleep because we are talking about maybe starting later." Although readings and conversations are inexpensive ways to be exposed to innovative new ideas, going to in-depth workshops, and having the entire staff attend the same professional development opportunity often provides a more thorough understanding of concepts and often provides a stronger desire to follow through with implementing change. Corey illustrated this point,

I like to try to keep them as current on the things that we do as possible. For example, we have Rick Wormley coming in to do a PD session for our school after we sent a number of people to see him last year on differentiated instruction.

In order to share new ideas, leaders need to be actively involved in PD themselves. They need to be researching new initiatives and learning about best practice. Jane shared this view,

You can only do it if you keep up yourself. If you do enough reading, if you attend enough conferences. Then you can take back bits of pieces and present them collectively or target individuals or departments with whatever piece you found out and think is worth sharing. You need to model it if you want your staff to grow.

If principals want students' needs met, want students to remain in school, and want students to graduate, they need to ensure that colleagues are aware of the latest research and best teaching practices, and they need to monitor their dropout rates. To do that, leaders need to change the thinking of staff and encourage new initiatives. Leaders need to find time to discuss new practices that instill higher order thinking, personal reflection, and further professional growth. Kate explained,

The last thing I want staff meetings to be full of is administrivia. Anything we don't need to discuss can be sent out via a memo, an electronic staff meeting. I like my staff meetings to be more content rich. To discuss what we are really here for. I know most of the staff read the memos because they seemed to be aware and excited about the items. A few others I am not so sure as they may be as inundated with information as I am. Sometimes they ask a question and I say that it was in the electronic staff meeting. So they either did not read it or they forgot. It has been a cultural shift to include readings and discuss them in our staff meetings.

Leaders need to encourage staff to pursue new initiatives and provide support to implement those initiatives. Corey shared, "We sent a couple of our staff to San Diego last year because they were interested in brain research and then we encouraged them to come back and share it with the staff." (The principal cannot dictate the professional

development if it is to be successful.) Rather principals need to encourage staff to pursue their own goals for professional development, These goals however should fit into the school's vision and fit into the school's goals. Cindy does this via PLC, "We for instance have three PLC sub groupings. Each is working on their own aspect, finding readings that work for them and looking at the readings to see which aspects they can adopt and make work." She cited having experienced teachers who have a life long desire for further learning as a key in her school's success since these teachers take on a leadership role and not only work towards improving their practice but other teachers' practices and students' learning. Cindy described staff members:

We have seven of 15 teachers who have masters. Once a person gets their masters or is getting their masters there is another dimension about learning that is added to that person's life and you don't get it till you are there. People who have their bachelors say, 'I went to University. I'm there.' They are where they are for what they see. People go back to get their masters because they are ready to be stimulated further. When they decide to go back and get their masters they are back in university again and the mental stimulation is exciting. That is why I teach a university class every summer, because it is exciting to be a part of that learning, that intellectual stimulation. When you have half of you staff who have their masters and they still like to read share in professional dialogue and discussions there is continual stimulation.

These teachers challenge the status quo because they continually seek out new information to improve their practice. Leaders can also challenge the status quo via challenging their staffs' basic assumptions. Noelle explicated this comment,

I question staff. I really believe the more you talk with your staff and have conversations about why they are doing something the more growth you get. I regularly ask them how does this have any influence on the kids? It is that constant questioning about what they are doing. When you say I really believe in you, you give them that responsibility. What are you doing about it? You do great things so what are you doing with those kids. It is a positive example that you leave with them. Have you considered this? Play both sides of the field. I was a little worried when I saw you do this the other day. How can we work on that? What do you think we should be doing?

Leaders need to create options and opportunities for staff. Leaders need to intellectually stimulate staff and remove roadblocks so that they not only develop a desire for personal improvement but also have access to the resources to reach their full potential.

Modeling Practices and Values Important for the School

Modeling is a practice that sets an example for staff to follow that is consistent with the values, vision, and goals the leader espouses. Furthermore, modeling is an attempt to enhance teachers' beliefs about their self-efficacy (Podsakoff et al. 1990, as cited in Leithwood et al, 1999). Leithwood cites three practices that are associated with modeling (see Table 12).

Table 12

Lead by Doing Rather than only be Telling

Commitment to school organization

Commitment to professional development

Enhance the quality of both group and individual problem-solving processes

Note. From "Changing Leadership for Changing Times," by Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R., 1999, Buckingham: Open University Press. Adapted

The nine principals addressed all three practices but focused more heavily on commitment to school organization and professional development.

Dave for instance indicated that commitment could be modeled by simply working hard, "You model by working long days and working hard. They see that modeling is setting a good example." Corey went further and indicated that it includes being seen:

We model by simply being there. We work hard, we are at the basketball tournament on the weekend and we are seen around the building. We are very visible. We follow through with all concerns. Every student and every staff member in this building is held accountable. I model those things.

Commitment is more than just being visible. It is about being visible in the right context and being seen doing the right things. Leaders need to model commitment by partaking in behaviours that they want teachers to partake in. Cindy explained,

Modeling is all about visibility, doing what you want them to do, bringing in readings, discussing readings, and treating staff and all kids with dignity and respect. Taking PD yourself, taking courses, and teaching classes. Writing your own PGP and sending it to all your staff and saying here is my PGP come and talk to me about it anytime you want.

William concurred,

You have to go to PD yourself and they have to know that you are going to PD and that you are always looking at better ways to do things within your school. If they can see that you are always looking to improve than they have a tendency to look at how they can improve. You model it and you have to promote it.

Fromkin and Rodman (1983) claim that up to 90% of a message's meaning is transmitted non-verbally thus leaders can do nothing better than model desirable qualities if they want to communicate commitment. Jane shared her viewpoint about the importance of modeling:

Modeling is a major precursor to change. When I assumed my principalship one of the things that came, as a surprise to me was how much I do in fact model. I have been at 3 secondary schools now and you are basically watched all the time and the thing that you are watched on most is how you interact with other people, You set a certain tone based on how you interact with other people and it better be respectful and polite and professional. Otherwise everybody else will think it is all right to act like a blockhead if you are acting like a blockhead. So modeling is huge.

Kate was the only principal that really addressed modeling problem solving and felt that solutions to problems need to come from the school's vision. She explained, "Model problem solving by always going back to the vision. I always use the vision to determine where we want to go."

Interestingly two principals stressed the importance of principals moving to different schools. They indicated that the principal can only influence a school culture for so long, and then it is time for the principal to move on to another school. If one does not move on and is not careful, the school culture might become stagnant. Cindy shared her view on this notion:

When I see how long some principals have been in their schools it scares me. When I was in my school I knew in year six that it was time for somebody else. I think you can take a school to a certain level and then you plateau. Then you can either stay on that plateau or you can take it up a notch and say, 'Ok lets get going again, lets find a new mission.' If you stay after achieving your mission then your school becomes stagnant. I think there is a huge fear in that. I think that principals should switch more often, for the benefit of the students.

Jane also shared her view on the importance of principals moving to different schools:

At one point in my career I wanted in there, to take on the beast and do what I can in my five year plan. Once that plan was done I was ready for something else. Someone else needed to come in there and give it their high energy because leaders can't effectively stay in that high energy capacity and be as effective as the next person coming in who gives it their energy and their vision. You are rejuvenated when you leave, and go to another school. I loved what I did, and love what I am doing in my new school. I come in optimistic and bright and energetic almost every day. At my stage in my life I am still doing what I love doing, working with good people, doing good things. The school I left was a great school. I would hate to say that a school I was in for five or six years was a bad school because how bad would I be as a leader?

Modeling commitment to the school can vary from simply working hard and being seen around the school to engagement in professional growth which includes: reading, discussions, and attending professional speakers and structured educational courses. For teachers to meet the needs of students and for those students to succeed, leaders need to ensure that they are modeling that commitment matter.

Redesigning the Organization

A huge proportion of a school's success can be contributed to its organizational culture, which includes: norms, beliefs, values, and assumptions (Leithwood et al, 1999). When a principal arrives at a school there is already a culture present and there are already structures and policies in place that guide the school's daily operation. Leaders need to continually redesign the organization to ensure that students have their academic, emotional, and social needs met. Leaders and teachers need to create a school where students are safe, cared for, and succeeding so that they remain engaged, remain in school and eventually graduate. Leaders need to create and implement policies and structures that foster such a culture and create community relationships that foster advocacy for and communication of these priorities. Cindy explained,

You inherit a culture. You get what you get. That is a Harry Wong quote. You get what you get. And you also inherit the policies and structure and you inherit the history of the community relationships. If the vision is seeing the dream, or changing the culture then you have to change your structure, your policies, your community relationships and all of those other things that affect students and staff. You can never impact one of those things without impacting the other. If you throw a rock into the ocean the ripple affects everything.

