

District Practices and Student Achievement

Lessons from
Alberta

Patrick
Maguire



SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF Excellence in Education

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Patrick Maguire

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Lessons from Alberta

SAEE Research Series 16

SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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Contents

List of Tables

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Chapter 1	Introduction	13
Chapter 2	District Effects on Student Achievement	19
Chapter 3	Design of the Study	27
Chapter 4	Horizon School Division	33
Chapter 5	Pembina Hills Regional Division	49
Chapter 6	Chinook's Edge School Division	65
Chapter 7	Edmonton Catholic School District	83
Chapter 8	Northern Gateway Regional Division	105
Chapter 9	Analysis of Findings	121
Chapter 10	Conclusions	137

Appendix A: District Improvement Index 142

Appendix B: Data Sources by Jurisdiction 143

Appendix C: Interview Questions 146

Appendix D: Online Survey 147

References 149

List of Tables

Table 3.1	Key District Success Factors	27
Table 3.2	Achievement Scores Used in the Selection of Districts	29

Horizon School Division

Table 4.1	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	35
Table 4.2	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	35
Table 4.3.	Provincial Diploma Examination 5-Year Results	36
Table 4.4	Foundational Statements	37
Table 4.5	Community Partners	38
Table 4.6	Distribution of Educational Qualifications	44
Table 4.7	Years of Teaching Experience	45
Table 4.8	Professional Development Funding 2002-2003	46

Pembina Hills Regional Division

Table 5.1	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	50
Table 5.2	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	51
Table 5.3	Provincial Diploma Examination 5-Year Results	51
Table 5.4	Foundational Statements	53
Table 5.5	Community Partners	54
Table 5.6	Distribution of Educational Qualifications	61
Table 5.7	Years of Teaching Experience	61
Table 5.8	Staff Development Funding	63

Chinook's Edge School Division

Table 6.1	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	66
Table 6.2	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	66
Table 6.3	Provincial Diploma Examinations 5-Year Results	67
Table 6.4	Foundational Statements	68
Table 6.5	Community Partners	69
Table 6.6	Allocation of Senior Administrative Responsibilities	71
Table 6.7	Distribution of Educational Qualifications	78
Table 6.8	Years of Teaching Experience	78
Table 6.9	Staff Development Funding	80

Edmonton Catholic School District

Table 7.1	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	84
Table 7.2	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	85
Table 7.3	Provincial Diploma Examinations 5-Year Results	85
Table 7.4	Foundational Statements	87
Table 7.5	Community Partners	88

Table 7.6	Partnerships for Teacher Support	89
Table 7.7	Distribution of Educational Qualifications	98
Table 7.8	Years of Teaching Experience	98
Table 7.9	Professional Development Funding	102

Northern Gateway Regional Division

Table 8.1	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	106
Table 8.2	Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results	106
Table 8.3	Provincial Diploma Examination 5-Year Results	107
Table 8.4	Foundational Statements	108
Table 8.5	Community Partners	109
Table 8.6	Distribution of Educational Qualifications	115
Table 8.7	Years of Teaching Experience	116
Table 8.8	Professional Development Funding	118
Table 9.1	Education Levels	129
Table 9.2	Experience	129
Table 9.3	ATA Local Staff Development Funding Allocations	132
Table 9.4	Total Staff Development Funding Allocations	133
Table A.1	District Improvement Index	142

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Executive Summary

Whenever educators seek new insights into student achievement, logic tightly focuses their magnifying lens on that crucible where teaching and learning typically occurs - the classroom. When their research perspective widens, it rarely extends beyond the classroom's immediate environment - the school.

This study takes a significant step back from the classroom. Researcher Patrick Maguire aims his magnifying glass at the school district to assess whether this collectivity can reach beyond administrative duties to influence the quality of education in a profound and positive way.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

In the North American context, the school district generally serves as the vehicle through which resources are allocated, teachers hired and work rules identified. As an administrative unit, it is generally seen as far removed from teaching and learning.

This study - which has little precedent in Canada - examines the role of the district in initiating and sustaining academic improvement across schools and seeks to trace the impact of policies and decisions taken by boards of trustees, superintendents of schools, and central office staff on the work of classrooms and schools.

Maguire brings his career experience as an Alberta superintendent of schools and education consultant to the research commissioned by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education. It was conducted between January and November of 2003 through a grant from the Donner Canadian Foundation.

WHICH DISTRICTS AND WHY

The study was situated in the province of Alberta which possesses a mature assessment system, allowing for the longitudinal tracking of achievement progress not only at the student, school, and provincial levels, but also at the district level.

Four consistently improving Alberta school districts were identified by means of a district improvement index developed by Maguire through statistical analysis of the 1998 - 2003 assessment data for the province's 60 districts. Academic performance trend-lines were evaluated on the basis of results in the Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) completed by students in Grades 3, 6 and 9, and the Provincial Diploma Examinations (PDE) which certify student completion of selected Grade 12 courses. The four districts selected by Maguire were roughly representative of Alberta's demographic profile, ranging in size from 3,500 to 35,000 students and located in rural and urban settings. A fifth district considered to be more 'typical' in performance was added to the study, more as a comparison than a control.

SEARCHING FOR REASONS

The central question posed by the study is whether the four consistently improving districts had certain characteristics that might be associated with their success.

With the consent of the participating districts, researchers embarked on a series of interviews, focus groups and surveys, as well as the collection of planning and results reports, board minutes and other key documents. Guided by the findings of the international literature on key features of successful districts, Maguire interviewed key district leaders ranging from superintendents and board chairs, department administrators, teacher association presidents, and selected school council chairs. They were asked to identify the most influential contributors to improved student achievement in their districts.

At the same time, the views of school administrators and teachers were probed through focus groups, and all district staff members were invited to complete a survey posted on the Internet. In all, 83 individual interviews and 30 focus groups were conducted to gather the data used to generate detailed case studies of these five districts.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN TYPICAL AND IMPROVING

Analysis of the data revealed that the five districts shared much in common in terms of formal structures and operations, but differences emerged when it came to actual practices. As compared to their 'typical' counterpart, the four improving districts demonstrated the following distinguishing characteristics:

- Vision statements that were more sharply focused on student learning and more widely promulgated and internalized at all levels.
- More links with community partners and agencies capable of supporting students.
- A collective culture in which school administrators and teachers took pride in their district because they shared in its planning, decision-making and achievements.
- The determination to measure schools against district-level expectations, not the parochial yardsticks of individual principals or teachers.
- Greater emphasis on improving the understanding and use of assessment data among school staff.
- Successful implementation of a curriculum-based, collaboratively developed and instruction-embedded model of staff development.

Given the descriptive nature of this study, definitively isolating cause-and-effect relationships is problematic. Nonetheless, the evidence clearly identifies district factors that create an environment conducive to system-wide improvements in achievement. Significantly, none of the key success factors was equally evident among all of the four improving districts or entirely absent from the

average district. What was most apparent was the unique manner in which the mix was applied in the different jurisdictions.

LESSONS LEARNED

The findings of this research predict that a ‘model district’, one which generates consistent gains in academic achievement, likely demonstrates the following features:

- A powerful concentration by the district’s administration on improving student achievement, coupled with at least one senior leader whose passion and energy are sufficient to fuel the district’s vision.
- Widespread, top-to-bottom understanding of the district’s mission and goals.
- A collaborative culture which values leadership at all levels and employs transparent performance criteria which trigger both celebrations for success and consequences for inadequate performance.
- Significant efforts and resources aimed at classroom-embedded teacher development programs.
- Identification of principals as the primary instructional leaders in their schools and active contributors to district-level decisions.
- Recognition that action-research is essential to improvement and goes hand-in-hand with a program to build instructional capacity and assessment literacy among district staff.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

This study also raises numerous policy issues for decision-makers. Given the critical role of superintendents, provinces should consider investing in additional education and leadership development programs for superintendents as a strategy for large-scale improvement. Similarly, the study recommends that trustee associations evaluate their development programs, particularly in the areas of vision and communication. Investment in staff development could be much more effectively applied if based on an action research model that is embedded in specific curriculum needs and assessment results.

CONCLUSION

The evidence highlighted by this research will be of interest to Canadian school district leaders everywhere who seek consistent improvement across their schools, and will invite thoughtful comparison with their own experience.

1 Introduction

The school district is a political, organizational and administrative unit created for the delivery of public education at the local level. Virtually universal across North America and many other countries, the school district¹ is generally the vehicle by which funds are distributed, teachers are hired and assigned, and work rules are established.

District governance is often perceived by many stakeholders to be quite remote from the actual day-to-day work in the classroom, especially in larger jurisdictions. In an environment of school-based decision making, the policies and strategies at a jurisdiction level may even be seen as an unwarranted intrusion into such areas as school leadership, instruction and student assessment.

Much of the research on improving student achievement has focused on principal, teacher, classroom and school factors. This seems very appropriate inasmuch as the day-to-day contact with students happens in classrooms and schools.

However, in the complex environment of teaching and learning, it is useful to consider the role of the district in initiating and sustaining academic improvement across schools. What is the impact of policies and decisions taken by boards of trustees, superintendents of schools, financial administrators, their assistants and directors of various educational functions on the work of classrooms and schools? Does the way in which those policies are enacted and those decisions made affect the way professional and support staff work? Is the district central office a force for improvement and growth or simply the locus of an administrative function by which resources and facilities are provided and accounted for?

This Canadian study sought to identify factors in the leadership, management and operation of school jurisdictions that might be associated with improvement in student academic achievement. It was situated in the province of Alberta which possesses a mature assessment system, allowing for the longitudinal tracking of progress in achievement not only at the student, school, and provincial levels, but also at the local jurisdiction level. The study examined practices in four Alberta school districts demonstrating consistent gains in academic achievement over the past five years as well as a fifth district, considered to be more 'typical'. The research was commissioned by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education through a grant from the Donner Canadian Foundation for this purpose. It was conducted between January and November 2003.

¹ Common synonyms are 'school division' and 'school jurisdiction' or 'local education authority', depending upon the region.

In the following paragraphs we describe the Alberta context as background to this research and provide an overview of the report.

THE ALBERTA CONTEXT

This account of certain features of the administration of Alberta's K-12 education system will be helpful for readers from other provinces and may assist them to apply the findings and conclusions of the study to their own circumstances. We deal in turn with the way Alberta's education is funded, its planning and accountability structure, the provincial assessment program, the school-based decision making model, and the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement.²

EDUCATION FUNDING

The Alberta government department responsible for education is called Alberta Learning. The 60 school jurisdictions in the province, varying in size from 400 to almost 100,000 students, operate under the provisions of the Alberta School Act and various Alberta Learning policies and regulations. Funding for education is provided through a range of grants and allocations directly from Alberta Learning and, in the case of school facilities, from Alberta Infrastructure. The basic allocation to districts is calculated on a per-student allocation for K–10 and on a Credit Enrolment Unit basis for students in Grades 10 - 12.³ Additional funding is provided through a system of earmarked and program-directed funding in areas such as special education, language programs and school improvement programs. Alberta Learning establishes a provincial mill-rate for property assessment throughout the province and collects all of the local property tax into a central revenue pool for education funding. There is very limited opportunity for school jurisdictions to access the local property tax for local funding purposes. Catholic, public, and francophone school systems are all equally funded in Alberta.

PLANNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A comprehensive planning and accountability cycle aligns government, district and school efforts. The Government of Alberta Business Plan sets out general goals and expectations for education in the province. These are restated as goals for the learning system by Alberta Learning, and are expanded to include specific outcome statements and mandatory measures for all jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction is expected to prepare a three-year education plan that incorporates the province's goals, outcomes and measures, and makes provision for budget allocation and for any local priorities, outcomes, measures and targets. Schools are then expected to prepare a similar three-year education plan that addresses the district's goals and priorities, the distribution of the allocation of funds received from the district, and may add local community priorities and measures as well.

² For fuller information on Alberta's school system, readers are encouraged to visit the Alberta Learning website http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12

³ The basic instructional grant per elementary/junior high student for the 2002 - 2003 school year was \$4,367, and the per-credit allocation for high school students was \$124.77.

On an annual basis, schools are responsible for the preparation of an Education Results Report on the achievement of the goals of their education plan for presentation to the district and to their community. The district prepares a similar document for submission to Alberta Learning, which in turn submits a similar report to the Provincial Legislature.

Three system-wide features linked to Alberta's accountability model are described below. These factors were the ones most frequently identified by the respondents in the study as having an influence on the leadership and management of instruction in their schools and districts. They are the provincial assessment program, school-based decision making, and the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement.

PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENTS

Alberta Learning expends significant resources in developing, distributing, marking, and disseminating the results of the Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) and the Provincial Diploma Examinations (PDE). The PAT are annual assessments intended to measure the extent to which students generally across the province are achieving the goals of the provincially-mandated curriculum and meeting the provincial standards for achievement. They are administered at Grades 3, 6, and 9. The PDE are intended to certify individual student achievement on completion of selected Grade 12 courses, and are administered at five different times in each school year. The PDE contribute half the final mark for the courses in which they are used, while the PAT are only used for individual student evaluation if the teacher chooses. The tests, based on the Alberta curriculum, are designed and reviewed by teams of specialist teachers in the various subject areas.

The PAT Language Arts examinations and all PDE contain a written component that is marked by teams of teachers who are currently teaching the particular course, under the supervision of Alberta Learning staff. A great deal of effort is put into ensuring that the examinations are available to all students and an extensive system of accommodations is available for students with special needs. Alberta Learning provides a comprehensive range of reports of results to school jurisdictions. Data regarding the total cohort in the grade tested are provided as well as the results for those writing the particular test. Five-year tables of results are developed, and more recently, a report based on prior levels of achievement is provided at Grades 6 and 9. This report indicates the comparison between the results obtained by a group of students in a grade with the results in the same subject for the same group of students three years later.⁴

The availability of the results of this testing program is a critical factor in the annual planning and accountability cycle in schools and jurisdictions. Results are analysed by districts and schools, and areas of strength and concern noted. The areas of concern generally form the basis of improvement plans and strategies at the school and jurisdiction levels.

⁴ http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/testing/

SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING

One of the education system reforms undertaken by the Alberta government in the mid-nineties was the implementation of site or school-based decision making. In general terms, the province sought to decentralize decisions by placing the responsibility for most aspects of school operation on the shoulders of the school principal, with the proviso that the principal operate out of a consultative decision-making model involving staff and parents through the school council. Since only the most general of guidelines were provided by the government at the time, the models vary in many aspects from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The most prevalent models see instructional planning being conducted at the school level within a framework provided by the Division's Education Plan. Principals are responsible for overseeing the development of their school education plans in collaboration with stakeholders. They are then responsible for preparing the annual education results report for their school and communicating this to the community, generally through the school council. Principals are also routinely involved in or responsible for staff selection, assignment and evaluation.

Decisions regarding the distribution of funds allocated to the school are generally made in consultation with staff and the school council. Funding is distributed from the jurisdiction's central administration to schools on a formula, generally a per-student allocation for students in Grades K through 9, and on a Credit Enrolment Unit (CEU) basis for high school grades. Equity factors are often built in to compensate schools for additional costs incurred due to low enrolments, remote locations or local program demands. Funding for high needs special education students is generally distributed through a centrally established budget line. A central pooling of instruction funds is prevalent and accommodates for contingency costs that an individual school would find difficult to undertake. Most often, the central pooled funds cover costs of long-term sick leave, maternity leave, and contributions to services that are used across the jurisdiction, such as membership in the regional library systems.

The major benefit of the model is that it provides the school community and the administration with the ability to respond quickly and effectively to local needs and conditions. The most significant outcome of this capacity is a considerable increase in the sense of achievement and morale of the school community and the development of an environment of teamwork and collaboration that generates high levels of satisfaction among all stakeholders.

The most significant concern with the model is that it creates a considerable increase in the administrative workload at the school. Much of the accounting previously done in the central office has been downloaded to the school; purchasing approvals and budget control are the school's responsibility; and all or most staffing decisions, with their attendant stresses, are now in the purview of the school administration. When the principal is the business manager, aspects of the instructional leadership role may be overlooked in the process, and principals whose strengths do not lie in the area of financial management may find the model frustrating and the responsibilities overwhelming. As it is difficult to design a funding distribution model that is equitable for all schools, the exercise

of gaining consensus is often divisive and may make it a challenge for a superintendent to direct significant resources to areas of need. Inequities in funding and expenditure often create large discrepancies between schools in the same jurisdiction, with some schools amassing large surpluses while others run up sizeable deficits.

Where jurisdictions have developed an effective leadership development program for school administrators and accountability systems and practices are well-designed and implemented, the school-based decision making model provides for an effective devolution of responsibility to the school and its team of administration, staff, parents and students.⁵

ALBERTA INITIATIVE FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (AISI)

This program, first introduced by Alberta Learning in December 1999, provides funding to school jurisdictions to conduct projects that are directed at improving student achievement.

The goal of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) is to improve student learning and performance by fostering initiatives that reflect the unique needs and circumstances within school jurisdictions.... AISI... [is] focused on improving student learning by encouraging teachers, parents and the community to work collaboratively to introduce innovative and creative initiatives.⁶

Guidelines from Alberta Learning indicated expectations that projects would be developed in a collaborative environment with the support of the overall school community, and would be guided by the research on school improvement. The establishment of targets for improvement and measurement of progress towards those targets were essential features of projects. A comprehensive project evaluation process monitored the success of projects on an annual basis. Supplementary funding at \$121 per student was provided to all jurisdictions in the province, but per capita allocations by the jurisdiction to schools were discouraged.

The program was first established with a three-year time frame, terminating in June 2003. A second three-year program has been announced commencing with the 2003/2004 school year.

In the course of the reorganization of education in the province in the mid 1990s, strict limits were placed on central office expenditures by Alberta Learning. As a result, districts either significantly reduced or eliminated the positions of curriculum leadership at the central office level. Responsibilities for curriculum implementation and review and for staff development were assigned to principals, with the result that work in these areas became largely school-based and reflected the interests and priorities of the principal or the school staff. District-wide co-ordination was minimal and as a result, large discrepancies developed between schools, even in the same

⁵ K-12 Learning System Policy, Regulations and Forms Manual: Section 1 - Education Programs and Services Policy Requirements, Policy 1.8.2 - School-Based Decision Making www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/pol-plan/polregs/182.asp

⁶ http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/special/aisi/

jurisdiction. Many jurisdictions are using the AISI funding and structure to restore a measure of central co-ordination and support in these areas.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

This chapter has described the purpose of the study and its rationale, with background material on selected aspects of the Alberta education system. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature relevant to the study. Chapter 3 outlines the study's research design and methodology. Chapters 4 through 8 each present the findings for one school jurisdiction. Chapter 9 draws these five separate case studies together in a cross-case analysis and proposes linkages for other similar research. The final chapter presents conclusions and recommendations for both policy and practice for districts wishing to assess their influence on student academic achievement, and suggests areas for further research.

2 District Effects on Student Achievement A Review of the Literature

The research literature on student achievement has a great deal of material on school effects and teacher effects. It contains some references to state level effects, but is limited on the topic of district effects. Indeed, there appears to be some doubt in the educational community as to whether districts have any effect on student performance.

We were met with a fair amount of scepticism when we started. We were told that there were school “effects” and teacher “effects” and state “effects” - but there were no district effects. We were also mindful of the popular sentiment that districts - particularly urban districts - were the problem, not the solution. Ironically, we came to agree with some of the scepticism about whether districts had an effect. In too many cases they probably did not. This study, however, indicates that such an effect is possible and can add significant value to the reform effects of others (Foundations for Success, 2002, preface)

Much of the research and professional opinion regarding effects on student achievement consists of examining school effects. Leading references on school effects include Goodlad, (1984), Lightfoot, (1983), and Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, and Ouston, (1979). Their findings, and those of others are summarized by Coleman and Larocque (1989) as follows:

The good school operates collegially; that is, there are shared values between all staff members, including the principal, which allow teachers both to operate autonomously in an atmosphere of mutual respect, and also to help one another continuously improve practice. This professional self-confidence and mutual support system provides the environment within which parent participation in the instructional program is welcomed and encouraged, and student accountability is insisted upon. Parent support for the school’s high expectations for student performance and behaviour is expected and willingly provided by parents who feel that they are full, not silent, partners in the instructional process (p. 20).

When one examines all of the variety of human interactions assumed in the summary above, it is very clear that the environment in which schools function, and the factors that contribute to

effective schools are very diverse and complex. Coleman and Larocque not only recognize this, but go on to write of the influence of district-wide factors.

THE EFFECT OF DISTRICT-WIDE VARIABLES

The potential association between district effects and student achievement is suggested by Coleman and Larocque (1989):

When both instructional and nurturance or ecological outcomes are considered important, the effective schools research suggests that there are six important focuses of school district activity, in which district emphases are analogous to, or perhaps linked to, school-level and classroom-level characteristics of the good school (p. 21).

These six areas of focus for school district activity are listed as learning, accountability, change, commitment, caring, and community, and the authors propose that these areas of focus, acting together, constitute the district 'ethos'. These authors go on to emphasize the importance, in their view, of the notion of district 'ethos' as a key to district improvement, and examine how these areas of focus interact in various districts in British Columbia. They propose that the various elements of 'ethos' are subject to administrative influence, and, as such, should be examined in any study of district effects on any important outcomes (pp. 28-29).

Much of the research literature on the particular topic of district effects and student achievement is characterized by agreement on a number of perspectives. Factors that are more or less "inherited" by the district include district wealth (Connors, 1982), Socio-Economic Status (SES) (Walsh, 1986), parent education levels (Walberg, 1984; Walberg & Marjoribanks, 1976), and ethnic mix (Dulaney & Banks, 1994). There is often little a district can do to influence or engender change in these factors.

Several studies, however, have examined factors that are to some degree at least at the discretion of the district. In Maine, Moreau and McIntire (1995) looked at the relationship between a number of district characteristics and student achievement in all 193 school districts in the state. Factors such as SES, tax base, expenditure levels, mill rates, pupil teacher ratios and teacher education levels were considered. Of the factors that were at the district's discretion for decision making, the higher achieving districts spent more on a per pupil basis, and employed a greater percentage of teachers with a graduate degree. Surprisingly, pupil/teacher ratios did not differentiate between high and low-achieving districts in this study.

The Education Commission of the States (1997) examined the extent to which various states promoted flexibility and deregulation in their education systems and the impact that these efforts had on student achievement. While the study determined that it was unable to measure the overall impact on student achievement, it did conclude that flexibility is one of several important strands in a comprehensive approach to improving student achievement.

Rosenholtz (1989) echoes this concern for flexibility and subsidiarity. She uses a concept from Kanter (1968) to differentiate in her study of eight districts in Tennessee between ‘stuck’ and ‘moving’ districts. ‘Stuck’ districts are generally characterized as those where little excitement or enthusiasm exists about student achievement, teacher commitment is low, and there is no sense of progress, growth or development, while ‘moving’ districts exhibited risk taking, a sense of progress, growth and high aspirations (p. 149). She argues that the technical culture (the various aspects of content and process) of schooling and learning is very uncertain and idiosyncratic, and in this environment delegation and flexibility are essential characteristics of success.

If the technical nature available to implement organizational goals is uncertain, successful superintendents tend to delegate authority, precisely because schools confront such complex work. Rather than control being secured by minute descriptions of tasks and their procedures as in stuck districts, moving districts rely heavily on delegated authority. That is, the work of teachers takes place within a structure of guidelines that they helped shape, granting them considerable discretion over technical decision-making and at the same time holding them accountable for those decisions (p. 203-204).

The notion of resource allocation as an important strategy by which districts can influence student achievement is echoed in work done by the *School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts (2002)*.

Equitable access to resources is a necessary ingredient in promoting high student achievement and equity within urban districts. The results of our research and experience-based guidance offered by our colleagues from the three districts have convinced us that student-based budgeting is a valuable tool for districts seeking to achieve results and equity for all their students (p. 11).

In a report compiled for the Governor of Colorado in 1996, a team led by Pacheco (1996) proposed a causal relationship between the establishment of district standards for content and performance on the one hand and improvement in student achievement on the other. This theory was based on results obtained on mathematics assessment in one district and on reading and writing in another.

The issue of family environment as a factor that influences student achievement is identified by many authors. In a paper by Swanson and Engert (1995) the concept of districts developing partnerships with other social agencies to ensure that children are provided with adequate shelter, nutrition, family counselling and health services is proposed as a means by which student achievement can be affected.

SUPERINTENDENT INFLUENCE

The leadership skills of the superintendent are highlighted by many authors including, among others, Johnson (1996). In a study involving 12 superintendents in the first two years in their positions she finds that three types of leadership were evident in the work of all influential superintendents – educational leadership (focus on pedagogy and learning), political leadership

(securing resources, building coalitions), and managerial leadership (using structures for participation, supervision, support and planning). Johnson proposes that superintendents must be ‘teachers’ in these three domains - educational, political and managerial - in order to successfully accomplish significant change and to maintain a focus on instructional issues amid the press to deal with all of the other demands of the job.

The influence of the superintendent is again emphasized by Hill, Campbell and Harvey (2002) in case studies of six large urban school districts. In each case the reform focus on student achievement was a central aspect of a new superintendent’s vision for reform and improvement. In Memphis, for example, the superintendent’s vision was seen as contributing to an increase in student test scores in the schools through implementation of the instructional model which she had suggested. As further evidence of the influence of a superintendent’s vision, in three out of the six cases studied, where the superintendent left the district, there is evidence that the reforms were difficult to sustain and in some cases have essentially been abandoned.

BOARD INFLUENCE

The idea of the ‘smart’ district is proposed in *School Communities that Work for Results and Equity*, an initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2002). Such a district would improve standards of student achievement and equity by (a) providing schools, students and teachers with needed supports and timely interventions; (b) ensuring that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions; and (c) making decisions and holding people throughout the system accountable by using indicators of school and district performance and practice (p. 6).

In a study that replicated Rosenholtz’ (1989) notion of ‘moving’ and ‘stuck’ districts, research conducted under the auspices of the Iowa Association of School Boards (Joyce and Wolf, 2000) sought to compare board-level attitudes, policies and practices among six districts - three high-achieving districts and three low-achieving districts - and attempt to determine what factors could be associated with student achievement. Three differentiating factors distinguished the high achieving districts. First, the board and senior administration consistently expressed a value system that perceived students as capable of achievement and improvement, in spite of various challenges. Second, the board demonstrated good knowledge and insight regarding the focus on school renewal and could describe the board processes and goals that were aligned with this focus. Third, stakeholders across the districts were able to identify the board’s involvement and alignment with the goals and objectives of the renewal focus. It is not suggested that there is a causal relationship between the understanding and beliefs of boards and student achievement, but they are perceived to be indicative of a district-wide culture focused on improvement and renewal.

In a further example of an emphasis on the role of school boards in establishing a climate for improvement in student achievement, the California Association of School Boards is leading a five-state project entitled *Targeting Student Learning: The School Board’s Role as Policymaker* (2002). The project materials contain proposals and directions to assist boards and superintendents in focusing on student-learning issues while maintaining a comprehensive approach to policy. It

recognizes that policies serve many legitimate functions such as fulfilling legal requirements, providing public accountability, assuring student safety and addressing other governance responsibilities but argues that issues related to student learning should dominate the policy manual and board discussion time.

The critical nature of the school board's relationship with its superintendent is further underlined by Goodman and Zimmermann (2000). This work sets out the challenges to effective school system leadership to meet broad student achievement goals as:

- Creating public engagement and community mobilization
- Attracting and retaining qualified school board members
- Attracting and preparing outstanding educators to become outstanding superintendents
- Achieving continuous board/superintendent education and development
- Revisiting laws that may inadvertently impede effective school governance
- Awakening students and teachers to the diversity in our changing society (p. 8).

INFLUENCE OF THE TEACHERS' UNION

Another district-level factor that can influence the success or failure of a reforms focused on improvement of achievement is the support of the teacher union, or the lack thereof. Litzcke (2001), Odden and Kelley (2002), and Landolfi (2003) document case studies of union-initiated local reforms that were designed to increase the quality of teaching and learning. Hill, Campbell, and Harvey (2002) relate the experiences of reform and restructuring efforts in Memphis, San Antonio, and Seattle, where a major factor in the loss of support for measures intended to increase student achievement was resistance and political action by the teacher union.

These examples from the literature underline the challenges of maintaining a focus on the vision and goal of student achievement among diverse groups of stakeholders with disparate interests.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL DISTRICTS

In a recent study of four large urban school districts, Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy (2002) identified some essential characteristics and strategies for success. Political and organizational stability over a prolonged period was a key factor. The board should demonstrate a focus on policy decisions that support student achievement and there should be evidence of a shared vision between the board and the superintendent. There was a consensus on organizational reform strategies, including the need to clearly identify instructional problems, to communicate and impart the vision to stakeholders, and to allocate resources in support of student achievement.

There was a focus on student achievement, with specific goals and defined consequences. Instructional practice and curriculum was co-ordinated across the district by means of central

office involvement in guidance, monitoring and professional development support. Additional resources were directed at the lowest-performing schools and particular attention was directed at the elementary grades. There was intensive instruction in math and reading at the middle and high school grades, even at the expense of other subjects.

Accountability was a high priority and systems were in place that held school and district leaders responsible through a commitment to data-driven decision making.

In a study of three Georgia school districts that demonstrated sustained gains in student achievement over a period of three years, Pajak and Glickman (1987) identified eight general categories of 'common findings' among the districts that they propose are associated with the demonstrated improvement. These categories are:

1. Awareness and Alignment - Work was done to make staff and administration aware of the testing program, data indicating how students scored on various objectives were shared among staff, curriculum objectives were aligned with test objectives.
2. Teaching and Materials - Texts were selected with test objectives in mind, additional materials were provided, and instructional time was reallocated to more accurately reflect content importance.
3. Planning and Sharing - Instruction to students in special programs was coordinated with the program in the regular classroom, plans and targets for improvement were written, teachers routinely shared materials, and staff development time was allocated for planning.
4. Reviewing Progress - Test objectives were included in lesson plans, and test objectives were routinely monitored by peers, building level and district level administrators.
5. System-Wide Policies - Attendance standards, promotion standards and accountability expectations were determined at the system level.
6. Competition and Cooperation - Test results for all schools and for surrounding school districts were distributed to all schools, school-level teamwork and teacher satisfaction regarding student success was common.
7. Influential Persons - New superintendents communicated the message that student achievement on tests was important, there was district-level coordination of instructional efforts, principals were seen as resource persons to teachers, other in-school support was available to teachers, and teachers helped one another.
8. Costs - Clerical help was provided for record-keeping, class sizes were reduced, planning time was increased, additional materials were readily available, there was greater supervisory support, and teachers received financial recognition for professional development.

Massell (2000), in a policy paper for the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, expressed the view that districts represent the sole source of external assistance and support for schools in building capacity among students, teachers and schools. In the course of a study of 22 districts across eight states over a two-year period, she identified strategies by which districts built capacity in schools. They were proficient in the use of data in planning, curriculum alignment and decision making in all instruction-related areas. They were committed to building teacher knowledge and skills. Teacher professional development was a priority and was supported and conducted with resource investment and creative problem-solving. There was a focus on aligning curriculum and instruction. Common curriculum guidelines and objectives across schools, aligned to assessment expectations and supported by common instructional materials were found in the more effective districts. They also assertively targeted interventions on low-performing students and schools by means of allocations of financial and personnel resources.

