in conversation

Evolving perspectives: leaders and leadership

An interview with Ken Leithwood

One of the commitments we have all made as educational leaders – myself included – is to continually develop our own individual leadership expertise and refine our daily practice. In the midst of this hard work, what we may lose sight of is the transformation we are achieving collectively across the province. While leadership at the school level continues to evolve, we are also now seeing the fruits of the system-wide alignment that is so important to supporting school leaders, and to maintaining a truly coherent, province-wide focus on student achievement and well-being.

With that broad perspective in mind, we launch the winter 2010 issue of *In Conversation* with Ken Leithwood to gain his insights on the major leadership currents.

As one of the world's most widely recognized thought leaders in the field of educational leadership, Ken requires little by way of introduction. He has worked extensively with the Ministry of Education and with educational leaders throughout the province for many years. Most recently, Ken accepted an appointment with the ministry as Leadership Advisor.

Ken speaks about the changing role of the principal, and the key shifts that in his view, have most significantly altered the focus and priorities of today's school leaders. He also offers thought-provoking comments on instructional leadership.

Finally, he shares some of his experiences working with supervisory officers and directors of education who are likewise re-aligning district-level leadership, and increasingly recognizing the direct impact that all their decisions ultimately have on student achievement and well-being.

You may find some of Ken's observations challenging and I invite you, as always, to use his comments as a springboard for your own reflection and professional dialogue. That is the spirit in which we publish *In Conversation*.

I encourage you to explore these ideas with your colleagues, and put them to the test in your own professional practice. I likewise encourage you to send your thoughts on this issue to InConversation@Ontario.ca.

The best of success in 2010.

Kevin Costante
Deputy Minister of Education

About Ken Leithwood

Dr. Leithwood is Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at OISE/University of Toronto. His most recent books include *Distributed Leadership According to the Evidence* (Routledge, 2008) and *Leading with Teacher Emotions in Mind* (Corwin Press, 2008). He is one of the most widely cited educational leadership researchers in the English-speaking world. Through his writing, graduate teaching and association with the Principal's Qualification Program (PQP) over three decades, he has made a substantial contribution to leadership development in the province. Professor Leithwood is the recent recipient of the University of Toronto's Impact on Public Policy award and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

The Ministry of Education has now contracted with Dr. Leithwood to act as Leadership Advisor for the next two years. Specific responsibilities include providing advice on the evolution, implementation and evaluation of the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS), helping to ensure that OLS practices are evidence-based, linked with the work of leading researchers in the education sector and comparable internationally. The ministry looks forward to working with Dr. Leithwood to foster leadership of the highest possible quality in schools and boards across the province.

Ontario

Over the past five years our view of the principal's role has continued to evolve. How, in your experience, has the role of the principal changed most significantly?

A. I would suggest that there are three quite significant changes.

The first is that principals are now responsible for improving achievement and well-being – raising the bar – in alignment with provincial goals, and I would doubt that there are any principals in the province who don't understand this as job one. That's significant because it's a shift toward seeing themselves as directly accountable for making that happen. They are not just accountable for creating the conditions in which results *might* happen – accountability presumably resting with teachers – but rather they are responsible to ensure that results *do* happen.

The second revolves around closing gaps in student achievement, and I would say this is a more recent shift. As we saw at the Principal Congress in February 2009, school leaders are thinking about this problem now. They're beginning to take ownership of it in a way that they hadn't before. And this is a very similar type of shift. It's about moving beyond the responsibility to provide good opportunities for learning and toward responsibility for the learning itself, so that all students are benefiting from and taking advantage of learning opportunities. This includes those who might have fallen through the cracks in the past. I think now, undeniably, the majority of principals see themselves as every bit as responsible for closing gaps in student achievement as they do for raising average scores in their schools.

The third shift which is closely related to closing gaps in student achievement involves turnaround capacities. There are schools in the province – schools in the middle, for example – that have made some progress, but not to the point that they meet provincial standards. These schools are being viewed in much the same way that turnaround schools were viewed five or six years ago. That is to say, there's some pressure to take it to the next level. What's shifted, also, is that where we might have focused five years ago exclusively on the kids who were at risk of failing, attention is being paid now to students who are just doing so-so at school. So our definition – our standard – of what needs to be turned around has grown. As a result, many more principals are assuming responsibility for turnaround efforts, in comparison with the three hundred or so original turnaround schools of five or six years ago.