This segment of chapter six discusses the findings and literature related to the following research question: How do formal leaders relate or support leadership strategies that help bolster student retention and graduation rates to redesigning the organization (culture, structure, policy and community relationships)? It is subdivided into four categories that correlate with Leithwood's definition of redesigning the organization.

School Culture

There is an enormous body of evidence that signifies that a school's success is largely dependent on its organizational culture: the norms, beliefs, values, and assumptions shared by the school's members (Leithwood et al, 1999). For students to be successful, a school's culture should be student centered, support continuing professional development, and motivate teachers to continually change (Leithwood et al, 1999). In order to strengthen a school's culture, leaders need to ensure the school's staff share a common vision. Cindy illustrated this viewpoint on culture metaphorically:

If you want to improve and change the culture all the people need to get on the same train. So what you inherit is all the different trains and everybody needs to start heading towards the same station. You are going to get there at different times and different ways but eventually lets all meet there and get on the same train. You need to respect the train others are on because where they are is who they are and their history of how they got there.

Ultimately, student success increases when a school culture fosters student success.

Leaders need to create such a culture and work collaboratively to support students.

Several of the principals described their culture as being an open one where learning and students were at the forefront of everything that is done. Kate explained,

We have an open door culture and constantly try to bring learning to the forefront of everything we do. Learning for both teachers and students. In the middle school we have a great group of students, a lot of good kids, a lot of great families, a lot of support and a lot of discussions about kids.

In order to possess an open culture, teachers need to know their leader and leaders need to know their teachers. Teachers need to feel safe, and know that the leader will not focus on their difficulties or weaknesses but rather that the leader will support them and meet their needs so that they can improve. To create such a culture, principals need to be visible within the school. Students and staff need to know who the leaders are and what

they stand for. They are the leaders of the culture, and they have a huge influence over it.

William shared his comments on being visible:

I try to be visible but if I do get into everyone's classroom in a day it has been a good day. There is so much coming down the pipeline that it is hard to get in. I would love to get into every single classroom every single day but it is not possible. Am I out of the school a lot? I hate being out of the school. When we have meetings I try to get back into the school as quick as possible. If I tell the secretaries that I have a meeting and will be back at two. I make sure I am back by two. I try to be in the school as much as I can. I try to be available as much as I can. I also try to be visible to students and the community on weekends when we have tournaments and during school night when there are games going on and so do my vice principals. We sit down and discuss who is going here and who is going here so that we are visible.

Barney also described the importance of being visible:

Our administration is very visible throughout the day and we never walk past a kid in our hallway with out talking to them. Even if it is just 'Hi how are you.' We never walk past a kid without saying anything and we always say, 'What are you doing? Where are you going? What are you out of?' And they know that. It is an expectation that now the whole school knows.

Once students, staff, and leaders know what the other values; once they understand the school's culture; once they know that the focus is student success, great things can happen. Corey for instance focuses on a culture that values respect and honesty:

Basically we have a culture that tries to focus on the respect of each other. The kids in this building will tell me anything. A teacher can question them for an hour and a police officer for an additional 45 minutes and I can come in and tell them to tell the truth and they do. It is a very good relationship that we have as an administrative team. I let them know what I think when they don't tell the truth. I put it up on my wall. 'The truth is the one thing that we all can give'. I refer to it all the time.

School leaders have an immense influence over the culture of the school. Jane shared her thoughts: "You model it through your decisions, actions and through the stuff that you will not tolerate. You also model it in terms of you behaviour and what gets praised."

Corey also indicated that leaders have an enormous amount of influence. He gave an example of how not tolerating attitudes, behaviours, and actions influences culture:

When I came here kids made a mess outside of the cafeteria. The former principal had tables set up outside the cafeteria, and it was a pigsty. Our caretakers should not have to clean that up. There are garbage cans 10 feet away. So I made an announcement that said, 'There will be no more mess out there or you won't have a spot to sit.' They kept making a mess and the tables went away. We had benches in the hallway when I came here. They were collection points for kids that did not want to go to class. Mud rooms, I thought they were practicing a play but they were all skipping out. It was different when I arrived. Students now know that this is a learning environment.

Teachers need to have a connection with the leader just like students need to have a connection with teachers and both need to feel like they belong. Leaders too need to have a connection and a relationship with staff and students. Most schools use sports to create connections with students, however many kids are not involved in school sports and might feel abandoned and neglected when a school focuses solely on sports and athletics. Noelle explained how principals and teachers too often focus on sports at the expense of other students:

The whole focus at one time was totally academics or solely on basketball and no one counted in between. That was a real big problem in my mind and a challenge to change. It took patience, and time to rekindle the staff and parents into saying, 'What about these kids?' We can't afford to forget about these kids. What should we be doing? It took a student writing me a letter; I still have it, to realize that things needed to change. I don't belong to basketball. I am not an athlete. I am academic but I am not the top of the pack but I am academic. I need to be seen. So what we did was that we started doing little clubs on the side. Some of the older staff started saying this is good. Changes started taking place, and we used that change to start talking about classroom practices.

Sports engage students, and create connections that make students feel part of the school. For many students, sports may be the only connection they have to the school and thus they stay enrolled but leaders must not forget the non-athletic student or the athletic students that did not make the team. Educators need to engage and connect with all

students if they are to ensure students remain successful. This can be done by creating non-athletic clubs, or simply by showing an interest in students' hobbies.

Furthermore, leaders need to engage teachers, connect with them, and show them that they too matter. William explained.

We try to have wine and cheese meetings where everybody gets together after school, more of an informal get-together. We celebrate little things like the end of the semester or Christmas, or things our teachers accomplish. Teachers need to know that they are doing a good job.

Activities that reduce teacher tension and anxiety are critical in building teacher capacity and creating a culture of teacher empowerment. Jane explained,

If you have a tense, anxious staff they can't focus on the things they need to focus on. I try to have their needs met, to show them that I care. I want a culture focused on successful learning and a culture focused on cohabitating with respect. Sharing space with respect. That is what I expect and what I modeling. It is frightening what a tone you set. Even in a building this size. That surprised me. You can kind of buy into it if your school is small, but it is every bit as important in large schools.

Each school has its own culture. Students and staff need to understand that culture, take ownership of it, take ownership of their own educational growth, and be involved in creating and maintaining that culture. When teachers and students understand and embrace a culture of learning, staff and students will engage in learning and students will remain in school and graduate. Collaborative cultures need to be supported throughout the different jurisdictional levels. Noelle explicated,

Our jurisdiction allows us to learn. We can expand our wings and take risks. Hopefully we do that to our staff as well. What the heck let's try it. We are allowed to take risks as long as we don't lose sight of the kids. Maybe some risks don't work out. So what, we gave it a shot, we tried. As long as we are honest with ourselves, if it is not working be honest about it. You have to be prepared to say this is not working so let's change.

Collaborative cultures foster growth, and growth needs to be based on evaluations of values, personnel, and group needs. School staff need to determine why students are not succeeding, why student needs are not being met, and what needs to change for these things to occur. Although change needs to occur via a collaborative process, staff need to realize that collaboration is not necessarily moving in the direction one wishes.

Collaboration is having a say about direction, desired outcomes, and about being heard. Although collaboration includes teachers expressing their views and leaders that listen to teachers one must not forget that it is the leader that ultimately needs to make the decision and be accountable for its outcome. William explained how teachers commonly misinterpret the meaning of collaboration:

Although they are involved in decision-making it does not necessarily mean that they are always going to have a vote. I think that they sometimes miss construe the two. I want them to have a say but I don't always give them a vote.

Change means overcoming obstacles and working together to reach consensus. Noelle gave an example:

At one time there was a fight within our school because the middle school was just being implemented within our school. The staff were really split but not anymore. It took lots of patience, lots and lots of patience, lots of sitting and listening and watching and molding and schmoozing and active involvement in collaboration and talking and listening and getting them involved. It takes time to develop that culture. Always keeping a focus on kids. We lose sight of it sometimes but generally when we make a decision we generally make it on behalf of kids. Other jurisdictions do not have that culture; kids are not always the topic of discussion. They like to think they are but they are not.

As Noelle pointed out, change comes slow. "Cultures don't change, they evolve. People say you are going to change the world one person at a time. It is really true. You need to have the dream and you need to share it with people." Leaders need a vision, and a school culture that expedites the fulfillment of that vision. Cindy explained,

If you are trying to maintain the status quo you are going to fall through the bottom of the earth because status quo means staying where you are and the world does not stay still anymore and neither do kids or the lives of families or the community. So you have to evolve, it is all about evolution. What ever you want to change, whatever the dream is, the absolute common core question we must ask is how is this going to be good for the learning environment? How will this improve our learning environment? How will this be good for our kids? Our staff? We are all learners and we all need to succeed.