In an extensive study of District 2, New York City, Elmore and Burney (1999) examined the many aspects of the process that saw that district improve its 1987 ranking of tenth in reading and fourth in mathematics out of 32 subdistricts in New York, to 1996, where it ranked second in both reading and mathematics. From the New York study, Fullan (2001) extrapolates seven ‘organizing principles’ that can be associated with this level of improvement in student achievement:

- It’s about instruction and only instruction;
- Instructional improvement is a long, multi-stage process involving awareness, planning, implementation and reflection;
- Shared expertise is the driver of instructional change;
- The focus is on system-wide improvement;
- Good ideas come from talented people working together;
- Set clear expectations, then decentralize;
- Collegiality, caring, respect (p. 175).

SUMMARY

There are persuasive indicators in the research that support the contention that the school district is an essential component of the leadership and management structure of education and that there are elements of district policy and practice that contribute to student achievement. Common threads and elements that run through the research provided above suggest that high-performing districts generally demonstrate the following characteristics:

- (a) A clear vision and set of beliefs and values that place a priority on student achievement.
- (b) A leadership and governance team that can clearly and unequivocally communicate the vision, beliefs and values.
- (c) Stable and progressive leadership.

- (d) District-wide coordination of curriculum objectives, instructional materials and assessment instruments and strategies.
- (e) District and school-level support for teacher professional development.
- (f) Data-driven decision making.
- (g) Subsidiarity in decision making - loose coupling around means issues, and clear expectations around ends issues.
- (h) A clear accountability and responsibility reporting structure from teacher through principal through superintendent to the board.
- (i) Resource allocation that addresses both school and student equity issues.
- (j) Effective partnerships within the community to address social, health, and safety issues for students.
- (k) A positive district 'ethos' or culture that addresses both relationship and process considerations among all of the various partners, and keeps them focused on the vision.

These characteristics of high-performing districts serve as a useful framework for examining the Alberta school districts profiled in the present study. That framework and the design of the study is a matter to which we now turn.

3 Design of the Study

This account of the study design begins with a description of the analytical framework developed from the literature review. Subsequent sections deal with the achievement data used, the method of selecting the sample districts, and the collection and analysis of data on district operations.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

As noted in the previous chapter, the literature reviewed for the study yielded a list of eleven characteristics of high-performing districts. The eleven characteristics were grouped into five clusters of related characteristics which provided the basis for the design of all data collection and a workable set of dimensions for both analyzing and reporting the findings. Table 3.1 shows the clusters and their constituent characteristics.

Table 3.1 Key District Success Factors

	Key Features of High Performing Districts (From Literature Review)	Categories for Analysis
(a)	A clear vision and set of beliefs and values that place a priority on student achievement.	Vision, Values, Beliefs and Ethos
(j)	Effective partnerships within the community to address social, health, and safety issues for students	
(k)	A positive district 'ethos' or culture that addresses both relationship and process considerations among all of the various partners, and keeps them focused on the vision	
(b)	A leadership and governance team that can clearly and unequivocally communicate vision, beliefs and values	Leadership and Governance
(c)	Stable and progressive leadership	
(e)	District and school-level support for teacher professional development	Staffing and Professional Development
(d)	District-wide coordination of curriculum objectives, instructional materials and assessment instruments and strategies	Curriculum Coordination
(f)	Data-driven decision making	Decision Making and Accountability
(g)	Subsidiarity in decision making - loose coupling around means issues, and clear expectations around ends issues	
(h)	A clear and accountability and responsibility reporting structure from teacher through principal through superintendent to the board.	
(i)	Resource allocation that addresses both school and student equity issues	

ACHIEVEMENT DATA FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The province of Alberta was chosen for this study because of the availability of longitudinal performance data at the school and district level. In order to select the sample districts - those that had demonstrated relatively consistent improvement in student academic achievement over time - district results were examined from the provincial achievement tests (PAT) at Grades 3, 6, and 9 and the provincial Diploma Examinations (PDE) for the period 1998 – 2002.

Test results were acquired from Alberta Learning for the 60 public, separate, and francophone school jurisdictions in the province. Results from private schools and charter schools were not included. Four jurisdictions did not present results in many of the PDE subjects in many of the years under consideration due to low student enrolment at the Grade 12 level and were therefore excluded from the calculation. Accordingly, data from 56 jurisdictions were examined in the selection phase of the study.

The provincial testing program assesses different subjects at different grade levels and it was felt that, as far as possible, results from each grade level should have an equivalent impact on the selection of districts. In some cases, due to program and curriculum changes, five years of data were not available in certain subjects. One jurisdiction did not present results in Physics 30 in one year of the period under consideration. Applied and Pure Mathematics had been part of the PDE for only two years at the time of the study. In consequence, Physics 30 and Applied and Pure Mathematics were excluded from the calculation.

With respect to the use of the PDE results, two other factors had to be considered. The first was the effect of school or district-based practices of student selection into high school subjects. Districts with a more open approach to admission of students into a subject such as English 30 could expect a higher participation rate, but the wider range of student ability in the program under these circumstances could be expected to lead to somewhat lower overall test scores. In order to compensate for this influence, the jurisdiction comparisons were calculated by using the product of the examination result and the participation rate. A higher participation rate would be offset by a lower test score and vice versa.

The second factor to be considered in using the PDE results was the treatment of data for English and Social Studies. Each of these subjects has two different levels, designated respectively by the course numbers 30 and 33. Most students typically take only one of the two courses in each subject. Thus, if participation in English 30 in a particular district was lower, then participation in English 33 in that district would probably be higher. The same can be said for Social Studies 30 and 33. The effect on the data would be that, if the results for both the 30 course and the 33 course were used, a high result for English 30 would probably be offset by a low result for English 33, and similarly for Social Studies 30 and 33. In order to verify whether this was in fact the case, the data were examined under three different scenarios: a) using all four results, b) using only English 30 and Social Studies 33, and c) using English 33 and Social Studies 30. The results of scenarios (b) and (c) were very similar, and different from the first scenario. It was felt that using only one of the

two levels from each subject would provide a more accurate measure of improvement and accordingly the selection calculation used only the results from English 30 and Social Studies 33.

For the PDE level, then, the data that were used were those for English 30, Social Studies 33, Biology 30 and Chemistry 30. Only the provincial examination results were used in the calculation of PDE achievement. In order to ensure consistency across all school jurisdictions, the school awarded marks were not considered.

With respect to the PAT data, results were available for Language Arts and Mathematics in Grade 3 and for Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies in Grade 6 and Grade 9. Since only two subjects were presented for Grade 3 as compared to four from each of the other grades, it was felt that the calculation of improvement would be unfairly weighted towards the senior grades. This was deemed to be especially pertinent since many jurisdictions have invested heavily in time and support for early literacy and numeracy programs. In order to provide each grade level with an equal influence on the calculation, each of the two Grade 3 results was used twice in the calculation. In order to avoid any influence on the results caused by student absence, the results for the total cohort at each grade level were used.

In sum, the selection of the sample districts was based on four subjects at four grade levels over four periods from 1998 through 2002. Table 3.2 summarizes what data were used.

Table 3.2 Achievement Scores Used in the Selection of Districts

Grade 3*	Grade 6	Grade 9	Grade 12
Language Arts	Language Arts	Language Arts	English 30
Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Social Studies 33
	Science	Science	Biology 30
	Social Studies	Social Studies	Chemistry 30
1998	1998	1998	1998
1999	1999	1999	1999
2000	2000	2000	2000
2001	2001	2001	2001
2002	2002	2002	2002

* Note: Results for Language Arts and Mathematics used twice in the calculation.

SELECTION OF THE DISTRICTS

In order to select the districts showing the most consistent improvement over the time period, the results in each of 56 districts in the subjects described were examined. The province designates two standards of performance: a Standard of Excellence (a mark of 85% or better) and an Acceptable Standard (a mark of 50% or better). In each district, the percentages of students achieving the Standard of Excellence and the Acceptable Standard respectively for each year were compared to those of the previous year. In each comparison, districts were ordered according to both the extent of improvement and the consistency of improvement in these percentages over the period.

In calculating the extent of improvement in the percentage of students achieving the Acceptable Standard, it was necessary to recognize that not all degrees of improvement are necessarily comparable. It seems evident that to raise the proportion of students achieving an Acceptable Standard from say 60% to 65% is of a different order than increasing it from 90% to 95%. To compensate for this kind of difference, the improvement was calculated as the percentage by which the district closed the gap between the previous score and 100%. For example, an improvement from 60% to 65% was calculated as a 5% improvement on a gap of 40% (100 - 60) or a net improvement of 12.5%. In contrast, an improvement from 90% to 95% was calculated as an improvement of 5% on a gap of 10% (100 - 90) or a net improvement of 50%.

In the case of the Standard of Excellence such a procedure is not appropriate. The percentage of students achieving the Standard of Excellence most often falls in the 10% to 20% range. In order, therefore, to ensure that these results would have a similar effect to those from the Acceptable Standard, improvement on the Standard of Excellence was calculated as an actual percentage of the previous year's result rather than as a measure of the extent to which the 'gap' was closed.

Consistency of improvement over time was measured by the number of occasions during the period that the jurisdiction's results from one year were higher than those of the previous year. In all, there were 64 opportunities to demonstrate improvement. The distribution of districts on the gains index created is provided in Appendix A. It is important to note, in the context of district selection, that the intent of the foregoing methodology was to identify jurisdictions that were demonstrating consistent gains in student achievement over the five-year period. There is no implication regarding the overall achievement standing of these jurisdictions relative to other districts. What was critical to the study was the rate and consistency of improvement.

In examining the final ordering of districts in the calculation of gains, it was felt that the value of the study would be enhanced if the jurisdictions selected were somewhat representative of the variety of jurisdictions across the province. Using this assumption, the four jurisdictions invited to participate in the study were the most diverse sample available from the first six jurisdictions in the gains index. They were:

- Horizon School Division No. 67, a jurisdiction of approximately 3,500 students whose administration offices are located in Taber, Alberta;
- Pembina Hills Regional Division No. 7, a jurisdiction of approximately 5,500 students whose administration offices are located in Barrhead, Alberta;
- Chinook's Edge Regional Division No. 5, a jurisdiction of approximately 11,500 students whose administration offices are located in Innisfail, Alberta; and
- Edmonton Catholic School District No. 7, a jurisdiction of approximately 31,000 students whose administration offices are located in Edmonton, Alberta.

One final step was to include a 'typical' jurisdiction so as to provide some comparison with the four high-performing districts. The jurisdiction selected was Northern Gateway Regional Division No. 10, a jurisdiction of approximately 6,500 students whose administration offices are located in Whitecourt. This division's student population is very close to the average student enrolment for the province; its improvement ranking was the average of the 56 jurisdictions examined in the selection process, and its actual results on the examinations closer to the provincial average more often than 90% of the remaining jurisdictions.

DATA COLLECTION ON DISTRICT OPERATION

Each of the superintendents of the five selected jurisdictions was invited to participate in the study and all of them accepted. In all districts one-on-one, hour-long interviews were conducted with members of the district leadership group which generally consisted of the superintendent of schools, the assistant superintendents and directors of various instructional functions. Other lead individuals such as the senior financial administrator, the board chair and the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) local president were also interviewed.

The interviews generally consisted of asking respondents to propose the factors which they viewed as the most influential contributors to the improvement in student achievement in their district. The interviewer then probed these responses, ensuring that the elements of the analytical framework were included in the discussion. Probes were also used to obtain a good picture of the way each of the named factors worked in the district.

Three focus groups of school administrators and three focus groups of teachers were conducted in each district. These also lasted approximately one hour each. Telephone interviews lasting about 40 minutes each were conducted with up to six school council chairs from each jurisdiction. The questions that were presented to these groups and individuals were similar. Appendix C provides the list of interview questions.

In total, 83 interviews and 30 focus groups were conducted. As an additional source of opinion, all staff members in the five jurisdictions were invited to participate in a brief online survey using an Internet website. These questions are found in Appendix D.

In addition to these interviews, surveys, and focus groups, relevant documentation from each district was requested. This included the jurisdiction's three-year education plans and annual education results reports, board minutes and minutes of the district's school administration groups for the five-year period of the study. Districts were also asked to provide current information regarding the education/experience distribution of their teaching staff and professional development expenditures. A summary of the data collection sources by jurisdiction is found in Appendix B.

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

The data from each separate district were compiled and analyzed through the lens provided by the analytical framework described earlier in this chapter. A cross-analysis was then undertaken to assess where commonalities among the high improvement districts existed and where there were differences. The analysis also examined where the high improvement districts were similar to or differed from the 'typical' district.

The analysis made it possible to construct a hypothetical Model District, a composite capturing the distinguishing characteristics and habits of school districts which effectively produce, sustain and improve academic growth for all students across all schools.

4 Horizon School Division

The Horizon School Division is a rural jurisdiction in southern Alberta running north from Coutts on the Canada/US border to Lomond in the County of Vulcan. The division's administrative offices are located in Taber, Alberta. The division provides education services to approximately 3500 students and consists of 30 schools of various grade configurations, including two outreach schools. Thirteen of these are Hutterite Brethren schools located on the Hutterite colonies within the division. Most of the communities within the Horizon School Division are small, with the Town of Taber, population 7,700, being the largest. Schools, excluding one-room colony schools, range in size from 85 to 438 students.

The economy of the area is primarily dependent upon agriculture and the oil and gas industry. Some agricultural processing, service industry and light manufacturing is present in the area. Many of the smaller rural communities have experienced population decline in past years but some appear to have now stabilized. Others continue to decline, which makes it difficult to offer comprehensive programs and services.

In many of the rural schools, the number of students per grade is small, resulting in some double and even triple grading. School subjects are generally cycled in multi-graded classrooms, which results in students writing exams a full year after completing the course. High schools with low enrolments also often combine classes in order to offer courses. Other courses are offered through distance learning. The division perceives that these factors work against these students experiencing the same degree of success as students in larger schools. Despite these challenges, small school environments are also seen to provide advantages for students, such as more individual attention and friendly atmospheres felt to be safer and more secure than those often found in larger schools.

In recent years, a substantial population of Mennonite families from Mexico and other Central American countries have moved into the area, and the division has encouraged the enrolment of children from these families in its schools. Three years ago, the division initiated a Kanadier Mennonite Learning Project in partnership with Alberta Learning. In addition to providing classroom instruction to the immigrant Mennonite students, the project also provides English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to adults and playschool activities to pre-schoolers. All students from this unique population are ESL students and they generally do not proceed beyond the

upper elementary or early junior high grades. Many of these students return with their families to Mexico during the winter months.

Despite having the second highest percentage of ESL students in the province, the district's achievement levels on provincial assessments are above the provincial average.

This analysis of the division and its operations is in seven major sections. We deal first with data showing the division's performance over a five-year period. Five sections then deal in turn with each of the elements of the framework described in Chapter 3, concluding with a summary.

JURISDICTION PERFORMANCE - FIVE-YEAR TREND

Tables 4.1 through 4.3 show the performance of the system over the past five years on the Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) for Grade 3, 6 and 9 and on selected Provincial Diploma Exams (PDE) at both the Acceptable Standard and the Standard of Excellence.⁷ Within each table is a graph representing the numerical values in that table. It should be noted that the graphs are intended only to provide a visual representation of the values in the table. The scale used in the graphs is constant for those within each table only, and varies from table to table. For each graph within a table the value axis is adjusted to best accommodate the high and low values in the chart.

Student achievement in the division, as measured by PAT and PDE, generally meets or exceeds provincial standards and is above provincial averages. The board, parents, and students have come to expect high levels of achievement compared to the rest of the province.

VISION, VALUES, BELIEFS AND ETHOS

“That team thing is real! Talk about ‘Team Horizon’, it is real!” (School Administrator)

“Horizon is Team Horizon, not only at the administrative level, but also at the teacher level and at the student level as well.” (School Administrator)

The division's guiding statements are centred on the concept of ‘Team Horizon’, and build on that collaborative, focused image to direct the energies of all members of the division to the task of educating students. This notion of a division ‘team’ approach is further expanded by statements that guide the division to address the needs of all students, creating partnerships with parents and the community, shaping a safe and caring environment, accountability, effective communication,

⁷ See the description of methodology in Chapter 3. For the PAT the measures are the percentages of students at each grade level and for each subject that achieved the Acceptable Standard, and the percentage who achieved the Standard of Excellence. For the PDE, the performance measures are arrived at by multiplying the percentage achieving at each standard level by the participation rate for that subject in the jurisdiction.

Table 4.1 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results

Percentage of Students Achieving the Acceptable Standard						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	81.1	86.9	91.0	86.3	90.8	
Math	80.1	83.0	90.7	87.4	92.0	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	87.2	82.7	85.5	79.3	85.5	
Math	88.3	87.1	87.6	80.0	83.3	
Science	84.1	88.1	89.3	87.3	87.6	
Social Studies	84.5	79.0	85.1	83.1	85.4	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	82.0	84.9	85.5	86.1	85.7	
Math	73.2	75.3	76.7	74.8	77.9	
Science	74.0	82.8	80.8	83.5	81.4	
Social Studies	74.4	78.2	81.3	79.7	81.5	

Table 4.2 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results

Percentage of Students Achieving the Standard of Excellence						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	11.7	16.7	19.7	16.9	23.4	
Math	18.5	24.8	27.3	28.7	36.8	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	16.2	20.3	22.3	9.1	15.2	
Math	20.0	20.3	15.6	21.8	15.6	
Science	22.8	23.7	24.9	25.4	23.4	
Social Studies	23.1	18.6	19.2	17.6	24.5	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	10.4	9.2	13.7	19.9	15.4	
Math	10.8	19.7	12.5	24.4	21.3	
Science	8.8	15.5	14.2	15.4	16.3	
Social Studies	14.4	20.1	19.6	18.8	21.6	

Table 4.3. Provincial Diploma Examination 5-Year Results

[Exam Result x Participation]						
Acceptable Standard						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	3750	3681	3884	4023	4508	
Chemistry 30	3231	2817	2616	3170	3875	
English 30	4508	5038	4671	4714	5134	
Social Studies 33	3685	3374	3937	3667	3669	
Standard of Excellence						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	871	946	911	1269	1446	
Chemistry 30	597	691	533	782	1726	
English 30	834	708	834	1077	1123	
Social Studies 33	363	518	613	496	349	

and an openness to innovation. Table 4.4 presents the statements found in the division's policy manual which describe these philosophical underpinnings.

Many respondents credited the former superintendent of schools with initiating and establishing the culture of collaboration and teamwork during the process of regionalization in the mid-1990s. This was a difficult process in many areas of the province where often unwilling neighbouring jurisdictions were brought together to create larger regional divisions. That superintendent led a concerted effort to help build a positive vision for the new entity among all the stakeholders.

There was a high degree of agreement among respondents that the division's values and beliefs created a strong and persistent press towards student learning and achievement. These statements focus on the elements of positive interpersonal relationships, life-long learning and the critical role of parents in the education of children. Virtually all respondents were relatively familiar with their content. The division's motto of 'Kids First' was one of the aspects of the division's foundational statements heard most frequently from respondents in all categories. It is firmly embedded in the division's language and philosophy. The focus on student learning and well-being can be observed in the assertive manner in which the division addressed the educational needs of the large numbers of immigrant Mennonite families that settled in the Taber area in recent years. Programs for these students were put in place even before any specific funding was available from Alberta Learning. This is a district that takes seriously its priority to look after the needs of students.

Table 4.4 Foundational Statements

FOUNDATIONAL STATEMENTS	
Vision	
Following is a brief description of the fundamental characteristics of education which Team Horizon is committed to achieving:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students who are prepared for the future. • Students who are creative problem solvers and critical thinkers. • Students who have confidence in themselves and others. • Meeting the needs of all students. • Frequent and meaningful communication among all partners. • Highly caring, competent and enthusiastic people. • A safe and secure environment for all. • An openness to innovative approaches and ideas. • Accountability and effective resource management. 	
Mission Statement	
Team Horizon empowers every person to excel in a changing society through stimulating and challenging learning experiences.	
Beliefs	
Team Horizon believes:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education makes a difference. • Every person is unique. • Every person can learn. • Learning is a life-long process. • Education is a partnership among home, community and school. • The parent is the primary educator. • Every person has inherent value. 	
Statement of Values	
Caring:	People show responsibility, understanding, sensitivity, and concern for the well-being of each person.
Responsibility:	People are dependable and make choices for which they are accountable.
Integrity:	People are honest, trustworthy, fair, and just.
Co-operation:	People work in partnership to achieve common goals.
Excellence:	People achieve their personal best.
Acceptance:	People value diversity and change.
Motto:	“Kids First”

The division and its schools are conscious of the need to extend these beliefs and values to other areas of student development and well-being in support of academic development. The division lists many levels of partnership with community organizations and services that provide enhanced learning and support services for students. Table 4.5 indicates the many local partners that work with the division to provide social, emotional and health-related services in support of student learning.

Table 4.5 Community Partners

Partner	Service
Headwaters Student Health Initiative	Provides Speech Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Family School Liaison Counselling and consultation.
Chinook Arch Regional Library	Facilitates inter-library borrowing privileges with all libraries in the region.
Barons-Eureka-Warner Family and Community Support Services	Provides family referrals, Family School Liaison Counselling, Roots of Empathy Program and Parenting Centres.
Chinook Regional Health Authority	Provides Speech Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Family School Liaison Counselling and consultation.
Southern Alberta Kanadier Association	Interagency association that co-ordinates the delivery of services to Kanadier Mennonite Families.
Mennonite Central Committee	Provides services to newly arrived Kanadier families and promotes children accessing public education.
Lethbridge Family Services	Deals with referrals for family support.
Palliser Regional Health Authority	Co-ordinates the Zone 6 ECS program among stakeholders.
Southwest Child and Family Services	Provides protection to children and social services to families.
Sun Country, Taber and District Community Adult Learning Association	Provides adult education programs including ESL to Kanadier Mennonite parents and operates a career centre.
Taber and District Literacy Program	Promotes adult literacy with parents of school-age children.
Pre-school and Play School Programs	Provides early intervention to special needs children before they enter kindergarten.
Taber Special Needs	Co-ordinates special needs program for children and adults and facilitates the transitioning of students.
Lethbridge Community College	Facilitates the transitioning of high school special needs students to college.

The board and senior administration also maintain a close working relationship with school councils and regularly attend meetings of these bodies. Representatives of school councils are routinely involved in the meetings that constitute the annual planning cycle of the board, and parent representatives of the division are encouraged to accompany trustees to the annual Alberta School Boards Association conferences.

The division works closely with the Alberta Teachers' Association local in funding and administering a joint professional development program plan. Communications with the labour organizations in the division were also perceived to be positive and productive.

There was a general perception that parents were very supportive of the division and the education that their children were receiving. They were perceived to have high expectations for achievement, especially for completion of Grade 12, and teachers felt that their decisions were supported in the home.

“The attitude here is that you finish Grade 12.” (School Administrator)

“We can phone home and feel confident that the parents are going to support us.” (Teacher)

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

“We really try and keep our focus on policy, direction and vision and keep out of management.” (Trustee)

“I would certainly say that our superintendent is very much focused on learning and improvement.” (Division Administrator)

The board of trustees is comprised of seven elected trustees. Most trustees have served for multiple terms and bring a considerable amount of experience to the board. The superintendent of schools has held the position for the past seven years, and was a former principal within the division. The deputy superintendent was appointed three years previously and was also a former school administrator in the division. The board and the senior administration clearly articulate the focus on student learning and teamwork at meetings of administrators, teachers, school councils and in the division's communities. They regularly comment publicly on the concept of 'Team Horizon', the goal of the division to select the 'best and the brightest' in their staffing process, and support the practice of using PAT and PDE results as an important aspect of evaluating student achievement. Division education plans, results reports and public communication documents consistently refer to student growth and achievement. Test results are provided to parents and are published in local news media.

There was a high degree of consistency between the statements of the board representative and those of the superintendent of schools regarding such issues as the focus on the well-being of children, the priority on improving achievement, the importance of measurement and assessment, the search for the best teachers and the importance of staff development.

Positive administrative and leadership support for instruction as a reason for improvement was cited by many staff members. Their comments reflected the impact of high expectations for teacher performance, a collaborative, sharing, environment, and effective communication strategies. School administrators and teachers identified the administrative style of the superintendent and other division administrators as a positive contribution to the learning environment in the division. All

school council respondents commented favourably about the availability and approachability of the superintendent and the board trustees.

DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Decision making in the division is based on its values of integrity, responsibility and cooperation. Decisions are made at the appropriate levels in a consultative model. There are clear accountability structures that are based on data and an expectation of continuous learning and improvement, and resource allocation and staffing practices are determined in consultation with the parties involved. The following paragraphs deal in turn with the division's school-based decision making and resource allocation, accountability measures and the use of data.

SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

“I feel like I have a lot more control over educational leadership, staffing, and decisions where the rubber meets the road as opposed to counting the beans.” (School Administrator)

“‘Site-based management’ is a new catchword for downloading the responsibilities and administrative work on schools when they should be concentrating on our kids and education.” (Trustee)

“We are a very collectively-minded school jurisdiction. It is not every site for themselves.” (Superintendent)

The school-based decision making model is determined by board policy and incorporates statements of responsibility and accountability for division and school administration, as well as a clear mandate for collaborative decisions at all levels. It makes a clear distinction between governance and administration decisions and the respective roles of the board and administration. The comments made by the trustee and the superintendent of schools indicate respect for the different roles in this regard.

School administrators are accountable for the operation of their schools and for the development and implementation of their school plans. Trustees and division administration were of the opinion that many of the expectations placed on school administrators tended to distract them from the educational leadership role that was their first responsibility. They expressed a preference for a model that would see more decisions regarding finances made centrally, thereby allowing principals to focus more on their instructional leadership role.

School administrators, on the other hand, expressed satisfaction with the decision-making and allocation model. They felt that their ability to determine the personnel needs of their schools through the staffing formula provided them with the opportunities to meet the needs of their students and their communities without a great deal of the financial accounting work that could be involved. They felt that the model did allow them to be instructional leaders rather than budget

managers. They were free to focus on the learning needs of their students and the development of their staff and were able to make comparisons with colleagues in other jurisdictions whose time appeared to be taken up with financial management issues. The quest for an ideal process is the topic of ongoing dialogue in the division.

Staff members, both administrators and teachers, reported a high degree of collaborative decision making. The board and the superintendent of schools were perceived as consultative, good listeners and highly supportive of teacher and school initiatives that addressed student learning and well-being.

Decisions which had division-wide consequences regularly appeared on the agendas and reports of the division's Administration Association. This group consists of all school administrators and the central office leadership group and meets on a monthly basis. There were regular accountability discussions between the superintendent and each principal, and annually between the board of trustees and the superintendent of schools. There was evidence of a strong collegial environment among administrators and teachers appreciated the opportunities to meet and share strategies and ideas. Instances of voluntary support by school administrators and school councils for projects and needs in other schools were freely shared. In one instance, representatives of a small rural school supported a reallocation of funds from their budget to a larger school to purchase the services of a police resource officer in recognition of the more pressing needs of that site.

ACCOUNTABILITY

“A lot of site follow-up is the key in this jurisdiction. Anything worth doing is worth checking on.” (Deputy Superintendent)

The board of trustees expects regular reports from its senior administrators regarding progress on various projects and activities in the division. It reviews the results of PAT, PDE and the satisfaction surveys of parents and students on an annual basis and expects to be advised of plans to address areas where trends towards lower results are evident.

School administrators report directly to the superintendent of schools. There is a structured annual schedule of meetings between the school principal and the superintendent of schools and the secretary-treasurer where the school's results, plans, budget and operational practices are reviewed and critiqued. The superintendent of schools also reviews the principal's Professional Growth Plan (PGP). As indicated in greater detail below, principals also review the PGPs of the teachers in their schools on an annual basis. The various elements of the school's education plan are regularly monitored by the senior administration during the course of the year.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

Test and survey data are employed consistently by school and division administrators in the development and evaluation of both division and school education plans. PAT and PDE results

are analyzed at the division level and are the subject of critical examination and discussion between the senior administration and the school administration. The deputy superintendent provides workshops to schools to build understanding of the framework and the implications of the PAT among administrators, school staff and parents.

The test results are presented annually to the board of trustees and included in the planning cycle at the division level. In some schools teachers in the grades leading up to the grades in which the tests are administered meet and review the PAT results and make decisions regarding changes in practice, materials, resources and further assessment to address areas of concern. Test results are also made available to school councils and parents, along with an explanation of the background and the implications of the results.

As an accountability measure, data from PAT and PDE results and from an annual satisfaction survey conducted among parents, staff and students are routinely reviewed by the superintendent of schools with both school administrators and with the board of trustees. School administrators and teachers were able to identify curriculum areas that had come under scrutiny in recent years as a result of lower than expected scores in PAT and PDE results. Aspects of elementary language arts and secondary mathematics were the subjects most often mentioned. The selection of AISI projects also reflected student learning needs that were identified through analysis and consideration of both assessment and survey data.

While schools use a variety of other assessment materials, both norm-based and criterion-referenced tests, the decision to select a particular assessment instrument is left to the school-based personnel. Analysis of the results from these assessment instruments are rarely reviewed by anybody other than the classroom teacher involved.

Students that are identified as potential candidates for special education programs are assessed using a battery of standard commercial assessment instruments. The results of these tests determine the eligibility of students for special needs assistance and programming, and form the basis of the Individual Program Plan (IPP) that is developed for the student by the teacher, the special needs specialist, the parent, and the teacher assistant.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The division reviews the areas of responsibility and budget that are allocated to schools and to the division respectively on an annual basis. Principals are involved in a collaborative process with division administrators in developing a staffing allocation for each school. This is in contrast to many other jurisdictions in the province where an actual funding allocation is made to each school and the principal is responsible to determine the staff mix that can be purchased with that allocation. The staffing formula reflects the wide variety of school size and configuration within the division, as well as the distances between schools, and the particular needs of small rural schools. A central funding 'pool' arrangement was in place to cover costs that would be difficult for the budget in any particular school to accommodate. The parameters for this pooled funding were again

developed in collaboration with school administrators. Instructional funds are also allocated centrally for staff development purposes. General instructional expenses are budgeted at the school level. Operations, transportation and maintenance costs are centrally administered. The board has made a commitment to retain small schools as centres of education in rural communities, and this commitment was strongly supported in the comments of administrators and teachers.

In an overall instructional budget of \$18.6 million in 2002/2003, the division allocated just over \$900,000, or 5%, towards small school support. Earmarked funds were directed towards the schools and programs that were eligible. All of the AISI funding allocation to the division was directed to instructional support through professional development and additional staffing. Special needs funding is administered on a division-wide basis to ensure that no school is faced with an overwhelmingly high program cost for any one special needs student.

PLANNING AND CURRICULUM COORDINATION

“In the context of our culture, all of these plans are developed at the grassroots level and we are sensitive to input from parents and school councils.” (Trustee)

“We are a very risk-taking jurisdiction. One of our philosophies is anything worth doing is worth doing poorly!” (Superintendent)

The division’s planning model reflects the consultative, collaborative model that is evident throughout the decision-making process. A representative group of stakeholders was invited to review and make recommendations on the division’s three year education plan which was eventually approved by the board. This plan is directly aligned with the goals and measures in Alberta Learning’s provincial three-year education plan. Schools are expected to base their education plans on the goals and targets of the division education plan, and there is also an expectation that teachers’ professional growth plans (PGP) reflect at least some of the objectives of the school’s education plan.

