Being an Effective Instructional Leader

by
Jessica Antosz & Elizabeth Bell
Directors, Professional Learning & Development, BCPVPA

Instructional Leadership is one of the four domains within the *BCPVPA's Leadership Standards for Principals and Vice-Principals in British Columbia*, and for good reason.

In the recent work of Dr. Simon Breakspear, Amelia Peterson, Dr. Asmaa Alfadala and Muhammad Salman B. M. Khai, they suggest that the core capacity of leaders is to increase the capacity of teachers through purposeful day-to-day, holistic and experiential learning. They cite the following as a basis of their work:

> *"The evidence is clear, that leaders who focus on student learning and teacher practice – sometimes called 'instructional leadership' – have considerably more impact."*
>
> *(Hattie, 2015a; V.M.J. Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008)*

In the 2017 paper *Developing Agile Leaders of Learning: School leadership policy for dynamic times*, Breakspear et al make the distinction between traditional education administration and agile leadership. Their first contention is that it is necessary to have a heightened focus on those activities that can have a substantial and sustained impact on student learning experiences and outcomes (p.2). This focus on leadership for learning requires investment in professional learning such that leadership can effectively support cultures of professional practice that affect student outcomes.

With evidence such as this as the base, the Instructional Domain of the *Leadership Standards* emphasizes the Principals' and Vice-Principals' role in improving the quality of teaching and learning for students and adults through modelling, creating and sustaining a community that supports all learners.

Standard 3:
Leading the Learning,
Action Statement #2
encourages *ongoing and targeted conversations regarding the progression of learning*

Standard 3:
Innovation and Inquiry,
Action Statement #1
suggests that PVPs *promote reflection and dialogue about teaching and learning*

Standard 4:
Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment,
Action Statement #4
suggests PVPs *continually and collaboratively plan, monitor and review the effectiveness of instruction*

Instructional leadership is contextual and can be transformational for a school when done in concert with all adult learners and leaders. Principals and Vice-Principals who are effective instructional leaders link the work of leadership and learning to everyone in the school and provide cohesion among the tasks that are the foundation of a common vision.

In this spirit of collaboration, and working in conjunction with the University of Washington Centre for Educational Leadership, the BCPVPA created *Leading a Culture of Learning 2* for Principals and Vice-Principals who wish to investigate and practice a model of classroom observation and feedback intended to promote collaborative student focused dialogue.

Learning Walks are not new to the toolbox of most Principals and Vice-Principals, nor is the concept of feedback. However, in the midst of the busyness of a school, the reality is often that good intentions fall somewhat short of desired professional dialogue that leads to deep learning or change in practice. But with a focus on learning, and with the use of an intentional framework, Principals and Vice-Principals can be effective instructional leaders.

So what does Leading a Culture of Learning 2 entail?

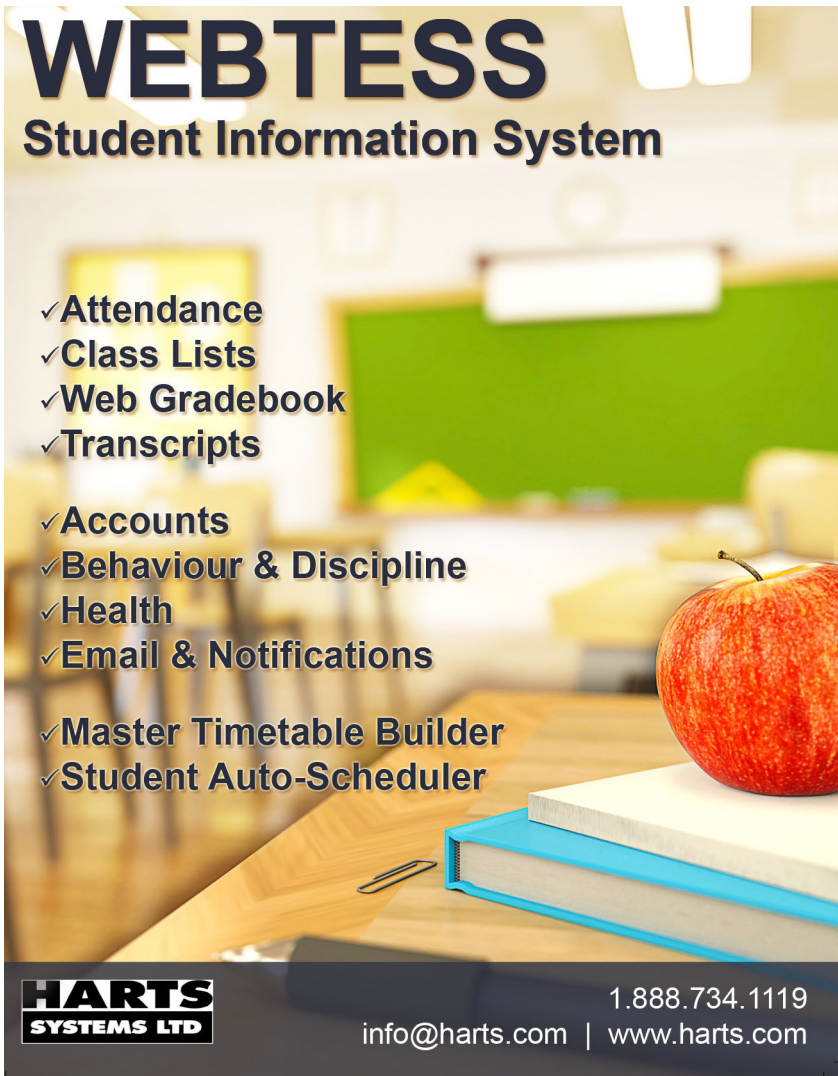
Five sessions are spread over the course of seven months allowing for a rich examination of common learning language and experiential practice. Four of the days include classroom visits and active observation of student learning. Using the guiding questions within the Attributes as a starting place, authentic curious questions are collaboratively considered and constructed with the intent of sparking deep learner focused dialogue. It is harder than you think to ask questions devoid of bias or advice that truly drive a learning conversation.