Cindy summarized the notion of culture, and change and having students succeed beautifully when she stated:

You need to have a dream and you need to have core values. The core issue is what matters most to us, it tells us what we need to do to get to the dream and every decision we make and the things we do along the way all need to be based on how this is going to be good for the learner. How this is going to help our learning environment. So if part of the dream is that every child is going to need to have a significant caring adult in their life, to make a connection with a significant adult, then what do we need to do to make that happen? What are we going to do to make that happen? You need to started examining structures and policies and practices and reform and reframe because it needs to be done if you want to go there because it matters to the core value, it matters if you want to improve the learning environment for kids, and that is going to contribute significantly to graduation. So how do you go about changing them? It is about the evolution of change. One thing moves and all the structures change and the reaction of people change and you regroup and you reform and then you move on again.

Creating Shared Decision-Making Processes (Structure)

Providing formal and informal opportunities for teachers and other school members to participate in decision-making about issues that affect them is crucial to the success of schools, and students. When people are involved, they take ownership of and remain engaged in learning. Furthermore, leaders need to adopt practices that create discretion and autonomy for teachers (Leithwood, 1999). Such practices empower teachers and enhance their beliefs that the leader will support new practices aimed at improving students' needs. Leithwood cites nine practices that are essential for creating and maintaining shared decision-making processes (see Table 13).

Table 13

Creating and Maintaining Shared Decision-Making Processes

Distributing power for leadership throughout school
 Sharing decision-making power with staff
 Allowing staff to manage own decision-making committees
 Taking staff opinion into account when decision-making
 Ensuring effective group problem-solving
 Providing autonomy for teachers
 Altering working conditions to provide collaborative planning time
 Ensuring adequate involvement in decision-making
 Creating opportunities for staff development

Note. From "Changing Leadership for Changing Times," by Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R., 1999, Buckingham: Open University Press. Adapted

Instead of focusing on structures that create and maintain shared decision-making, most of the principals preferred to focus on physical structures that increase student success, Jane for instance discussed structures such as physically locating students in specific parts of the school to create a safe and caring environment:

We have common groupings for our grade nine students. We have four grade nine core teachers who take a lot more ownership of those kids than high school teachers show for their kids. They are the grade nine teachers and they know those kids very well. They are in a common physical space. We feel it helps our grade nines to succeed. They get lost too easily when they first come into grade nine and get shuffled all around the building. With a home area they feel safe and cared for.

She also described structures that provide advantages for student learning such as not being semesterized.

We have a linear structure and I can see both sides of it. One argument is that it slows the learning down and therefore it allows more kids to keep up. Especially your average kind of kid, we don't push as much, as fast and so you have more time to sit with a kid and nurture. We feel it keeps more kids in school and that kids are more successful. Kids need the material to be slowed down. ... It allows the kids time to absorb the material better. ... It slows down the learning and makes for better learning.

Dave on the other hand feels that the semester system meets students' needs better than the linear system because it provides opportunities to retake courses and greater flexibility in programming. In fact, Dave's school has made further accommodations to the classes in his semesterized school so that students have even more flexibility to take courses. Dave explained,

We have changed our structure for kids even though it is a burden for teachers. Before if I wanted to take Art it might be the same time as Chemistry, and thus I was out of luck if I wanted to take both. In larger schools there are lots of opportunities to enroll in courses. There is one guy doing design and he is doing design all day and you can get in at some point. That was not the case here. What we did was have Art 10, 20, and 30 in the same room and offered it both semesters. That way you have two opportunities to get into Art. We do the same with all of our CTS options. We tried to increase the routes and paths kids can go. We have also made all of them three credits. We feel that you should be exposed to lots of options and get a wider background.

Corey also discussed changing structures but indicated that these changes were not change for change's sake but based on research. He explained,

We change our structures because they are easy to change but we always try to base them on sound reasons. ... If we can't think of a way to make it better we don't do it. For example, we are looking at changing our math periods in grade nine so that they won't have double periods, so it is not as condensed in one area, so it is easier for kids that transfer in from other areas. If the reasons for changing make sense to people we can make it fly.

There is no reliable literature that indicates a relationship between structure and performance and productivity. Much of school reform over the last 20 years' however has targeted structural dimensions (Elmore, 1995; Murphy, 1990; Rowan, 1990; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996b, as cited in Smylie and Weaver, 1999). In fact Elmore (1996) indicates that structural change is insignificant in relation to changes in occurrences within those structures when improving teaching and learning (as cited in Smylie and Hart, 1999). Betty addressed this concept and stressed that she was more focused on what

her staff do than the school's structure. In fact she does not even like the term structure as she feels it is too rigid and prevents students' needs from being met. She explained,

I don't see our structure as structured, don't get me wrong, there is a structure in place, there has to be a structure to keep things in place but everybody works and helps everyone else out. ... Things are not solid. It has to be that way. So when I hear the word structure I think inflexible. It has to be very spongy; we have to be able to say, 'That is not working so let's get rid of it.' Even my staff, as soon as I start seeing that they are starting to become rigid in anyway with students or with anything I talk to them because when they start to get rigid it becomes hard on students and it becomes hard on the program and that is not what this program is about. We are about being flexible, open and you have to be moving in and out all the time.

While most principals focused on physical structures, Corey was the only principal that focused on structures for decision-making. He felt that staffs' opinions need to be taken into account and that they need to be involved in the process of decision-making. He explained how he goes about making decisions:

When I came here, I was fortunate to start in April and basically watched. Then I took the summer to reflect on what was good, bad and what was ugly. Then I took the first half of my second year to confirm the good, bad and ugly and then at the semester break I discussed the ugly with the staff. I always deal with structural change or program change in terms of it being a disease.

To further elucidate this decision-making process he used two examples:

For example we have students come in Friday afternoon if they were absent during the week. I would say, 'Here are the symptoms of a sick system. We have 40 kids on our list and six are showing up. Kids are not caring, not showing up. They are flying our policy in our face and administration is regularly making 45 phone calls. There is some sickness going on here and if we are to make it better, how are we going to have it make sense to teachers?' If the solution is communal and it makes sense to staff they will go for it. If it does not make sense we try not to broach it and that goes a long way. People just know that you are not going to fly things out there that are not trying to make things better for the kids. ... When I arrived here they were riding bikes in the hallway. Bikes in the hallways! Who rides a bike in the hallway? I said, 'What are you doing?' 'Well I'm just putting my bike away.' 'Well put it outside.' He said, 'It is a \$600 bike.' So I said, 'Put it by my \$40,000 van. Like it is an outside toy.' So I put an announcement in the school. There will be no more bikes in the school. That is my approach to always watch confirm and then implement common sense change. Change that staff are

involved in and change that makes sense. If they know the reasons as to why we are doing it, it has a heck of a larger chance that it will succeed. You always need to reevaluate change.

Decision-making and school structures need to meet the needs of students and if they are not meeting those needs they need to be reevaluated and changed so that they do meet student needs. Schools' primary goal is student success not adults' and the culture and decision-making structures within the school need to move the school towards achieving that goal.

Developing and Implementing School Policies

If leaders are to ensure student success, schools cannot be rigid in their policies. Leaders have to provide flexibility when applying policies because students are guaranteed to mess up at some point throughout their schooling. All of the participants expressed that their jurisdictions have very general policies that indicate that schools have policies in place to deal with certain issues. These general policies allow schools to look at their own context and create unique policies that address their school's concerns. One jurisdiction even reduced the number of policies so that schools could be more flexible and address contextual issues. The jurisdiction transferred the majority of their policies to an Administrators' Procedures and Guidelines Manuals and by doing so the jurisdiction has become even more flexible because each school has the ability to refer to the jurisdictional guidelines but is free to set their own policies based on contextual information. Jane supported the importance of policy flexibility so that students maintained options when they fail to succeed:

Our policies are not as simple as one, two, three you are expelled. We want students to be successful and we try to have policies in place that foster that success. Sometime you are expelled after strike one if you bring drugs into the school. Sometimes you are still here after strike 15, it all depends on whom you

are and what it is that you did. I don't think you can expel any kid on any kind of mathematical formula or any set of guidelines. You work in the gray area when it comes to student expulsion. You have to have a pretty solid reason for not wanting them. Once we make the recommendation to expel we encourage them to contact our outreach school. I tell them that it is the first option, and I can help them pursue it. I list other options as well, but our outreach school should be there first option. When they are expelled hopefully they still want to finish up their schooling. I still have an expectation that they need to finish their schooling, and let them know that. I tell them I will help them to succeed but they can't be here. Don't get me wrong. Expulsion is not forever. I tell them they can come back next semester and lots do because they know we care.

Flexible policies and guidelines provide principals the ability to allow certain students, depending on their situation, to avoid obeying policies that would otherwise be too restrictive in nature. Students are not robots; they are humans and as such occasionally stumble. Policies need to be in place to not only provide guidance but to facilitate learning when they stumble. Principals must ensure that policies allow students to stumble and provide avenues for them to get up, learn from their errors, and move forward. Strict, inflexible policies do nothing but keep students down once they fall.