PAT and PDE test results are examined and analyzed at both the division and school levels, and the results of these assessment instruments are reviewed in the context of the division’s and the schools’ education plans. Many respondents were able to identify incidents where results in particular areas of these test results were deemed to be unsatisfactory by either the division, a school, or both, and plans for remedial action were included in the school’s education plan.

The selection of Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects was mentioned by many respondents as an example of a collaborative grass-roots planning approach that involved school councils, staff, administrators and trustees. School council respondents felt that their opinion and input was respected and valued, both at the school and the division level.

Numerous respondents mentioned their perception that the board and the division leadership were open to creative ideas and were willing to take risks in order to meet the needs of students.

Throughout the planning process, schools and individuals were encouraged to propose strategies and projects to address student learning needs. Both staff and school council respondents were confident that such proposals would receive the full and unbiased consideration of the board and senior administration. Associated with the level of risk tolerance was an attitude of empowerment among staff at all levels. There was a prevalent feeling that stakeholder input was valued and appreciated, and that individuals could make a difference. Examples of creative and innovative approaches included the establishment of ESL and parent support programs for the Mennonite families that were moving to the area and the recent development of Career and Technology Studies (CTS) travelling resource kits.

STAFFING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“We fundamentally believe the teachers are the ones that have the most significant impact on students in the classroom.” (Deputy Superintendent)

“The important work happens in the classroom. Everything else should support the classroom.” (School Administrator)

Respondents frequently mentioned the quality of the teaching staff and the effective staff development model as highly influential in building student achievement. In the following paragraphs we address the division’s overall staff profile, new teacher selection and evaluation, and staff development.

STAFF PROFILE

As of September 30, 2002, the division employed 270 certificated staff and 242 non-certificated personnel. Table 4.6 indicates the distribution of educational qualifications among the certificated staff. This distribution of qualifications was similar to provincial averages. Table 4.7 provides a summary of the experience levels of the teaching staff. Almost half (47.8%) of teachers had less than 10 years of experience - the largest percentage in this category among the five districts.

Table 4.6 Distribution of Educational Qualifications

Highest Level Completed	Division %	Provincial %
Bachelor of Education	51.48%	53.06%
Bachelor of Education and Other	25.56%	25.27%
Bachelor Degree not in Education	9.26%	8.08%
Total Bachelor Degree	86.3%	86.41%
Master of Education	7.78%	8.06%
Master of Education and Other		0.13%
Master’s Degree not in Education	2.59%	3.74%
PhD	0.74%	0.62%
Total Post-Graduate Degree	11.11%	12.55%
Education Not Reported	2.59%	1.05%
Total	100.00%	100%

Table 4.7 Years of Teaching Experience

Total Years of Experience	% of staff
< 5	25.7%
5-9	22.1%
Total <10	47.8%
10-14	13.7%
15-19	12.8%
20-24	12.8%
25-29	8.8%
>29	4.0%
Total =/>10	52.1%
not reported	0.0%
Total	100.0%

2001/02 data

TEACHER SELECTION, INDUCTION AND EVALUATION

“We look for people who have talent and we try to hire only the very best we can find.”
(Superintendent)

While actual staffing decisions are school-based, division administrators are closely involved in the selection process and in the evaluation and retention of teachers new to the division. The division prides itself on always seeking out ‘the brightest and the best’. The division leadership see its proximity to the University of Lethbridge as a distinct advantage in the search for talented teachers and maintains a close partnership with the university’s teacher education faculty and placement services. The deputy superintendent is directly involved in both supporting and evaluating all new teachers through regular classroom visits and conducting orientation and development workshops throughout the year. Division standards for teacher performance are considered to be high, with the result that an average of 10 to 15% of newly hired teachers are released at the end of the one-year probationary period. The teacher evaluation policy and the division’s high standards were identified as key factors by many respondents.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“We have jurisdiction goals that we want to make sure we attain so our PD should be focused on meeting these goals.” (Superintendent)

“You get committed people going and they can change the whole culture.” (Superintendent)

Professional development support was identified by the majority of respondents as a key factor in student achievement gains. Teacher professional development is addressed on a number of levels. The division maintains a centrally administered fund that is used to organize activities within the division to address the development needs of groups of teachers and administrators. These activities are organized for the most part by the deputy superintendent in response to needs identified in the division’s education plan.

Each teacher completes an annual Professional Growth Plan (PGP), which is reviewed with the immediate administrator both at the beginning and at the end of each year. There is an expectation that at least one of the goals within the PGP addresses a goal from the school's education plan. The principals' PGP are reviewed by the superintendent of schools and are subject to the same requirement. The division and the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) local collaborate to establish a fund that supports the initiatives of individual teachers to attend conferences, workshops and seminars outside the division. A recent initiative involves collaborative teams of teachers at the same grade level that meet on a regular basis throughout the year to examine student learning in a variety of contexts such as curriculum, planning, assessment, and instructional practices. Teachers felt empowered by the nature of the sharing and exchange of strategies and experiences that occurred in this process.

Both division and school administration are alert to professional development opportunities for administrators, and routinely review ideas and strategies from national and regional conferences in relation to the needs of the division. Most recently, the work of Dufour, Eaker and Baker (1998) on the concept of professional learning communities is being explored for use within the administrative group. There is an emphasis on a professional development approach with school administration called *Leading Learning*. School administrators are challenged, through a structured schedule of activities, to explore the concepts of instructional leadership so as to better understand curriculum and teaching methodologies and have a direct influence on the learning environment in their schools.

Table 4.8 indicates the division's expenditures on staff development in various categories. Employee salaries are not included in these data.

Table 4.8 Professional Development Funding 2002-2003

[includes substitute cost, travel, accommodation, materials and fees]

Name	Purpose	Amount 2002/03	Per Teacher [253 FTE]
Division Approved			
Supt. Approved P.D.	To support division-wide PD activities and activities involving generally more than one school. Support staff may also access	\$25,000	
Curriculum P.D.	To provide PD support for curriculum implementation	\$15,000	
Special Education	To support PD opportunities for Classroom Support Teachers (CST) & teachers of students with severe special needs.	\$5,000	
Special Education	To support subs for CST's and teachers for PD and IPP meetings	\$11,000	
Sub-total Division Approved		\$56,000	\$221
AISI Projects	To support PD directly related to AISI projects	\$18,000	\$71
Total Division Approved		\$74,000	\$292
Joint ATA/School Division Committee Approved			

Joint ATA/ School Division	To provide individual teachers with PD opportunities based on the teacher's own growth plans and professional needs		
	ATA Local contribution	\$10,000	\$40
	Division contribution	\$40,000	\$158
Total Joint ATA/School Division Committee Approved		\$50,000	\$198
School Approved			
Teachers/Support Staff/ School wide	For teacher and support staff PD and to support school-wide PD involving all staff	\$15,000	
Admin. PD	To provide PD support to administrators that focuses on school administration	\$15,220	
Total School Approved		\$30,220	\$119
TOTAL		\$144,220	\$570

SUMMARY

“What makes this jurisdiction successful is that people believe that they can make a difference.”
(Division Administrator)

The division actively promotes the concept of ‘Team Horizon’, and the notion has caught on at all levels of the organization. It was commented upon by the board representative, senior administration, school administration, teachers and parents. It presents a robust understanding and expectation of teamwork, collaborative decision making, collective responsibility and goal orientation on behalf of the entire organization. There was general agreement that the focus of the division’s efforts was on student learning and results, while maintaining a caring, supportive environment.

At the beginning of the interviews, respondents were asked for their perceptions of the key factors for the division’s improvement in achievement. The question was also asked in the online survey. The most frequent responses are noteworthy. The supportive, collaborative environment was particularly appreciated by parents, teachers and school administrators as providing them with opportunities to be involved in a meaningful way in the system and in the openness that was demonstrated to new ideas and practices. Respondents were confident that this environment made it possible to concentrate on the needs of students and work towards continuous improvement. One also heard many references to the motto ‘Kids First’, and were able to identify examples of where this concept had been influential in making the best decision in support of student growth and development. There was general agreement that the division was fortunate in the quality of its staff, and the practices of selection and evaluation were cited as primarily responsible. The staff development program was particularly appreciated in that it provided opportunities for teachers and administrators to focus on instructional issues and build skills in those areas. The ability to share experiences and teaching strategies was appreciated by many teachers. Respondents also supported the focus on data and the analysis of the provincial tests as providing sound justification for changes in practice and the allocation of resources through AISI, ESL and Early Literacy

programs. They spoke of high academic standards matched with high expectations for responsibility and accountability.

Respondents were quite gratified with the contributions of this small jurisdiction to many issues of provincial importance. Out of almost 120 responses to the online survey, which was completely anonymous, there were only two that could be construed as expressing a critical opinion of any aspect of the division's operation. There was a high degree of pride in being part of Team Horizon.

5 Pembina Hills Regional Division

Pembina Hills Regional Division No. 7 is a regionalized division consisting of the former Westlock School Division No. 37, County of Barrhead No. 11 and Swan Hills School District No. 5109. The division delivers educational services in an area northwest of Edmonton, Alberta that encompasses the towns of Barrhead, Westlock and Swan Hills and the rural areas and hamlets surrounding these communities.

The division's twenty schools include two Hutterite colonies, an alternate public school focusing on non-denominational Christian education, an outreach program and a virtual school program. Under a contract with Alberta Learning, the division is also responsible for the operation of the Alberta Distance Learning Centre, a distance education school that serves all of Alberta's school districts and divisions. The division provides transportation services for students to the Catholic separate school and to the private school within its boundaries. In the 2002-2003 school year the division employed approximately 320 FTE teaching staff and 390 support staff, and had an annual budget of over \$50 million.

The population base of the region is stable, with approximately 25% of the population in the 'seniors' category. The Barrhead/Westlock region has been immune from the 'boom-bust' cycles of the single resource communities such as Swan Hills. Swan Hills has had significant growth since the 60's but its future at this point hinges on its oil fields and waste treatment plant. Significant changes in these industries are reflected in dramatic changes to the town, and of course, the school population. The region contains few visible minorities. Student enrolment trends were flat throughout the first half of the '90's, but the numbers have declined since 1995 and this decline is predicted to continue at a rate of approximately 1% - 2% per year. This is most evident in the Barrhead and Swan Hills communities. Swan Hills School and Barrhead Elementary School, for example, have each lost approximately 20% of their students in the last five years.⁸

This analysis of the division and its operations is in seven major sections. We deal first with data showing the division's performance over a five year period. Five sections then deal in turn with each of the elements of the framework described in Chapter 3. The chapter concludes with a summary.











⁸ www.phrd.ab.ca

JURISDICTION PERFORMANCE - FIVE-YEAR TREND

Tables 5.1 through 5.3 show the performance of the system over the past five years on the Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) for Grade 3, 6 and 9 and on selected Provincial Diploma Exams (PDE) at both the Acceptable Standard and the Standard of Excellence.⁹ Within each table is a graph representing the numerical values in that table. It should be noted that the graphs are intended only to provide a visual representation of the numbers in the table. The scale used in the graphs is constant for those within each table only, and varies from table to table. For each graph within a table the value axis is adjusted to best accommodate the high and low values in the chart.

Student achievement in the division, as measured by PAT and PDE, generally meets or exceeds provincial standards and is above provincial averages.

Table 5.1 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results

Percentage of Students Achieving the Acceptable Standard						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	85.1	87.9	91	91.2	90.2	
Math	70.8	79.4	90	84.0	90.2	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	77.7	73.4	84.5	76.2	81.3	
Math	75.8	71.5	83.3	78.3	79.2	
Science	79.2	75.2	82.1	82.2	79.2	
Social Studies	79.5	72.4	79.5	76.8	77.7	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	78.4	75.2	77.4	75.0	77.3	
Math	57.3	62.6	65.2	63.0	65.9	
Science	75.1	69.1	72.7	68.8	74.5	
Social Studies	68.2	69.8	67.7	72.1	70.4	

⁹ See the description of methodology in Chapter 3. The PAT measures are the percentages of students at each grade level and for each subject who achieved the Acceptable Standard, and the percentage who achieved the Standard of Excellence. For the PDE, the performance measures are arrived at by multiplying the percentage achieving at each standard level by the participation rate for that subject in the jurisdiction.

Table 5.2 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results

Percentage of Students Achieving the Standard of Excellence						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	12.2	12.9	18.2	17.9	15.6	
Math	18.7	17.8	26.2	21.5	28	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	7.8	9.7	16.6	15.7	12.5	
Math	7.6	10.4	10.3	15.1	15.7	
Science	10.7	15.6	17.6	22.6	15.1	
Social Studies	13.8	10.1	12.6	14.9	18.7	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	5.8	8.9	11.5	8.4	14.6	
Math	8.9	16.1	10.0	13.6	18.2	
Science	9.9	13.0	11.6	8.1	10.4	
Social Studies	10.2	14.9	15.7	16.4	16.9	

Table 5.3 Provincial Diploma Examination 5-Year Results

[Exam Result x Participation]						
Acceptable Standard						
	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	2599	2462	2688	2647	2921	
Chemistry 30	2460	2134	2357	2273	2384	
English 30	3950	3785	4118	4136	4450	
Social Studies 33	3171	3246	3300	3096	3069	

Standard of Excellence						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	780	572	678	785	851	
Chemistry 30	562	340	608	705	795	
English 30	526	490	522	599	822	
Social Studies 33	183	354	586	399	351	

VISION, VALUES, BELIEFS AND ETHOS

“We tried to set out what Pembina Hills is, what we are about, our values, and goals, right from day one.” (Superintendent)

The jurisdiction is proud of the voluntary nature of the union that helped lay the groundwork for the spirit of co-operation that exists today. When the jurisdictions of Westlock, Barrhead and Swan Hills were regionalized, the new board and administration took pains to develop a clear statement of values and beliefs for the new division. These statements, as shown in Table 5.4, have directed the division’s attention to student growth and improvement, collaborative decision making, mutual respect and concern and recognition of the value of partnerships.

The division’s foundational statements were developed through a collaborative process that sought buy-in from all groups of stakeholders. The vision statement places students at the centre of the system. The belief statements provide the overriding direction and clearly describe the division’s approach to all stakeholders and their role in the education of students. The emphasis on student learning and success prevalent throughout the division’s foundational statements since its establishment in 1995 was evident in the comments of virtually all of the respondents to the study. The board’s meeting record indicates numerous discussions and agenda items to do with student learning and achievement. The priorities and strategies in the Education Plans are consistent with this focus. The emphasis on staff development through the work of the Curriculum and Instruction department and the manner in which the AISI projects were organized clearly reflects a divisional concern about improving instruction and student achievement. Test results are routinely analyzed for indicators of improvement or potential improvement, and there is a clear accountability process for all members of the division. School council representatives were unanimous in their feeling of being included in the decision-making process.

Table 5.4 Foundational Statements

FOUNDATIONAL STATEMENTS
<p>Vision Statement</p> <p>All students in the division will have the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be self-reliant, responsible, caring and contributing members of society. Central to this vision of the whole child is the importance of the following aspects of a student's education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • values • interpersonal skills • pursuit of excellence • relevant, interesting and challenging programs • school-to-work transitions • adaptability, creativity • partnerships with parents and community (it takes the entire village to educate a child) • physical well-being (sound mind and body) <p>Mission Statement</p> <p>Our Mission, together with our community, is to provide students with the means and opportunity to gain the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes to become lifelong learners and responsible citizens in a changing society.</p> <p>Beliefs</p> <p>Beliefs provide the fundamental value base of an organization. They guide decision making and serve as a reference point in establishing direction. Underlying all beliefs is the principle that open communication is vital to our success.</p> <p>With Regard to Students We Believe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The education and well-being of students is our primary focus. • Students should have access to a quality basic education within their home community. • All students have a responsibility to maximise their own potential. • All students will be encouraged and challenged to live a healthy lifestyle which includes both physical and mental well being. <p>With Regard to Parents We Believe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents are a student's first educator and caregiver. • Children need to arrive at school ready to learn. • Parents should value education. • In the importance of parents working co-operatively with all system personnel. <p>With Regard to Communities We Believe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education is a shared responsibility, supported and valued by the whole community. <p>With Regard to Learning We Believe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All individuals can learn and experience success. • Learning is a life long process. <p>With Regard to Our School System We Believe:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will endeavour to provide a safe and positive environment where each individual is respected, valued and affirmed. • Successful schools are energized by quality staff, a positive learning environment and supportive parents. • Decisions should be made after consultation with stakeholders. <p>Motto: "TOGETHER WE LEARN"</p>

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The division and its schools maintain many levels of partnership with community organizations and services. Table 5.5 indicates the many local partners that work with the division and the services they provide to support student learning.

Table 5.5 Community Partners

Partner	Service
Region #7 Child and Family Services	Child welfare referrals and family support
Aspen Regional Health Authority	Provides the core rehabilitation services to schools including speech, OT/PT, and mental health services
Aspen Student Health Initiative	Provides rehab and social/emotional support services to all schools
Westlock Family and Community Support Services	Provides family referrals, family school liaison services, parenting centers and numerous short courses in the Westlock community
Barrhead Family and Community Support Services	As above, but specific to their community
Woodlands County	Shares the cost of family school liaison services to one school
Town of Swan Hills Family and Community Support Services	Works in partnership with the school to provide FCSS services
Northeast Alberta Community Board for Persons with Developmental Disabilities	Is involved with a number of families who have adults in transition including financial support to develop transition plans for students who are still in school
Yellowhead Regional Library	Provides library support to all schools
Central Alberta Media Centre	Provides media support to all schools
Adult Learning Centres	Provides opportunities for adults in larger communities

In addition to this list, individual schools have entered into partnerships with local businesses and community organizations in their own communities in order to offer Career and Technology Studies (CTS), Work Experience, Work Study, and Registered Apprenticeship Programs. The board and senior administration maintain a close working relationship with school councils and regularly attend meetings of these bodies. School council representatives are involved in the meetings that constitute the annual planning cycle of the board. The division works closely with the Alberta Teachers' Association local in funding and administering the joint professional development program plan. Communications with the labour organizations in the division were perceived to be positive and productive in spite of a recent labour dispute.

PARENTAL SUPPORT

“I think that whole issue of community involvement is huge because parents are so closely connected and the kids know that if something happens at school and it's not a great thing, not only will their parents know, so will everybody else's parents.” (Principal)

There was a general perception among respondents that parents were highly supportive of the division and the education that their children were receiving. Parents have high expectations for achievement, especially for completion of Grade 12, and teachers felt that their decisions were supported in the home. Many respondents, parents included, indicated that most parents were more interested in how their child was progressing overall than in any particular result on the PAT. Their satisfaction criteria included such factors as the child's happiness in school, their safety, and the level of information they received from the school about their child's progress.

One of the key success factors of high-performing districts from the literature is the existence of a positive climate or culture in the district. Many of the elements that constitute a positive ethos were reflected in the comments of a majority of respondents. There is a high priority on relationships and it is evident that a high level of trust exists among teachers, administrators, the division office and the board. Teachers felt supported and encouraged to learn, to share and to improve their practice in a collaborative, sharing environment. While there is a clear expectation for accountability, it is exercised in a collaborative, supportive manner rather than in a punitive fashion. Most teachers interviewed had spent all or most of their career in the division and were very confident that it was the best place in which to work.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

“We have a good board, a very focused board. Everything with our people is student-centred.”
(Board Chair)

“If the board is at loggerheads with each other the rest of the system will deteriorate, there is no doubt about it.” (Board Chair)

“Leadership is about creating culture, climate and relationship, as opposed to command and control, which it is not. It's about the heart of things.” (Superintendent)

The division is governed by a board of seven trustees, and the administration is led by the superintendent of schools. The majority of trustees have served for multiple terms, and the chair has held that position for 15 of his 16 years on the board. Both the board chair and the superintendent reported that the relationship among trustees was positive and cohesive.

The superintendent of schools has held that position since the formation of the division through the school jurisdiction regionalization process in 1995. Prior to this appointment he had been superintendent of schools in the Westlock School Division, one of the regionalized boards that comprised the Pembina Hills Division, since 1986, and had held superintendency positions in other jurisdictions since 1978. At the time of the study he was one of the longest serving superintendents in Alberta and intended to retire at the end of the 2002/2003 school year. The associate superintendent of operations has been named the new superintendent for the division.

The division instructional administration structure also includes an Associate Superintendent of Operations, an Associate Superintendent of Student Services, the Secretary-Treasurer, Directors of Instructional Services and Student Services and a Principal-at-Large. Finance, Operations and Transportation functions are led by other administrators who report to the Secretary-Treasurer.

The respective roles of board and administration are specified in policy, and there was ample evidence of a high degree of respect by the board and the administration for their respective roles. The board expects a high degree of accountability from its administrators and the board minutes indicate that the board regularly received reports of program developments, instructional delivery and student performance. There was also evidence of the priority that was placed on student learning in the development and consideration of Education Plans and Results Reports. These division documents provided public evidence of the board's leadership and vision to other authorities, parents and the community.

The statements of the board chair and those of the superintendent of schools reflected a high degree of consistency with respect to student learning, improving achievement, and the importance of the AISI projects and staff development. The superintendent of schools has made it abundantly clear that student achievement is an item of the highest priority. At a meeting of administrators some years ago when results were lower than expected he made the statement, "If I was on the corporate board, I would have the directors fire me. We need to improve this situation." Some administrators still recall that statement and the incentive that it provided for the group to take student achievement seriously. This synergy of direction was evident in the comments of principals and teachers. They were aware of the focus and goals of the board, and the priority that the superintendent placed on student achievement.

To maintain a secure supply of well-prepared leadership candidates for the future, the board and administration have built a leadership development pool of staff who aspire to leadership positions. This group of teachers and administrators was encouraged to participate in post-graduate study and attend conferences and workshops related to administration and leadership.

DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The research literature identifies a number of factors in decision making and accountability that have an impact on student achievement. This section examines the manner in which the division addresses decision making, resource allocation, accountability practices and the use of data.

SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The outline of the division's model for school-based decision making is found in the board's policy on the functions of school principals. In addition to responsibilities for staffing and allocation of resources, the principal is held responsible under this policy for ensuring that student achievement meets the standards set by the board. Much of the ongoing co-ordination of the business of the division is conducted at the monthly meetings of the Administration Association.

According to respondents, discussions are highly collegial, and seek to arrive at decisions and conclusions in a collaborative and consensus-based environment.

The majority of the instructional funding is distributed on a per-student or a per-credit basis to schools by means of a formula that recognizes factors such as school size, grade configuration and enrolment. Principals develop school budgets according to a template provided by the secretary-treasurer that assists with the calculation of both revenue and expenditure. Principals are then responsible for developing the staffing and resource expenditure budgets for their schools and managing the finances throughout the school year. There was evidence from respondents that school-based stakeholder groups had opportunities to be involved in the development of school budgets.

The division maintained a 'co-op' pool of funds to cover contingencies such as long-term illness replacement and payments for services that were equally available to all schools, such as the contribution to the Regional Library and an audio-visual lending service. Funds for certain division-managed staff development activities were administered centrally by the director of instructional services. Decisions as to what expenditures were covered by the pooled funds were reviewed annually by the Administration Association, which consists of all of the school administrators and the division leadership team. A staff development allocation is also identified centrally and is managed by the director of instructional services. Earmarked funding such as AISI, Early Literacy and Special Education is directed to specific schools and programs based on needs assessment.

A board decision at the inception of the AISI program to operate it as a division-wide initiative established a structure of jurisdiction-level needs analysis, planning and project implementation. Here again, there was a great deal of stakeholder input into the actual design of projects under a framework focused on literacy and numeracy.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The superintendent of schools reports to the board of trustees on the operation of the division and the extent to which targets have been met in all areas of operation including student achievement. This report forms part of the process for performance appraisal of the superintendent. Overall achievement for the division is reported, and trends over time are examined. Respondents were able to identify areas where changes in practice had been introduced due to concerns about achievement that were raised in these discussions.

School administrators report to the superintendent of schools. The superintendent and secretary-treasurer meet formally with each school administrator on two occasions during the year to review both the elements of the education plan and, later, the results that have been achieved on the measures included in that plan. The agenda looks at assessment results, satisfaction survey results, the financial status of the school, and any other matters affecting the operation of the school. The superintendent also visits schools on a regular basis throughout the year and maintains close contact with school administrators and the ongoing issues that existed in the various communities.

School administrators indicated that they paid particular attention to the results of the satisfaction surveys of parents and students.

The sense of a desire for continuous improvement as a commitment to a collegial group rather than a supervisory expectation was notable among school administrators and teachers. There was no sense that the monitoring process was in any way critical or punitive, yet the principals that were interviewed were highly committed to doing the very best job they could. They were confident that the division would provide support and assistance if there was a problem that needed to be addressed. There was a great deal of collective pride in the success of the division on a number of fronts.

School Reviews

“The bottom line is that when you get the staff opinion, the surveys, the internal report and the external report, usually that starts the school in a new direction, on a path to some new goals.” (Associate Superintendent)

“For the most part it is validation you are doing a great job. I don’t think teachers in general get enough of that kind of stuff.” (Principal)

The division undertakes a regular program of school reviews under the terms of its policy. Schools are scheduled for review on a seven-year cycle, but unscheduled reviews could occur for a number of reasons, generally for reasons of concern regarding some aspect of school operation. The review consists of an internal review conducted by a team of staff members followed by an external review that validates the findings of the internal review. School administrators spoke positively of the review procedure in that it accomplished a number of objectives for them. They learned a great deal from participating in reviews of other schools and felt that the reviews of their own schools provided an opportunity to celebrate and communicate the many good things that were going on there as well as identifying areas for school growth and improvement. Student achievement and parent satisfaction were high on the list of areas of performance that were analyzed during a school review.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS

“By and large, we are meeting our targets because it’s something that everyone is working hard towards, everyone!” (Board Chair)

One of the superintendent’s strategies to focus attention on achievement was to work on improving the analysis of test results. The practice in the division in previous years was to bring in external presenters to provide workshops to teachers and administrators on the provincial test results and their implications. The division administration found that there was limited follow-up and analysis at the school level after these workshops and that a change in practice was necessary to provide more consistent reporting, information and follow-up. The position of principal-at-large was established, and one of the primary responsibilities of this position was the analysis and reporting

of both PAT and PDE results to schools, the division leadership, the board and the community.

The principal-at-large has developed a template by which the division can quickly identify areas of success and areas of potential improvement on both a division-wide and a school-by-school basis. These results are reviewed by the division administration and the board and individual school results are provided to schools for their examination and action. Information workshops are provided to school administrators and staffs, and individual support is provided to schools in examining and analyzing their school results.

At the school level, test results were analyzed by administration and staff. In most schools teachers from the grades leading up to the test grade met and reviewed the results together and collaborate on strategies to address issues arising from them. Many school-based respondents were able to identify areas where the analysis of the results indicated areas of concern with student performance and the strategies that were implemented to address them. The areas most often identified were mathematics and writing skills.

PLANNING AND CURRICULUM COORDINATION

“The board is the very heart and soul of the planning process. They are very supportive of instruction.” (Secretary-Treasurer)

“We have some very tight goals in the education plans - here is where we want to head. Operationally, through school-based decision making, schools have a lot of flexibility.” (Superintendent)

The division’s Education Plan identifies a number of areas that will be a concern into the future, the first of these being student achievement.¹⁰ There are concerns regarding the ability of the division to educate the growing number of special needs students, and how best to prepare students for future employment in a changing economy. Issues of class size, the impact of technology, declining enrolments and resources, an aging population and the multiple demands on the education system will continue to challenge the division in years to come.

The annual planning cycle in the division includes opportunities for contributions from stakeholders such as school councils, senior students, school staffs, school and divisional administration, and the entire board of trustees. The process reflects the commitment to consultation that is described in the division’s belief statements.

All stakeholder groups mentioned this opportunity to participate in the planning discussions as an important aspect of the culture of the division, and saw it as an effective monitor of the goal of continued improvement in student learning. School education plans are expected to be aligned with the division’s education plan, and stakeholder input is a requirement for the preparation of

¹⁰ www.phrd.ab.ca/publications/

the school plans. In order to ensure that this process is given the attention it deserves, the division calendar has contained a day set aside for schools to develop the school's plan after the division plan had been approved by the board. The planning model was perceived as 'loose-tight', in that there was a high level of consistency and focus on the overall goals and outcomes and a great deal of flexibility around methods and strategies. The analysis of the data from test results and satisfaction surveys is used in the development of these plans, both at the school and the division level. There is a general expectation that teacher professional growth plans (PGP) will reflect school and division education plan goals and outcomes.

There was a strong perception among respondents that the alignment of plans was an important contributor to achievement. There is a level of division-wide co-ordination of staff development and program implementation which creates a sense of the jurisdiction as an entity rather than a system of disconnected schools. Respondents spoke of a common understanding across the division regarding the priorities for student learning which generated a sense of collaboration and group achievement. They also mentioned the benefits of a common language among teachers and administrators regarding literacy, assessment of student needs and instructional practices that supported communication and understanding across schools and classrooms.

"It is consistent across the district. The expectations from school to school are pretty much the same so even if children move, they are still getting the same kind of programming. (Teacher)"

ALBERTA INITIATIVE FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (AIS I)

"This (AIS I) is the most successful thing that I have seen in all my years in education."
(Associate Superintendent)

A board decision that supported the concept of curriculum co-ordination determined that the AIS I funding would be managed on a division-wide basis rather than distributed directly to schools. Here again the consultative model was used in developing the plan. A meeting of stakeholders was convened to assist in determining what divisional needs might be addressed by AIS I funding. This process resulted in a general consensus that the most pressing needs existed in the areas of literacy and numeracy. A group of instructional staff and administrators was asked to consider how best to address the division's needs in these areas and after extensive research and discussion, a number of projects were proposed and adopted. Some projects operate in only one community, while others involve teachers and administrators from a number of adjacent schools. The majority of the funding was expended on instruction-embedded, ongoing staff development. Many respondents were confident that the attention given to early literacy instruction in particular would have a considerable effect on student performance and achievement across the curriculum in the future.

STAFFING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many of the respondents identified the quality of the division's staff and the heavy investment in staff development as factors that strongly influenced gains in student achievement.

STAFF PROFILE

As of September 30, 2002, the division employed 316 FTE certificated staff and 390 non-certificated personnel. Table 5.6 indicates the distribution of educational qualifications among the certificated staff. While the percentage of teachers with Bachelor degrees in Education (67%) is considerably higher than the same category across the province (53%), the total percentage of teachers with Bachelors degrees (89%) is similar to that of the province (87%). The percentage of teachers with post-graduate degrees (10%) is somewhat lower than the provincial percentage of 13%. In table 5.7 it is noted that twenty-seven percent of the division's staff have less than 10 years of teaching experience - the lowest of the districts in the study.