The premise of core instructional elements of the program – as presented by City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel (2009) – are identified as a means by which we can increase student learning.

They include:

• Increasing the knowledge, skills and expertise of the teacher

• Increasing the level and complexity of the curriculum / content



• Changing the role of the student as learner

Understanding that there are multiple entry points to increasing student learning encourages us to work collaboratively as we grow our expertise. We might ask *"What does the Principal or Vice-Principal need to learn in order to support the learning of the teachers who are supporting the learning of the students?"*

The 5 Attributes of Teaching and Learning is used as a framework to establish common language which describes a vision for high-quality teaching and learning. These attributes have been adapted in order to reflect the BC Curriculum from the 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning used by the University of Washington Center for Education. This framework, not unlike others, can help to deepen the dialogue about the practice of teaching and learning.

The components of the *5 Attributes and Sub Attributes* include:

Attribute	Sub Attribute
Purpose	**Learning Standards, Big Ideas and Core Competencies** **Learning Targets**
Student Engagement	**Thinking Skills & Metacognition** **Engagement Strategies & Structure** **Communication**
Curriculum and Pedagogy	**Curriculum Design** **Instructional Design** **Scaffolds for Learning**
Assessment	**Assessments**

Classrooms are complex environments to say the least. Given that, there is much to observe that can lead to general feedback. While it is important to provide appreciative motivation, effective feedback and collaborative coaching (Douglas Stone & Sheila Heen, *Thanks for the Feedback* 2014) often require more focused classroom visits. That is where the *5 Attributes* come in: they help to target attention to one or two areas so that the learning of all is rich and deep.

A key foundation of the program is that it comes from a strengths-based stance. Principals and Vice-Principals engage in a formative feedback cycle that provides immediate, focused and relevant feedback. The feedback builds on the observation of what students are learning and what the teacher is doing. It is a growth-oriented process that requires the teacher and leaders to work side-by-side to develop instructional practice expertise.

The process of LCL 2 is one that endeavors to foster collective efficacy and to reflect the essence of Michael Fullan's five conditions that inspired the article *Building Blocks of Collaboration* by Chris Bryan and Brenda Kaylor (December 2018).

5 Conditions for Collective Efficacy

• The team must create a culture based on trust

• The team must commit to transparency in

practice and results

• The team must create a climate of nonjudgementalism

• The team must be specific in terms of the practices it will employ and actually employ them

• The team must be clear about the specific evidence it will collect to document growth, it must collect and use the evidence to improve professional practices.

The Learning Professional, Vol 39. No 6, Dec 2018

As such, there is considerable attention paid to the culture that precedes these intentional learning observations. Without a foundation of trust and the common intent of supporting student success, dialogues for learning can be less effective. But when Principals and Vice Principals have made their learning visible and share the *Attributes* with staff members, teachers have been willing to support the process and are inviting the learning of the leaders into their classrooms.