Fostering Productive School-Community Relationships

Schools are not islands unto themselves. The assumption that the cause of dropping out of school resides solely in the school is wrong. There are powerful factors that are far outside the control of any school or school system. The stresses in children's lives are intimately connected to the conditions of their parents, their families and their communities. Furthermore, parents, families and parenting styles and practices remain very powerful influences on all areas of children's development. In fact, there is evidence that problems of inequality in education are strongly connected to broader inequalities in society (Levin, 2006). Schools do not solely cause these social problems and cannot be expected to solve them alone. Schools can and should be part of the effort to improve

educational and other life outcomes, so that students may be successful in society.

Meeting these outcomes means creating relationships with the school community and focusing on the inherent value of students and their families. The first step to creating these relationships is ensuring that the community is aware of the school and that the community possesses the right information about the school's intended purpose and its goals and objectives. Betty described how time was required for her school to gain acceptance within her community:

At one point people did not even know we existed. We were a non-entity. We got out there and said, 'We are so and so' or we would get out there and say, 'We are from the outreach school' and they would say, 'Oh, what do you do there?' We buy locally and would say, 'You know we are having a BBQ with the kids, why don't you come down, you are welcome to attend.' We have open houses and invite the chamber of commerce and all the local people to attend. It started to make a difference. People would start saying, 'You are with that outreach school. How many kids do you have now?' Pretty soon you start to hear positive things instead of 'Oh, you have those kids.' It was not so much those kids anymore because now they see those kids and those kids weren't so bad and they'd come over and start chatting to them or they'd start coming in and were not afraid to come in. There are various agencies in our building so various people have to go into the building. Often they are not sure where to go and so they come in to the school for directions and that has been ok too because they go, 'Oh, what is this?' Having people come in and see it is a school is ok for all of a sudden those kids are like real people, they are real kids, they do real things in here like work. So it turned out to be a bonus.

As Betty indicated, having the community come into the school and see first hand what is being done to ensure student success is a successful way to build community relationships. Rather than waiting for community members to accidentally wander into schools leaders need to find innovative ways to engage community members to take interest in and participate in the school. Dave provided an example of how he encourages community relationships: "If service groups want to use a room in the school it is free. ... We try to have the elections at our school. We like to be the community school and get

the public into the building.” Relationships are not just about the interaction of the school and the community but also about responding to each other’s needs. Corey explained,

We support and recognize our community partnerships. Anytime any of our neighbours have called the school we have responded immediately. Whether it was the old folks home, the swimming pool, or the daycare across the street that does not like our announcements when they are blasted outside. About my second day on the job, the daycare called and said, ‘When you do your announcements can you turn down your outside microphone.’ I said, ‘I did not even know that we had an outside microphone.’ So I phoned up our janitor and he turned it down. She showed up with cookies the next day and said, ‘Thank you. I have been calling for five years to get this thing turned down. You come here and within two days it is done. Thank you very much.’ The old folks home knows that if the kids are doing something they don’t like we are going over there.

When leaders respond to the community and support the community, the community is more likely to support the school. Corey illustrated this point:

We have a program in the spring and fall where we do a yard work clean up blitz. We also support our community financially. When we buy, we buy locally all the time, whenever possible. That allows us to go to them and ask if they would like to donate something to our grad. We do everything locally that we can. We also recognize our community partners.

Building these partnerships takes time as Noelle explained:

One word. Patience. That is all I can think of. That is one critical thing. I don’t know if you know my community very well. It is a very tough community. ... It is a community that I want it my way or the highway. When I arrived the staff did not trust the community and the community did not trust the staff. School council? What the hell is that? Get them the hell out of here! Very early on our goal was to get this community to pull together to support this school. I had to make political decision, to play a game. You play a game with regards to whom you support to get that buy-in by the old creatures of habit. Slowly things have changed, have come around. It has been slow and extremely hard work.

Although parental involvement varied amongst schools, all principals mentioned that satisfaction surveys indicated that parents, whether they were involved with the school or not were generally happy. Dave for instance felt parents were happy although not involved:

Parents are pretty happy with the way it is. We run the school council flag up and phone every parent. We say positions are already filled, but why not come out and have a coffee. If there is an issue they show up. When we reconfigured the schools we had a whole room full of parents but generally they are happy and are not too active or involved in the school.

While William felt he has lots of parental involvement,

We have a group of community members that support our school and raise a lot of money for our school. We have a band parents association, a football booster club. We have lots of parental involvement. Each parent supports the school in their own area. ... The community supports the athletics and any areas we ask them to. They supervise at dances. We typically have 500 kids come to our dances, and the community loves them.

Kate was also satisfied with her school's parental involvement: "We have parents volunteer for our weekly hot lunch program, and parents help coach teams. We don't have enough staff and don't want staff to burn out and have asked parents to fill in and they have." Although several principals were happy with the amount of parental involvement all principals expressed that they would like to see more parents becoming involved at a school level. All the principals also had concerns with their school council. William for instance mentioned that parents were reluctant to get involved with school policies, practices, and procedures. He discussed this comment,

We have lots of parent involvement and community partners but not necessarily in school council. School council is an information gathering group rather than an active group. They like to come to gather information and are there as a support group. They will voice their concerns on certain things, like the school calendar but if you offer them the opportunity to sit in on staffing or timetabling or budgeting they say, 'You know what, that is not our area of expertise so you guys can go ahead and do that.'

Although parents are actively involved in her school, Kate also has, "a hard time finding parental involvement for the school council, we have only a small school council but

most parents appear happy with our school and we don't hear a lot of negatives." William summarized it best when he states.

I think our community is like everybody else's. There are certain things they like, certain things they don't like, certain staff they like, and certain staff they don't like. There are certain things I do they like and certain things they don't like. Quite often it is a matter of whether you are saying yes to them or no to them.

Sadly, not all community members support schools. Jane for instance expressed a concern about some common business practices that negatively affect student learning:

I don't know how strongly we are supported from the business point of view because some of our kids work the late shift and have to work till 12 and have to close. They are the ones working the banquets till one and two in the morning. I wish that that would not happen. The amazing thing is that they come to school the next day. Those kids need to be getting more sleep. They should not be closing. Businesses should not be facilitating their withdrawal from schooling.

With or without community relationships, and with or without school support, the perseverance of students is obvious. Most want to do well and succeed in school and society. Jane illustrated this comment,

I would have to say I am really proud of our kids. I am thinking of one boy. He lost his dad and he is the oldest in a Mennonite family and his mom does not speak any English and yet he is going to graduate. I am so proud of him because it would be so easy for him not to. I have a grade 11 girl that is expecting a baby and she still wants to graduate. I said, 'You work with me and you come and see me every week. Let me know how you are doing and how you are feeling and we will work through this, somehow, we will make it happen so that you can still graduate.' We have another grade 11 girl who is hooked on drugs and has addiction problems. She wants to face them and wants to graduate. She needs to get off the drugs. Graduation seems to matter to our kids. I can give you more examples but they just seem to want to graduate. I think that it is a community expectation to finish school.

Leaders must celebrate students' successes and share their stories with the community.

When student's stories are shared with the community, their successes and failures become personal and community members become more likely to come on board and recognize the need and the importance of ensuring that all students succeed.

Unlike leaders with a more control-oriented and hierarchical bent, transformational leaders seek to create a context in which organizational members are motivated by what they consider to be a moral imperative. This imperative is to collaborate with their colleagues and other stakeholders in providing students with the best educational experiences of which they are capable (Leithwood et al, 1999, p. 96).

When principals and teachers create caring, compassionate relationships, they create connections. These connections allow for the creation of character, and confidence, which ultimately results in student competence and success.

CHAPTER SEVEN: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

With the preceding chapters in mind, the objective of this study was not to make an evaluative judgment about the effectiveness of specific leadership practices and strategies. Nor was it an attempt to outline a step-by-step process to ensure retention and high graduation rates. Furthermore, any impressionistic conclusions based on this study are not the basis of social science, and thus my contributions reside in the theoretical realm. My intention was to better understand the process of disengagement, and the factors that lead students to withdrawal from school. Moreover the goal was to explore the philosophical and practical aspects of leadership and develop theoretical insights relevant to the retention of students and increasing graduation rates.

This study's two most revealing findings are the non-inclusive attitudes many of the school leaders possessed in regards to early school leavers and the integrated nature and complexity of the problem.

The Forgotten

Leaders it seems prefer to focus on successes. They have a plethora of stories about students whose needs the school met and students who are now successfully working or pursuing further formal schooling. Sadly, it appears that there is less recollection about at-risk students and the students who left school early. These students seem to not only be less remembered anecdotally but also forgotten in the success rate and graduation rate calculations. Surprisingly, discussions about graduation rates were not consistent with the numbers and comments that principals made during those same interviews (see Table 14 and 15).