Table 5.6 Distribution of Educational Qualifications

Highest Level Completed	Division %	Provincial %
Bachelor of Education	67.3%	53.1%
Bachelor of Education and Other	14.7%	25.3%
Bachelor Degree not in Education	7.1%	8.1%
Total Bachelor Degree	89.1%	86.5%
Master of Education	7.1%	8.1%
Master of Education and Other	0.3%	0.1%
Master's Degree not in Education	2.0%	3.7%
PhD	0.3%	0.6%
Total Post-graduate	9.7%	12.5%
Education Not Reported	1.3%	1.1%
Total	100.00%	100%

Table 5.7 Years of Teaching Experience

Total Years of Experience	% of staff
< 5	13.7%
5-9	12.9%
Total < 10	26.6%
10-14	15.5%
15-19	14.5%
20-24	15.5%
25-29	14.0%
>29	12.4%
Total =>10	71.9%
not reported	1.5%
Total	100.0%

2001/2002 data

NEW TEACHER ORIENTATION

The division conducts an extensive orientation program for teachers new to the division. While the program addresses many of the organizational details facing new employees, it also focuses on the importance of good classroom management practices through a positive discipline model,

and a thorough review of the AISI projects and the opportunities for involvement that they present. New teachers are also teamed up with a mentor, an experienced teacher, with whom they could develop a close working and supportive relationship during the year. New teachers are employed on a one-year probationary contract. The evaluation process for new teachers is conducted by the principal of the school who makes a recommendation to the superintendent regarding continuing employment.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

“Our PD is definitely more comprehensive. It’s connected. It’s integrated with what we are doing. It’s really involving a lot of discussion amongst professionals of an appropriate kind.” (Associate Superintendent)

“The team leaders were paramount in having the time to be released from their normal jobs to actually sit in a classroom, practice, model, sit with the teachers one-on-one, and that really helped to create the culture of the common language and stuff like that.” (Principal)

“I think it (the concept of Professional Learning Communities) has a significant role to play in how principals talk to their teachers and the kind of dialogue that they use.” (Associate Superintendent)

Staff development occurs on a number of fronts in Pembina Hills. The ATA Local provides funding on a per-teacher basis that is accessed by individual teachers to work on the goals of their PGP. Schools set aside funds in their school-based budgets for development activities involving individual staff members, groups of staff members or entire school activities. Funding is also budgeted at the division level and administered by the director of instructional services for inter-school group development activities. Much of the AISI budget is also allocated for staff development and administered by the director. The majority of the staff development activities are led by division personnel, thereby keeping individual travel and subsistence costs under control. A district PD (professional development) committee that is representative of the schools works with the director to establish a PD plan for the year and assists with the organization and management of the activities in the plan.

An emphasis on ongoing curriculum-embedded staff development has been a feature of the AISI program delivery model in the division. Groups of teachers from various schools met with an AISI team leader and reviewed the assessment records of students and the research on instructional methodology in literacy and numeracy. Instructional strategies were planned, and the teachers returned to their classrooms to implement these strategies. The AISI team leader visited classrooms to assist teachers with their implementation, model different teaching behaviours, or work with individual students. The group of teachers reassembled after a month or so to analyze and discuss their experiences and make plans for further action. The action research, shared experiences and the professional trust and competence inherent in this process was greatly appreciated by the teacher respondents.

Both school and division administrators were currently involved in a development process using the concept of the school as a professional learning community as outlined in work by Dufour, Eaker and Baker (1998). There was evidence that some administrators were working on a similar process with their staffs, students and school councils.

Table 5.8 indicates the division's expenditures on non-salaried aspects of staff development.

Table 5.8 Staff Development Funding

[includes substitute cost, travel, accommodation, materials and fees]			
Name	Purpose	Amount 2002/03	Per Teacher [316 tchrs]
Division Allocated and Approved			
Supt.	To support division-wide PD activities and activities involving generally more than one school. Support staff may also access	Included below	
Approved PD			
Curriculum PD	To provide PD support for curriculum implementation	Included below	
Special Education	To support PD opportunities for teachers of students with severe special needs.	Included below	
Special Education	To support subs for teachers for PD and IPP meetings	Included below	
Sub-total Division Approved		\$37,366	\$118
AISI Projects	To support PD directly related to AISI projects	\$69,003	\$218
Total Division Approved		\$106,369	\$336
Joint ATA/School Division Committee Approved			
Joint ATA/ School Division	To provide individual teachers with PD opportunities based on the teacher's own growth plans and professional needs		
	ATA Local contribution	\$22,120	\$70
	Division contribution	\$22,120	\$70
Total Joint ATA/School Division Committee Approved		\$44,240	\$140
Total Division Allocated and School Approved			
School Allocated and Approved			
Staff PD	For both teaching staff and support staff PD and to support school-wide PD involving all staff	Included below	
Admin. PD	To provide PD support to administrators that focuses on school administration	Included below	
Total School Allocated and Approved		\$72,678	\$230
OVERALL TOTAL		\$223,467	\$707

SUMMARY

“If you are an employee of Pembina Hills you are here for the students. You are here to contribute your gifts in whatever way you can for the student.” (Secretary-Treasurer)

Pembina Hills Regional Division No. 7 was brought together in the mid 1990s as a regionalized authority consisting of three former jurisdictions. A concerted effort was made at the time to

establish a clear philosophy and set of beliefs for the new division; statements which underline the importance of student learning and development, collaborative decision making, parent and community involvement and life-long learning. The division employs approximately 320 FTE teaching staff and 390 support staff, and has an annual budget of over \$50 million.

There is a systematic planning and accountability cycle that sets out the major goals at the jurisdiction level and allows schools and teachers to develop strategies to achieve those goals. Results are actively monitored through consistent data analysis, school reviews and regular meetings between division staff and school administrators. Staff development and the administration of AISI projects are initiated through a consultative process and then co-ordinated across the division from central office.

At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked to reflect on the key factors in the achievement gains shown by students. The most frequently mentioned factors are noteworthy. The board, the division administration and school leaders all identified the clear priority on student learning, growth and development. This leadership is recognized by other stakeholders and perceived to be an important factor in the division's success. The district's collaborative decision-making process has produced a prevalent sense of teamwork. The co-ordinated models for instruction-embedded staff development and the implementation of AISI projects were seen as highly influential. Teachers felt supported and encouraged to learn, to share and to improve their practice. The consistency in instructional language and practice across the division is growing and is expected to produce still greater gains in future years.

Respondents indicated a consistent sense of pride in being members of the Pembina Hills staff and in the division's record of student achievement. They spoke of an environment of trust and respect among trustees, administration and parents for teachers and the work they did. Stakeholders felt empowered to contribute ideas and strategies to the division planning process, and were confident that their input was appreciated. There is a persistent sense of a strong team effort with the success of the student as the ultimate goal.

“There is no one person on whose shoulders the goal of achievement rests, it is all of us.”
(Superintendent)

6 Chinook's Edge School Division

Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73 came into being as the result of a merger of two divisions during the reorganization of Alberta school districts in the mid-1990s. As noted in the division's Three-Year Education Plan (2003-2005)¹¹, it educates over 11,000 students in the central Alberta region straddling Highway 2 from Red Deer south to Carstairs. The population in the area stood at almost 65,000 people in the 2001 census. The division employs approximately 700 FTE teaching staff and about 760 support staff, and has an annual budget of roughly \$83 million.

The economy of the area is primarily dependent upon agriculture and the oil and gas industry. Some agricultural processing, service industry and light manufacturing is also present. Many of the smaller rural communities have experienced population decline in past years but some appear to have now stabilized. The towns of Innisfail, Olds and Sylvan Lake are the largest communities in the division with respective populations in the 7000 range.

This analysis of the division and its operations is in seven major sections. We deal first with data showing the division's performance over a five year period. Five sections then deal in turn with each of the elements of the framework described in Chapter 3, concluding with a summary.

JURISDICTION PERFORMANCE - FIVE-YEAR TREND

Tables 6.1 through 6.3 show the performance of the system over the past five years on the Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) for Grade 3, 6 and 9 and on selected Provincial Diploma Examinations (PDE) at both the Acceptable Standard and the Standard of Excellence.¹² Within each table is a graph representing the numerical values in that table. It should be noted that the graphs are intended only to provide a visual representation of the numbers in the table. The scale used in the graphs is constant for those within each table only, and varies from table to table. For each graph the value axis is adjusted to accommodate the high and low values in the chart.

¹¹ http://www.chinooksedge.ab.ca/pdf/3YrPlan2002_2005.pdf

¹² See the description of methodology in Chapter 3. For the PAT the measures are the percentages of students at each grade level and for each subject who achieved the Acceptable Standard, and the percentage who achieved the Standard of Excellence. For the PDE, the performance measures are arrived at by multiplying the percentage achieving at each standard level by the participation rate for that subject in the jurisdiction.

Table 6.1 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results

Percentage of Students Achieving the Acceptable Standard

Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	86.5	89.9	91.5	90.5	88.1	
Math	81.9	87.1	87.4	87.1	88.8	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	81.8	81.8	82.8	82.6	86.2	
Math	81.1	79.6	84.9	83.5	86.1	
Science	78.3	82.8	85.2	85.5	87.3	
Social Studies	74.9	79.1	82.8	79.4	85.2	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	75.5	77.1	80.4	79.4	81.3	
Math	56.4	59.2	63.5	66.7	64.7	
Science	71.4	70.3	71.6	73.3	76.1	
Social Studies	68.0	70.9	73.0	73.2	76.8	

Table 6.2 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results

Percentage of Students Achieving the Standard of Excellence

Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	14.4	14.6	19.7	15.4	12.5	
Math	19.8	28.9	26.9	20.0	31.2	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	12.9	14.9	17.4	13.4	12.2	
Math	15.1	13.9	16.5	16.2	16.2	
Science	16.5	19.3	24.6	23.8	23.4	
Social Studies	13.8	13.6	17.9	14.0	18.8	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	6.9	8.2	12.5	8.9	11.6	
Math	6.1	8.6	9.4	11.5	10.9	
Science	10.9	10.1	10.3	11.3	9.8	
Social Studies	9.4	12.5	12.8	12.7	13.4	

Table 6.3 Provincial Diploma Examinations 5-Year Results

[Exam Mark x Participation]						
Acceptable Standard						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	3230	3248	3177	3465	3911	
Chemistry 30	2622	2375	2735	2575	2527	
English 30	4076	3974	4333	4242	4579	
Social Studies 33	2708	2805	2865	3092	2755	

Standard of Excellence						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	1026	870	1007	1108	1104	
Chemistry 30	418	370	772	505	635	
English 30	580	490	790	858	832	
Social Studies 33	333	377	522	601	480	

Student achievement in the division, as measured by Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) and (Provincial) Diploma Exams, generally meets or exceeds provincial standards and is above provincial averages.

VISION, VALUES, BELIEFS AND ETHOS

“[W]e always make our decisions with the best interests of students and learning in mind.”
(Superintendent)

“I think we’ve got a great team of people in our division that are really focused on the kids, and on teaching and learning and doing the very best for them.” (Division Administrator)

The division has undergone a review of its foundational statements in recent years, and the outcome has been a change in the focus of the over-riding divisional motto. ‘Where Students Come First’ is intended to bring attention in all decision-making conversations to the needs of students as a first priority. The Foundational Statements in Table 6.4 demonstrate how the focus on students is reflected in the purpose and vision of the division.

The majority of employees interviewed were well aware of the division’s motto and could easily identify incidents and circumstances when decisions were reviewed and evaluated from this perspective. It is a principle that has become embedded in the philosophy and decision making of the division at all levels and across all functions. The objective of providing the best educational

Table 6.4 Foundational Statements

FOUNDATIONAL STATEMENTS	
Purpose	To provide students with the opportunity to obtain the academic, personal and teamwork skills necessary for lifelong learning.
Vision	Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73 is committed to providing the best educational opportunities for students through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating learning communities that focus on lifelong learning. • Providing choices and involvement for all stakeholders. • Being open to proved educational innovations that have merit for our students. , • Continued evaluation of personnel and programs to ensure that Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73 is effective and efficient.
Values And Beliefs	<p>Diversity: Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73 values the uniqueness of each individual and the rich difference that arises from the diversity of programs.</p> <p>Equity: All students are provided with the opportunity to achieve the best possible education to meet their individual needs.</p> <p>Involvement: Stakeholder participation is sought and used in a variety of forms and to different degrees that reflect the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholder.</p> <p>Risk taking: Since change is a constant to which we must respond and adapt it is necessary to take risks.</p>
Motto:	<i>Where Students Come First.</i>

opportunities for students has driven an ongoing search for best practices in the literature and in other jurisdictions. Analysis of assessment results is conducted at the division level in a systematic manner and schools are held accountable for outcomes. Staff development is focused on systemic opportunities for improvement in student learning and is designed to be ongoing and embedded in curriculum development. A collaborative, team-oriented environment was prevalent at all levels, and extensive training has been provided to administrators and staff in relationship building and management.

The board and senior administration maintain a close working relationship with school councils and regularly attend meetings of these bodies. Representatives of school councils are involved in the meetings that constitute the annual planning cycle of the board. School council respondents to the study commented positively on the excellent working relationship that exists between school

councils and the board and administration.

The division has worked closely with post-secondary institutions to provide education and development programs for teachers, teacher assistants and administrators. The University of Calgary, the University of Lethbridge, Red Deer College, Royal Roads University, and San Diego State University have provided programs in recent years.

The existence of effective partnerships within the community to support the social, emotional and nutritional needs of children is one feature of high performing districts indicated in the literature. The division and its schools maintain many levels of partnership with community organizations and services in the interests of supporting and promoting student well-being and achievement. Table 6.5 indicates the extent of these partnerships, and the contribution of each.

Table 6.5 Community Partners

Partner	Service
Region 4 Child Family Services Authority	Provide protection to children, social services to families and support to family wellness workers
David Thompson Regional Health Authority	Provide Speech Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy
Town and County Family and Community Support Services	Provide support for Family School Wellness workers
Street Teams	Partner in Residential Treatment Program for children exploited by prostitution
Sky Wings Aviation	Partner in ground and flight school training program
Shell Canada (Central Alberta)	Cross training in Leadership Development
Human Resources Development Canada	Youth-at-risk training program
Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder Outreach Program	Outreach support for staff working with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome students
Regional Educational Assessment and Consultation Services	Rehabilitation Consulting for children with severe disabilities
Horizon and Parkland School Divisions	Private/Public partnership for placement of severely disabled children
Pre-School/Play School	Private/Public partnership for delivery of services to pre-school special needs students
Red Deer Catholic School District/Town of Sylvan Lake	Joint committee management of community portion of shared Fox Run/Mother Theresa schools
Olds College	Articulation and instruction of CTS courses
Red Deer College	Delivery of RAP courses and Teaching Assistant training programs
Nutrition for Learning Society	Society provides healthy snacks to students
Tech Prep Program	Combined initiative of Central Alberta Boards to provide employment skills based credential
Calgary Academy	Private/Public partnership to provide professional development for teachers of special needs students

One further feature of high-performing districts attested to in the literature is the presence of a positive district ‘ethos’ or culture that addresses both relationship and process considerations among all of the various partners, and keeps them focused on the vision. The comments of the vast majority of respondents in the division reflected a great deal of confidence in and affirmation for the collaborative culture that existed. Many respondent comments referred to the leadership style of the superintendent of schools and the work that he had done providing the vision and empowering people to achieve within the context of that vision. People appreciated the opportunities for training in relationship-building and the team-oriented environment that had been created in the division. The focus on students, the excitement generated by the staff development program, and the evidence of improving student academic achievement all contributed to a high level of morale among staff. The staff members interviewed were virtually unanimous in their sense of pride in their division and their belief that it was the best place to work.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

“The board is always focused on how we get better. They encourage risk, but they also want measurement and improvement.” (Superintendent)

“We believe that the better the teaching, the better the quality of education to the student.” (Board Chair)

The board of trustees has nine members. There is considerable trustee experience on the board as many members have served for multiple terms. At the time of data collection, this particular board was in its fifth year together as a group. The Chair, a former member of the Alberta legislature, brings a comprehensive view of political and economic issues to his perspective on the importance of education and educational issues. The current superintendent of schools has held the position for the past four years, and was a former acting superintendent, assistant superintendent, principal and teacher within the division. The deputy superintendent and the two assistant superintendents were selected to their positions during the term of the current superintendent.

Table 6.6 shows the disposition of administrative responsibilities among the various senior administrators. In addition to the responsibilities shown in Table 6.6, the deputy and both assistant superintendents are assigned responsibility for a group of schools and are the first-call leadership and administrative contact for their liaison schools. In the financial services department, led by the corporate treasurer, each group of schools is assigned an accountant who is responsible for the financial support and accounting services for that group of schools. School administrators expressed a great deal of appreciation for this support.

Table 6.6 Allocation of Senior Administrative Responsibilities

Administrator Title	Areas of Responsibility
Deputy Superintendent	Curriculum and Instruction and School Liaison
Assistant Superintendent	Human Resources and School Liaison
Assistant Superintendent	Support Services, Transportation and School Liaison
Director	Special Education
Director	Curriculum and Instruction
Director	Technology
Other senior administrators	Departments of Finance, Transportation and Facilities

Comments from both the board chair and the superintendent of schools indicated that the board of trustees was careful to respect the relative roles of governance and administration, while at the same time maintaining an assertive monitoring role in matters of division operation. The board expects a high degree of accountability from its administrators and regularly receives reports of program developments, instructional delivery and student performance.

There was a high degree of consistency between the statements of the board chair and those of the superintendent of schools regarding the focus on students, improving achievement, the importance of best practices and the essential nature of effective staff development. It was also clear through the interviews that this consistency was widely observed by others in the division and understood by them to be a significant benefit to the division.

Division Education Plans and Results Reports clearly focused on student growth and achievement. There was ample evidence in the board's documents of a comprehensive understanding on the part of the board of issues concerned with teaching and learning, and of its intent to support and encourage a wide range of activities and initiatives directed at student achievement and well-being. The board and the senior administration clearly articulated the focus on student learning and teamwork at meetings of administrators, teachers, school councils and in the communities. The board makes a distinct effort to communicate the division's goals and progress to members of the community who do not have children in schools, and test results are not only provided to parents, but also published in local news media.

A great deal of work has been done in the term of the current superintendent of schools to build a culture that united the two former jurisdictions that were regionalized to form Chinook's Edge Division. Effort was also directed at creating a decision-making environment where the areas of responsibility and accountability for schools and the division's central services were determined and defined in a collaborative manner. The goal was to create a school system that worked interdependently, rather than a system of schools that operated with a high level of individual autonomy. The superintendent was credited by the majority of respondents with establishing an environment that supported attention to student learning through the emphasis on staff development, analysis of data, the collaborative decision-making model and a clear accountability structure.

DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The concepts of data-driven decision making, of decisions being made at the appropriate levels with adequate accountability mechanisms, of consultation in resource allocation are all in play in the division. The following paragraphs deal in turn with the division's school-based decision making and resource allocation, accountability measures and the use of data.

SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

“ [Principals]... know what their needs are. They know what the needs are for the kids, the staff, the community...” (Division Administrator)

“Originally when we first went to per-student funding it quickly created haves and have-nots, and people not willing to share with one another as well.” (Superintendent)

“[Funding] ... doesn't automatically go out to schools on a per-student basis because there are pockets where literacy rates are lower than others.” (Division Administrator)

The division's model of school-based decision making was determined by board policy. It incorporates clear statements of responsibility and accountability for division and school administration, as well as a preference for collaborative decision-making at all levels.

The intent of the policy statements and procedures was reflected accurately in the comments and observations of respondents. Administrators generally expressed satisfaction with the balance of decision making between the school and the division office, and the manner in which joint decisions were achieved. Decisions which had division-wide consequences were discussed at Administration Association meetings, at which all principals and division administrators were present. Respondents attributed the success of the model to the extent to which all parties had developed a sense of mutual trust. The superintendent of schools was seen as the person most responsible for the development of this environment in the division. School staff members reported a high degree of collaborative decision making at the school level with most reporting that teachers were as fully involved as they wished to be in the development of school education plans and objectives. School councils also felt that their opinion and input was respected and valued, both at the school and the division level.

There was a general opinion that there was a high level of risk acceptance among division administrators and the board. Comments from both staff and school council respondents indicated a level of confidence that proposals for strategies and projects to address student learning needs would be considered positively by the board and division administration.

Respondents' views about school-based decision making did include some concerns. For some people, the concerns were based in the belief that the principal should be an instructional leader rather than a business manager. There were some concerns also about the distribution of funds to

schools. The formulae used in the distribution of funds were under regular annual review, and, even after almost ten years of adjustment, had still to produce a distribution that was sufficiently equitable to meet the expectations of all of the parties involved. Perhaps in recognition of some of these concerns, certain budgetary areas were being centralized for reasons of efficiency and to maximize the benefits of large scale purchasing and accounting.

Although the distribution formulae have never pleased everyone, they were collaboratively developed by both division and school administrators. They reflect the wide variety of school size and configuration within the division, as well as the distances between schools, and the particular needs of small rural schools. The board's approval of the formulae includes provision for their constant review and adjustment with the goal of improving overall equity among schools.

A 'pooled' funding concept is in use to cover costs of services used by all schools, and occasional contingencies that would be difficult for one school, especially a smaller school, to budget for. Maternity leaves, long-term illness and support for students with severe special needs were examples of the kind of contingency expenses that were paid for out of pooled funds. A centrally-based allocation is also established to fund the operation of the Curriculum and Instruction department.

ACCOUNTABILITY

"If you are going to have site-based management, then you had better have the accountability there as well, and accountability really means student performance and stakeholder satisfaction."
(Superintendent)

"I believe that [results data] truly are a measure that we can use to guide us in trying to increase student performance." (Division Administrator)

A clear accountability and responsibility framework reflects the various roles of the board, the division administration and school administrators. The board of trustees receives regular reports from its senior administrators throughout the year regarding activity and progress on various projects and activities in the division. It reviews the results of PAT, PDE and the satisfaction surveys of parents and students on an annual basis. Five-year trends are closely examined and discussed, and the board expects to be advised of plans to address areas where trends towards lower results are evident. Respondents mentioned math, libraries and gifted education as examples of areas in which the board had expressed a concern for improvement in recent years.

The first appointment for school administrators is a one-year probationary one. Those who successfully complete this probationary appointment are placed on a five-year term contract. They are responsible to and report directly to the superintendent of schools. There is a structured annual schedule of meetings between the school principal and the superintendent of schools, the liaison superintendent and the treasurer. In these meetings the school's results, plans, budget and operational practices are reviewed and critiqued. These meetings are guided by a set agenda, the details of which have been determined in consultation with division and school administration.

The liaison superintendent also reviews the principal's Professional Growth Plan (PGP). The various elements of the school's education plan are regularly monitored by the senior administration during the course of the year.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

“If you want people to change their practice, you're much better to say, ‘Here's the data’ than say, ‘I think we need to improve here’.” (Superintendent)

The division has been concerned not only to develop structures for accountability, but also to ensure that accountability is data-driven. The superintendent of schools is committed to the concept of encouraging change through the analysis of data rather than by directive methods of persuasion. Most interview respondents were able to identify incidents where the use of test data was instrumental in bringing about changes in practice and program development in order to improve student achievement in a particular area. Mathematics was the subject most frequently cited, and several respondents noted that the selection of AISI projects also reflected student learning needs primarily identified through analysis and consideration of both test and survey data.

The superintendent of schools and the liaison superintendents formally review with school administrators the data from PAT and PDE results and from an annual satisfaction survey conducted among parents, staff and students. These reviews look at many aspects of school operation and achievement, and are conducted in a spirit of openness and mutual problem-solving. The results are analyzed at both the division level and the school level and are the subject of critical examination and discussion between the department of Curriculum and Instruction, the liaison superintendents and the school administration. The division office provides each school with a template into which the school staff are expected to enter their school results. The template provides an instant numerical and graphic picture of the various aspects of the tests and where the school has and has not scored satisfactorily. Test and survey data are employed consistently in the development and evaluation of both division and school education plans and staff development goals and objectives. School administrators submit reports on the results analysis to the central office accompanied by a description of the specific strategies by which they intend to address issues and difficulties. Staff members in the department of Curriculum and Instruction routinely follow up with school administrators on the implementation of these plans and strategies, primarily to offer support and resources, but also to monitor progress.

The test results are communicated to and interpreted for school councils, and parents are involved in many of the remedial decisions that need to be made. At the school level, it is becoming more prevalent throughout the division for teachers of the three grades leading up to each of the PAT to meet to review the results together, thereby accepting responsibility for improvement in student achievement at all levels. Decisions regarding changes in practice, materials, resources and further assessment are perceived to be more effective when made collaboratively by teachers in the years leading up to the grades in which the tests are administered.

The board of trustees also receives a detailed report of student achievement on the PAT and the PDE. This report indicates achievement at each school and across the division, and also contains a five-year trend graph. The report gives rise to spirited discussion among trustees and administration. On an annual basis, the local trustees meet with members of their communities at a community breakfast meeting hosted by the division where these results are shared and discussed. The results are also shared annually with the community at large through a division publication. The division has employed a communications specialist to ensure that the good news of student achievement is effectively presented.

PLANNING AND CURRICULUM COORDINATION

“They [Education Plans] are an actual checklist that we use and go through with schools and focus on the things they said they were going to do.” (Division Administrator)

The division has identified literacy, numeracy, health and wellness, counselling, safety, libraries, small high schools, special education, technology, funding and data reliability as issues in their planning process. Trends that will affect planning in the future include the expansion of separate school boundaries, greater demand for special education services, greater difficulty in recruiting and retaining quality teaching staff, especially in specialist areas, and energy cost increases.

The board’s Education Plan is directly aligned with the Alberta Learning goals and measures as published in provincial Three-Year Education Plan. School Education Plans are expected to align closely with the goals and targets of the division Education Plan, and there is an expectation that teachers’ Professional Growth Plans (PGP) will reflect at least some of the objectives of the school’s Education Plan.

The process is a combination of a top-down, bottom-up planning model. The division’s plan was developed as a result of discussions with stakeholders, including school council representatives, teachers, school administrators, and, on certain occasions, secondary school students. In this manner, the needs of various communities and stakeholders were brought to the planning process. The goals and directions from Alberta Learning were also used to guide the process. There was a high level of subsidiarity evident in the process in that the board set out the major goals and outcome expectations and the administration and staff were expected to design the strategies and practices to accomplish these goals.

The planning model reflects the consultative, collaborative model that we have already seen in the decision-making process. Satisfaction survey results and PAT and PDE test results are examined and analyzed at both the division and school levels, and the results of these assessment instruments are used in the development of division and school Education Plans. Many respondents were able to identify instances where results in particular areas were deemed to be unsatisfactory by either the division, a school, or both, and plans for remedial action were included in the school’s Education Plan.

Stakeholder involvement notwithstanding, the division exercises a measure of central co-ordination over curriculum and curriculum-related matters. Division administration subscribes to the philosophy that the division must be in a position to influence the implementation of its core values and mission through determining division-wide priorities in certain areas. These include program development, staff development, teacher retention and technology administration. The determination of division-wide priorities was accompanied by the development of division-wide standards. In the Curriculum and Instruction department, centrally retained funds are primarily for staff development. In the new round of AISI projects, funding has been provided to individual schools on a project basis rather than on a per-student basis. Special needs funding is administered on the basis of school needs, to ensure that schools have equitable access to funding and that no school is faced with an overwhelmingly high program cost for one student. Literacy grants are also distributed on the basis of a school's literacy profile as determined by student assessment.

The selection of AISI projects was mentioned by many respondents as an example of a collaborative grass-roots planning approach that involved school councils, staff, administrators and trustees. School council respondents felt that their input to the decision-making process was respected and valued, both at the school and the division level. Risk tolerance in the planning process was considered to be high, and schools and individuals were encouraged to propose strategies and projects to address student learning needs. Both staff and school council respondents were confident that such proposals would receive the full and unbiased consideration of the board and senior administration. Associated with the level of risk tolerance was an attitude of empowerment among staff at all levels. There was a prevalent feeling that stakeholder input was valued and appreciated, and that individuals could make a difference.

In the initial round of AISI projects, each school was allowed to develop its own projects, a process that was somewhat contrary to Alberta Learning expectations. It was felt by the division that a project developed locally by a school would have a much higher degree of commitment and change potential than one developed at a divisional level and mandated for a school. As the superintendent noted in interview, "I felt that if we really wanted a legacy that stayed with our division, then we really needed to deal with improving teacher practice."

There was a level of division co-ordination in that a meeting of stakeholders was convened to build a template and criteria for local school projects. The meeting determined that projects should meet three division-wide criteria that reflected the expectations of Alberta Learning. These criteria were a focus on collaborative planning with teachers, an emphasis on professional development, and research on alternative instructional strategies. The process encouraged collaboration among schools and has led to a great deal of sharing and exchange between schools and classrooms. Teachers were enthused about the opportunities to work together and share expertise and instructional practices.

Project progress was monitored on a regular basis from the division office through the Curriculum and Instruction department. All projects met the Alberta Learning requirements for both qualitative and quantitative measures.

There was a perception among respondents that the application of action research in the AISI projects had become a springboard for the development of other action research in classrooms and schools. The practice of establishing these research projects had placed a new and clearer emphasis on the value of authentic assessment and the application of data to future planning.

STAFFING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“The idea is reinforced that when you’re planning your PD that it’s linked to your professional plan and your school goals.” (Division Administrator)

“One of the most important things we do to make sure we have quality teaching is to support our new teachers.” (Board Chair)

“It’s creating focus groups that work over time, study groups that keep getting back at it and taking a look at the way they work, and trying to embed that into the culture...” (Division Administrator)

“I can think of one school where they have developed a focus on a professional learning community with the staff and the whole idea of results-driven improvement has grown from that.” (Division Administrator)

“We’ve done quite a bit of work with custodians and bus drivers helping them understand their role as part of the professional learning community.” (Division Administrator)

The importance of staff and the professional development of staff were mentioned as key success factors more frequently than any other features. The following paragraphs examine the division’s overall staff profile, new teacher orientation and evaluation, and staff development program.

STAFF PROFILE

As of September 30, 2002, the division employed 699 full-time equivalent (FTE) certificated staff and 764 non-certificated personnel. Table 6.7 indicates the distribution of educational qualifications among the certificated staff. The table shows that the division has a somewhat higher percentage of teachers at the bachelor’s degree level (91%) than the provincial percentage (86%) and a corresponding lower percentage of teachers with a post-graduate degree at 7% as compared to almost 13% for the province. Table 6.8 shows that 66% of the division’s teachers have ten years of experience or greater and are at the top of the salary scale.

Table 6.7 Distribution of Educational Qualifications

Highest Level Completed	Division %	Provincial %
Bachelor of Education	59%	53.06%
Bachelor of Education and Other	23%	25.27%
Bachelor Degree not in Education	9%	8.08%
Total Bachelor Degree	91%	86.41%
Master of Education	6%	8.06%
Master of Education and Other	0%	0.13%
Master's Degree not in Education	1%	3.74%
PhD	0%	0.62%
Total Advanced Degree	7%	12.55%
Education Not Reported	2%	1.05%
Total	100%	100%

Table 6.8 Years of Teaching Experience

Total Years of Experience	% of staff
< 5	13.7%
5-9	18.0%
Total <10	31.7%
10-14	18.9%
15-19	14.2%
20-24	15.2%
25-29	12.2%
>29	6.3%
Total = >10	66.8%
not reported	1.6%
Total	100.0%

2001/2002 data

NEW TEACHER ORIENTATION AND EVALUATION

The orientation and mentoring of teachers new to the division is a comprehensive, year-long process that involves a two-week orientation period before the beginning of the year for which participants are paid a stipend to attend. Much of the discussion at these sessions focuses on aspects of teaching and learning and the goal of improving student achievement. New teachers are discouraged by the superintendent from taking on many additional extracurricular responsibilities until they have gained a degree of comfort and confidence in their classroom responsibilities.