Following observations, the cohort of Principals and Vice Principals work together to refine and practice questioning skills so as to craft authentic questions that will drive the learning of the teachers. The feedback is rich, both for the leaders and for the teachers. What we know now, as reported from past participants, is that this method of formative observation and feedback is now the positive foundation for formal teacher evaluations.

The expertise of leadership, teaching and learning must continually be fed to expand and flourish. When a collaborative culture of experiential learning, evidence-based observation and common language exists, deep conversation about learning and enriched practice that support students can result. Programs such as *Leading a Culture of Learning 2* are offered in order to support Principals and Vice-Principals as they strive to model the *Leadership Standards*.

To request a cohort in your area for 2020 / 2021 please call the BCPVPA 604-689-3399.

Targeted Feedback Institute

May 7 & 8, 2020

Sponsored by the BCPVPA and facilitated by the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership

Open to all Principals and Vice-Principals

Participants will:

Analyze characteristics of effective targeted feedback

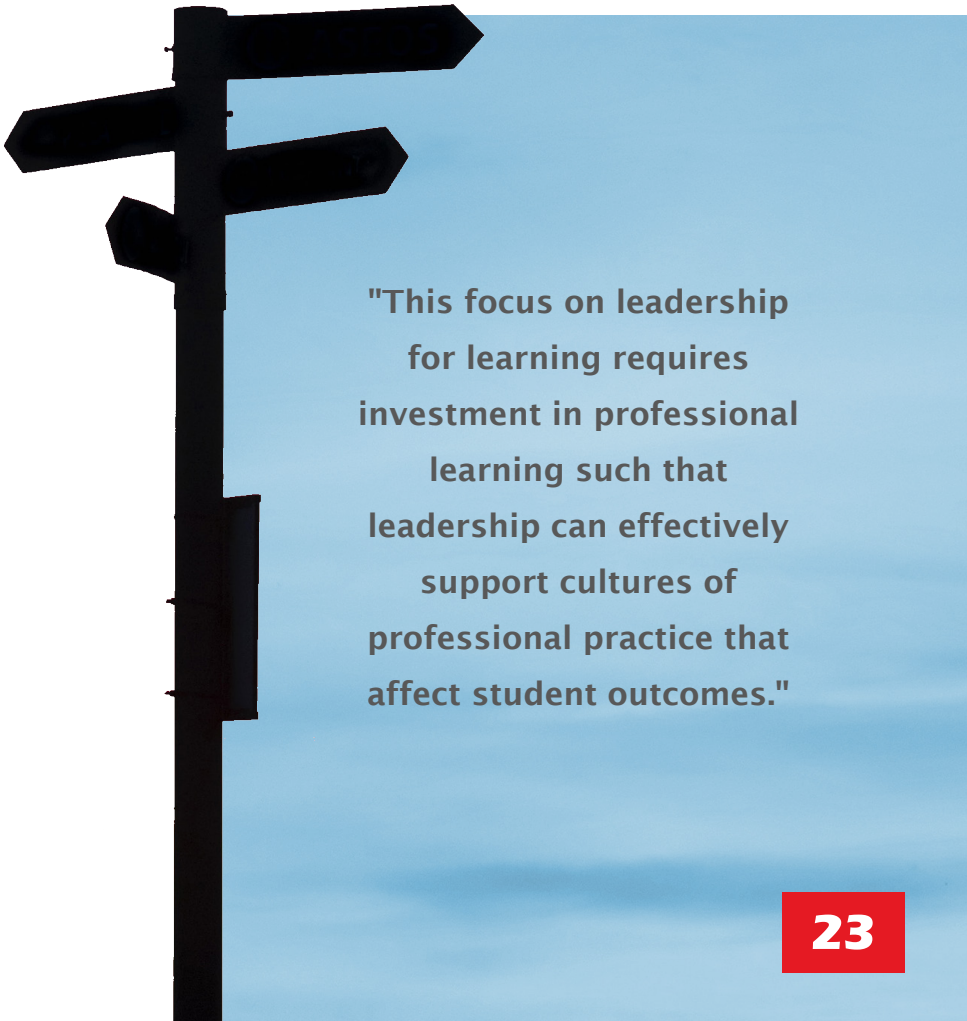
Use evidence from a classroom visit to provide feedback connecting teacher practice to student learning

Utilize a strengths-based stance when providing feedback

Understand how to implement a targeted feedback cycle with teachers

Practice a replicable feedback process that supports teacher growth

bcpvpa.bc.ca



"This focus on leadership for learning requires investment in professional learning such that leadership can effectively support cultures of professional practice that affect student outcomes."