INSIGHT

"Leadership is the pivotal explanation for turnaround success."

Leithwood & Strauss (2008)

What are the implications of these shifts for principals? What do they mean about where principals may want to place their focus?

A. Certainly, they mean that as a principal you want to pay much more attention to the specific forms of instruction that are happening in classrooms, and you want to make fewer assumptions about them all being good. You want to know in more detail, and more precisely, whether or not instructional strategies are working. So you're more willing than you might have been before, for example, to sit with your teachers as they develop teaching-learning critical pathways.

DIGGING DEEPER

The Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (T-LCP) is a promising model used to organize actions for teaching and student learning, inspired by a strategy presented by Fullan, Hill and Crévola (2006) in their book *Breakthrough*. For guidelines on how to implement T-CLP, see *'Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways: One Model for Ontario Professional Learning Communities'* posted at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy.

Likewise, as you are digging more deeply into instruction, you'd probably want to get much more efficient, much more quickly about the standard operating procedures in your school, because you don't have all the time in the world to worry about those things anymore. You can't spend very much time on budgets and buses and bricks. There was a day when people thought that was the principal's role. But that's not the case anymore. It still has to be done, but you have to do it and get on with it very quickly because you need to focus on instruction.

DIGGING DEEPER

For powerful, practical, and realistic ways that leaders can minimize disruptions while building support for continued emphasis on the things that really matter, see 'Managing the Distractions without Losing Focus' in Ben Levin's (2008) *How to Change 5000 Schools*.

Another implication of these changes – and this also relates to instructional leadership – is that you would want to begin working more closely with families on the whole improvement and student achievement issue. It's still the case, if you look at the evidence, that this is difficult and somewhat "foreign" work for both principals and teachers. But it's going to be important as we move forward because family variables explain such a huge proportion of the differences in student achievement.

DIGGING DEEPER

For a comprehensive synthesis of evidence related to successful turnaround practices and lessons learned, see *The Educator's Handbook for Understanding and Closing Achievement Gaps* by Joseph Murphy (2009) and 'Closing Achievement Gaps: Lessons from the Last 15 Years' also by Murphy (*Kappan*, November 2009).

Does this view of the principalship align with what you are hearing from principals?

A. Yes, I would say that there is consensus both on the areas of focus we need to attend to, and of course, the challenges that go with all of this. The challenges are not really surprising. There is considerable talk about the challenges, for example, in closing gaps in achievement. There's a lot of talk and data about the challenges of getting people to collaborate together in a meaningful way to improve instruction. Most of the conversation right now is focused on the work principals need to do with their teachers, some of the work they need to do with parents and, certainly, the work they need to do with

their students. So while the challenges may not be particularly surprising, they do remind us again and again, of how hard this work is to do in schools.

Perhaps we could look at each of these, beginning with closing gaps in student achievement.

A. This is certainly challenging, particularly because we know less about how to do this than we would like to know. Principals don't have a lot of codified advice about what they can actually do to close gaps in student achievement. The Principal Congress 2009 captured the "tacit knowledge" that a group of experienced principals brought to the table. And the collective response was pretty sophisticated. Individuals there weren't privy to the collective capacity of the group. And so one of the main outcomes of having brought that data together is being able to share it with others, so that leaders in the province will be able to look at what the good experience of others has taught them about closing achievement gaps. That in itself was an extremely valuable exercise.

It's also interesting to notice how thinking reflected in the results of the Principal Congress 2009 is evolving in this area. You know, the starting point for gap closing was that we need to shift these kids' orientation toward school. I don't know that schools were ever "blaming" kids for the problem, but they were certainly suggesting that, if schools are going to be effective, students need to get to the point where they're thinking about school as a meaningful place to be, and taking ownership for their learning.

Of course, you come to realize that some of these kids come from homes where there's no reason they would have picked that up. Their parents were unsuccessful at school, or didn't stay in school very long, or had bad experiences at school, and school doesn't get a very good rap around the dinner table, if it gets any attention at all.

So those are the kinds of things we're going to have to work on with parents.