The division had conducted a mentoring program in the past, but with limited success. Having found that teachers in regular employment did not find it easy to schedule mentoring activities, the division moved to employ retired teachers as mentors for new teachers, and again agreed to

provide a stipend for this responsibility. The mentoring relationship is not evaluative, but is intended to be supportive and advisory. New teachers and their mentors meet regularly and mentors spend a great deal of time in teachers' classrooms. An ongoing development process is provided for new teachers throughout the year to make them familiar with division practices and expectations.

The division employs a principal-at-large whose main responsibility is the monitoring and evaluation of teachers in their one-year probationary period with the division. This individual conducts classroom visits and meets with new teachers on a regular basis during the year. The administrator of the new teacher's own school is also heavily involved in his or her evaluation. Teachers who do not meet the requirements of the probationary period are not retained by the division. The employment contracts of an estimated average of 5% of new hires are not renewed each year.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

A trend that will continue to affect practice into the future is a change in the philosophy and delivery of professional development in the division. The staff development model is shifting from an emphasis on individual development to a combination of individual and organizational development. This staff development model is driven by a clear, coherent strategic plan, supported by data, for the division, for each school, and for each department that serves the schools. The division leadership sees it as an indispensable process to improve student learning and it is the area in which division co-ordination was most evident.

While both the schools and the Alberta Teachers' Association Local make funding available for individual teachers to attend staff development opportunities out of the division and for the annual Institute Day in the Fall, the majority of funding and activity in professional development is determined through a division-level planning and funding model. The division has undertaken a major shift in philosophy in this area in the past five years.

A Curriculum and Instruction Department was established in 1998 and placed under the direction of the current deputy superintendent. The department's goal was to look for opportunities to improve the skills and competencies of teachers within the core subjects and in that manner to impact student achievement. Staff development is focused on specific areas of curriculum, conducted with groups of teachers in self-supporting teams, and is maintained through classroom visits and school-level meetings throughout the year. Programs are delivered during the school day - a practice that was greatly appreciated by teacher respondents. The department staff are passionate in their attempts to provide the kind of assistance that schools and teachers need to improve their practice, and were perceived by many respondents as being the main drivers behind the improvement in student achievement results. Table 6.9 shows the various categories of expenditure on staff development during the past year.

Table 6.9 Staff Development Funding*

*[includes substitute cost, travel, accommodation, materials and fees]

Name	Purpose	Amount 2002/03	Per Teacher [603 FTE]
Division Allocated and Approved			
Centrally Approved P.D.	To support division-wide PD activities and activities involving generally more than one school. Support staff may also access	\$49,200	\$82
Curriculum P.D.	To provide PD support for curriculum implementation	\$200,500	\$333
Admin. PD	To provide PD support to administrators that focuses on school administration	\$48,650	\$81
Special Education	To support PD opportunities for teachers of students with severe special needs.	\$6,600	\$11
Special Education	To support substitutes for teachers for PD and IPP meetings	N/A	
Sub-total Division Approved		\$304,950	\$506
AISI Projects	To support PD directly related to AISI projects	\$211,600	\$351
Total Division Approved		\$516,550	\$857
Joint ATA/School Division Committee Approved			
Joint ATA/ School District	To provide individual teachers with PD opportunities based on the teacher's own growth plans and professional needs		
	ATA Local contribution	\$27,135	\$45
	District contribution	\$3,500	\$6
Total Joint ATA/School Division Committee Approved		\$30,635	\$51
School Allocated and Approved			
Staff PD	For both teaching staff and support staff PD and to support school-wide PD involving all staff	\$186,600	\$309
Admin. PD	To provide PD support to administrators that focuses on school administration	N/A	
Total School Allocated and Approved		\$186,600	\$309
OVERALL TOTAL		\$733,785	\$1217

The major areas of focus in teacher development are literacy, numeracy, early intervention and special needs. Work in these areas generally involves school-based teams who attend numerous development sessions throughout the year. This curriculum-embedded, collaborative focus was also evident in the delivery of staff development in technology and in the structure of administration development programs.

The superintendent of schools places a strong emphasis on leadership development. School administrators are encouraged to complete post-graduate study in educational leadership and are supported financially in their efforts to do this. At the time of data collection, almost all administrators and over half the teaching staff had taken training in the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989), and were currently involved in a development process using the *Professional Learning Communities* work by Dufour, Eaker and Baker (1998). There was evidence

that some administrators had taken that particular process into their school communities and were working on a similar model with their staffs, students and school councils.

A great deal of effort has also been expended in the past five years, again at the insistence of the superintendent of schools, on programs to enhance the skill and expertise of both teachers and teacher assistants in the special needs programs. Development programs have also been implemented with custodians, bus drivers and maintenance staff.

SUMMARY

Formed almost ten years ago from the merger of two former divisions, Chinook's Edge School Division No.73 educates over 11,000 students and employs over 1,400 professional and support staff. The division's PAT and PDE results over the past five years are generally above the provincial average. The foundational statements focus on students and learning, and espouse the values of diversity, equity, involvement and risk-taking. Fertile partnerships exist with other community agencies and division staff express a sense of pride in their work. The board and senior staff are recognized for their leadership which insists upon conformity with the division's vision and values. The school-based decision making structure is complemented by the retention centrally of some necessary functions and by the central definition of performance standards. A clear accountability framework reflects the various roles of the board, the division administration and school administrators. Decision making is data-driven and to a high degree collaborative. Planning and curriculum coordination follow division-wide priorities, the establishment of which gives meaningful involvement to stakeholders. Professional development, including extensive orientation for new teachers, is a high priority for the division and focuses very clearly on the needs identified by staff as division results are examined.

At the beginning of all interviews for the study, respondents were asked for their perceptions of the reasons for the division's improvement in achievement. A tabulation of the most frequent responses is revealing. It highlights five features: professional development, trust and empowerment, leadership, the way in which AISI projects were handled, and the focus on results.

More than any other response, staff development was identified as the most important factor. Respondents at all levels of the division credited the model as implemented by the Curriculum and Instruction department with demonstrating significant benefits in terms of teacher empowerment and improvement in instructional practice. The three most important aspects for respondents were that it was provided during the day rather than after school or on weekends; that it was job-embedded, so that it was immediately relevant to teacher experience; and that it was reflective, allowing teachers to share their experiences with colleagues. Some associated factors included the opportunities that were provided for teacher collaboration, and the enthusiasm that was built among teachers through learning from one another, both across schools and in staff groups within schools.

Teachers and school administrators spoke repeatedly about the level of trust and empowerment they felt within the current administrative structure. There was a strong sense of being held accountable for results, but also an understanding that the freedom to select and decide on strategies to achieve results rested at the school level. There was a great deal of appreciation for the level of risk tolerance at the division office, and the extent of support that school-based people felt whenever they proposed an initiative that supported learning.

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects were perceived as highly influential in raising student achievement. The elements of research-based instructional intervention, focused staff development and action research at the classroom and school level were identified as important factors. Also highlighted was the overall focus on analysis of test and survey results. The information from this analysis was seen to be effective in identifying areas where interventions needed to occur to improve instruction and achievement.

The leadership of the superintendent of schools, the board of trustees and the division administration was identified by numerous respondents. While there is a clear expectation for accountability, people are also supported in their efforts to improve. Leadership development programs, Masters in Education programs, and the concept of professional learning communities were specifically identified. These respondents recognize that the division leadership is committed to a vision that sees the well-being and achievement of students as the highest priority, coupled with a concern for building capacity and strong, respectful relationships.

7 Edmonton Catholic School District

Edmonton Catholic Separate School District No. 7 educates over 31,000 students in the metropolitan area of Edmonton, Alberta. It is the fourth largest district in the province and the second largest Catholic district west of metropolitan Toronto. The district employs about 3000 staff (1800 certificated and 1200 unclassified staff) that provide services in 83 schools and 4 district buildings. The annual budget of the district is close to \$217 million and 96.3% of every dollar goes directly to schools and school support.¹³

The district has identified three major areas of priority: Catholicity, student achievement, and support for district operations. Within each are specific goals that will be the focus for a three-year period. The priority area of Catholicity entails ensuring that programs are offered in a Catholic environment; disseminating the 'good news' of Catholic education within the district and beyond; continuing to work with local post-secondary institutions in the faith formation of both new and current staff; working with partners to promote and preserve Catholic education in Edmonton and Alberta; and establishing a District Archives and Meeting Centre.

The priority area of student achievement covers a wide variety of goals to ensure high levels of attainment. One of these goals is a commitment that every child who was with Edmonton Catholic Schools for three years will leave third grade being able to read at his or her potential. Other goals address leadership development, support for aboriginal programs, the Assessment for Learning project, small schools, a review of school-based decision making, and the completion of four new schools.

The goals for district operations address improvement in the timeliness, accuracy and cost-effectiveness of information reports; the full integration of district data bases to ensure consistency and availability to users in a timely and understandable fashion; and that the data bases are useful and cost-effective.

This analysis of the division and its operations is in seven major sections. We deal first with data showing the division's performance over a five year period. Five sections then deal in turn with each of the elements of the framework described in Chapter 3. The chapter concludes with a summary.

¹³ Edited extract from the district's Education Plan 2003 - 2006

JURISDICTION PERFORMANCE - FIVE-YEAR TREND

Tables 7.1 through 7.3 show the performance of the system over the past five years on the Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) for Grade 3, 6 and 9 and on selected Provincial Diploma Exams (PDE) at both the Acceptable Standard and the Standard of Excellence.¹⁴ Within each table is a graph representing the numerical values in that table. It should be noted that the graphs are intended only to provide a visual representation of the numbers in the table. The scale used in the graphs is constant for those within each table only, and varies from table to table. For each graph within a table the value axis is adjusted to accommodate the high and low values in the chart.

Student achievement in the division, as measured by PAT and, PDE generally meets or exceeds provincial standards and is above provincial averages.

Table 7.1 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results

Percentage of Students Achieving the Acceptable Standard						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	78.4	81.1	83.4	82.1	84.2	
Math	77.0	81.5	83.4	82.2	83.8	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	77.7	77.9	81.1	79.8	84.1	
Math	80.1	76.3	79.7	80.2	82.2	
Science	75.6	76.3	78.8	82.6	82.5	
Social Studies	72.3	74.3	79.8	80.4	80.7	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	75.5	80.1	81	81.1	80.2	
Math	64.5	69.0	70.2	71.9	65.2	
Science	66.4	70.2	72.9	71.3	72.1	
Social Studies	65.7	71.8	74.2	74.3	73.2	

¹⁴ See the description of methodology in Chapter 3. For the PAT the measures are the percentages of students at each grade level and for each subject who achieved the Acceptable Standard, and the percentage who achieved the Standard of Excellence. For the PDE, the performance measures are arrived at by multiplying the percentage achieving at each standard level by the participation rate for that subject in the jurisdiction.

Table 7.2 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results

Percentage of Students Achieving the Standard of Excellence

Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	13.8	13.9	19.7	16.5	17.4	
Math	21.7	26.2	28.5	26.7	28.8	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	13.0	15.8	18.3	16.2	15.9	
Math	17.4	16.4	18.4	19.7	19	
Science	18.9	22.6	25.4	26.1	22.4	
Social Studies	14.6	15.0	22.3	19.6	20.4	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	8.4	8.3	11.6	12.0	14.4	
Math	15.3	17.9	16.7	20.8	16.9	
Science	10.0	12.6	10.6	11.8	10.2	
Social Studies	8.9	15.6	13.3	16.5	20.1	

Table 7.3 Provincial Diploma Examinations 5-Year Results

[Exam Result x Participation Rate]

Acceptable Standard						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	3305	3017	3211	3045	3639	
Chemistry 30	3228	3219	3452	2957	2971	
English 30	4639	4594	5073	4512	4901	
Social Studies 33	2756	2972	2924	2885	2819	
Standard of Excellence						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	1019	936	892	1011	1032	
Chemistry 30	609	633	912	739	865	
English 30	896	827	1076	1129	1257	
Social Studies 33	302	406	604	528	485	

VISION, VALUES, BELIEFS AND ETHOS

“When the expectations for student achievement/learning start at the top, all elements, both financial and personnel are put in place to attain the desired results. Everyone knows where the district is focussed and the role they will play in accomplishing the goals.” (Teacher)

“It’s just like we are part of one big family here in the way we look out for one another.” (District Administrator)

The formal statements of the district are set out in Table 7.4. They clearly state the two overarching goals of its existence and purpose - that of providing education for its students and doing it in the context of the Catholic faith. These two goals can be traced through the division’s planning documents and the superintendent’s priorities to the actual work in departments, schools and classrooms. The district’s beliefs direct its members to consider the spiritual nature of all people, their giftedness and their commitment to community building. They also remind members of the district that education is a life-long pursuit, and that people will be held accountable for their responsibilities.

There was a consistent clarity in the comments of all respondents with respect to the mission and goals of the district. People were aware of the focus on student learning and growth in the context of the Catholic faith. The board was clear about this; the messages from the superintendent of schools and district administration were consistently and sharply focused on these goals, and school administrators and teachers were explicit about their responsibilities in the accomplishment of these two objectives.

District communication to schools and the community also reflect this focus. There is a consistent press towards building capacity in administrators, teachers, support staff, and students in both goal areas. Many respondents at all levels spoke of the manner in which the philosophy of involving all stakeholders in creating a caring, faith-based community at the district and school levels inspired a desire to improve, grow, and support the growth of others.

Table 7.4 Foundational Statements

FOUNDATIONAL STATEMENTS
<p>Mission</p> <p>To provide a Catholic education which inspires and prepares students to learn, to work, to live fully, and to serve God in one another.</p> <p>Inspired by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love of the Creator • Faith in Jesus Christ • Hope from the Holy Spirit <p>Mandated by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The parents and guardians of our students • The educational mission of the Church • The Alberta Ministry of Learning <p>We believe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That each person is created in the image and likeness of God. • In the goodness, dignity, and worth of each person. • That all learn and develop their gifts. • That Catholic education includes spiritual growth and fulfillment. • That Catholic education is a shared responsibility in which parents have a primary role. • That Christ is our model and teacher. • In building Christ-centered communities for service to one another. • In celebrating and witnessing to our faith in truth and life; holiness and grace; justice, love and peace. • That learning is a life-long journey. • That all have rights, roles and responsibilities for which they are accountable. • In making the world a better place in which to live. <p>Vision</p> <p>Edmonton Catholic Schools delivers the curriculum of Alberta Learning to students within a Christ-centred learning community. There is emphasis on the centrality of a strong learning and teaching focus within a Catholic context resulting in the optimizing of human potential for students in our trust. Our community is a team of the school, home and parish working together. We offer our students a message of hope and growth; living Christian values of faith, hope and charity; respect and compassion; and present the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Edmonton Catholic Schools experience is more than academic achievement. Christ's teachings inspire our staff to see each child as a precious gift and a sacred responsibility. This is reflected in everything we do ensuring the best learning possible for the children entrusted in our care.</p> <p>Core Values</p> <p>The Edmonton Catholic Schools is a Catholic/Christian community, which is inspired by and committed to the following values:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dignity and Respect; • Honesty; • Loyalty; • Fairness; and • Personal and Communal Growth.

The district and its schools maintain an extensive structure of partnerships with community organizations and services in order to provide enhanced learning and support services for students. Table 7.5 indicates the many local partners that work with the district and the services they provide to support both student learning and effective teaching.

Table 7.5 Community Partners

Partnership	Service
Edmonton Student Health Initiative Partnership	Speech Language Pathology, Occupational and Physical Therapy, Family School Liaison counselling.
University Reading Clinic	Reading assessments at a reduced cost by M. Ed. students.
Mennonite Centre of Newcomers Learning Network Canadian Heritage	Programming for immigrants; settlement services for new immigrants; teacher and student exchanges and placements; support for new and continuing initiatives for immigrants and refugees; programming for young people adjusting to living in Canada and homework clubs for young people.
Family Services Centre	Counselling for separation and divorce; parenting.
Child and Adolescent Services Association	Counselling, psychological services for children and adolescents.
University of Alberta Walk-In Clinic	Psychological services for children.
Catholic Social Services	Settlement officers for new immigrant families; support services for new immigrants; multicultural homework clubs in school; counselling, psychologist, social workers, and consultation.
Edmonton Immigrant Serving Association	Translation and interpretation services.
Multicultural Health Brokers	Language assistance to multicultural families seeking health care assistance; assistance for families in completing necessary referral information; referrals to cultural health care workers.
Vietnamese Association	Support to the Vietnamese Community; referrals to cultural health care workers; homework clubs and other youth activities.
Community Based Mental Health Project	Multicultural brokers, counsellors, social workers to assist families with mental health issues.
Capital City Savings	Opportunities for students to have their art work published in their annual calendar.
Tevie Miller Heritage School	An extensive language program including speech.
Edmonton Regional Educational Consulting Services	Interdisciplinary assessment, consultation and inservices to address the educational needs of children/students with severe disabilities throughout Northern Alberta.
Cornerstone Counselling	Counselling for parents and their children.
Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta	Information and clarification, conferences on learning disability; assistance for parents.
Citizenship and Immigration Canada	Financial support for the Liaison Workers at the ESL Centre; financial support for translation, interpretation and settlement services to the immigrant families.
Edmonton Symphony Orchestra	Educational concerts at a minimal cost for secondary and elementary students; the "Adopt a Player" program.

Edmonton Police Services	DARE Drug Awareness Resistance Education (Grade 6) School Resource Officer Program (in 5 senior high schools and 4 junior high schools); Crimestoppers Program.
Careers: The Next Generation	Registered Apprenticeship Program in high school.
Alberta Motor Association Safety Patrols	Grades 5 and 6 Crosswalk Safety Program.

The district also works with numerous organizations to support the work of teachers and support staff in many specialist areas. Table 7.6 lists of some of these organizations.

Table 7.6 Partnerships for Teacher Support

Partnership	Service
Alberta Assessment Consortium	Teacher resource support materials for differentiated assessment in all subjects.
Edmonton Art Gallery	Educational inservices and workshops for teachers that introduce them to publishers, artists and writers.
ATA Specialist Councils	Information and resources for teachers in subject areas and special education.
Cornerstone Counselling	Counselling for parents and their children.
Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta	Information and clarification, conferences on learning disability; assistance for parents.
International Reading Association	Reference material and resources for teachers.
Music Alberta	Annual conference; Organizes clinicians with sessions specifically for classroom teachers; includes Alberta Band Association, Alberta String Association and Alberta Music Education Foundation; “Keyboard for Kids”- volunteer teachers who give lessons to inner city students as well as provide keyboards for home practice.
Alberta Choral Federation	Conference with clinicians; “Sing Alberta”; A large lending library for members; Choir workshops.
Alberta Orff Association (Music for Children)	Workshops and an annual conference for classroom teachers; newsletters.
Alberta Kodaly Association	Workshops for teachers; a scholarship program; an annual conference for classroom teachers.

This district has a close working relationship with all of the post-secondary institutions in the Edmonton area for the provision of further education for staff, and in particular with Newman Theological College for programs in the areas of Religious Education and faith development of staff.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

“There is a great deal of flexibility here around means, but improvement is not an option!”
(District Administrator)

“If you’re a principal in Edmonton Catholic Schools the emphasis has to be on teaching and learning.” (Superintendent of Schools)

The seven members of the board of trustees present a broad mix of experience. Four trustees were in their first term on the board, and of the remaining three trustees, two were in their second term and the third was serving a fourth term. The board operates from a policy governance model, where the ‘ends’ are clearly stated and monitored by the board, and the ‘means’ are entirely the responsibility of the superintendent of schools. The distinction between policy and administration is diligently maintained by both the board and the superintendent, and the responses of both the board chair and the superintendent were quite consistent in their focus on the goals and values of the district. The board was perceived by school-based respondents generally as somewhat distant from school operations, and heavily involved in political issues, but still highly supportive of the district’s goals. Many school-based respondents were able to relate instances when individual trustees made an effort to be present at school awards and special events to show this support in person. In such a large jurisdiction, these efforts were noted and appreciated by staff members.

The superintendent of schools was completing his fourth year in the position, and was a former principal and teacher in the district. A high majority of district-level administrative and consultative staff have also spent most or all of their careers with the district.

There is a clear expectation of accountability in the relationship between the board and the superintendent of schools. The district’s records indicate a consistent reporting process where all schools and departments report annually in writing to the superintendent of schools, who then presents these reports to the board. Through this process the district ensures that the work of all departments is clearly aligned with the goals of the district. Targets for each department are set in consultation with the superintendent of schools, and there is a requirement for transparency in the planning and budgeting for each department and for the district as a whole. Schools have a great deal of flexibility in the strategies by which they achieve their goals, but there is an expectation that areas of concern regarding goals and targets will be addressed effectively and assertively. The superintendent’s performance appraisal is conducted by the board and is directly linked to the accomplishment of district goals and targets.

A feature of the presentation of the district’s direction to its stakeholders is the annual publication of the Superintendent of Schools’ Goals and Priorities. This document is introduced by the following statement:

The Superintendent’s Goals and Priorities for the 2003 – 2004 year emerge from and are in alignment with: the goals of Alberta Learning; the goals of the Board of Trustees of Edmonton

Catholic Schools; the District's Three Year Education Plan: 2003 – 2006; and the mission statement of the superintendent. Additionally, these goals and priorities are operationalized in keeping with the principles of openness, accountability, and solidarity through goal alignment as outlined in Appendix 2.¹⁵

There is a heavy emphasis on building capacity among people with leadership responsibilities in the district and its schools. There has been a concerted professional development effort over a four-year period, based in research on school improvement and led by scholars such as Dr. Michael Fullan and Dr. Carol Rolheiser from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and Dr. Anne Davies from the University of Victoria, to develop concepts and practices that strengthen the role of the principal as instructional leader in the school. The various district departments were established with the clear mandate to be of service to the needs of schools as identified by school administration and staffs in their school growth plans. Principals are actively involved in many aspects of the leadership and administration of district events and practices, including budget development and leadership programs and activities. Principals are routinely seconded to central office roles for term-certain periods thereby addressing two issues - bringing a school perspective to central administration and making effective connections between schools and the central office. Leadership development is an area of concentration as well, with ongoing programs for assistant principals and a development program for teachers aspiring to be school administrators. Teachers and administrators are also supported financially to attend programs in faith formation at Newman Theological College in Edmonton.

There was a strong sense among all respondents that the leadership of the superintendent of schools was a key factor in keeping the district focused on its goals and keeping people accountable for their results.

DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

“We need to have a system in place that someone can hook into - for this problem, concern or goal, there is a system or a person that I can work with.” (Superintendent of Schools)

The district operates from a model that includes data-driven decision making, clear accountability mechanisms and decisions being made at the appropriate levels, and consultation in resource allocation. The following paragraphs describe these processes in action.

SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The district's policy documents clearly outline the responsibility and accountability of the school administrator and staff for school-based decision making. The model works from a philosophy of systemic structure, where the roles are clear and the rules transparent and applied universally across schools and departments. It is also based on the principle of subsidiarity, where the person

¹⁵ Superintendent of Schools Goals and Priorities, 2003

held accountable for the decision is responsible for making the final decision, and on the principle of consultation and collaboration, where those affected by decisions are encouraged to be involved in the decision making process.

Areas of school responsibility are listed as follows:

- a. school culture;
- b. organizing for instruction;
- c. curriculum emphasis – including target setting;
- d. determining and addressing staff professional development needs;
- e. managing financial resources and developing a budget that adhered to the budget regulations;
- f. selecting personnel;
- g. school-community linkages; and
- h. physical plant management and maintenance.

There is a high degree of support available to schools from all of the central service departments of Leadership Services, School Operations Services, Learning Support Services, Technology Services and Religious Education Services. These departments were quite clear in their mandate to serve the needs of schools in order to achieve the goals of the district and the school growth plans. Where school growth plans indicated an area of concern, there was an expectation from the superintendent that the various service departments were to be involved right away in support and development activity with the school administration and staff.

The district has a comprehensive budget preparation process that involves a Budget Committee chaired by the superintendent of schools and consisting of district directors, school principals, and presidents of the district's employee groups. This committee examines and reviews the entire budget in all categories and makes recommendations to the superintendent, who then takes the budget to the board of trustees for consideration and approval. The process is directed by a set of guiding principles that are based in Catholic social teaching as described in the district's budget process manual.

Edmonton Catholic Schools' budget and allocations will reflect gospel virtues of justice and integrity, will reflect the principles outlined by the Budget Review Committee of the superintendent, and will attend to the social teachings of the Catholic Church.¹⁶

The primary values reflected in this document are the dignity of persons and the common good, equitability, and participation. These values are further described in terms of Catholic social teachings and are an integral part of the decision-making process. The Budget Committee's guidelines include a requirement that:

“...the provision of an effective teaching-learning environment for students is the *first priority* for budget allocations.”¹⁷ (emphasis from the original text)

¹⁶ District Budget Process Manual, 2003

Other guidelines address the preference for a consultative process, transparency, accountability, fairness, equity, and the expectation that all sites produce a balanced budget. All sites are expected to operate within an expenditure range of a 7% surplus to a 3% deficit at any one time.

The Budget Committee makes recommendations for the allocations in all areas of district operation. In the instructional function, it makes recommendations for allocations to schools as well as to the departments of Learning Support Services, School Operations Services, Religious Education Services, Technology Services, and Human Resource Services.

The majority of funds are allocated to schools on the basis of a per-pupil formula at the elementary and junior high school levels, and on a Credit Enrolment Unit (CEU) basis at the high school level. This is supplemented by a basic allocation determined by school size for necessary operational services. There is an expectation that 94% of the school's allocation be expended on staff.

Special education funding is distributed to schools based on demonstrated need through assessment of special needs students. A number of central funds are established to ensure equity among schools and to deal with staffing and operational contingencies. One of these funds provides additional per-student funding to the 15 schools exhibiting the greatest degree of socio-economic disadvantage as identified by local and community indicators. In addition, when the enrolment count is finalized at the end of September each year, a review of the allocations is undertaken to address any anomalies that have arisen since the development of the budget.

School administrators expressed satisfaction with the model in that their views and needs were well represented in the development of the allocations and it allowed them flexibility to address the priorities of their schools. District administrators also expressed satisfaction with the model, tempered by a concern with the variations in budget management skills among the administrators of 83 schools.

ACCOUNTABILITY

“It leads to a level of relationship and accountability. It emphasizes where our focus is and where we are going.” (Superintendent of Schools)

All school and district leadership positions are directly responsible and accountable to the superintendent of schools. Each school and department prepares an annual progress report based on the outcomes and measures of their education plans as described below. This report is reviewed by and with the superintendent. All department reports are presented to the board as part of the superintendent's annual report to the board. The superintendent holds an annual meeting with each school principal that covers all of the areas of school-based responsibility, and reviews the progress of the school towards the targets in the school growth plan. These meetings also allow

¹⁷ District Budget Process Manual, 2003

time for the superintendent to meet with the school staff in a question and answer session that allows for a free flow of dialogue directly between the staff members and the CEO.

Principal and department leaders spoke positively regarding the accountability process. The direct involvement of the superintendent provides a level of support and encouragement that principals are able to translate into support and encouragement for their staff at the school. Teachers were able to identify feelings of success and achievement associated with meeting targets, and translated those into stories and instances of excited students and satisfied parents. There was also a sense of pride that was evident in the comments of principals whose schools had worked through school growth plans and strategies that resulted in improved results on assessment measures.

Another strategy that was reported by principals as a demonstration of their accountability was the practice of having principals develop their Professional Growth Plans (PGP) and share them in focus groups with their colleagues. Then as the year progressed, they reported back to that group on the progress they were making in achieving the goals they had set for themselves.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

“As a district, we have become much more educated about the power of the data and what it’s saying to us.” (Principal)

“As a staff we sit down and go over the strengths and weaknesses, then we make our goals to improve. When the staff is part of the decision making process they work harder to get the goal done.” (Teacher)

“Because it’s regression analysis, you can’t blame results on student or school or community factors. You’re either above, equal or below your potential. If you’re below, it’s down to you and your staff team and what needs to happen here!” (Principal)

Assessment of student progress through the accumulation and analysis of results are the cornerstones of the district’s goal of building a culture of learning and improvement. The focus on data and the information that is gleaned from its analysis was heard from respondents at all levels. Two measurement specialists are employed to collect the data and provide analysis and reports on the various aspects of the district assessment and measurement activities. This information is used by all departments and schools to inform decision making in all areas of operation. A member of the consultant staff was formerly employed by Alberta Learning in the System Improvement Branch as an examination manager and has first-hand knowledge of the theory and processes underpinning the provincial achievement tests. These individuals regularly provide workshops and support to schools in the interpretation and understanding of the test results and their implications for school growth.

In contrast to other jurisdictions, however, school performance is not solely measured against provincial assessment results. The district also annually administers the Canadian Cognitive Aptitude

Test (CCAT) and the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) to students in Grades 3, 6, and 9 and establishes a measure of potential for each classroom group. A regression analysis is conducted on the results of the CCAT in conjunction with the results on the PAT to determine the extent to which students are achieving in relation to their potential. Teachers and school administrators were much more sensitive to these comparisons than they were to comparisons with the provincial results. The comparison of achievement with potential is highly classroom-specific, in that it takes into consideration the various factors that are present in the actual group of students being assessed. In this manner it avoids many of the concerns heard elsewhere among teachers and administrators that the PAT process is unfair to many students who do not fall within the 'average' range. The belief in the district is that regression analysis allows schools in disadvantaged areas to establish a more realistic picture of their achievement than a comparison with a provincial result, and it also presents a more authentic challenge to schools where achievement is expected to be high than does a correlation with provincial measures.

The school growth process involves an analysis of the test results and reports at the school level. The school principal is held responsible for these results in the annual accountability meeting with the superintendent. There is a mandatory program of workshops on school improvement for those principals whose school results continue to be below the values indicated by the regression analysis. This is complemented by assertive support to the school by consultants from the Learning Support Services department. Principals who have participated in this program indicated that, not only did it provide them with valuable skills in instructional leadership, but it also served as a strong incentive for staff in their schools to hone their instructional skills. Teacher respondents also saw the results as a valuable learning and development tool for instructional improvement.

Most respondents reported that test results were evaluated and analyzed by teams of teachers within the school, and that the results were not seen as the responsibility of the Grade 3, 6, or 9 teachers alone. There was, however, a feeling among teachers that the public perception in the community was that these particular teachers were more responsible for the results than others. The district has undertaken a major project to develop district-wide diagnostic tests in language arts and mathematics at the Grade 2, 5 and 8 levels, primarily on the recommendation of school administrators. This assessment process is intended to provide another benchmark for teachers and schools to identify areas of strength and concern on an earlier and more frequent basis than is provided by the PAT process. There was a concern that the district was doing too much testing, and as a result, starting with the 2003-2004 school year, the CTBS will no longer be required at the Grade 3 level.

The district also conducts a comprehensive system of satisfaction surveys of parents, students and staff. These results are analyzed at the school and district levels and are a critical aspect of the planning and monitoring process within the district.