Table 14

Jurisdictional three and five Year Graduation Rates

	3 Year Rate	5 Year Rates
Provincial Average	65	73
Horizon School Division	79	81
Lethbridge School District	65	72
Medicine Hat CSRD	77	84
Palliser Regional Division	77	81

Note. 3 year rates is average of graduate rates from 1997/98 to 2002/03, 5 year rates is average of graduation rates from 1999/2000 to 2002/0, From "High School Completion Rates," Retrieved March 18, 2005, from http://ednet.edc.gov.ab.ca/k_12/completion, by Alberta Education, 2005, Alberta: Alberta Education.

Although the province states the participants' jurisdictional graduation rates are in the 60 to 70 percentile, most of the principals interviewed stated that they thought their rates were significantly higher.

Table 15

Principal's Conflicting Comments on Graduation Rates

Comment	Contradictory comment
<i>Middle School Principal Comments</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None were expelled. We don't kick anyone out, and they don't voluntarily leave. • We don't measure it but we have 100% retention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were a couple in the last four years that we lost. They were never here and they eventually dropped out. • We had one boy, he would be in grade 10 now but the last I heard he was not in school.
<i>High School Principal Comments</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just one boy quit last year, the rest graduated. • If we can get them beyond grade 10 and especially into grade 12 they all graduate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lots move and are lost but that is not tracked. • If a kid leaves us and moves we don't know if they do graduate.

Note. Contradicting comments about graduation rates from middle school and high school principal.

Furthermore, Kate's comments, "We do not expel" and "They all graduate" as well as Dave's comment, "If we get them beyond grade 10 and especially into grade 12 they all graduate" seriously contradict the statistics. If these comments are accurate then where

are the students who drop out? Where do they come from? Where do they go? If they are incorrect then why do the leaders forget the early school leavers? There is a reason that Alberta has in excess of 100 outreach schools across the province. How many principals would acknowledge that these students are students whose needs they have failed to met?

Many of the high school students that have become disengaged from school and/or left school early are slowly vanishing from the minds and hearts of principals and teachers. They are becoming or have become ghosts that are no longer remembered. They are the *forgotten*, and are not considered part of the school's successes and/or failures. This perception is corroborated by the graduation rate comments principals shared. Dave for instance shared, "Lots of kids are transient. They are here, then they are back with mom, then in the city, and then back with a relative." Dave showed no indication that these students were members of his school community, nor did Barney when he stated, "There are kids that show up at outreach that I don't know where they came from." It appears that school leaders do not easily take ownership of transient students, students that are often at-risk of leaving school early. Dave corroborates this,

On a fairly regular basis we get a kid that's in a lot of trouble in the city. The judge sends them to our community. They come in grade 10, you never had them before and then quickly they are gone. We get a fair amount of those.

As can be seen from the comments these transient students are not totally forgotten. Rather their stories and failures were shared but they were not viewed as part of the school's student population and thus the school felt no obligation to ensure they succeeded.

If leaders are to address the issue of high school dropouts, leaders need to accurately track every student. Principals and teachers need to take ownership of all

students that enter the school no matter for what duration. Leaders need to encourage teachers to form relationships with students, engage students, and take the time to find out what is not working and why. The more informed principals and teachers have, the more likely they will see and be able to help those in need.

Although not taking ownership of these transient students is a serious issue that needs to be addressed, the interviewees are already journeying towards ensuring their students succeed. Principals repeatedly referred to the students and teachers within the school as *my kids* and *my staff*, and the school as *my school*. They have taken ownership of the students and the school as a whole and with ownership comes accountability, and with accountability comes growth, and student retention and increased graduation rates. To increase retention and increase graduation rates, ownership needs to be embraced by all staff and pertain to all students even the at-risk students.

Complex Problem

Presently a disparate range of service providers including: health, social services, justice, and education attempt to address students' needs by a program-by-program basis. The concern is that these programs address perceived problems of the student and are often based on the assumption that the cause of the problem resides in the student (Levin, 2004, as cited in Jordan, 2006). However, students at-risk have needs that are often multidimensional, affecting multiple programs. To complicate matters further, not all students that are at-risk of dropping out are academically at risk. For instance, half of all students who drop out of school are making reasonable academic progress and chose to leave because of personal difficulties or because they were asked to leave (Bowlby & McMullan, 2002, as cited in Jordan, 2006). Furthermore the great majority of students

with multiple risk factors end up leading satisfactory lives (Willms, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992; Masten, 2001, as cited in Levin, 2004). A holistic approach would take into account the full array of needs and meet the complex problems of students at-risk via a seamless accessible web of support.

A child's life is their reality. Their financial situation, attitude, and the attitudes of those around them influence who they are and what they do. Kids who feel unsafe or uncomfortable in their schooling will not succeed. It is therefore critical for leaders to have a vision, goals, and high expectations so that they can move the school in a direction where all students succeed. To venture down such a path leaders need to develop their staff and support their staff to reach their full potential so that all students' needs are met. Leaders need to implement the proper policies and structures and create a culture where student disengagement and student failure is not tolerated. To achieve such a goal, principals and teachers must model the right values and overcome the negative influences of society. Leaders' and teachers' beliefs as well as their practices have a significant impact on student achievement (Pajares, 1982; Muijs & Reynolds, 2002, as cited in Jordan, 2006). Jane shared her viewpoint on staff and their importance to engagement and graduating rates.

You have to have quality teachers; you have to have excellence in the classrooms. For me it absolutely boils down to teachers. Teachers that make their kids feel welcomed in class, that want to share their classroom with them, and care about them as human beings, in a genuine way.

Principals and teachers need to make sure students see the value of remaining in school.

Noelle explained.

We have to sell the fact that school is important, that education is important. It is more than just curriculum that we are working with. We are dealing with students' social lives, teaching the brain to think differently, to see different

perspectives of the world. There has to be a passion in what we are offering our kids. Our problem is that sometimes we forget about this bigger vision. We have to sell that we believe in our system. We have to take a lot of pride in what we do. I am proud to be a teacher. I would not do anything else. I have no questions about that. I am proud of the fact and proud of where we are as a division, as a school. I see us growing and I get excited about that and we have to share that. We need to promote our school and get excited about what we are doing because we have great kids. Our kids do well. They do well because we care and we are passionate about what we are doing. The enthusiasm for education will run off onto kids.

Recovering Students

Surprisingly few schools make serious attempts to reach out to students that have dropped out. Many principals indicated that their plates are full and that they have little or no time to find and reach out to school leavers. They indicate that they work proactively with students to ensure retention but that once the student makes the decision to leave school there are no organized efforts to recover them. Once students leave school, most principals felt the student was no longer a member of their educational community, thus they focused on motivating and working with students still registered in the school. Students that have left however are usually informed that they would be welcomed back to school but the staff did little to entice them into school. Jane explained that,

For the most part it is tough to get them back, really tough. The kids that leave school to go to work are even harder to get back. The kids that leave school because they messed up, they, you have a chance with, if it means something to them. ... I just tell them they can come back the next semester and for the most part they just show up.

William stated that although they track and work to maintain students they do not do much after June of their grade 12 year, unfortunately the system actually penalizes them for such efforts. William described the situation,

We track the number of students that meet the graduation requirements, not how many actually get their diploma. Unfortunately a lot of things come back to money. We get penalized for the students that come back. When they come back they are counted in our student count. And our central office says we need to

average 38 CEU per student and they only need one course but they count those students in our count anyway and they kill our average. Now we take them back and encourage them to come back and then we always have to negotiate with central office and let them know that they can't count these students. You are always having to negotiate with central office.

Dave also indicated that his funding framework penalizes his school if non-graduates return. Furthermore, he does not track any students past grade 12, nor does he ensure that they actually graduate. He commented,

If a kid blows a diploma and does not make it we don't track them down and recruit them and say you need to finish this. Sometimes they will register in an outreach program but lots of times they have a job.

Part of Dave's concern about tracking students after grade 12 is related to Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) legislation. He feels that once students leave they are not his students anymore. He remarked that,

Tracking students is a FOIP issue. ... Once a student leaves and goes to university. Did they graduate? Did they finish university? None of my damn business since they are not a student of mine anymore; but of course we would like to know. There are all sorts of FOIP related questions. Can we get this info without identifying the kid? We do need to report to the jurisdiction where our kids go. By and large we look at the list and say, 'he said he was going to college'. We have a good feeling but don't know for sure.

FOIP should not be used as an excuse not to do something. It was never meant to restrict the flow of information pertinent to the improvement of teaching and learning and ensuring the success of students.

Although Statistics Canada and the provincial government track graduation rates on a jurisdictional level, most of the principals interviewed were unaware of their school's actual rates. To better track students, Alberta Education is looking into creating a registry of all students in Alberta and where they are attending school. Additionally, the Alberta Government is exploring the option of having all students maintain their Alberta

Education identification number throughout their educational journey. Both these endeavours would go a long way in improving the validity, and accuracy of educational statistics, and determining student status.