A. Yes. And when we talk about working with parents, we're not talking about poverty, or other factors that are unalterable. We're talking about what parents can do in the home to improve the chances of their children's success in school – helping them with their homework, having concrete expectations for what their children are going to do at school, helping kids see the relationship between doing well at school and having a good life after school. Parents have a huge role to play in setting

expectations for kids. Those expectations are perhaps the biggest factor that explains kids' motivation to learn at school. They have to see some longer-term purpose for it, or at least many kids do. That is the elephant in the parent room right now – looking at the variations in student achievement that arise from the expectations students develop through their parents. We can't acknowledge that and then not do something about it.

I would add that it's not getting families into schools that's accounting for the achievement we're talking about here.

It's what families are doing in the home, often with the help of the school. So one of the things that's gradually changing is that people are thinking about the relationship schools should have with parents. They are, and need to be thinking about shifting from how we get more parents into the school toward how we support parents at home. That's the shift, I think, that needs to happen.

Is there a broad awareness of the importance of this type of work with parents?

A. Collectively there is. But there are many individual principals who would still like not to have to spend too much of their time on that. And this is an interesting challenge we have, I think, as a province. The province has adopted instructional leadership as its "label" for good leadership. And so, if you don't go any further than the label, what you think about is "well, my responsibility is to make sure the quality of instruction in these classrooms improves. End of story." And that doesn't take you to parents at all.

So part of the issue is to expand people's understanding of what we mean by instructional leadership. One way or another, it's about student learning. And we do that in a variety of ways. Classroom instruction is one of the ways.

But working with families is another way. You're doing instructional leadership when you work with families to improve the quality of instruction the kids are getting in the home or when you assist families in developing significant expectations for their child's work at school.

So it's important to keep in mind that there is more than one route to improving student learning.

A. Yes. In some of my other work I have identified the various paths leaders can take to arrive at improved student learning. The "family path" is certainly one. I speak about the "rational path", the "organizational path", and an "emotional path" as well.

The "emotional path" directly relates to working with teachers, which you mentioned earlier.

A. Yes, the "emotional path" includes such things as teacher's commitment to the job and to their students' learning, a sense of efficacy about what they're able to do, the morale they bring to their work. Collectively, these and other "internal states" represent the emotional climate of the school, and the fundamental building blocks for teachers' professional motivations.

This explains a large proportion of what goes on in classrooms. It does have an effect on kids' achievement – that has been demonstrated with quite a bit of evidence. So another of the challenges in our large-scale reform efforts right now, which focus on capacity building, is to bring emotions out of the shadows and say "this is part of capacity building too". We have to nurture the way our staff is feeling about their work if we expect them to be resilient and sustain their efforts. The work has to be something that's meaningful. It needs to feel like we're making progress, and it needs to be something teachers are confident about being able to do.

At the Principal Congress 2009, the conversation about work with teachers also touched on the challenges principals face with some of their teachers in moving to the point where they feel responsible for all kids' achievement. That's a tough one. In our turnaround research we have wonderful quotes from teachers that say: "You know, before we started to do this work, we had a group of kids who were coming from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds, and we were here to care for them, we were here to nurture them, we really didn't think they could learn very much, but we were going to make this a happy, warm environment for them". In a nutshell, what they were saying was that they had low expectations for their academic learning. And part of the role of the principal now, given the gap-closing agenda, is to create high expectations for learning among teachers and parents, and for all kids.

DIGGING DEEPER

Read more turnaround success stories in which teachers who at first doubted that their particular school was capable of improvement learned not only that their students had improved, but also that they themselves found their work more satisfying and rewarding, in:

- *Leadership for Turning Schools Around* by Leithwood, Harris and Strauss (2010),

- 'An Agenda for Improving Teaching and Learning' in *How to Change 5000 Schools* by Ben Levin (2008).

The "emotional path" seems a bit more abstract than some of the other areas of focus. What "on the ground" evidence would a principal have that the emotional climate in the school needed attention?