PLANNING AND CURRICULUM COORDINATION

“I have been with the district for 30 years and I have never felt the sense of a learning community that we have now.” (Consultant)

The board’s Education Plan is directly aligned with the Alberta Learning goals and measures as published in provincial Three-Year Education Plan and includes the district’s Catholicity goal. School Education Plans are expected to align closely with the goals and targets of the division Education Plan, and teachers are encouraged to build these into their Professional Growth Plans (PGP). Department leaders and school principals are required to prepare an annual growth plan for their particular area of responsibility. This plan must include goals, measures, targets, strategies and a budget and must be aligned with the district’s goals and Alberta Learning goals. School plans are expected to conform to a district template which was developed collaboratively with input from principals. The department of School Operations Services analyzes all school plans for consistency with the district’s goals and provides a written report to the school principal. The transparency requirement mentioned earlier means that all plans are public documents within the district. Teachers and school council respondents were able to relate instances where they were involved in the development of school growth plans.

Trends that will influence future planning include a greater demand for the provision of special education services, greater demand for program choices by parents and students, the continuation of the AISI program, increases in the costs of technology and energy, changes in Alberta Infrastructure formulae for facility utilization, and preservation of publicly funded Catholic education.

There is a strong press for consistency through collaborative decisions in the implementation of programs and curriculum support. The Learning Support Services (LSS) provides consultant support to schools and teachers in all subject areas and conducts a wide range of in-service activities throughout the year for teaching and support staff. The level of activity is such that the LSS consultant and school principals have established a process to monitor the integration of the many activities to avoid duplication or conflicting staff development efforts. Schools have had approval to adjust their schedules to include time free of instruction for teachers to attend such activities while still meeting the provincial requirements for overall instructional time for students. Teachers and school administrators spoke frequently of the value of the support and service from LSS.

A major feature of the district’s co-ordination of instructional intervention is the Assessment for Learning (AFL) initiative. The AFL initiative brings together school teams on a regular basis and develops focused and curriculum-embedded strategies to bring about change in schools and develop assessment literacy among participants. All schools are required to participate. These teams are composed of teachers and administrators, with the principal as a mandatory participant. Strategies and philosophy are brought back by the teams and used for school-based development activities. Teams return to future sessions, evaluate results, and develop alternatives. This initiative is discussed in further detail in the context of staff development below.

The approach to the AISI program is another example of a coordinated strategy for the entire jurisdiction. In the first cycle of the AISI program, from 2000 to 2003, the district operated nine projects, addressing issues ranging from curriculum and assessment development in subject areas such as Junior High social studies and mathematics, early literacy, extended experiences for ECS students from disadvantaged areas, high school chaplaincy, Native Education, programs for gifted and talented students, and the Assessment for Learning initiative (described below). The selection process required that projects were aligned with the district goals and the superintendent's priorities of early literacy, gifted and talented programs and Assessment for Learning. Once those priorities were addressed, remaining funds were allocated to other projects that addressed more specific subject area or school-based initiatives. Projects were submitted by consultants, directors or groups of principals and monitored by the departments from which they originated. Results were reported as being very positive and, as evidence, the fact that the district had exceeded the provincial averages in the Standard of Excellence on the PAT in every subject at every grade level in 2003 was a persuasive indicator. The results were described by one consultant as 'stunning'. The high priority on a small number of projects had, according to many respondents, resulted in the development of a common language around teaching, learning and assessment in the district, and had been successful in bringing the majority of teachers to a new level of instructional effectiveness.

For the current cycle of projects, a district coordinator was appointed to manage and monitor the submission and implementation of all AISI projects. The project selection process was similar to the previous one with the additional condition that each project required a steering committee which would have parent representation along with teachers, school administrators and, where appropriate, students. Again, district priorities were established, consisting of early literacy, gifted and talented programs, and district examinations in language arts and mathematics at Grades 2, 5 and 8. All projects were required to directly address student learning and achievement. A template and rubric for the preparation and submission of project proposals was prepared, and a selection committee consisting of parents, teachers, consultants and principals chose the projects that would proceed. The coordinator is an ex officio member of all steering committees and will monitor the progress of all projects. He will also conduct the communication process for all projects and a web-based communication strategy was under development that was intended to encourage direct parent access to project information and progress.

STAFFING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

"We are consultants first and subject area specialists second," (Consultant)

"The strength of a school is in the strength of the leadership within the building." (District Administrator)

The quality and commitment of the district's staff and the professional development support that was made available were reported in interviews as factors leading to success more frequently than any other aspect of the district. In the following paragraphs we deal the district's overall staff profile, second with new teacher orientation and teacher evaluation, and third with staff development.

STAFF PROFILE

As of September 30, 2002, the district employed 1767 certificated staff and 1231 non-certificated personnel. Table 7.7 indicates the distribution of educational qualifications among the certificated staff. While some differences exist between the district's percentages and those of the province in individual categories, the overall distribution of teachers with Bachelor degrees was somewhat lower than that of the province as a whole, and the number of teachers with post-graduate degrees was almost two percent higher than similar provincial statistics. Table 7.8 outlines the experience distribution among the almost 1800 teachers in the district. Of the five districts in the study, this district had the largest percentage (72.2%) of its teachers at the top of the salary scale with ten or more years of service.

Table 7.7 Distribution of Educational Qualifications

Highest Level Completed	District %	Provincial %
Bachelor of Education	56.6%	53.1%
Bachelor of Education and Other	22.1%	25.3%
Bachelor Degree not in Education	6.4%	8.1%
Total Bachelor Degree	85.1%	86.5%
Master of Education	10.7%	8.1%
Master of Education and Other	0.2%	0.1%
Master's Degree not in Education	2.7%	3.7%
PhD	1.1%	0.6%
Total Post-Graduate Degree	14.7%	12.5%
Education Not Reported	0.3%	1.1%
Total	100.0%	100%

(2001/2002 data)

Table 7.8 Years of Teaching Experience

Total Years of Experience	% of staff
< 5	12.6%
5-9	14.5%
Total <10	27.1%
10-14	18.4%
15-19	12.5%
20-24	14.6%
25-29	14.5%
>29	12.2%
Total =>10	72.2%
not reported	0.7%
Total	100.0%

(2001/2002 data)

NEW TEACHER ORIENTATION

The district co-sponsored the orientation of new teachers in the past. This was an activity delivered by the ATA local, and consisted of a single meeting and social where new teachers were introduced to the general expectations and conditions that they could expect in their new roles with the district. The ATA local also held a number of sessions intended to assist new teachers throughout the year and provided financial assistance to teachers to attend the provincial New Teachers' fall conference.

In 2002 a group of principals supported by the district conducted a pilot project which saw approximately 30 newly hired teachers spend a week in August in activities designed to prepare them for their first independent classroom experience. This model was currently under review for future consideration. In addition to this orientation experience, new teachers were invited to meet on four occasions throughout the year to review their experiences and develop strategies for upcoming events such as parent-teacher interviews.

Mentoring of new teachers is also encouraged at the school level. Experienced teachers are matched with new teachers to provide an opportunity for sharing and support during the first year of teaching. This model was also under review.

TEACHER SELECTION AND EVALUATION

Teacher selection and hiring is a two-phase process in the district. The first phase involves a team of principals trained in behavioural interviewing techniques who interview applicants to the district. From these interviews, a list of candidates is developed and provided, with certain recommendations, to school administrators who have identified vacancies in their buildings. The final selection of the candidate is the responsibility of the school principal.

Performance appraisal for tenured staff is aligned with provincial policy and based on Professional Growth Plans (PGP) developed by teachers, reviewed with their supervisors, generally the principal of the school, and executed by the teacher. The principal is responsible for any additional performance monitoring for this group of teachers.

Direct monitoring of teachers on probationary or interim contracts of employment and for assistant principals on probationary assignments is also the responsibility of the principal. The district Human Resources Department provides templates, rubrics and a schedule for the evaluation process to principals and regularly monitors the implementation of this procedure.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

“I hear teachers chatting about professional topics in the staff room. I never used to hear that!”
(Principal)

“This has given us many opportunities to improve student learning. We have learned about the importance of meta-cognition activities, goal-setting, descriptive feedback, student involvement in creating criteria.” (Teacher)

“There is this sense that it (AFL) creates joy for my students, joy in my classroom, and is this ever cool when it works!” (Teacher)

“It affects our ability to respond to change. As teachers, we need to have opportunities to share what works with our colleagues. Meeting together provides us with chances to try new ideas, and helps develop an attitude where we want to work together.” (Teacher)

As would be expected in a large jurisdiction, staff development takes place at a number of levels and addresses a variety of needs and objectives. The majority of staff development is organized and presented through the Learning Support Services department (LSS), which consists of a corps of consultants who specialize in the various subject areas and disciplines. These consultants were teachers and administrators appointed to provide support and in-service to teachers and administrators primarily in their topic area, but also in any area of instruction in which their help is requested.

The consultant respondents described various situations where they provided support to teachers and schools who had specific requests and needs in particular subject areas, and also indicated initiatives that involved introducing new thinking, new techniques and new curriculum strategies to the district. One of the resources underlying much of the philosophy of the staff development being delivered by the Department is *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998). Finding time for staff development activities has been an issue, and over half of the district's schools, mostly elementary and some junior high schools, have adopted a modified timetable which provides for four and a half days of student attendance in a five-day week, with the remaining half-day for teacher preparation and staff development activities.

The district places a high priority on administrator development. The superintendent of schools believes that the key to achieving district goals is in the strength and competence of its leadership group. To this end, a separate department within the district administrative structure designated as Leadership Services is responsible for development activities for district leadership, current school principals and assistant principals, and the pool of prospective district and school leaders. The district holds an annual administrators' retreat which has recently been extended to three days, and supplements this with a monthly half-day meeting and development program for all school principals and district leaders. The overall theme of the administrative leadership program for the past four years has been the 'Principal as Instructional Leader'. It has addressed issues of instructional leadership in schools and challenged many of the traditional models of the principalship as a building management position as compared to a leadership responsibility for learning both at the district and school levels. More recently, the focus is on the principal as 'Catholic Educational Leader'. The program for these activities is developed by teams of principals and, for the most part, delivered by in-house leaders and facilitators.

The district also conducts a structured development program for assistant principals which introduces participants to the theory and practice of school administration in a bi-monthly series of half-day workshops throughout the year. In this manner, the district believes that it is building a competent pool of candidates for school and district leadership positions. The district also seeks candidates for leadership positions from outside its boundaries on an annual basis.

The process for appointment of new principals is designed in such a manner as to ensure that candidates are well-prepared and suited to their responsibilities. The first two years of an administrative appointment are probationary. In the first year, the district provides coaching support to the new principal through the Leadership Services department. In December of the second year a small team from that department conducts a thorough performance appraisal of the principal, involving feedback from staff, parents and students prior to a decision regarding continued employment.

A staff development and leadership effort that encompasses both teachers and school leadership is the Assessment for Learning project which originated from a leadership retreat some five years previously led by Dr. Michael Fullan and Dr. Carol Rolheiser. The following excerpt provides a philosophical overview of the initiative:

Assessment for Learning (AFL) continues to be a pivotal district initiative that integrates all initiatives and other projects in Edmonton Catholic Schools. The prime goal will continue to be building capacity in schools in terms of effective change culture and assessment literacy. The partnership with Drs. Michael Fullan, Carol Rolheiser from OISE and Dr. Anne Davies continues to enrich and ensure the sustainability and growth of Assessment for Learning. The district administration fully support and understand the extent to which the value of this initiative is rooted in teaching and learning.

The Assessment for Learning initiative is implemented through nine priority areas:

- Communication
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Professional Development
- Integration of District Initiatives
- Ensuring impact of AFL at elementary, junior high school, high school
- Structures and Processes
- Leadership
- Professional Learning Community
- Recognition and Celebration.¹⁸

Most teacher and administrator respondents agreed that this initiative has had a major impact on the effectiveness of instruction in their schools, and as a result, the improvement in student performance and achievement. Principals reported increased understanding of curriculum, instructional strategies, assessment procedures and analysis, and classroom environment issues.

¹⁸ Superintendent of Schools Goals and Priorities, 2003

Teachers reported high levels of satisfaction with their ability to share ideas with colleagues, with the many new techniques for assessment that they became familiar with and implemented in their classrooms and with the evidence of improvement in student understanding and achievement that they observed. Many indicated a substantial increase in student understanding of the learning process and a greater degree of independent learning on the part of many students. The most prevalent comment from respondents was that the project has provided participants with a common language with which to discuss instruction, assessment and learning. This aspect of the project was seen to be a valuable unifying feature in a large, multifaceted and diverse school jurisdiction. The project has been most successful in elementary schools, and the district is reviewing the model to make it more appropriate for the needs of the junior and senior high schools.

The Religious Education department is also heavily involved in staff development, both in the area of the religious education curriculum and in the development of higher levels of understanding of the Catholic faith among staff. Many respondents credited the values and beliefs that were created and nurtured in a faith-based environment that encompassed students, parents, teachers and the parish in a strong community atmosphere with increased levels of achievement.

Table 7.9 indicates expenditures on non-salaried aspects of staff development and includes the contributions of schools, the ATA local and the district. This is the largest allocation per teacher of the five districts in the study.

Table 7.9 Professional Development Funding

[includes substitute cost, travel, accommodation, materials and fees]

Name	Purpose	Amount 2002/03	Per Teacher [1791 FTE]
District Allocated and Approved			
Centrally Approved P.D.	To support district-wide PD activities and activities involving generally more than one school. Support staff may also access	\$50,000	\$28
Curriculum P.D.	To provide PD support for curriculum implementation	\$184,000	\$103
Admin. PD	To provide PD support to administrators that focuses on school administration	Included	Included
Special Education	To support PD opportunities for teachers of students with severe special needs.	Included	Included
Special Education	To support subs for teachers for PD and IPP meetings	Included	Included
Sub-total District Approved			
AISI Projects	To support PD directly related to AISI projects	\$773,145	\$432
Total District Approved		\$1,007,145	\$562
ATA Local Contribution		\$134,325	\$75
School Allocated and Approved			
Staff PD	For both teaching staff and support staff PD and to support school-wide PD involving all staff		Included below
Admin. PD	To provide PD support to administrators that focuses on school administration		Included below
Total School Allocated and Approved		\$1,342,706	\$750
OVERALL TOTAL		\$2,484,176	\$1,387

SUMMARY

At 31,000 students, the Edmonton Catholic District is the fourth largest in the province of Alberta. The fact that a district of its size, which would be expected to score close to the average in province-wide tests, was selected by virtue of its gains in student achievement attests to the success of many of the strategies and practices that it has implemented. The PAT results and the PDE results are generally above the provincial average, and a regression analysis of PAT results against a standardized aptitude test provides a school-by school assessment of school effectiveness and improvement opportunity. Schools are provided with a wide range of data analysis supports and services and there is a focus on building assessment literacy for all stakeholders.

The district espouses the values of dignity, respect, honesty, loyalty, fairness, and personal and communal growth. In the responses of participants it was clear that these values are strongly held among many members of the district community and serve to guide the day-to-day relationships and processes in the district. Many respondents reflected on the role of the faith community that was part of their experience in the district as creating strong community ethos and making a considerable contribution to student self-esteem and achievement.

At the beginning of all interviews for the study, respondents were asked for their perceptions of the reasons for the district's gains in achievement. The five features most frequently mentioned were: the Assessment for Learning project, the leadership of the superintendent, the data-driven decision making and planning process, the support of the district for professional development at all levels, and the quality of the district's staff.

There is a high priority on building capacity at all levels of the district, not alone by means of leadership programs and through the general staff development program, but in the range of district-wide responsibilities and opportunities that are provided to principals and teachers. District co-ordination of staff development and the AISI projects have contributed to the development of a common language and understanding across the district with respect to curriculum and instruction issues. The district spends more on staff development than any other jurisdiction in the study on a per-teacher basis, despite having the highest percentage of teachers with advanced degrees and the highest percentage of teachers with ten or more years of experience of the jurisdictions in the sample.

Teachers saw themselves as empowered to make local decisions for their classrooms and schools to achieve their goals. School administrators saw themselves as full partners in the achievement of district goals and objectives, and were able through the leadership and decision-making process to have a legitimate impact, not only in their own schools, but across the district. The board was perceived as supportive of the goals of Catholicity and learning, and, for the most part, trustees were visible in the schools and the community in support of Catholic education. There was a palpable feeling in the descriptions and comments of the respondents, both in the interviews and the on-line survey, of a learning community permeated by the values of the Catholic faith that had a clear mission and purpose and was making progress to achieving it.

“We might not be number one, but our schools radiate hope and joy and love because that core of who we are is very clear.” (Teacher)

8 Northern Gateway Regional Division

The Northern Gateway Regional Division extends along Highway 43 in northwestern Alberta for nearly 375 kilometers, from Onoway in the south-east to close to Falher in the north-west. It contains 20 schools, including two Hutterite Colony schools.

The area served by the division is primarily rural, quite diverse geographically and composed of municipalities varying in population size from very small to over 8,000. The east end of the division is largely agricultural. The central portion of the division around the towns of Whitecourt and Fox Creek is characterised by forestry, oil and gas. Industry in the northern portion is comprised of oil, gas, and agriculture. Populations in the southern areas are growing, due primarily to expanding rural acreage development. In the agricultural areas generally student population remains relatively static. The Whitecourt area is growing, while the population in the Fox Creek and Valleyview areas is currently stable.

Northern Gateway Schools has a population of approximately 5700 full-time equivalent students in E.C.S. to Grade 12. A full range of regular programs is offered to all students. In order to accomplish this, several of the smaller schools offer some programs on a cyclical basis. Even small schools, however, have been able to extend their program offerings beyond the mandated Program of Studies. This provides outstanding educational opportunities for all students. In addition to regular programming, students with special needs are served in a variety of ways. Individual Program Plans are developed for students who are primarily integrated into regular classrooms. Some dedicated special needs programs are in place. Storefront programming for high school students is provided in Whitecourt, Valleyview and Mayerthorpe. Technology continues to play an increasing role throughout the division and the establishment of the wide-area network and Centre for Learning and the Instructional Media Centre have enhanced this.¹⁹

¹⁹ Extract from Northern Gateway Three Year Education Plan 2002 - 2005

²⁰ See the description of methodology in Chapter 3. For the PAT the measures are the percentages of students at each grade level and for each subject that achieved the Acceptable Standard, and the percentage who achieved the Standard of Excellence. For the PDE, the performance measures are arrived at by multiplying the percentage achieving at each standard level by the participation rate for that subject in the jurisdiction.

Table 8.1 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results











Percentage of Students Achieving the Acceptable Standard						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	87.2	83.7	87.4	83.8	86.1	
Math	76.9	74.8	81.7	80.3	82.3	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	83.8	82.6	78.2	78.7	83.1	
Math	78.6	81.0	78.7	80.2	81.6	
Science	75.4	83.6	77.8	82.8	83.9	
Social Studies	77.1	79.8	78.1	81.3	81.3	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	78.2	79.2	80.8	80.8	80.2	
Math	61.8	57.0	59.6	63.8	60.6	
Science	72.8	68.3	68.1	71.7	72.8	
Social Studies	75.1	69.0	71.9	75.4	75.5	

Table 8.2 Provincial Achievement Test 5-Year Results











Percentage of Students Achieving the Standard of Excellence						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Grade Three						
English Language Arts	13.7	9.9	15.1	11.9	10	
Math	19.1	18.3	18.3	16.2	14.3	
Grade Six						
English Language Arts	14.0	17.4	11.0	12.6	11.1	
Math	10.8	13.8	11.0	12.6	11.8	
Science	13.8	23.6	13.5	23.9	20.2	
Social Studies	14.3	16.7	11.7	14.3	13.9	
Grade Nine						
English Language Arts	7.0	6.6	10.8	11.5	10.3	
Math	6.3	6.6	8.3	9.6	11.9	
Science	8.5	9.2	7.6	8.3	10.9	
Social Studies	14.8	10.9	13.5	10.3	15.1	

Table 8.3 Provincial Diploma Examination 5-Year Results

[Exam Mark x Participation]						
Acceptable Standard						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	2827	2668	2682	2918	3179	
Chemistry 30	2678	2075	2704	2939	2585	
English 30	4250	3566	4095	3802	3830	
Social Studies 33	4081	4069	4414	4082	3289	
Standard of Excellence						
Subject	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	5 Year Trend
Biology 30	608	552	665	805	843	
Chemistry 30	557	332	566	373	450	
English 30	643	423	555	981	905	
Social Studies 33	1254	953	1348	1146	781	

JURISDICTION PERFORMANCE - FIVE-YEAR TREND

Tables 8.1 through 8.3 show the performance of the system over the past five years on the Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) for Grade 3, 6 and 9 and on selected Provincial Diploma Exams (PDE) at both the Acceptable Standard and the Standard of Excellence.²⁰ Within each table is a graph representing the numerical values in that table. It should be noted that the graphs are intended only to provide a visual representation of the values in the table. The scale used in the graphs is constant for those within each table only, and varies from table to table. For each graph within a table the value axis is adjusted to best accommodate the high and low values in the chart.

VISION, VALUES, BELIEFS AND ETHOS

The division's foundational statements speak directly to the interests and needs of students. Students are mentioned specifically in almost every statement in the document. There is an expectation that a high priority on student learning, staff development, collaborative decision making and partnerships with home and community will guide the division's operations and decisions. Other board documents indicate many instances where these beliefs and values are exercised on a frequent basis. The board minutes contain numerous references to staff presentations and board discussion regarding items such as student successes, test result analysis, and program and staff development. The division's education plans are aligned with Alberta Learning goals and outcomes, and division priorities in that document include literacy and numeracy, staff development and improvement in achievement in secondary mathematics.

Comments from the board chair and the superintendent of schools confirmed these priorities and values and provided examples of initiatives and strategies designed to implement them in the

Table 8.4 Foundational Statements

FOUNDATIONAL STATEMENTS	
Mission Statement	Opening the Gateway to a Lifetime of Learning
Vision Statement	The vision looks to a future in which:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students achieve superior educational results as shown on provincial, national and international measures. • High quality of education is widely recognized by all participants for meeting student's individual needs. • Students complete their schooling with positive attitudes, a love of learning and the skills necessary to achieve their aspirations and contribute positively in a changing society. • Parent and student interests, needs and aspirations are accommodated by innovative, creative and high quality programming. • Schools are dynamic, safe and rewarding places in which to learn and work. • Student, staff, parent and community involvement is an integral part of planning, problem resolution and decision making. • Resources are managed to ensure the best educational benefits to students. • Facilities are well equipped and maintained, and services are tailored to ongoing educational demands. • School personnel implement proven advances in instructional strategies, curriculum, technology and alternative modes of delivery to enhance student learning. • School-community partnerships are developed to enhance student learning and preparation for the world of work.
Principles and Beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are the primary focus of the school and school system. • Every student can learn. • Schools must protect the student's right to be a learner. • Every student is entitled to learn in a safe, caring environment. • Schools shall demonstrate respect for each individual, by modeling and encouraging the behavior expected of individuals in our society. • Parents have the right and responsibility to actively participate in their child's education. • An effective school system is one in which co-operation, collaboration and teamwork are valued. • The school shall teach the skills and attitudes required to prepare students to become lifelong learners and contributing members of society. • Each school must be an integral part of its community. • The educational efforts of schools are strengthened through partnership with the home and community.

division. A concern was expressed, both by these respondents and by many others, that the message of the board was not being successfully communicated throughout the division. Teacher and parent respondents in particular had difficulty identifying any particular area of focus or priority of the board or of the superintendent other than that of generally supporting education in the division by managing the distribution of instructional funds. Most respondents quoted the education

plans as a source of such information. This communication issue was perceived to reduce or limit the extent to which school-based respondents identified with the division as an influential entity when compared to their school. Many respondents affirmed the board for the efforts that it was making in overcoming this communication gap and identified the division's communication documents such as 'The Achiever', trustee attendance at schools and at school council meetings, and the annual stakeholder retreat as effective communication strategies. At the time of the study, the division had plans to employ a communications officer to work on improving the communication practices and linkages throughout the division.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The division and its schools maintain partnership arrangements with community organizations and services in order to provide enhanced learning and support services for students. The following Table 8.5 indicates the local partners that work with the division and the services they provide. Support services are accessed by the division in areas of student health, counselling, various therapy needs and learning resources.

Table 8.5 Community Partners

Partner	Service
Region Seven Child & Family Services Authority	Family and school counselling services
Aspen Regional Health Authority	Resources to support student health
Aspen Student Health Initiative Partnership	Speech Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy
MISTAHIA Regional Health Authority	Resources to support student health
Yellowhead Regional Library	Cataloguing services, book purchasing, inter-library loans, teacher inservice
Peace Library System	Cataloguing services, book purchasing, inter-library loans, teacher inservice
Whitcourt Drug-Free Zone	Promotes Safe, Caring and Drug Free Schools

The division was formed in the mid 1990s by means of a merger of two geographically large jurisdictions, with the result that the regionalized jurisdiction is one of the largest in the province. With 20 schools in communities that are located along over 350 km of highway, distance and communication are ever-present challenges. Travel is time-consuming, both for people who have to attend meetings at any of the division centres, and for the division leadership to visit schools and other operational sites. It is especially challenging in winter-time when weather and road conditions make travel inadvisable. These factors of distance, travel conditions and communication are pertinent in that they have presented challenges in developing the kind of division-wide cohesiveness and identity that can be observed in other jurisdictions. Schools are community-oriented and have developed a sense of independence and self-reliance rather than seeing themselves as intimately connected with the rest of the division. Teachers do not know many of

their colleagues in other schools. Division-wide administrator meetings are a relatively recent strategy, and some administrators are still hesitant to invest the time and travel to attend them. For some respondents attendance at division-wide meeting requires over two hours of travel each way, something many respondents are reluctant to do. The division is working on a number of fronts to address these situations, and has a high expectation that the installation of a high-speed electronic communication backbone in the province will assist with this effort.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

The school system is led by a board of nine trustees, all of whom have served for more than one term, and some who have served for numerous terms, so there is a good deal of trustee experience on the board. At the time of the study, the superintendent of schools was completing his second year in that position, and had served as superintendent in other jurisdictions in Alberta for almost 25 years. He was the third person to hold that position since the retirement of a long-time superintendent in 1998. The deputy superintendent's primary responsibility is personnel, and the director of instructional services is responsible for the areas of curriculum, staff development and technology. The division is divided into zones and each zone is assigned to a division administrator for day-to-day communication and problem-solving. There are co-ordinators for staff development, special education and special initiatives who work out of the Sangudo Learning Centre, a facility approximately 60 km from the central office.

The roles of board and system administration are outlined in policy, and the comments from the board chair and the superintendent indicate a high level of shared trust and confidence that each party respects the boundaries and roles of the other. The board's role focuses primarily on policy development and review, communication, and labour relations. The superintendent is the CEO of the division and is responsible for all administrative matters. School principals report directly to the superintendent of schools.

The division encouraged teachers to undertake study towards post-graduate qualifications and conducts an ongoing leadership development program for aspiring administrators in order to accomplish this goal. It wants to endure that there will continue to be a pool of effective candidates in place as vacancies arise in leadership positions in the system.

The board seeks stakeholder input into plans and decisions through visits to school council meetings, visits to schools and an annual two-day retreat which brings together parents, students, teachers, support staff administration and trustees to discuss planning and communication activities and strategies. The board chair and the superintendent attend a meeting of every school council in the division at least once a year. The superintendent also visits all of the municipalities in the division and reports on the performance of the division on a number of areas including student achievement. Respondents spoke very favourably of the work that the board does to be visible in their schools and those who had participated in the planning retreats spoke very positively about that experience.

DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The division's values and belief statements underline the importance of collaborative decision making processes and effective management of resources. The following paragraphs deal in turn with the division's school-based decision making and resource allocation, accountability measures and the use of data.

SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

"The downside of the ability of a school to decide to participate in a division program is also the ability to decide not to participate." (Principal)

"School-based decision making is only as successful as the manager making the decisions." (Division Administrator)

"What I see is the principal being torn between the jobs of office manager and educational leader. He can't be effective in both areas." (Division Administrator)

The school-based decision-making model is outlined in board policy. Procedures are outlined in the Division Budget Handbook. The policy delegates the responsibility of school operation to the principal and includes planning, staffing, budgeting, and school operations in that responsibility. School principals are expected to operate their schools on a consultative, collaborative decision making model involving parents, staff and, where appropriate, students. Schools operate with a great deal of autonomy, and any co-ordination of division-wide initiatives is a challenge.

Comments from both division level and school-based respondents indicated some ambivalence regarding the effectiveness of the current structure. Division administrators related their concerns with the wide disparity that exists among schools in the manner in which they are managed. Much of the concern was related to financial administration, but there were also concerns regarding instructional issues such as student achievement and staff development. Most division level administrators would prefer to see a model where more of the financial decision making was centralized and school principals were free to spend time on instructional leadership and school improvement rather than on money management. While some school principals indicated a great degree of satisfaction with the role, most would be pleased to see a reduction in the amount of administrative detail that went with the job. All school principal respondents agreed that the one most persuasive factor in support of school-based decision making was the principal's ability to quickly address issues of need in virtually any area of school operations without being dependent on a distant level of administration that was not perceived to be familiar with the local needs and conditions.

The model appears to have encouraged a great deal of independence at the school level, a factor that seems to be accompanied by a certain measure of isolationism in many schools. Many respondents cited the size of the division and the time required to attend division functions and

meetings as a significant contributor to this sense of isolation and self-dependence. There has been little inter-school transfer of teachers or administrators for many years, and both division and school-based administrators saw this as a concern.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The board receives two separate reports each year from principals regarding school operations. In the spring, each principal makes a presentation to the board in a committee session outlining the school's goals and plans for the upcoming year. These presentations are relatively brief, but allowing an opportunity for trustees to dialogue directly with principals regarding any and all aspects of their school's operation. These presentations are also attended by the group of principals scheduled to present on the same date, resulting in a certain amount of informal peer review of school leadership and management. In the fall, principals return to the board committee session to present the results of the provincial testing program and to outline their school's successes and areas of concern. Again, there is opportunity for dialogue between the principals and the board on these issues. Trustees feel that this is a very good opportunity for them to be acquainted with local conditions in the division's many communities. There appears to be a concern on the part of the board with the extent of school accountability in the current model. This is reflected in a comment by the chair that, "The board can list their priorities, but we certainly don't have any control over how the dollars are spent towards those priorities. That happens at the school level."

On an annual basis, generally in late spring, the superintendent meets with each school principal to review plans for school operation and any issues of interest or concern at the school. School test results and satisfaction survey data are reviewed at these meetings as well as the schools plans for any program implementation and staffing changes. The superintendent has also recently introduced the practice of holding monthly meetings of the school and divisional administration. These meetings provide a forum for consideration of administrative decision making and planning of division-wide activities. Administrative respondents spoke favourably of the opportunities thus provided, although there was some concern with the amount of travel time required to attend. The secretary-treasurer is also in regular contact with each school regarding the management of the school's finances and expenditures.

The division reports to parents and the community through the medium of the Education Results Report and its communication bulletin, *The Achiever*, on the results of the provincial testing program as well as on the results of the satisfaction surveys that are conducted annually among students, parents and staff. Principals are expected to communicate their school results to their parents through the school council and through school newsletters.