To ensure graduation the government has laws in place that state that students are legally required to attend school until they are 16 years of age. Unfortunately, if a family chooses not to register their child in a school, or the child chooses not to attend there are few options for the school to pursue. Often schools are unaware the child is even in the community. The school does have the authority to take that child and that family to the attendance board. If this course of action is pursued, the school and family will appear in the Court of Queen's Bench and a justice of the peace will decide the case. This strategy is not only expensive and time consuming, but usually ineffective. Kate explained, "We have taken a student to the attendance board once but it was not viewed as a positive experience for anyone and it did not change anything."

Although ensuring graduation is a top priority for all schools and jurisdictions, one jurisdiction is making a conscious effort to increase graduation rates for their jurisdiction by focusing on recovering students that have slipped through the cracks. The school staff actively looks for students that either do not graduate in grade 12 or do not return to school after summer holidays. Cindy explained this strategy,

Here is what we are doing. This binder has all of the demographic information from last year's grade 12 students from our jurisdiction and we are going through and crossing off the ones that we know have diplomas granted to them or are currently attending school. Then we are going to go through the extranet and go through every single kid and cross out the ones that already have their diploma. The ones that are left, we are going to phone, every single one of them and we are going to say this is what you are missing and we can offer it to you. Please come see us or go back to your old school. We have initiated it as a district initiative to raise the districts graduation rate. Some may only need 5 credits so come on in and we can help you get your high school diploma. The other thing we are doing

is following up on our own kids. Any students that were here last year and did not come back

This is a united effort between the jurisdiction's outreach school and senior high schools.

William, the high school principal, expanded on Cindy's explanation of actively looking for students that are no longer in school.

What we are doing is when kids dropout there names are immediately sent to our outreach. We tell them to go to the outreach school. We tell them that if they ever want to come back, come back, even the kids we expel. ... If they don't come back to us there names are submitted to the outreach. And then they follow up on them and see where they are. Are they working? Do they want to go to school? We follow up with all kids in all grades; if a kid leaves here in grade 10 they always leave with us setting up some form of alternative educational setting. If they left in grade 9 we would involve social services. When they are leaving we contact the parents and let them know everything that is available to them including our school.

Although schools are attempting to recover students, educators must not forget that most of the students that dropout have become disengaged from school. They have lost the connection. Leaders must recognize and celebrate the student's contribution in the recovery process. Cindy summarized this issue beautifully when she stated,

We don't even know how much courage it takes for them to walk through the door, to get their ducks in a row and to even think about coming back to school. So you want to do everything you can to get them back, to hook them, to hang on to them, to help them, to meet their needs.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of this study suggest several implications for practice if leaders want to ensure their schools are addressing the needs of at-risk students. Addressing these needs will assist in increasing retention and graduation rates, and ensuring student success.

1. Communication is imperative if leaders want to increase retention and graduation rates since communication is one of the fundamental processes for implementing

Leithwood's leadership elements: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization.

2. Leaders need to support their staff in an individualized manner. This means more than simply being visible. It means providing relevant professional development and ensuring that teachers bring this PD back to the class to positively impact student learning.
3. Leaders need to facilitate the creation of a vision that unifies the staff in a common purpose. This vision needs to be revisited regularly. Furthermore, goals need to be created that assist all staff in the pursuit of this vision.
4. The school's vision and goals need to be created collaboratively to ensure staff ownership and the vision and goals need to be consistent with one another.
5. To address the needs of at-risk students, school goals need to focus on more than simply academics. They need to address emotional and social components as well. These goals need to be created in such a way so that leaders can monitor their success and be accountable for the results.
6. Leaders need to create schools that are equitable, humane and considerate. They can facilitate this process by creating opportunities for listening, questioning, and reflecting.
7. Schools are learning centers and that learning is not only for students. As such, school leaders need to develop their staff if they are to increase retention and graduation rates. This support, whether physical, financial, or emotional, needs to remove roadblocks that prevent student success.

8. School leaders need to model traits that are consistent with the school's vision, mission, goals, and values.
9. Schools need to provide students, whether or not they are college or university bound, with the hope that they will succeed in life and prepare them for a successful transition into society.
10. Leaders need to have flexible policies and flexible expectations to allow for the creation of unique expectations for unique individuals. Such flexibility allows everyone to be challenged at his or her level.
11. School leaders need to ensure that school policies are general enough to allow schools to look at their own context so that a school's unique culture can be addressed. Such a policy ensures that there is enough flexibility to be able to address the unique needs of at-risk students.
12. It is a myth that at-risk kids cannot learn; it is simply a matter of connecting with them, engaging them and making learning relevant.
13. When instilling changes to the culture and structure of a school, in hopes of increasing retention and graduation rates, leaders need to realize that change that impacts student success comes slowly and is worth waiting for.
14. School leaders need to create a school culture that is student centered and motivates teachers to continually change in the pursuit of student success.
15. School leaders need to realize that structural change is insignificant in relation to changes in occurrences within those structures.
16. The assumption that the cause of dropping out of school resides solely in the school is wrong. There are powerful factors that are far outside the control of any

school or school system. As such leaders need to create relationships with communities so that the community and the school responds to and become responsible for each other's needs.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this study suggest several possibilities for further investigation.

1. The findings of this study are based upon nine principals from southern Alberta. It is recommended that the study be replicated using participants from other regions of the province and other geographic areas that contain jurisdictions with high retention and high graduation rates as well as jurisdictions with increasing rates.
2. The data was collected by means of a semi-structured interview. However further investigation, utilizing participant observations and student interviews would assist in determining if the findings identified in this study are trustworthy.
3. Since collaboration is a huge component of many of the leadership practices and strategies further study is required to determine teachers' perceptions of effective practices and strategies.
4. Since social integration, engagement, and a sense of connection with the school, seem to be key to retention, further study should be conducted in regards to students' contributions to group identity and engagement.
5. Society seems to have a bias in favour of university and college education. This bias marginalizes those who are not want to go to university, in spite of the fact that they will comprise the majority of the work force. Further research needs to be conducted to determine how leaders influence what values society places on the contributions made by those who pursue jobs not requiring a college or

university education. Moreover, how will schools provide students an education whether they are college or university bound with the hope that they will succeed in life?

6. Further study should be conducted on the role of the student as mediator of his or her own environment and success. The importance of students as agents of institutional and social change cannot be underestimated.
7. Due to the fact that Native and Metis student high school completion rates are significantly lower across the province and the fact that none of the schools interviewed in this study possessed a large proportion of these students this study recommends exploring the native issue further.

Conclusion

The issue of students at-risk is important because educational attainment is positively correlated with every single important life outcome. This research has focused on high school completion because it is widely regarded as the minimum education qualification needed to be able to earn an adequate income in the labour market (Levin, 2006). It is important to realize that predictions of which students are at-risk are never going to be perfect. As such leaders need to ensure that all students experience success in their education regardless of whether they are at-risk of leaving school early. In fact identifying students that are at-risk will only be useful if the identification in fact leads to improvement.

If Albertans truly value student success and want to increase student retention and graduation rates, then educating Alberta's children needs to be a collaborative endeavour that includes teachers, administrators, parents, school communities, and society as a

whole. Schools should not be pursuing this endeavour alone since many of the factors that could have important impacts on educational outcomes lie outside the scope and responsibility of the school system (Levin, 2006, p. 27). Kate concurred. “I think students and families need to take more responsibility for school, and more responsibility for learning.” This does not mean that leaders are granted permission to shed the responsibility for student success. They in fact should lead the cause since leadership is considered to be vital to the successful functioning of many aspects of a school and plays a pivotal role in the degree to which a school is effective.

This study looked specifically at what leaders are doing and should be doing in this collaborative endeavour so that students find educational success. The findings from both the literature and the nine interviewees strongly substantiate the importance of leadership and leaders’ use of Leithwood’s transformational leadership practices to increase the commitment of followers thereby increasing graduation rates. Leaders can and should seek to engage the support of teachers to enhance their capacities so that they may contribute to achieving an increase in graduation rates. In recognition of the multi-faceted nature of the concept of risk, leaders must develop broad, multi-faceted prevention strategies, and practices that create and support student success.