A. Your best teachers would go to another school where there was a more positive atmosphere. Because it's a teacher's level of commitment to the school that is one of the main explanations for teachers moving schools or professions. Teacher burnout is the most negative emotion teachers can develop. We actually know quite a bit about teacher burnout. When people reach this emotional state, when they move from just feeling a lot of stress to actually being "burned out", they care mostly about themselves. They're very uninterested in taking responsibility for anybody else, including students. They're not in the business of supporting other people because they need a tremendous amount of support for themselves. And they're largely unwilling to think about changing their practice at all. So that very negative emotion, on the part of even a couple of teachers, can have a huge dampening effect on most of what goes on in the entire school.

The link between confidence and learning and persistence has a sound basis in nearly 30 years of research on "efficacy" – teachers' perceptions that they can be effective in helping students learn. In the mid-1970s, a team of RAND Corporation researchers included two questions in an extensive questionnaire being used to study reading programs and interventions in Los Angeles.

• The first question read, "When it comes right down to it, a teacher can't really do much because most of a student's motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment".

• The second question read, "If I really try hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students".

In later research, Megan Tschannen-Moran, Anita Hoy, and Wayne Hoy in 'Teacher Efficacy: Its Meaning and Measure' (1998, *Review of Educational Research*) explain that "it may have been simply a hunch or a whim but these researchers got results, powerful results, and the concept of teacher efficacy was born." Since then, a large number of studies have confirmed the positive effect of perceived efficacy and student outcomes.

You also mentioned teacher confidence as a significant factor.

A. Yes, confidence or "self-efficacy" on the part of teachers is another emotion we know quite a bit about. It's a very important factor explaining why some teachers persist, and eventually learn new practices, and why others give up at the first sign of failure. There's rich theoretical and empirical literature on self-efficacy on the part of students, teachers, administrators and people outside of education. The basic explanation for why it's such an important emotion is that when you feel confident that you're likely going to be able to solve the next problem – one you have not faced before – you give yourself the opportunity to learn what it takes to solve that problem precisely because you don't give up at the first sign of failure. It's a performance-based explanation of your own capacity. This is in contrast with a talent-based explanation of your capacity, which is to say "I tried cooperative learning strategies in my classroom yesterday; it was a complete disaster and I'm never going to do that again". But in fact, you would expect it to be some version of a disaster the first time you tried it. So a lot about learning and persistence is driven by confidence.

Can you build a sense of efficacy among teachers and students?

A. Yes. That's part of what we have in this rich literature. You don't build confidence by throwing people into the deep end, with something they've never done before. You ease them into the water, and give them a lot of support, so that they're not traumatized by the effort. It's called "mastery experiences" in the literature. You give them opportunities to master things without a huge amount of risk, by being there to help them through it, or putting them in low-risk situations where they can practice. Or, you can send them to see other people doing this – it's called "vicarious experience" in the literature – so that they can see that it's possible for somebody else who also puts their pants on one leg at a time, and build a sense of confidence that it might be possible for themselves as well. You can simply encourage people, and that works for some folks – "try it, you'll like it" or "I've seen you do things like this before" or "you may feel uncertain about it, but I'm sure you can do it, give it a try".

So it's not about content, but how we approach content.

A. Yes, and that is what is important to distinguish. It's not confidence in what I already know. It's confidence in my ability to learn what I don't know. That's what the efficacy piece is about. And it's very specific. One of the things the evidence does tell us is that we can feel highly efficacious about one thing but feel a total lack of confidence in other things. For example, you could feel highly efficacious in teaching with kids from very diverse backgrounds, but not have confidence to teach "high flyers".

Without that sense of confidence, presumably you can't grow.

A. No – you keep doing the same thing that you think you know how to do. That takes us back to the turnaround piece. Part of helping teachers get to the point where they're willing to dramatically change their practices to better compensate for the needs of a new group of kids in the school, is to give them the confidence to be able to think this through, and the confidence that they can, in fact, learn this with a little help.

This links back, presumably, to the development of a collaborative culture and effective professional learning communities, which you mentioned earlier. What insights does your research or Ontario experience shed on this?

A. The revelation here is that the development of effective professional learning communities (PLC) isn't rocket science. Part of the problem is the label. It's no different than a well-functioning team, or a good committee of people who have a clear set of goals and some sense of urgency about getting on with those goals, and somebody in the group who keeps track of the decisions being made, who is making sure people volunteering to do things actually follow through.