Most respondents agreed that parents in general indicated a high level of satisfaction with their child's school and the overall education that they were receiving. In some instances, parents were assertive in expressing their expectations and concerns about the nature and the effectiveness of the education that their child was receiving, but for the most part this was directed at a particular teacher than at the school in general.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Instructional grants from Alberta Learning are distributed to schools on a per student basis for elementary and junior high students, and on a Credit Enrolment Unit (CEU) basis for high school students. Earmarked funds for programs such as Early Literacy and second languages are provided to the schools and sites which operated those programs. Special needs funding is distributed to schools based on the assessed needs of identified students. The division has established a co-operative ‘pool’ of funds for certain contingency purposes that were managed by the division office. These contingencies included items such as maternity leave coverage, special education co-ordination, the operation of the division’s wide-area network, and the costs associated with long-term sick leave. A small allocation for staff development is also administered centrally. A fund of approximately \$850,000 was established and administered centrally to provide equity allocations to small schools which do not have the efficiencies of scale that are available to larger schools. No other additional program-related funds are provided to schools. In total, 92.84% of the instructional grant from Alberta Learning is distributed directly to schools.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

“The more we analyze the achievement tests the more we realize that reading is a key component even in Science and Social Studies tests.” (School Administrator)

“We have many ways of assessing and we need to have a broad repertoire of assessment tools.” (Superintendent)

The measures most often applied to school operations are the results of provincial tests and examinations, satisfaction surveys and the deployment of budget allocations.

Results from the provincial testing program are routinely analyzed at the division and school levels. At the division level a report is prepared for the board of trustees which identifies strengths and areas of concern in the annual results. Five-year trends are also reported to the board and significant trends are identified and discussed. Division administrators review school results for areas of strength and concern and discuss these with school administrators as warranted.

Schools are also expected to analyze the school results. The prevailing practice in previous years has been for school staffs to conduct this analysis as teacher teams and make coordinated plans to change practices in order to address deficiencies. These plans are generally reflected in the school education plans for the following year. In most instances, improvement plans are developed and implemented at the school level, and only on rare occasions was there an opportunity to address issues across a number of schools. The division is a member of the Alberta Assessment Consortium, and division administrators regularly attend conferences and workshops of that organization.²¹ Teachers also attend the examination marking and standard-setting workshops for the PAT and PDE provided by Alberta Learning.

²¹ Information regarding the Consortium at <http://www.aac.ab.ca/>

PLANNING AND CURRICULUM COORDINATION

Division education plans are directly aligned with Alberta Learning goals and outcomes. The annual divisional planning process begins in late fall with a two-day stakeholder planning retreat, the results of which are compiled and included in the board's official three-year planning document. Schools are expected to produce school education plans that are aligned with the division's plans, again using a consultative, collaborative model involving staff and parents. The division has produced a template that schools are expected to follow in preparing their education plans so that the alignment with the division plan can be more easily implemented and monitored. All teaching and administrative staff are expected to present Professional Growth Plans (PGP) to their supervisor on an annual basis. In some schools there was an expectation that the PGP contain at least three goals, one professional in nature, one personal, and one related to program priorities of the school as included in the school's education plan.

The amount of division co-ordination of curriculum activity is limited. A pilot project that sought to build awareness among teachers regarding the extent to which their planning, teaching strategies and assessment practices were aligned with the Alberta curriculum did not produce the success that was expected. There were instances of teacher concern with the process, and a revision is in the planning stage.

In the first cycle of AISI projects, each school was responsible for developing and managing its own projects. The division was only marginally involved in the coordination of project goals, measures or outcomes. School respondents indicated that their projects proved to be exciting and worthwhile opportunities for school growth, especially in the manner in which they rallied the enthusiasm and energy of the entire school community around a program or a set of goals. However, the evaluation and reporting requirements of the large number of projects created a great deal of administrative frustration, and there was some indication that certain projects fell short of achieving their goals. In addition, the great variety of projects and approaches has caused concern at the division level. As an example of the lack of consistency, one division administrator mentioned the variety of approaches to reading intervention that existed across the division, not all of which were equally effective.

In the second cycle, a committee consisting of school and system administrators, trustees and parents considered submissions from all schools for project ideas and through a selection process identified two that would be division-wide and would be open for schools to participate in as they wished. These projects addressed literacy development and high school student retention and, according to division administrators, were selected more based on a perceived need than on any hard data that would confirm that a need existed. A division co-ordinator was appointed to prepare submissions, communicate with Alberta Learning and monitor the progress and the outcomes of the projects. Both principal and division respondents felt that this co-ordinated activity proved to be very beneficial in directing the division's AISI resources at two problem areas.

STAFFING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The key factor in improving student achievement that was mentioned by most respondents to the study was the provision of staff development. In the following paragraphs we deal first with the division's overall staff profile, second with new teacher orientation and teacher evaluation, and third with staff development

STAFF PROFILE

"If student achievement is going to improve it's going to be down to the teacher in the classroom." (School Administrator)

"The most important decision by the principal is who we put in front of the class." (Superintendent)

As of September 30, 2002, the division employed 312 FTE certificated staff and 288 non-certificated personnel. Table 8.6 indicates the distribution of educational qualifications among the certificated staff. The number of teachers with Bachelors degrees is very close to the provincial average, while the percentage with advanced qualification is slightly lower.

Table 8.6 Distribution of Educational Qualifications

Highest Level Completed	Division %	Provincial %
Bachelor of Education	66.4%	53.1%
Bachelor of Education and Other	16.4%	25.3%
Bachelor Degree not in Education	5.9%	8.1%
Total Bachelor's degrees	88.7%	86.5%
Master of Education	7.5%	8.1%
Master of Education and Other	0.0%	0.1%
Master's Degree not in Education	1.1%	3.7%
PhD.	0.5%	0.6%
Total Post-graduate	9.1%	12.5%
Education Not Reported	2.2%	1.1%
Total	100%	100%

Table 8.7 illustrates the range of experience among teachers. There are 33.6% of teachers with less than 10 years of experience, the second highest percentage in this category among the districts in the study.

Table 8.7 Years of Teaching Experience

Total Years of Experience	% of staff
< 5	16.4%
5-9	17.2%
Total <10	33.6%
10-14	18.5%
15-19	15.3%
20-24	14.8%
25-29	9.7%
>29	5.9%
Total =>10	64.2%
not reported	2.2%
Total	100.0%

2001/02 data

NEW TEACHER ORIENTATION AND EVALUATION

The division employed 15 to 20 new teachers per year on average during the period of the study. New teachers are provided with a two-day orientation to division policies and practices in August before they begin their assignment. In addition, they are encouraged to attend the annual provincial New Teachers' Conference provided by the Alberta Teachers' Association, generally in October. The director of instructional services also provides occasional workshops throughout the year on specific topics of interest to new teachers.

New teachers are encouraged to seek out mentors, generally from among the teachers in their assigned school. Principals were also expected to assist in the identification of mentors for new teachers. Supervision and evaluation of new teachers is conducted by the school principal or the assistant principal if so designated. The process of this evaluation is determined by the individual principals. Areas of concern are brought to the attention of the deputy superintendent who has responsibility for human resources. Approximately 10% - 15% of new teacher's contracts are not renewed after the one-year probationary period.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

"We put together processes and programs to support principals. We really see (staff development) as a service offering to schools." (Division Administrator)

"The more that teachers are able to keep abreast of recent research and have time to look at and analyze new curriculum, the better the classroom situation will be and the better student achievement will be." (Division Administrator)

Prior to the appointment of the previous superintendent of schools, much of the staff development in the division was either an individual choice of the teacher or administrator, or an in-school initiative of a school administrator. Occasionally schools within a community or adjacent to one

another collaborated on a staff development event. Most teachers and school administrators sought opportunities and programs offered by other jurisdictions or presented in larger centres in the province. Funding for these activities was provided by the Alberta Teachers' Association local and the respective school. Due to the distance and the time involved, this model of staff development was expensive and served only a minority of the division's staff. Goals were highly individual and any dispersal of new information or learning among colleagues was limited.

In an effort to address this situation, the previous superintendent established the office of Coordinator of Staff Development. The responsibilities of this position were to identify staff development needs and organize and deliver programs to meet them. One major objective was to provide programs within the division that would be accessible to all staff and would involve less travel time and expense. These staff development programs were offered and resources were stored for distribution in two Centres of Learning that were established in different locations in the division so as to be more accessible to all schools. The operational costs for the centres are allocated centrally, while the participant cost for PD programs is borne by school budgets.

The coordinator works with school PD representatives to assemble a list of PD needs and develop programs and services in response. The focus for the first two years was on technology integration in instruction and these workshop sessions were well attended by staff from all schools in the division. Attendance in the previous year was reported as being somewhat lower, with distance and travel time being cited as the main reasons. The coordinator indicated that the goals for the upcoming year were intended to develop a broader understanding of a variety of assessment practices and to build understanding of the concept of professional learning communities.

Teachers were virtually unanimous in their desire to see the division organize and facilitate opportunities for teachers with similar interests from various schools to meet and participate in development activities together. They felt that their inter-school sharing experiences in the past were highly worthwhile and productive. There was a prevalent perception, however, that many of the division's organizational policies mitigated against this practice. In more than one example, student transportation needs and rigid school calendar policies were cited as taking precedence over staff development needs.

In the area of leadership development, the division provides a program aimed at developing the knowledge and skills of aspiring administrators and also provides support for staff members to undertake post-graduate studies. At the time of the study, 12 staff members were registered in a Master of Education program. Most current administrators cited attendance at provincial administration conferences as the preferred sources of professional development for them.

Table 8.8 indicates the division-level expenditures on non-salaried aspects of staff development as well as funding for PD provided by the ATA local. The division does not report on school-level expenditures for PD at a system level so the data on these expenditures are not available.

Table 8.8 Professional Development Funding

[includes substitute cost, travel, accommodation, materials and fees]

Name	Purpose	Amount 2002/03	Per Teacher [312 tchrs]
Division Allocated and Approved			
Supt. Approved P.D.	To support division-wide PD activities and activities involving generally more than one school. Support staff may also access.	\$35,000	\$112
Curriculum P.D.	To provide PD support for curriculum implementation	\$10,000	\$32
Special Education	To support PD opportunities for teachers of students with severe special needs.	Included	
Special Education	To support subs for teachers for PD and IPP meetings	Included	
Sub-total Division Approved		\$45,000	\$144
AISI Projects		Not available	
Total Division Approved		\$45,000	\$144
ATA Local Allocated			
	ATA Local contribution	\$34,320	\$110
School Allocated and Approved			
Staff PD	For both teaching staff and support staff PD and to support school-wide PD involving all staff	Not available	
Admin. PD	To provide PD support to administrators that focuses on school administration	Not available	
Total School Allocated and Approved			
OVERALL TOTAL		\$79,320	\$254

SUMMARY

The regionalization process that created the division in 1994/1995 brought with it a great deal of change and uncertainty for staff and administration. Since that time, the division has undergone four changes in the superintendency with the result that efforts to build a division identity and cohesiveness have not had the opportunity to grow and develop consistency over time. Under the previous superintendent of schools a number of initiatives designed to build capacity among staff and administration were undertaken and are strongly supported by the current administration. These included the establishment of the staff development program and the leadership development program. A new division logo was unveiled and the annual planning workshop was initiated. These initiatives were credited with the beginnings of a reculturing of the division, but most respondents agreed that there was still much to be done in this regard.

At the beginning of the interviews, respondents were asked to reflect on their perceptions of the key factors in the achievement gains shown by students. The five most frequently mentioned factors related to the work of the coordinators of staff development and of special education, the impact of program interventions such as AISI and Early Literacy, the high calibre and dedication of teachers across the division, and practices associated with analysis of assessment data and their application to instructional planning.

Virtually all respondents saw the size and sparsity of population in the division as the most influential factors mitigating against a sense of cohesiveness and division identity. Teachers did not know many of their colleagues in other schools. It was difficult to organize inter-school activities or staff development opportunities due to the travel time required, especially under winter conditions. The visibility of the division's leadership team in schools was greatly reduced by the distances involved in visiting schools. School-based staff who were employed in the pre-regionalized jurisdictions saw these factors as a loss of contact and felt that the division leadership did not really understand the conditions and challenges in their schools. As one teacher put it, "Now I feel that you're on your own in your own little domain."

This sense of distance from the division and from colleagues appeared to have created a situation where teachers identified strongly with their own school and saw little influence from the division in their daily responsibilities. Some schools organized school-wide staff development and built strong team linkages within the school. Smaller schools found this difficult to attain by themselves and often linked up with adjacent schools for staff development programs. The only division-level factors relating to improvement in student achievement that most school-based respondents were able to identify were the coordinators of staff development and student services.

It was clear from the replies of the division leadership that the goal of reculturing the division to build cohesiveness and identity held a high priority for them. Strategies are in place to improve communication, address administrative responsibilities and build teacher capacity in curriculum analysis. The advent of Alberta Supernet, a province-wide high-speed computer communications backbone, is seen as an opportunity to link up communities and provide more effective and less costly communication. Most respondents agreed that there was much to be done to accomplish the vision of an effective, cohesive jurisdiction built on collaboration, co-operation and teamwork.

9 Analysis of Findings

This chapter explores the question posed at the outset of the study, namely whether there are certain features of consistently improving districts that might be associated with their success. It assembles the data from the five districts described in Chapters 4 through 8, examines the similarities and variances among them and, where possible, relates them to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The analysis uses the same five-part framework as before and concludes with a summary.

VISION, VALUES, BELIEFS AND ETHOS

It will be recalled that there are three elements in this category of the framework. For this cross-case analysis it is useful to deal with them separately.

VISION AND MISSION AND THEIR DISSEMINATION

The most consistent observation across all five jurisdictions was the desire and the drive among all respondents to improve learning opportunities for students. This theme was reflected in the comments of trustees, jurisdiction administration, principals, teachers and parents. The unanimity was noteworthy in view of some distractions in the recent past that could have affected the perception of the various groups and individuals with respect to their mission and purpose as educators. The province had recently gone through a divisive labour dispute involving teachers, school boards and the provincial government. Funding for programs and facilities was either capped or reduced, and regulations regarding examination security were perceived by teachers as punitive. Despite these and other difficult issues, the vision to improve teaching and learning was prevalent.

The formal mission statements of all five jurisdictions placed a high priority on student learning and growth. While the individual statements differed in language, organization and approach, all of the districts had given considerable consideration to their purpose and vision documents. It was difficult to draw any distinct parallels between their differences in content and the actual incidence of improvement in student performance.

In general terms, the more removed a respondent's assignment was from the board of trustees and the office of the superintendent of schools, the less familiar that respondent was with the contents of the jurisdiction's foundational statements. Parents were generally vague and uncertain when asked about the mission or priorities of the board or the superintendent. Teachers were somewhat more confident in their responses, while principals and district administrators were generally able to list at least two or three aspects of the jurisdiction's statements without difficulty.

It was evident, however, that in the case of the consistently improving jurisdictions, many respondents at all levels were familiar with certain district priorities. For example, in the case of Horizon (HRD) and Chinook's Edge (CESD), the focus on 'Kids First' was familiar to all. In the Edmonton Catholic District (ECSD), respondents were well acquainted with the dual goals of student learning in a Catholic environment, while in the Pembina Hills Division (PHRD) there was consensus that the priority for the board and the superintendent was student achievement. In the Northern Gateway Division (NGRD), the 'typical' district, there was a greater degree of uncertainty in the responses to the question of board and superintendent focus and priority.

The determining factor seems to be the extent to which the board and the superintendent sharpen the focus of the vision and mission of the district on student learning, and use every available channel of communication to bring that priority to the attention of the entire educational community. In the districts where the jurisdiction's priorities were well known throughout the organization, it was evident that the messages from the board and the superintendent were focused on student achievement and growth as the highest priority and were communicated persistently in the jurisdiction's literature throughout the planning and reporting cycle and in the public comments of officials and trustees at both community and school events and meetings.

It was also evident that the existence of a clear and strong jurisdiction message had an impact on decisions at all levels of the organization. Administrators in areas of finance, transportation and facilities were able to relate their responsibilities to student learning and growth. This was particularly evident in CESD, where officials could readily cite examples of the "Where Students Come First" philosophy in the design of facilities and the operation of the student transportation system. Principals were able to articulate clear goals to staff and, similarly, teachers were able to relate the same goals to students and parents. School councils were also able to see the relevance of their involvement with school support and decision making as part of the larger picture in the jurisdiction.

This is an area of high consistency with observations in the research. Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy (2002) speak to board focus and commitment to priorities, while Fullan (2001) lists setting clear expectations and building a focus on instruction as two of his 'organizing principles'. There is good reason to propose that the existence of a focused mission and vision statement, effectively communicated, is a major factor in achieving one of the goals of many trustees and jurisdiction leaders, that of creating an interdependent school system with a common focus rather than a system of relatively autonomous schools with diverse objectives.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Less prominent in the literature is evidence concerning the impact of the district's ability to mobilize community organizations and agencies in support of instruction-related services for its students. It is evident from this study that the consistently improving jurisdictions had enlisted the involvement of a much greater number of community partners and agencies to assist with student health, literacy, school attendance and parenting support than the 'typical' district. To what extent this is an independent variable, or additional evidence of the district's focus on improvement of the

teaching-learning relationship in the school is unclear. What is clear, however, is that the consistently improving districts put a great deal of effort into building and maintaining partnerships that enhance learning. Swanson and Engert (1995) propose that attention to the health, social and emotional needs of students is a factor in improving student achievement, and suggest that partnerships with other social agencies play a large part in accomplishing this. This also may be a fertile area for further research.

CULTURE

A distinct commonality was evident among the consistently improving districts. There was a strong sense of identification with the jurisdiction as an institution to which one belonged, not merely as an employee, but as a valued participant in the decision-making process and in the achievement of the district's outcomes. Goals were few and expectations clear, and a convergence of activities and language across the district on these goals and expectations was apparent. While effective performance was recognized, there was evidence of consequences for poor performance. People were proud of their association with the jurisdiction, protective of its reputation, and believed that it was a good place in which to work. They felt that their contribution was valued, their opinions respected, leaders listened and encouraged risk-taking, decisions were made collaboratively, transparency was prevalent, accomplishments were celebrated, and communications respectful. Many respondents spoke of feeling empowered by the support they received through the provision of staff development and financial resources for projects. Teacher and principal respondents reflected on activities that brought them together to share experiences and learn from one another, and how those activities built a professional respect among colleagues. They spoke of a 'common language' about instructional issues that built a mutual understanding of issues and concerns across the district. This, too, is prevalent in the literature. Fullan (2001) speaks to the impact of collegiality and caring as of an effective district. Rosenholtz (1989) identifies many of these as characteristics of her concept of 'moving' districts, and Pajak and Glickman (1987) describe the benefits of teachers working together and learning from one another.

This is not to suggest that all employees of the consistently improving districts would fully endorse these descriptions of their district. There was evidence in the course of the study that differences of opinion existed among administrators and teachers regarding issues such as staff development focus, expenditure decisions, and assessment policies and practices, for example. Neither is there a proposition here that all schools in the improving districts are consistently improving, or that all schools in the 'typical' district are failing to do so. There were indications in comments from the board chair and the division leadership that the 'typical' division did indeed contain certain 'lighthouse' schools where many of the characteristics of an environment of improvement were evident. Respondents from the improving districts, however, had a much greater degree of identification with the jurisdiction as a significant influence in their professional practice than was the case in the 'typical' district. In this district, the focus of respondents was, for the most part, on the school as the influential institution and the one to which teachers and principals indicated the greatest degree of attachment.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

As respondents listed factors perceived to have contributed to improvement in student achievement, they were asked to identify the source or initiator of the practice. In virtually every instance, the person identified was either the current or a former superintendent of schools or both. This impact of the superintendent is consistent with much of the literature on leadership. (Hill, Campbell and Harvey, 2002; Johnson, 1996; and Goodman and Zimmermann, 2000). While the superintendents were inclined to be somewhat modest about their contribution to student growth, their administrators and staff were emphatic about their impact on the success of the system. Respondents credited superintendents with a clarity of purpose, a sharp focus on the district's objectives and mission, and an ability to both communicate that vision and support the district staff in their work to achieve it. The principle of subsidiarity was an aspect of leadership style that was also evident across all the study districts. The board of trustees and the superintendent of schools identified the major goals and expectations - generally arising from the goals established by the provincial government - and schools were mandated to develop the specific strategies by which these goals could be accomplished in response to local conditions.

All districts demonstrated a high degree of coherence between the board and the superintendent with respect to philosophy, goals and mission. In the districts evidencing consistent achievement growth, the current superintendent had held the position for at least four years, while in the 'typical' district the superintendent was completing his second year in the position at the time of the study. The consistently improving jurisdictions displayed a synergy of leadership from the board to the superintendent and the district administration to the school principals. There was evidence of considerable involvement of school administration in district-level planning and decision making through the use of collaborative committee structures for program planning, staff development and administrative policy making. School administrators in these districts felt that they had an authentic role to play in the overall growth and success of the district in addition to their school-based responsibility. This system-level involvement was also apparent in the comments of many teachers in these districts, and was expressed as a sense of pride in the district and a high degree of identification with their role in it. In the fifth or 'typical' jurisdiction, the concept of regular meetings of school and district administrators was a recent development, with the result that there was a much lesser degree of district-wide co-ordination of activities. The travel time across such a large jurisdiction was the limitation most often cited.

It was interesting to note that the governance model in one jurisdiction (ECSD) differed considerably from the others in the study. ECSD operates from a governance model which sees the board responsible for policy decisions and the establishment of 'ends' statements, and holds the superintendent of schools fully responsible for all aspects of operations, or the 'means' aspects. While the other boards and superintendents may have felt that they operated out of a somewhat similar model, a more distinct separation of governance and administration was evident in the Edmonton Catholic District. There was no clear evidence in this study to link governance/administration models to improvement in achievement, but the topic may be worthy of future research.

DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

LOCUS OF DECISIONS AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The decision-making model found in these jurisdictions showed a number of similarities and variations. The responsibilities of principals were defined in district policy, but the level of detail regarding these responsibilities varied greatly across districts. There was in all cases a clear alignment that could be traced from the goals of Alberta Learning through the goals and expected outcomes of the district to the school's goals, targets and strategies. The principal was responsible for staffing decisions, but in three of the consistently improving districts there were varying degrees of support and involvement of central office personnel in the selection and evaluation process for new teachers.

School allocations were calculated on a per-student and CEU basis, and in all cases a centrally held instructional 'pool' of funds was set aside to address contingencies. Earmarked funds were directly applied to the programs for which they were intended, and in all cases, special education programs were the only program areas to which additional funds were allocated over and above the provincial grant. All jurisdictions continue to struggle with the concept of equity of funding to meet the diverse needs of schools and programs. Each provided some form of equity funding in special circumstances, although the reasons varied from district to district. The most prevalent recipients of supplementary funding were smaller schools and in one district, schools identified as high-risk, a practice supported by the literature on district-level improvement (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2002; Massell, 2000).

The majority of principals and district administrators in the study felt some degree of frustration with the decision-making model in their districts, although considerably less pronounced in the case of ECSD. In most cases, respondents indicated that they would like to see more emphasis among principals on instructional leadership and a reduction in the amount of administration required to manage the school budget and accounting structure. The quest for an equitable formula for the distribution of instructional funds to schools was an ongoing preoccupation. There was, however, a high level of agreement among principals that the flexibility enabling them to respond to their own school's needs and priorities was highly valued.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The accountability model was similar in all districts, with an annual meeting between the principal and the central office administration to review school plans, results, and operations being the norm. In one district, the principals individually presented their school plans and results to the board of trustees in a closed session. In all districts, the quantitative data for this review included provincial test results, parent and student satisfaction survey results and financial management data. One of the consistently improving districts conducted periodic school reviews during which all aspects of a school's operation were examined by both internal and external evaluation teams and a report produced with both commendations for quality performance and recommendations for improvement.

There appeared to be a much greater sense of responsibility to a system-level expectation or ethic among principals in the four consistently improving districts, whether out of a sense of allegiance, respect for a leader or for the institution, or because poor performance could have significant career-related implications. In the fifth or 'typical' district, the sense of achievement was generally measured against personal, school, or community expectations rather than a system-level standard. Where the system expectations were clear, principals were able to translate these into expectations and targets for staff and students that supported their own personal educational philosophy. Where the system's expectations were less clear, principals whose own educational philosophy was clear and focused were experiencing considerable success in school leadership and student achievement. Results were more mixed in the instances where the school leadership was inclined to be less assertive and informed.

In general, there was a commonly held understanding among principals and district administrators that areas of concern in school achievement and operation would be identified at the system level. In all districts, there would be active discussion between the school and the district administration regarding intervention by way of both support for improvement initiatives and consequences for continued concern. Supervisors and consultants would work closely with a principal whose results were unsatisfactory until such time as those results improved or an alternative administrative assignment was made. There was a high degree of clarity and formality in this understanding among the consistently improving districts. In three of these districts respondents were able to cite situations where, as a result of ongoing concerns about school performance, school administrators had been placed in other assignments.

The concepts of subsidiarity and high expectations for accountability are prevalent in the research. Fullan (2001) speaks to the benefits of setting clear expectations and decentralizing decision making, as does Rosenholtz (1989), while Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy (2002) highlight the impact of clear accountability systems. In the concept of the 'smart' district, both school-based decision making and high levels of accountability for results are considered to be effective contributors to improvement (*School Communities that Work for Results and Equity*, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2002).

DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS

The research is quite insistent regarding the value of data-driven decision making as a motivator for improvement in district-wide student achievement. It is emphasized in the study of four large urban districts by Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy (2002), as well as by Massell (2000) and many others. As a result of the provincial accountability framework, all of the districts in this study had relatively similar practices in place for the analysis of the data from the Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) and the Provincial Diploma Examinations (PDE). Results were downloaded from the province and analyzed by a central office official. School results were made available to schools, who were required to do a similar analysis and report results to parents and the community through the school council. Areas of concern were identified and the expectation in all districts was that the school would take steps to address these with dispatch. The areas of concern and the strategies

to deal with them were expected to appear in the next round of the school's planning and reporting cycle and became an agenda item for future discussion between the principal and the superintendent. Respondents at all levels and in all districts were able to identify areas of curriculum that had received special attention because of lower than expected results on these tests, with elementary language arts and junior high mathematics mentioned most often.

Attention to the results and their analysis varied somewhat among districts. In the consistently improving districts, generally a district administrator made a point of providing workshops to schools to clarify and enhance the understanding of staff about the various aspects of the assessments and the meaning of the results. In some instances the district office provided an analysis template to assist schools in the identification of strengths and areas of concern. Examination of the five-year trend data was also an important aspect of the district analysis of school results. The district's attention and follow-up to the results had the effect of raising the level of concern among school-based staff for improvement in the results over time despite a certain level of antipathy among teachers for the provincial testing program in general.

There was evidence across all districts that a high percentage of teachers did not support the concept of the PAT. When pressed for reasons, the most frequently cited were the one-time nature of the assessment, the perceived unfairness of the test for certain groups of students, such as students with any type of reading difficulty and students in combined classes, and the publication of the results. This antipathy caused many teachers to discount the value of the results as indicators of genuine improvement in academic achievement. Most school and jurisdiction administrators, on the other hand, felt that, while the tests were not the solution to all of their assessment needs, the results were an important indicator of student and school success. While these administrators were concerned about the annual results, they were much more likely to make plans and decisions based on the long-term trends in the results, supplemented by concurrent information regarding implementation of new curriculum, acquisition of new resources, teacher development, socio-economic data and other similar factors.

With the exception of one of the consistently improving districts, no formal district-wide assessment program other than the provincial program was found. In ECSD, a cognitive ability test was administered to all students in the PAT grades and a regression analysis conducted comparing these results with those of the provincial assessments. This allowed schools and teachers to evaluate their results against their students' potential rather than against a provincial standard that was perceived to be less relevant to their individual school circumstances. There appeared to be a much higher degree of acceptance and support for the provincial assessment program among teachers in this district. There were plans in place in this jurisdiction to implement further district-wide locally developed diagnostic testing at different grade levels in the near future.

An observation from the discussion regarding the analysis of the provincial assessment results by the other districts was that the general benchmark of satisfaction for virtually all respondents was the provincial average performance score. The success of a district, school, or a class was determined by the comparison with the provincial results. Interestingly, the education plans of these districts

often contained achievement targets that were different from the provincial expectation, but in discussion with respondents, few were aware of these targets and the extent to which their school or district achieved them.

PLANNING AND CURRICULUM COORDINATION

One of the pervasive elements of the instructional organization in all five districts was a well-aligned planning model reflecting the framework mandated by Alberta Learning. The template for education plans for all jurisdictions is based on the provincial government's business plan and includes both mandatory goals and measures and areas where the goals and measures are at the discretion of the district. In all cases, the districts examined used a consultative model to solicit input from various stakeholders into the district's plan.

Based on the jurisdiction plan, schools in all five districts were expected to develop school-based education plans in a consultative manner. Most teachers interviewed were satisfied that they had sufficient input into the development of this plan. In all districts, the school plans were submitted to the superintendent or another district official for review. In one case, principals were required to present their education plans to a committee meeting of the board of trustees for a dialogue about the school's operation and performance, a dialogue which appears to be thought very valuable for the trustees. Strategies by which the school plans were checked against district expectations and feedback provided to the principals varied across districts. The use of templates for school documents was perceived to be effective by three of the five jurisdictions.

A great deal of credit was assigned by many respondents to the AISI program for improvement in student achievement. The program's benefits were perceived to be two-fold. It focused attention on areas of need and concern such as literacy, early intervention, numeracy, secondary mathematics and high school completion, and it provided funding for teacher professional development targeted to these areas. The vast majority of the funding in all five districts was directed to work at the primary grades in literacy and numeracy development, a concept that is consistent with propositions by Massell (2000) and Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy (2002). Teacher capacity was built through the development of research-based instructional strategies and resources in an action research environment. Teacher enthusiasm was created and maintained by such factors as the evident success of student learning and the positive feedback that arose from the action research process. In all but one of the consistently improving districts there was a high degree of central co-ordination of the selection and implementation of AISI projects in the first three-year cycle from 2000 to 2003. Criteria were established for project submission and approval, and a district-level administrator was responsible for coordinating and monitoring the projects. For the second round commencing in the Fall of 2003, all districts have implemented a greater degree of central co-ordination of project selection and approval and all have now implemented a process of central monitoring and co-ordination.

STAFFING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As in the previous chapters, this section deals with staffing profiles, new teacher orientation and evaluation and staff development. It also includes some discussion of respondents' views about what motivated them to improve.

STAFF DEMOGRAPHICS

Tables 9.1 and 9.2 show teacher education and experience levels in the five districts. No attempt was made to develop any statistical relationship between the data presented below and any aspect of student achievement. What the data do indicate, however, is that while differences exist across jurisdictions in certain categories of education and experience, there does not appear to be any pattern common to the four consistently improving districts or indeed any contrast with the 'typical' district.