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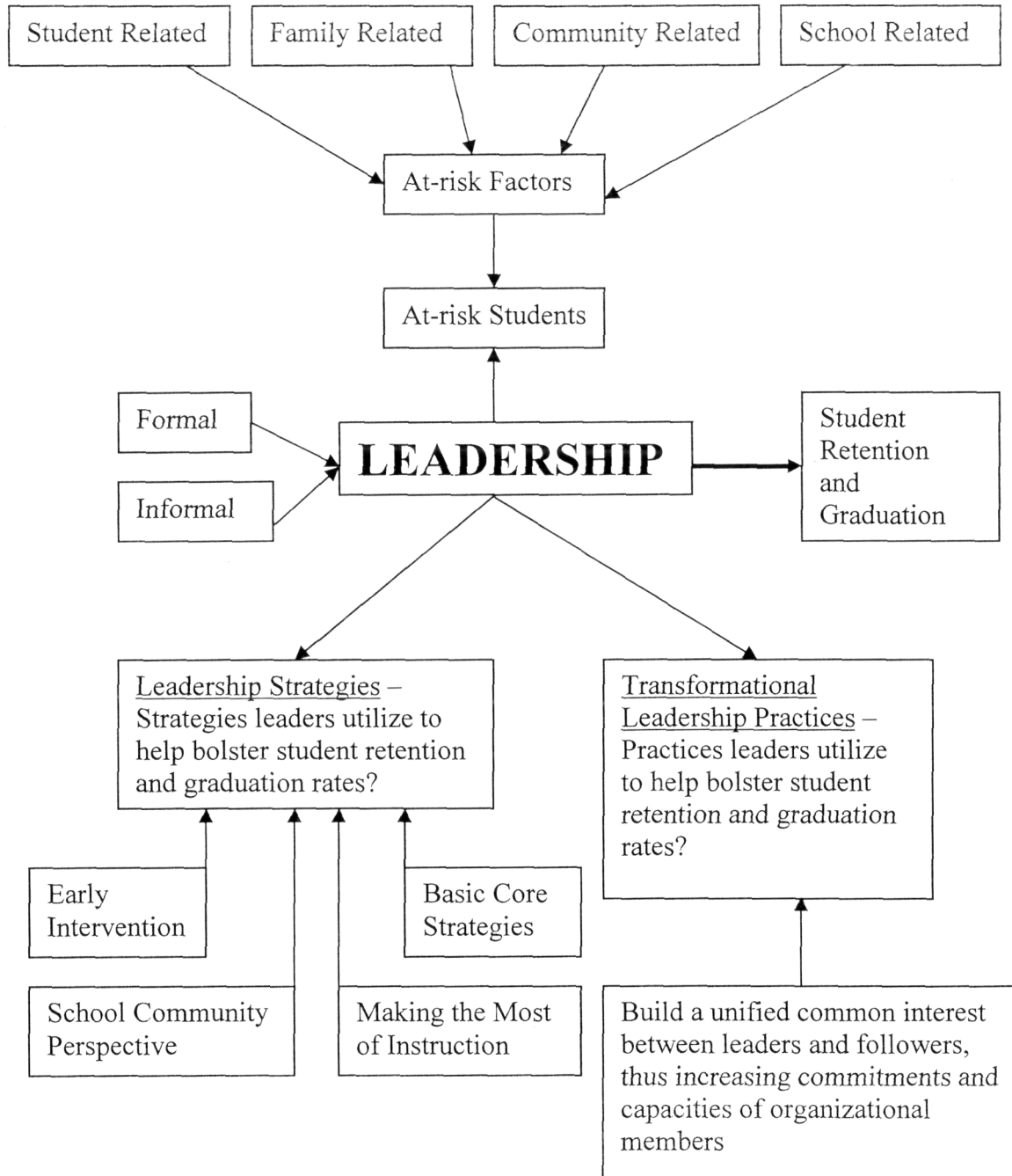
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Appendices

Appendix A

Research Graphic Organizer



Appendix B

Leadership Practices



Note. From "Changing leadership for changing times" by Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Appendix C

Factors for Early School Leaving

Student related factors	
• Irrelevance of education	• Low level of extracurricular participation
• Physical / sensory disorders	• Negative peer influences
• Developmental and behavioural disorders	• Minority ethnic background
• Temperament and behavioural disorders	• Non involvement in labour force
• Alienation	• Male gender
• Social immaturity	• Early pregnancy
• Lack of occupational aspirations	• Low ability level
	• History of low achievement
School related factors	
• Negative teacher student dynamics	• Teaching methods poorly matched to learning styles
• Inadequate teacher education in-service	• Teachers hold low expectations for students
• Student feelings of being at-risk	• Lack of program / school choice
• High teacher turnover	
School community student related factors	
• Long bus rides	• Low parental education level
• Scare tactics	• Transient
• Family and welfare issues	• Over work
• Weak family supports	• Favorable labour force opportunities
• Family income	

Note. From "Removing Barriers to High School Completion: Final Report," by Alberta Learning, 2001,

Alberta: Alberta Learning; System Improvement and Reporting. Adapted

Appendix D

Circumstances that Place Students At-risk

School related	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict between home/school culture • Ineffective discipline system • Lack of adequate counseling • Negative school climate • Lack of relevant curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passive instructional strategies • Inappropriate use of technology • Disregard of student learning styles • Retentions/Suspensions • Low expectations • Lack of language instruction
Student related	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor school attitude • Low ability level • Attendance/truancy • Behavior/discipline problems • Pregnancy • Drug abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor peer relationships • Nonparticipation • Friends have dropped out • Illness/disability • Low self-esteem/self-efficacy
Community related	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of community support services or response • Lack of community support for schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High incidences of criminal activities • Lack of school/community linkages
Family related	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low SES • Dysfunctional home life • No parental involvement • Low parental expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-English-speaking home • Ineffective parenting/abuse • High mobility

Note. From "Quick facts: Situations that put Youth At-risk," by National Dropout Prevention

Center/Network, 2004, Clemson University. Clemson, SC. Adapted.

Appendix E

Disengagement and Protective Strategies

Warning signs of disengagement

- Poor attendance and skipping classes
 - Low grades
 - Failure to complete assignments
 - Disinterest in academic, social, or co-curricular activities
 - Suspension for disruptive behavior
 - Low expectations for success
-

Protective factors

- Consistent attendance
 - Family involvement
 - Good grades
 - Completion of schoolwork
 - Involvement in co-curricular activities
 - Sense of belonging and school connectedness
 - Shared values
-

Note. From "Promoting School Completion," by Morse, Anderson, Christenson, and Lehr, 2004, Principal Leadership 4(5). National Association of Secondary School Principals. Adapted.

Appendix F

Symptoms of Visible Behaviors

Behaviour	Symptom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor school attitude • Low ability level • Attendance/truancy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disinterest in schoolwork, often off-task • Disinterest in schoolwork, poor grades • Ongoing absences, trouble getting caught up up
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior/discipline problems • Pregnancy • Drug abuse • Poor peer relationships • Nonparticipation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detentions, suspensions, expulsion • Trouble connecting with schoolwork • Deviant friendships; illegal behavior • Isolates self from peers • Anger, aggression, competing interests like employment or sports
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends have dropped out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disinterest in schoolwork or peers at School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness/disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor relationships with peers, possible cognitive difficulties with assignments

Note. From "Literature Review for School Completion and Dropout," by Doll, 2004, College of Education and Human Development. Texas A&M University. Adapted.

Appendix G

Dropout Prevention Strategies

- Providing direct, individualized tutoring
- Providing support to complete homework and attend class
- Assisting students to stay focused on school
- Vocational classes and community based work experience programs
- Programs for migrant workers
- Program flexibility
- Alternative curriculum programs
- Providing alternative opportunities for students to retake courses
- Supporting expelled students
- Counseling
- Middle school to high school transition programs which reduce grade 9 failure, a major indicator of high school completion
- Professional development, without decreasing instructional days
- Increasing parental involvement
- Setting goals beyond graduation and plans for achieving those goals so that students see a purpose in what they are being asked to learn and see the connection between high school and a good job

Note. From "10 Strategies for Raising Achievement and Improving High School Completion Rates," by Bottoms, 2005, Southern Regional Education Board. Atlanta, GA. "Improving Graduation Rates Through Dropout Prevention Strategies That Work," by Lehr, 2003, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition Institute on Community Integration. University of Minnesota. "Missing: Texas Youth. Dropout and Attrition Rates in Texas Public High Schools. A Policy Brief," by Supik and Johnson, 1999, Intercultural Development Research Association. San Antonio, TX. Adapted

Appendix H

High School Completion Strategies

- Enhance early childhood development supports
 - Listen to and support students
 - Manage student alienation
 - Increase opportunities for success among Aboriginal students
 - Increase student's knowledge of self and the effects of labeling
 - Increase program flexibility
 - Enhance cooperative educational opportunities
 - Track students
 - Best practices
-

Note. From "Removing Barriers to High School Completion: Final Report," by Alberta

Learning, 2001, Alberta: Alberta Learning; System Improvement and Reporting. Adapted

Appendix I

Categorized Dropout Prevention Strategies

 School Community Perspective

- Systemic renewal
 - School community collaboration
 - Safe learning environment
-

 Early Intervention

- Family engagement
 - Early childhood education
 - Early literacy development
-

 Basic Core Strategies

- Mentoring / Tutoring
 - Service-learning
 - Alternative schooling
 - After school opportunities
-

 Making the Most of Instruction

- Professional development
 - Active learning
 - Educational technology
 - Individualized Instruction
 - Career and Technical Education
-

Note. From "Helping Students Graduate; A Strategic

Approach to Dropout Prevention," by Smink and Schargel,

2004, Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education. Adapted

Appendix J

Leadership Standards of Practice

- Facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community
 - Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth
 - Ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment
 - Collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources
 - Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner
 - Understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context
-

Note. From "Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium: Standards for School Leaders," by Shipman and Murpy, 1996, Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. Adapted.