Running a good meeting, running a good team, are the same as running a good PLC, with maybe one exception. What the evidence from PLCs does tell us is that until teachers are engaged in what the literature calls "deprivatized practice", that is, until they're going into their colleagues' classrooms and watching them teach, and having conversations in the PLC about what they saw, including offering constructive criticism, the impact on teaching is really minimal. Most PLCs can successfully get to the point where people are doing the lesson planning together, long term and short term, where people are talking about individual students together, and so on. It's a very, very unusual PLC that gets to the point at which people are actually doing deprivatized practice.

We've talked about connections with teachers, parents and students. What about connections beyond the school walls? What has your work told you about the link between school leadership and system leadership?

A. The ministry has been exploring this area, and it raises many important questions. For example, what does it mean to be an instructional leader when you're a director of education? What it means, we're discovering, is helping your supervisory officers who visit schools on a regular basis to ask the right questions, for example. Many of the directors I've worked with recently have a protocol they've developed with their supervisory officers to ensure that the focus of conversations they have with principals and teachers when they visit schools is about how schools are improving instruction, what kinds of support schools need from the board to do that better, and what resources or professional development teachers need. So the conversations with supervisory officers have become very closely aligned with the overall mission of the district.

So the view here is that directors of education, as much as school leaders, are focused on influencing and closing gaps in student achievement?

A. Yes, in fact they have a unique role to play because of their position. Everyone can agree that the director's role is unique, but nobody has a very good way of describing what that role is, and that's what we've been trying to do. The director's role is unlike any other. Directors have access to resources. They have autonomy. They have relationships with the board of trustees that are unlike anyone else's.

Directors and superintendents need to really have a good appreciation of what it takes to have a productive relationship with the chair of the board. And if you don't have that kind of relationship with the board chair, it's very difficult for the board agenda to focus on improving schools.

You're suggesting yet another shift at the level of the board of trustees

A. Yes, because focusing on improving student achievement has not traditionally been the focus of boards in many cases. That seems like the technical stuff – things that boards would expect their staffs to do. But the increasing expectation for boards is to take on much more direct responsibility for improving student achievement and well-being. At one of my recent meetings with a group of directors, each director brought a board agenda, and we asked, "if you were an instructional leader, would this agenda look the way it does?". That began a conversation around what directors can do to

craft a board agenda, working with their chairs, that will keep the focus on the main mission of the district. It's important development work.

It seems we are seeing the earliest stages of the system-wide alignment that the Ontario Leadership Framework is so focused on.

A. The unstated assumption I've made in this conversation – which probably needs stating – is that most of these challenges that we're asking schools to take on require quite a bit of support from people who are not in schools. It's obvious they need resources. They also need the kind of attention that we're asking directors and superintendents – and the board – to provide to them as well. It's very much about aligning the whole system around the mission, and working out what unique contributions people in every role can make to that mission.

One of the things we've explored – and it turns out that there is almost no research evidence to help us on this – is the question of what the optimum structure of the senior leadership team should be in a district. Among the directors I've been working with on this question, there is a tendency to assign a much larger proportion of the senior leadership team's responsibility toward school activity.

One director, for example, has created superintendent roles, all of which have responsibility for some schools, as well as other responsibilities. This was a major shock for some of the superintendents who had been dealing with personnel or plant, for example. If you've been dealing with plant for the past ten years, and have not been working with schools, there may be a lack of self-efficacy there about instructional improvement. This is an extreme example, but this is the direction directors are headed – to having more and more district leaders with their feet in schools, one way or another.

That is quite literally a shift from budgets and bricks and buses to instruction.

A. It's certainly a shift toward instruction. But it's not as though plant and personnel don't eventually have a bearing on student achievement. Part of it is the indirect kind of re-conception of how the decisions you make about personnel or plant – and those are only two examples – can contribute to improving instruction. If these are just silos, and you don't have much of an opportunity to see what the consequences of budgeting decisions are – you think of budgeting as a kind of independent set of activities. But budgets make a huge difference, eventually, to instruction. So this is another goal directors are pursuing – to improve the coherence between the different pieces of their organizations and explore how those different pieces contribute to the long term goal of improving student achievement.