Table 9.1 Education Levels

Highest Level Completed	Prov.	CESD	HRD	ECSD	PHRD	NGRD
Bachelor of Education	53.06%	59%	51%	57%	67%	66%
Bachelor of Education and Other	25.27%	23%	26%	22%	15%	16%
Bachelor Degree not in Education	8.08%	9%	9%	6%	7%	6%
Total Bachelor Degrees	86.41%	91%	86%	85%	89%	88%
Master of Education	8.06%	6%	8%	11%	7%	8%
Master of Education and Other	0.13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Master's Degree Not in Education	3.74%	1%	3%	3%	2%	1%
PhD	0.62%	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%
Total Post-Graduate	12.55%	7%	12%	15%	9%	10%
Education Not Reported	1.05%	2%	3%	0%	1%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

***Note: Some discrepancies may exist in totals due to rounding.*

Table 9.2 Experience

Total Years of Experience	CESD	HRD	ECSD	PHRD	NGRD
< 5	13.7%	25.7%	12.6%	13.7%	16.4%
5-9	18.0%	22.1%	14.5%	12.9%	17.2%
Total <10	31.7%	47.8%	27.1%	26.6%	33.6%
10-14	18.9%	13.7%	18.4%	15.5%	18.5%
15-19	14.2%	12.8%	12.5%	14.5%	15.3%
20-24	15.2%	12.8%	14.6%	15.5%	14.8%
25-29	12.2%	8.8%	14.5%	14.0%	9.7%
>29	6.3%	4.0%	12.2%	12.4%	5.9%
Total >10	66.8%	52.1%	72.2%	71.9%	64.2%
not reported	1.6%	0.0%	0.7%	1.5%	2.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

***Note: Some discrepancies may exist in totals due to rounding.*

The Edmonton Catholic District has the highest percentage of teachers with post-graduate degrees (15%), and also leads the field in the percentage of teachers with ten or more years of service - teachers at the top of the pay scale (72.2%). There does not appear to be any similar discernible pattern among the other districts. Horizon School Division has the lowest percentage of teachers at ten or more years of service (52.1%), but is second highest in the percentage of teachers with post-graduate degrees (12%). Chinook's Edge Division has the lowest percentage of teachers with advanced degrees (7%) and is in the middle of the group for teachers with over ten years of experience (66.8%).

NEW TEACHER ORIENTATION AND EVALUATION

All districts had some arrangement in place for the orientation of new teachers to the district's expectations and philosophy. These strategies included a structured induction program offered before the beginning of the school term, generally followed by occasional workshop sessions throughout the first year of employment. This was enhanced by a mentorship program pairing new teachers with more senior ones for consultation and support throughout the first year. One of the improving jurisdictions, CESD, assigned significant resources to this program and provided a stipend to new teachers to attend a week-long program in August followed by monthly workshops during the first year. This was further reinforced by the provision of paid mentors, selected from the ranks of retired teachers, to work closely with the new teachers throughout the year and ensure their success. In the other districts, the August program consisted of periods of two days to a week and mentors were provided from current staff who were generally busy with their own assignments, resulting in limited contact time with the new teacher.

Three of the four consistently improving districts assigned the evaluation of newly-hired teachers to a central office administrator, generally in conjunction with the principal of the school. It was felt by these districts that a more centralized evaluation process was less threatening to school collegiality, more objective, and more consistent across the district irrespective of school placement. In the other two districts, the evaluation process was conducted by the principal or a designate and the eventual employment decision was made as a recommendation to the superintendent of schools.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The factor identified by a considerable majority of respondents at all levels of the districts as making the most significant contribution to improvement of results was staff development. Teachers and administrators alike credited their district for organizing development programs and opportunities that heightened understanding of the teaching-learning process among teachers, thereby improving student achievement. This emphasis on professional development for teachers is reflected in virtually all of the research on district-level progress.

All districts had system-level consultants and administrators whose responsibility was to lead and administer the district's staff development program. Without exception, these individuals

demonstrated an extraordinary level of energy and passion for teacher growth and development. What varied from district to district was the extent to which this was supported and affirmed by the district leadership through policy and the allocation of resources. There was evidence of an ongoing formal program of principal development in three of the improving districts, with varying degrees of investment of time and resources. In the two remaining districts, leadership development for current principals was largely left to the individual. All five jurisdictions conduct leadership development programs for teachers who aspire to administrative roles. In the improving districts generally, there was evidence of considerable involvement of school administration in district-level planning and decision making through the use of collaborative committee structures for program planning, staff development and administrative policy making. School administrators in these districts felt that they had an authentic role to play in the overall growth and success of the district in addition to their school-based responsibility. In the case of the typical district this was a recent development. Budget allocations for staff development varied considerably as indicated in the tables provided in the jurisdiction profiles and summarized in Table 9.4.

A number of similarities were evident in the staff development models employed in the successful districts. While more traditional models consist of one-shot workshops on topics of general interest for groups of teachers, supplemented by support for attendance at out-of-system workshops of personal interest, the consistently improving districts for the most part had adopted a staff development model organized around a comprehensive set of program priorities identified by district needs and goals. These priorities included many subject areas, special education programs, strengthening literacy and numeracy instruction, and early reading intervention. Training programs were research-based and embedded in the curriculum and in the day-to-day practice of participants. They were delivered over a series of sessions with the expectation that participants would return to their classrooms to implement their learning and come to the next workshop prepared to share their experiences and learn from one another. New skills and knowledge were often shared with colleagues at the school. The benefits of these strategies that make provision for shared expertise and learning are a persistent element in the research on improvement. Fullan (2001) includes the concepts of shared expertise as the driver of instructional change and the fact that good ideas come from talented people working together among his 'organizing principles' for instructional improvement.

An additional benefit of this model described by many teachers and school administrators was the development of a common language in the district around instruction, learning, assessment and curriculum. This universal understanding of concepts among parents, students, teachers and administrators built an environment of mutual respect and credibility in the system. Numerous school administrators and teachers referred to the increased prevalence of professional conversations among teachers in the staff room, a phenomenon that previously did not exist.

Another factor that appeared to set the consistently improving districts apart was the extent to which teachers were supported and encouraged by system-level personnel and practices in their efforts to improve their own professional practice and share their experiences with their colleagues. In these districts, teachers were provided with system-level organization, resources and opportunities

to work collaboratively within and across schools to increase student success. These events included grade-level or subject-level meetings, where teachers from different schools were able to meet and develop common instructional materials and resources, share successful instructional strategies and build assessment instruments such as common course final examinations. In these circumstances, teachers felt that their efforts were recognized and respected at a jurisdiction level. This recognition contributed to numerous statements from teachers indicating identification with the district as an institution and a sense of responsibility for the success of its goals. In three of the four consistently improving districts, the school calendar was modified to provide time free from instruction in the school day so that teachers could participate in development, planning, and coordination activities.

The selection and organization of the staff development program in schools was the responsibility of the principal, but in many instances this was delegated to a staff committee. In three of the five jurisdictions, school representatives sat on a district staff development committee where decisions regarding program priorities for the district were discussed and determined. In one of the consistently improving districts, school administrators were encouraged to participate in curriculum and instruction-related workshops. In another, each school in the district was required to send a team of teachers including the school administrator to a series of monthly workshops on assessment for learning and share its learning with the other members of the school staff. In all districts, individual staff members had access to school-based funds to pursue areas of interest not included in the school or district staff development programs.

The Alberta Teachers' Association locals in all jurisdictions provided financial support for teacher professional development. This support took the form of direct grants to teachers for conference attendance or contributions to a joint district/local PD fund that was used for a district-wide inservice activity or directed to schools to be administered by a teacher committee. Table 9.3 indicates the annual allocation to teacher professional development by the ATA locals in each jurisdiction. There does not appear to be a distinct relationship between the provision of this support and district-wide improvement in achievement.

Table 9.3 ATA Local Staff Development Funding Allocations

	CESD	HRD	ECSD	PHRD	NGRD
Total \$\$ per teacher to Staff Development	\$45	\$40	\$75	\$70	\$110

Table 9.4 summarizes the allocations to staff development activities by schools, the jurisdiction and the ATA local in the five jurisdictions. These allocations generally include all costs associated with staff development other than salaries and benefits for jurisdiction-level staff. The details as made available by the district financial administrators and ATA local officials are provided in the individual jurisdiction profiles. The reader is cautioned that it is not appropriate to use these numbers as anything other than a rough guide to expenditures on staff development. There are considerable differences in accounting and reporting procedures from jurisdiction to jurisdiction

and it is virtually impossible to make direct comparisons under these circumstances. In NGRD, in particular, while schools do set aside allocations for staff development, no data are collected centrally on school-based expenditures, so these are not included in the total provided.

Table 9.4 Total Staff Development Funding Allocations

	CESD	HRD	ECSD	PHRD	NGRD*
Total \$\$ per teacher to Staff Development	\$1217	\$570	\$1387	\$707	\$254*

*Note: No data collected centrally on school-based expenditures in NGRD.

The Edmonton Catholic District, the jurisdiction with the highest percentage of teachers with advanced degrees and the highest percentage of teachers at the top of the pay scale, is also the district that is recorded as making the largest investment in teacher professional development.

MOTIVATION TO IMPROVE

For the most part, the primary motivator for the study respondents was their professional responsibility to provide the best learning environment for every student, and to ensure that their professional skills and knowledge were the most current and effective. The provincial test results were also a strong motivator, at least to the extent that students achieved at or above the average range. School-based respondents in the improving districts felt a strong responsibility to the district leadership for the success of the district overall, and the public perception that it communicated. In communities in which another system operated similar schools, school-based respondents were conscious of the level of achievement of the other schools and the comparisons that might be made in the community between systems. Parents were generally not seen as imposing any consistent degree of press on schools or teachers to improve achievement, and in most cases responded to surveys with high rates of satisfaction with the education that their children were receiving. Respondents felt that this indicated that parental satisfaction with schools was based on a range of criteria and not exclusively on academic achievement. Teachers and principals indicated that expectations of parents in the higher socio-economic areas of the districts were often more evident than those in other areas. The vast majority of respondents expressed a high level of antipathy towards the practice of the publication of the school's rating in the local and provincial press on the basis of test results.

SUMMARY

These five Alberta school districts have much in common in their structures and operations. It is clear, however, that practice in the four consistently improving districts differs in some respects from practice in the 'typical' district.

All districts had well developed 'vision' or foundational statements which gave high priority to student learning and growth. What distinguished the consistently improving districts was the extent to which the vision was sharply focused, promulgated to and internalized at all levels of the system.

Respondents in the 'typical' district, showed more uncertainty and a wider range of responses to the question which asked about board and superintendent focus and priority than did those in the other four districts. Consistently improving districts had developed links with more community partners and agencies than had the 'typical' district. They were also different in their ethos or culture. Respondents in these districts had a strong sense of identification with the jurisdiction as an institution to which they belonged. They felt they were valued participants in the decision-making process and in the achievement of the district's outcomes.

The leadership of the superintendent was acknowledged in all five districts as being extremely important. In all districts there was strong coherence between the board and the superintendent with respect to philosophy, goals and mission. The principle of subsidiarity was an aspect of leadership evident across all the districts. The board and the superintendent identified the major goals and expectations, and schools were clearly given the responsibility for developing the specific strategies by which these goals could be accomplished in their local circumstances. In the consistently improving districts not only was this chain of connectivity very evident, but there was also considerable involvement of school administrators in district-level planning and decision making. School administrators saw themselves as playing an authentic role in the overall growth and success of the district, and not merely in their own schools. This system-level involvement appeared also among many teachers in these districts. It was expressed as a sense of pride in the district and with their role in it.

The school-based decision making model was common to all districts. The responsibilities of principals were defined in district policy, but the level of detail regarding these responsibilities varied greatly across districts, as did the provisions for involvement and support given by district administrators. These variations did not distinguish between consistently improving and 'typical' districts. There was little variation in the methods used for the allocation of resources. Some form of equity funding for special circumstances was found in all districts, although the definition of special circumstances varied. In all districts, the majority of principals and district administrators reported some frustration with the decision-making model although this was considerably less pronounced in the case of the Edmonton Catholic District. A common view was that what was wanted was more emphasis among principals on instructional leadership and a reduction in the amount of administration required to manage the school budget and accounting structure. These concerns continue to be explored by all jurisdictions. Nevertheless, there was strong agreement among principals that they valued the flexibility which enabled them to respond to the needs and priorities of their own schools.

Because of the provincial framework, all districts had a similar accountability model. There was a common understanding among both school and district administrators that it was at the district level that areas of concern in school achievement and operation would be identified. In the consistently improving districts, this understanding had a degree of clarity and a formality that was not found in the 'typical' district. The principals in the four consistently improving districts evidenced a sense of always measuring their own success in terms of system level expectations. In the 'typical' district, principals seemed more likely to use personal or school expectations as their

yardstick. Data-driven decision making was the norm in all five districts, but in the improving districts there was a greater emphasis on improving assessment literacy among school staffs.

All districts used a well-aligned planning model based on the framework required by Alberta Learning. All five districts also used a consultative process to solicit input into the district's plan from various stakeholders. With respect to school level plans, the manner in which they were checked against the district expectations and the way in which feedback was provided to the principals varied from district to district, but appeared to be more structured and detailed among the consistently improving districts. In all but one of the consistently improving districts, there was a high degree of central coordination of the selection and implementation of AISI projects.

There are variations across the five districts in the levels of their professional staff's education and experience. These differences, however, do not appear to distinguish between the 'typical' and the consistently improving districts. Similarly, all districts have developed structured programs for the orientation of new teachers and, while these programs have varying features, their differences do not seem to be associated with whether or not one is in a consistently improving district. Chinook's Edge Division has made a considerable investment in ensuring that the orientation program and the subsequent mentoring of new teachers is the most effective possible by compensating teachers and mentors for the time involved and selecting mentors who do not have full-time teaching responsibilities.

Staff development was the aspect of district operation identified by a majority of respondents as the most important contributor to improvement of achievement results. All districts had system-level consultants and administrators assigned to lead and administer the staff development program, although the extent to which resources were allocated to this function varied. In addition, it was evident that in all of the improving districts, the emphasis on staff development by senior administration and the level of expectation from them that teachers and administrators would participate was considerably higher than in the typical district. Another difference that did appear with respect to teaching staffs — school-based respondents in the consistently improving districts felt a strong responsibility to the district leadership for the success of the district overall. The most consistent difference between the improving districts and the typical district was their success in implementing a curriculum-based, collaboratively developed, and instruction-embedded model of staff development. Teachers met regularly over a period of time in a facilitated setting, developed strategies in planning, instruction or assessment, returned to their classrooms to implement these strategies and reassembled with their workshop counterparts to evaluate their success and plan anew. In two of these districts school administrators were encouraged or required to attend these instructional development sessions.

In summary, while all five districts share many of the key success factors identified in the research, the analysis does show differences between consistently improving districts and the 'typical' district. These differences are evident in the extent to which their vision is promulgated and known at all levels, in their overall culture and their involvement with other community agencies, and in the degree and kind of involvement of principals in district decision making. There are contrasts also

in the clarity and formality of accountability processes, in the pervasiveness of district-level expectations, in the degree to which assessment literacy is inculcated, in the level of central involvement in curriculum planning and in the staff's sense of allegiance to district, as distinct from school expectations. The most apparent contrast is in the manner in which the function of staff development is co-ordinated, planned, funded and implemented.

This analysis permits a number of conclusions to be drawn and a number of recommendations for policy and research to be made. These conclusions and recommendations are the subject of the next chapter.

10 Conclusions

In a descriptive study of this nature the identification of definitive cause and effect factors is somewhat improbable. Practically all respondents spoke from a highly personal perspective of student achievement and reflected various aspects of jurisdiction operation and culture that were important or influential for them. The provincial context establishes an overall philosophy and historical perspective that pervades all social institutions including its school districts and thereby exerts an influence on their outcomes. There is, however, a preponderance of opinion and observation among the responses and documentary evidence that suggests that there are key factors at the jurisdiction level that can create an environment in which system-wide improvement in student achievement can be accomplished.

In proposing a synthesis of the findings in Chapter 9, it is essential to note that none of the key success factors was equally evident among all of the improving districts or entirely absent from the ‘typical’ district. What was most apparent was the unique manner in which the mix of factors was applied in the different jurisdictions, generally in response to local needs or perspectives, in achieving gains in student achievement.

As a strategy to illustrate the key factors in quality district performance, the following rubric for districts wishing to influence the success of student academic achievement is proposed. The rubric consists of a description of a ‘model’ district which incorporates the various elements suggested by the study as making a substantial contribution to student success. While many of the principles upon which the model is constructed may be somewhat self-evident, their impact in the studied districts warrants their inclusion. In today’s educational context where “improvement is not an option”, readers are encouraged to compare and contrast the practices in their own experience with those of the research.

THE MODEL DISTRICT

A school district which produces steady district-wide achievement gains year after year will likely include the following features:

PURPOSE AND PASSION

District governance and leadership demonstrate a powerful concentration of purpose directed towards the improvement of student achievement. This purpose is effectively and persistently communicated at every opportunity and to all stakeholders. It is evident in all aspects of the

jurisdiction's operation, including those areas of operation that may be considered to be only indirectly related to instruction, such as finance, facilities and transportation. There is also at some level of the senior leadership at least one key individual with a passion for learning, improvement and growth, whose energy and enthusiasm provides the inspiration and impetus for the district's vision.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

The district recognizes and validates leadership at all levels of the organization. A collaborative culture exists, where the collective wisdom of the organization can be brought to bear on issues both in schools and at the district level. District staff members feel a sense of pride and ownership in collective district outcomes. There are effective communication linkages throughout the organization. Decision making is based on the principles of subsidiarity and accountability, performance criteria and measures are transparent, and there are both celebrations of success and consequences for inadequate performance. This leadership extends to the community where partnership services are enlisted in support of the social, emotional and physical needs of students.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The district, in its goal of building school capacity, directs significant efforts and resources to focused, curriculum-embedded teacher development that is well-grounded in current research on teaching and learning. Improvement in student achievement is accomplished by ensuring that teachers are highly skilled and committed to the goals of student learning and their own professional development and growth. Teachers feel that their work is validated, that their challenges are understood, and that their ideas for instructional improvement are seriously considered. They are given regular opportunities to work collaboratively on group projects and undertake action research. There is a common understanding of the language of the profession. The orientation and induction needs of teachers new to the district are recognized through the provision of well-funded and effective support services and programs.

SCHOOL-BASED LEADERSHIP

Principals are first and foremost the instructional leaders at their schools. They challenge and motivate the members of the school community towards a vision that is pre-occupied with student growth and achievement. They are conversant with curriculum issues at all grades and in all subjects in the school. They participate in staff development with teachers. They are regularly present at classroom activities, participate in curriculum projects and celebrate student and school achievement. There are strategies in place to relieve principals of the minutiae of accounting and record-keeping. Principals are involved in a coherent, well-planned, district-wide program of leadership development activities and are encouraged to continue in formal study. They also feel that they are appropriately involved in the decisions of the district overall. Programs are in place to build capacity in teachers who wish to develop their leadership skills and a structured leadership succession plan is in place.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS

The district recognizes that an action research model is essential to systematic and consistent improvement. Program planning is clearly aligned with provincial and district goals. The cycle of assessment, analysis, planning, implementation, and monitoring of outcomes is evident throughout the district. Data from multiple sources are routinely considered, disaggregated, and analyzed for their implications for instructional practice and the allocation of resources. There is a structured program to build assessment literacy among all members of the district community, and as a consequence staff members approach the consideration of assessment results from a collaborative, reflective perspective. Teams of teachers and administrators, both within and across schools, regularly work together to identify strengths and areas of concern and develop plans and strategies to address them.

ETHOS

Members of the district community have a strong sense of the mission and goals of the district and their role in achieving them. Student learning and well-being are at the core of all decisions. Expectations are high and well communicated. Accountability is clear, but practiced in an environment that seeks success through support and collaboration. There is a sense of trust and respect among individuals and functions across the organization. Collaboration, risk-taking and questioning are encouraged and supported. People perceive and expect a high degree of professional behaviour from themselves and their colleagues across the district. There is evidence of strong identity with and pride in the district entity.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of this study point to the need for additional research on district-level effects on achievement. Examples of areas in which further exploration might provide valuable guidance for districts and decision makers include the following:

1. The study had no information about districts that either failed to show any improvement or whose relative performance declined over time. It would be useful if a study could be designed to explore the dynamics in these districts in contrast with those showing consistent progress.
2. Governments have tended to merge school districts in the quest for administrative savings. The considerable impact of travel time and distance in the 'typical' district in this study appears to mitigate against effective outcomes. It would be instructive to determine if this factor was in play in other similar jurisdictions.
3. The report identifies the Edmonton Catholic District as having the governance model which most clearly distinguishes between ends and means. Given the prevalence of literature on board governance that advocates this separation, it could be instructive to examine if this governance model exerts an influence on student achievement.

4. The sample in the present study included no districts over 31,000 students. Given the importance found in this study of vision dissemination, 'buy-in', and district-wide collaborative structures to create a district identity, the question arises of how feasible it is to produce this degree of cohesiveness in the largest of school districts.
5. The Alberta context was a constant in this study, and certain provincial imperatives determined to some extent how districts operate. It might be useful to examine the impact of provincial frameworks on district performance by broadening the study to compare similar districts from other provinces.
6. There is evidence in the data that the improving districts reported a wider range of community partnerships in providing health, emotional and social support for students than did the 'typical' district. Further exploration of such support as it might relate to student achievement would be helpful to practitioners.

POLICY RAMIFICATIONS

While it is very likely that the factors identified in this study can be found to some degree in most school jurisdictions, and much more remains to be done to isolate and definitively measure the characteristics that distinguish high-performing districts, the following broad observations are recommended to decision makers for action:

1. Quality district performance relies heavily on the leadership skills of the superintendent. This suggests large dividends will accrue from a coordinated and deliberate provincial investment in the further education and leadership development of superintendents as a large-scale improvement strategy.
2. While the superintendent is credited with being the most important influence in creating a productive climate, the successful districts in the study also showed the importance of strong leadership by the board. Elected trustees may or may not come to the task with the necessary knowledge base to demonstrate this leadership with respect to student achievement. Trustee associations might wish to evaluate their development programs in the light of the influence of board chairs in particular, especially in areas of vision and communication.
3. All professional development programs are not equal. Investment in effective staff development programs grounded in research will maximize student and staff learning. The most effective program will founder without the vision and passion of a leader at the district level who is truly committed to lifelong learning and capacity building for all stakeholders.
4. Given the importance of quality instruction and the apparent impact of appropriately delivered staff development programs as a factor in producing achievement gains, it may be valuable to review the adequacy of teacher pre-service preparation programs.

5. Assessment literacy is uneven across most districts. Focused efforts to increase comfort levels with assessment data at the school and classroom level will increase the system's capacity to use this information to improve teaching and learning.
6. AISI or similar action research initiatives generate collective teacher learning to leverage student success. District and provincial support for site-based research focused on identified areas of need will pay important dividends in large-scale improvement.

This study set out to determine if there were aspects of school district strategy or practice that could support and enhance the work of schools, principals and teachers in more effectively achieving the goal of growth in student academic achievement. There is persuasive evidence in this study that districts can and do have such influence. In the pursuit of excellence it is essential that the work of clarifying and further defining that influence should continue.

Appendix A

District Improvement Index

Table A.1 shows the final calculation of the district improvement scores using the method described in Chapter 3. The lower the score, the greater the gain in achievement from 1998-2002. The index represents the distribution of aggregate gains scores across 56 Alberta jurisdictions. The numbers shown in the 'Jurisdiction' column are not in any way related to the official division or district numbering system in the province.

Table A.1 District Improvement Index

Jurisdiction	Score	Jurisdiction	Score
1	226	29	508
2	287	30	520
3	299	31	521
4	307	32	530
5	308	33	535
6	337	34	540
7	339	35	542
8	354	36	557
9	366	37	564
10	366	38	565
11	383	39	606
12	384	40	607
13	385	41	618
14	410	42	623
15	415	43	630
16	424	44	634
17	427	45	640
18	442	46	642
19	448	47	649
20	449	48	655
21	450	49	661
22	463	50	665
23	476	51	682
24	476	52	697
25	484	53	723
26	484	54	723
27	499	55	758
28	506	56	813

Appendix B

Data Sources by Jurisdiction

Horizon School Division

Individuals	Trustee and former Chair of the Board of Trustees Superintendent of Schools Deputy Superintendent of Schools Secretary-Treasurer Director of Technology Director of Student Services President of the ATA Local
Focus Groups	14 school administrators in 3 groups 13 teachers in 3 groups
School Councils	5 representatives
On Line Survey	116 respondents
Documents	District Education Plans 1999/2000 through 2002/2003 Education Results Reports 1999/2000 through 2001/2002 Administrators' Association meeting minutes 2000/2002 Board Minutes 1999/2000 through 2001/2002

Pembina Hills Regional Division

Individuals	Chair of the Board of Trustees Superintendent of Schools Associate Superintendent of Operations Associate Superintendent of Student Services Secretary-Treasurer Director of Curriculum and Instruction Principal-at-Large President of the ATA Local
Focus Groups	10 school administrators in three groups 16 teachers in three groups
School Councils	5 representatives
On Line Survey	Too limited to provide meaningful data.
Documents	District Education Plans 1998/1999 through 2002/2003 Education Results Reports 1999/2000 through 2001/2002 Board Minutes 1998 - 2002

Chinook's Edge School Division

Individuals	Chair of the Board of Trustees Superintendent of Schools Deputy Superintendent of Schools Two Assistant Superintendents Corporate Secretary Treasurer Director of Technology Services Director of Special Education Director of Curriculum and Instruction President of the ATA Local
Focus Groups	12 school administrators in 3 groups 17 teachers in 3 groups
School Councils	6 representatives
On Line Survey	Too limited to provide meaningful data.
Documents	Three Year Education Plans - 199/1997 through 2002/2003 Education Results Reports - 1998/1999 through 2002/2003 Board Minutes - 1998 through 2000 Board Education Committee Minutes - 1998 through 2002

Edmonton Catholic School District

Individuals	The Board Chair Superintendent of Schools Assistant Superintendent - Leadership Services Treasurer Director- Human Resources Services Director - Educational and Administrative Technology Services Director - Educational Planning and Administrative Services Director - Learning Support Services Director - Religious Education Services 2 District Principals - School Operations Services District Principal - Instructional Leadership and Learning Support Services 4 Subject Area Consultants - Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies AISI Co-ordinator 2 Measurement Specialists ATA Local President
Focus Groups	22 principals in 3 focus groups 36 teachers in 3 focus groups
School Councils	5 representatives
On Line Survey	50 respondents
Documents	Common Essential Learning Outcomes District Education Plans 1998/1999 through 2002/2003 Education Results Reports 1998/1999 through 2001/2002 Department Annual Reports 2002 District Budget Process Manual, 2003 Superintendent's Goals and Priorities, 2003

Northern Gateway Regional Division

Individuals	The Chair of the Board of Trustees The Superintendent of Schools Deputy Superintendent The Secretary-Treasurer Director of Instructional Services Co-ordinator of Staff Development Co-ordinator of Special Education Co-ordinator of Special Initiatives The President of the ATA Local
Focus Groups	9 school administrators in three focus groups 16 teachers in three focus groups
School Councils	5 representatives
On Line Survey	Too limited to provide meaningful data
Documents	Division Education Plans 1998/1999 through 2002/2003 Education Results Reports 1998/1999 through 2001/2002 Board Minutes 1998 - 2002 AISI proposals 2000-2003

Appendix C

Interview Questions

The interviews were not tightly structured, and were guided to a large extent by the specific issues that the respondent felt were important to the topic. The following questions were addressed in the individual interviews and focus groups. School council representatives were asked a subset of these questions:

What aspects of the district's practice, policy or strategy were perceived by the respondent to result in improved student achievement?

Why did the respondent select these aspects?

What was the motivation or the driver that caused these practices to exist and persist?

What were some of the priorities of the board of trustees?

How would one be aware of these?

What were some of the priorities of the division leadership and administration?

How would one be aware of these?

What was the influence of the board on student achievement?

What was the influence of the superintendent of schools?

What was the respondent's view of the decision making model in place in the district?

What was the respondent's view of the planning process?

What was the accountability structure for principals? For teachers?

What were the practices for introducing new teachers to the jurisdiction?

How were teachers and principals evaluated?

What was the influence of parents on student achievement?

What were the priorities and features of the staff development program in the district for teachers? For administrators? How were these programs funded?

What community partnerships were in place?

How would the respondent compare the practices in this jurisdiction with any other they might have worked in?

What advice would the respondent give to other districts that might wish to improve their student achievement results?

Appendix D

Online Survey

The online survey was administered to all staff of each jurisdiction. Staff members could access the questions by going to a unique URL for each jurisdiction. Information regarding the survey was circulated to staff through the jurisdiction's internal e-mail over the signature of the superintendent of schools. The survey responses were anonymous and confidential. Claros Research Corporation conducted the survey and reported the results. The covering memos and the questions follow.

Introductory Message

Our school district is currently involved in a study being conducted by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (www.saeec.ca). The study is looking at the district-level factors that could possibly lead to improvement in student academic success. Mr. Patrick Maguire has been employed by the Society to conduct the study.

As part of the study, Mr. Maguire wishes to invite all district employees to participate in a very brief survey on the study topic. The survey questions can be found at [internet link]. Please be assured that this survey is completely at arms-length from the district and, other than to provide this memo in support of the project, the district will have no further contact with the survey, the results, or information about any individual's responses.

We are very pleased to have been selected to participate in this study. I would personally recommend that you consider participating in the survey. Signed: Superintendent of Schools

About the Survey:

Thank you for taking the time to assist us in this survey. Please be assured of the following:

- The survey is completely anonymous.
- There is no record of your e-mail address.
- At no time will you be asked to divulge personal details.
- Your comments and responses will be held in complete confidence.
- Your district is not involved in any way other than to assist us by distributing the covering message which contained the link to this survey.
- The compiled results of this survey from all jurisdictions in the study will be contained in the final report of the study.

Please address any questions or concerns about the survey to Patrick Maguire at maguirep@telus.net. The survey will be available at this link until 4:00 p.m. Monday, June 30, 2003. Your assistance is sincerely appreciated. Signed: Patrick Maguire

Survey Questions:

1. What is your primary role in the district?
 - teacher
 - classroom-based support staff
 - other school support staff
 - school-level administrator
 - district-level administrator or consultant
 - district-level support staff
 - other (please describe)
2. Briefly indicate your district's policies, practices, or strategies that you believe might be responsible for improving student academic achievement? Briefly outline up to five. List as many as you wish.
3. From the list that you provided in the previous question, select choose the three that you believe have had the greatest impact on the improvement in student achievement and list them in order of their impact - 1 being greatest impact.
4. Why do you believe that your first choice from the previous question has the greatest impact on improving student achievement?
5. Have you worked in another school jurisdiction before joining this one? If 'Yes', please proceed to question # 6. If 'No', please skip question 6.
6. If you think about what your district does to improve student achievement, what would you say are some of the differences between this district and the one in which you were last employed?
7. What would be the most effective policy, practice or strategy that your district could implement to improve student academic achievement still further?

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Patrick Maguire

District Practices and Student Achievement

Lessons from Alberta

How do district practices influence student achievement? This study of five Alberta school jurisdictions is one of the first in Canada to examine the effects of central office on student performance. The research conducted by Patrick Maguire was designed to identify district-level practices associated with improved academic performance, based on data from provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations over the past five years. Analysis of interview data gathered in the 2002-03 school year from trustees, senior administration, principals, teachers, and school councils offers valuable insights into leadership and management practices that appear to positively affect student performance across the district.

Patrick Maguire received his teacher education at St. Patrick's Teacher's College in Dublin, Ireland. After seven years as a teacher and principal in Ireland, he moved to Alberta and joined Northland School Division. He has served in five school jurisdictions in Alberta as teacher, principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent of schools. He currently provides consulting support in organizational development to the not-for-profit sector, and is pleased to count many Alberta school jurisdictions as clients.

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