Appendix K

Principal Quality Practice Standards

The school principal is an accomplished teacher who provides quality leadership in the provision of optimum learning and opportunities for the development of all students in the school.

- The school principal builds trust and supports effective working relationships within the school community and educational system on the basis of sound moral and ethical foundations.
 - The school principal collaboratively involves staff, students, parents, school council members, and the school community increasing and sustaining shared values, vision, mission, and goals.
 - The school principal nurtures and sustains a school culture that values and supports learning
 - The school principal ensures that all students have access to quality teaching and have opportunities to meet the provincial goals of education.
 - The school principal promotes the development of leadership capacity through the active involvement of students, staff, and parents in a variety of leadership roles for the overall benefit of the school community and educational system.
 - The school principal manages school operations and resources to sustain safe, caring and effective learning environment.
 - The school principal understands the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural contexts impacting the school and responds appropriately by giving consideration to the unique and diverse community characteristics and needs.
-

Note. From "Principal Quality Practice Standard; Successful School Leadership in Alberta, field review response draft," by Alberta Education, 2006. Adapted.

Appendix L

Participant Consent Form



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Please understand me:

Effective leadership practices and strategies that increase graduation rates

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled *Please understand me: Effective leadership practices and strategies that increase graduation rates* that is being conducted by Wilco Tymensen. Wilco Tymensen is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and a principal within the Horizon School Division and may be contacted for further questions as follows

ACE Place Learning Centre
2nd Floor 5329-47 Ave
Taber AB T1G 1R4

Phone: 403-223-4761
Fax: 403-223-4781
wilco.tymensen@horizon.ab.ca

As part of a M.Ed. (Educational Leadership) I am conducting research. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. George Bedard. (403) 329-2725.

The purpose of this research is to reveal leadership practices that formal leaders identify as contributing to an increase in graduation rates. “Too many children are falling through the cracks” (Alberta Teachers Association, 2002, p. 68). This is unacceptable in today’s modern society. Without young people who have completed their studies, Alberta will not be able to acquire the highly skilled workforce it needs (Alberta Education, 2003). The study will be a timely contribution to the provincial context of public education. Specifically in addressing ACOL 11 “Develop and implement a comprehensive, province-wide strategy with the goal of ensuring that 90% of students complete grade 12 within four years of starting high school” (Alberta Commission on Learning, 2003, p. 61). It will complement the current literature base with an informed Albertan perspective.

Alberta Education’s mission statement states that “through its leadership and work with stakeholders, [it] ensures that learners are prepared for lifelong learning, work and citizenship so they are able to contribute to a democratic, knowledge-based and prosperous society” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 6). Many leaders have strong beliefs about leadership and what students require to succeed. Yet many students fail to achieve success throughout their educational careers. If we want students to be successful, should we not ask what leaders are doing to ensure student success? Only by exploring this question can we determine what steps are required to ensure educational success for all.

You are being asked to participate in this study because your school division possesses high student graduation rates. Your views on leadership strategies that increase

graduation rates are valued. The potential benefits of your participation in this research include providing leaders with strategies that increase graduation rates, thus benefiting society as young people complete their studies and enter Alberta's highly skilled workforce.

If you agree to participate in this research, your participation will include a thirty to sixty minute interview outside of the school day in a comfortable and convenient setting appropriate for uninterrupted, audio-recorded dialogue. Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary and no compensation for time is provided. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw your permission at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed. If agreed, sections of data may be included in the thesis.

There are some potential risks by participating in this research and they may include discussions about colleagues during the course of the interview. To prevent or to deal with this risk confidentiality will be carefully preserved. Neither the names of participants, nor those referenced in responses shall be included in the interview transcripts. Excerpts from interviews may be referenced in the discussion and analysis of responses. When this occurs, contextual information may be portrayed that may identify participants. Specific, identifying details will not be included. Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by coding all participants with a number and no names will be included in any documentation. Names of schools will also be omitted and replaced by non-identifying references. Quotations from interviews may be used to illustrate a point or when a significant point is made by a participant. As mentioned, these references will not reveal individual names or schools.

Data from this study will be disposed. Only the significant passages of the interview will be transcribed and included as appendices of the final thesis submission. All other notes and the audio recordings will be destroyed upon the completion of the thesis.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others at regional school administrator meetings, and/or provincial conferences.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher [and, if applicable, the supervisor], 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 at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

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

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

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

Appendix M

Interview Protocol

You agreed to participate in a study entitled Please understand me: Effective leadership strategies that increase graduation rates.

The purpose of this study is to identify effective leadership strategies that enhance high school graduation rates, thus benefiting society by having young people complete their studies and enter Alberta's highly skilled workforce.

You are being interviewed because your school contributes to your school division's high graduation rate.

Your participation will consist of a thirty to sixty minute interview that will be audio-recorded. Portions will be transcribed. Confidentiality will be carefully preserved. Neither the names of schools, participants, nor those referenced in responses shall be included in the interview transcripts. All other notes and the audio recordings will be destroyed upon the completion of the thesis.

You may withdraw your permission at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed. However, if agreed, sections of data may be included in the thesis.

All interviews shall be guided by the following ethical principles from the Tri-Council Ethics Framework. They express the common standards, values and aspirations of the research community across disciplines that constitute ethical research.

1. Respect for Human Dignity:
2. Respect for Free and Informed Consent:
3. Respect for Vulnerable Persons:
4. Respect for Privacy and Confidentiality:
5. Respect for Justice and Inclusiveness:
6. Balancing Harms and Benefits:

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others at regional school administrator meetings, and/or provincial conferences.

If interview questions are not fully addressed by the response, neutral probes that encourage additional information may be used. Some examples of probes are "How is that?" or "In what ways?" and so on.

Some follow-up questions may be used for obtaining further information when probes do not result in covering the areas. Follow-up questions will touch on whatever the interviewee has already said; thus there is no best way of phrasing them.

Background information on interviewee

1. Name: _____
2. Gender: _____
3. Age: _____
4. Date of interview: _____
5. Position of interviewee: _____
6. Length of time in present position? ____ years ____ months
7. Previous formal leadership positions held: _____
8. Previous teaching experience not including leadership position: _____
9. Level of education: _____
10. Size of school: _____

Questions

1. What are the characteristics of those who drop out of school?
2. Why are students not graduating? (Dropping out?)
3. What strategies do the professional staff, influenced by either your leadership and/or the leadership of team leaders of the school, use to increase graduation rates?
4. What practices do you, the formal leader of the school, use to increase graduation rates?
5. How does setting direction (vision, goals, and high expectations) increase retention and graduation rates? How do you go about implementing this and assuring it is effective?

6. How does developing people (individualized support, intellectual stimulation, and modeling) increase retention and graduation rates? How do you go about implementing this and assuring it is effective?
7. How does redesigning the organization (culture, structure, policy and community relationships) increase retention and graduation rates? How do you go about implementing this and assuring it is effective?
8. How many of the 36 strategies (from literature review – see list at end of questionnaire) do you utilize?
9. How do these strategies fit into your school?
10. What do you need to do to make them successful?
11. How do we increase retention and increase high graduation rates without letting the quality of education slide?
12. What is being done to recover students who have dropped out of school?
13. What other strategies, practices or factors impact graduation rates that I have not asked. Feel free to comment?

36 Dropout prevention strategies

School Community Perspective

- Systemic renewal
- School community collaboration
- Increasing parental involvement
- Safe learning environment
- Increase student's knowledge of self and the effects of labeling
- Manage student alienation
- Listen to and support students
- Assisting students to stay focused on school

Early Intervention

- Family engagement
- Early childhood education
- Early literacy development
- Enhance early childhood development supports
- Counseling

Basic Core Strategies

- Mentoring / Tutoring
- Increase program flexibility
- After school opportunities
- Alternative schooling
- Service-learning

Making the Most of Instruction

- Professional development, without decreasing instructional days;
- Active learning
- Individualized Instruction
- Educational technology
- Enhance cooperative educational opportunities
- Career and Technical Education
- Vocational classes and community based work experience programs
- Setting goals beyond graduation and plans for achieving those goals so that students see a purpose in what they are being asked to learn and see the connection between high school and a good job
- Program flexibility
- Providing support to complete homework and attend class
- Alternative curriculum programs
- Providing alternative opportunities for students to retake courses
- Supporting expelled students
- Middle school to high school transition programs which reduce grade 9 failure, a major indicator of high school completion
- Increase opportunities for success among Aboriginal and other ethnic minority students
- Programs for migrant workers
- Best practices
- Track students

Note: from Alberta Learning, 2001; Bottoms & Anthony, 2004; Bottoms, 2005; Lehr, 2003; National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2004; Smink & Schargel, 2004; and Supik & Johnson, 1999