Closing gaps in student achievement is a good example of the importance of district organizations. It's hard to see a turnaround school accomplishing anything very significant without new resources in the school, new leadership capacities, new curriculum resources, more time for professional development and the like – even for a limited time.

Those are things that exist on the organizational path, which I mentioned earlier. So what you're trying to do is make sure that those things that are part of the district's operations support the instructional mission. I'll tell you that it's hard work to figure that out. There haven't been lots of disciplined efforts to try and do that. So that is an important piece of work to be done at the moment.

DIGGING DEEPER

Providing supports to help Ontario's educational leaders develop into the best possible instructional leaders is a goal of the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS). Refer to *Ideas Into Action* at www.ontario.ca/eduleadership to learn about five Core Leadership Capacities (CLCs) derived from the OLF that have been adopted by the Ministry of Education as a key focus for capacity building beginning 2009-10:

• setting goals
• aligning resources with priorities
• promoting collaborative learning cultures
• using data
• engaging in courageous conversations.

The Institute for Education Leadership (IEL)
Ontario's Institute for Education Leadership is a unique partnership committed to exploring leading-edge thinking on education leadership and applying that expertise to the development of high-quality resources and learning opportunities for school, board, and system leaders. As part of its work on research into practice the IEL has adopted the Ontario Leadership Framework and continues to support and promote it as a powerful vehicle for strengthening school and system leadership in the province. Visit: www.educationleadership-ontario.ca for more information about the IEL, upcoming events, leadership research, and a variety of tools and resources for leaders.

I wonder if, in closing, you could give us some insights on where we're headed in this work together. What is it that we recognize we don't know, and need to address as we move forward?

A. The Ontario Leadership Framework is premised on the argument that we have quite good evidence about the core practices of successful leaders in many different contexts – schools, districts, corporate contexts – and that almost all successful leaders use these practices from time to time. But we also know that context matters in the sense of how these practices are enacted. For example, the same set of practices, like setting goals, can be enacted – and need to be enacted – quite differently in a turnaround context as compared with a high-performing context. You do it very differently. You do it with a great deal more urgency in a turnaround context.

And this takes us to the place in our work where we're starting not to know what we need to know. That is, we don't have a very good picture of which specific leadership practices work most effectively in which context. Does it really make a difference that this is a leader of a secondary school rather than an elementary school? Does that make a big difference in how you might enact certain practices? We probably do know that successful leaders enact these practices in a somewhat more authoritarian and urgent way in schools that are in challenging circumstances than we might in schools that aren't. So that's a context we know matters. But we could certainly use a lot more information about how it matters, and what that means. It's a kind of nuance, but that's where we are.

We're also looking at the question of how to manage leadership development on a large scale, within a district, for example. How do you work across the district to manage the overall improvement of leadership district-wide? There are a number of pieces we do know about in that area, but we need much firmer answers, or much firmer guidelines we can offer people in district leadership roles. Is what we've uncovered about succession planning and talent development enough? Probably not. There's probably much more that needs to be done there. Under what circumstances can we really ramp up the capacities of our new principals? What kinds of experiences would be best for them? There are a lot of assumptions being made about leadership development at the present time but not very much evidence.

If questions remain, it certainly seems that we are on a very promising trajectory toward finding the answers – at every level of the system.

A. Absolutely. We know that leadership matters system-wide. And I would stress that principals are as responsible as anyone for the improvement we're seeing. Especially in needy schools, nothing much changes in the absence of effective leadership. We've understood the critical role of principals for a long time, and my experience with the Principal Congress 2009 tells me that our school leaders are clearly taking on that kind of responsibility full-force.

INSIGHT

In 'Leadership Development: The Larger Context', Michael Fullan (*Educational Leadership*, October 2009) writes about whole system reform: "The measure of collective efficacy is that school and district leaders have confidence that they and their peers can together figure out how to make progress – that is, their ongoing interactions and experience with one another build the trust and knowledge that they are collectively responsible and good at their work. It is not the sum total of individual leadership qualities that counts but the fact that people learn from and identify with one another. System learning is an interactive activity, not an individual one."

What are your thoughts on the ideas presented in this issue of *In Conversation*? Email your comments and insights to InConversation@ontario.ca.