

Alberta Leads the way in Professional Practice Standards

By Barry Litun

February 7, 2017 will forever be a day of immense significance for education in Alberta, and for system leaders in our province. On that day Education Minister David Eggen signed three Ministerial Orders. The first was to update the Teaching Quality Standard (TQS), and the other two were to formally introduce two new Professional Practice Standards; the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) and the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS).

While all education partners were in agreement that the current TQS required updating, the Minister's announcement was significant in that for the first time ever all system leaders and all school leaders in Alberta's public, separate, Francophone, charter, First Nations and independent school authorities will be expected to meet a common set of competencies. I believe this level of assurance to the public does not exist anywhere else in the world. I feel confident in sharing this belief because of comments made by internationally renowned education researcher and writer, Dr. Michael Fullan. The College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) has worked with Dr. Fullan on many occasions over the years, most recently since Spring 2017 as CASS began its support for superintendents and all system leaders for the implementation of the Professional Practice Standards. Dr. Fullan indicated he is unaware of a standard for superintendents in any other jurisdiction in the English-speaking world.

The SLQS represents a goal that CASS has had for many years. In the absence of a formal standard, CASS developed the CASS Practice Standard more than a decade ago. This standard was expanded upon in *The Alberta Framework for School System Success*, a CASS publication based on the research of Dr. Ken Leithwood for a CASS commissioned review of the characteristics of high performing school systems.

While the CASS Practice Standard and The Alberta Framework for School System Success lacked formal status, many school authorities used the documents to establish expectations of and professional growth, supervision and evaluation frameworks for superintendents. This was an acknowledgement that the Leadership Dimensions identified in the two documents accurately reflected the actions of successful superintendents and system leaders.

The use by school authorities of the CASS Practice Standard and the Alberta Framework for School System Success mirrored the use of the Principal Quality Practice Guideline. The Guideline, while never receiving formal status, was recognized by virtually all school authorities as a powerful document that could be used to establish role descriptions as well as professional growth, supervision and evaluation frameworks for school leaders.

It should come as no surprise that the CASS Practice Standard, The Alberta Framework for School System Success and the Principal Quality Practice Guideline were the initial resource documents that the ministry and education partners used for the development of the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard and the Leadership Quality Standard.

And while the Professional Practice Standards outline the base core competencies for teachers, school leaders and system leaders, it should also not be a surprise that the professionals that comprise Alberta's education system often commit to levels of expertise that exceed what is stated in the Standards. The fact that Alberta is recognized as having one of the best education systems in the world is an acknowledgement of the dedication of teachers, school leaders and system leaders to strive for excellence in their practice, thereby ensuring every student in Alberta is afforded the opportunity and provided the support to achieve to her or his potential.

It is important to recognize that teachers, school leaders and system leaders have continuously sought ways to expand their knowledge and skills for their respective positions, despite the lack of a formally recognized Standard for school and system leaders, and a Standard for teachers that is widely acknowledged as being outdated.

It is also important to understand that school boards, superintendents and principals have, and will almost certainly continue to use, their respective authority to establish expectations for staff they supervise. The Professional Practice Standards will be a baseline for competency, not a ceiling. This understanding is why school authorities establish leadership development programs and mentorship programs, both of which provide opportunities for teachers, school leaders and system leaders to supplement their personal professional growth plans.

While the Professional Practice Standards do not officially come into force until September 1, 2019, CASS and other education partners have been developing resources and providing learning opportunities for their respective members. One such resource CASS will be making available for superintendents is the *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard: Practice Profile*, a tool intended to support superintendents as they reflect on their practice based on the SLQS indicators. CASS will be making available a similar Practice Profile for all system leaders in the province.

Such resources and supports, combined with changes Alberta universities are implementing in teacher development programs and education administration leadership graduate programs will provide assurance to parents and members of the public that our province will continue to have an outstanding education system. This will ensure that every student, and especially those least advantaged or least able to defend themselves against biases or prejudices, are provided the opportunity to succeed, an inherent right of every student in a publicly funded education system within a truly democratic society.

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