

Leading from where they stand

School leaders in the Comox Valley turn to distributed leadership and create a Curriculum Support Teacher (CST) role as part of a structure to support teachers and build capacity. **Doug David**, a CST, explains the rationale behind the structure and how a deeper learning culture for the district is emerging.

The introductory slogan on the British Columbia Ministry of Education's *BC Education Plan* website reads "The world has changed ... The way we educate our children should too." The *BC Education Plan* (2011) stems from one guiding principle, that "every learner will realize their full potential and contribute to the well-being of our province." Ultimately, the goal is for children to develop into self-directed lifelong learners. The complex predicament is such that as educators, "we are currently preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist, to use technologies that have not been invented and to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2008).

Educators, therefore, are faced with the burdensome yet critical task of determining "how to cultivate and sustain learning under conditions of complex, rapid change" (Fullan, 2001). Confronting this need for change, the *BC Education*

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Plan identifies five essential components for "modernizing education so it can adapt and respond to students' needs." The key elements of the plan are outlined as personalized learning for every student, quality teaching and learning, flexibility and choice, high standards and learning empowered by technology. How should BC's school leaders respond to these lofty ideals? Fullan (2001) recommended:

Leading in a culture of change means creating a culture (not just a structure) of change. It does not mean adopting

innovations one after another; it does mean producing the capacity to seek, critically assess and selectively incorporate new ideas and practices — all the time inside the organization as well as outside of it.

Bearing in mind the need for change and the countless demands of school leadership, how are school leaders in the Comox Valley School District No. 71 (Comox Valley) producing this capacity that Fullan (2001) speaks of? It is through distributed leadership. Spillane and Diamond *et al.* (2007) explained,

“[a] distributed perspective acknowledges that the work of leading and managing schools involves multiple individuals. Moreover, leadership and management work involves more than what individuals in formal leadership positions do.”

Five years ago a distributed leadership structure was initiated in the Comox Valley to support the shift to a deeper learning culture. A position designated Curriculum Support Teacher (CST) was created in response to the need to help elementary school teachers deal with the diversity of learners in their classrooms. Each of the 15 elementary schools in the district had a part-time CST assigned to its building to directly support classroom teachers. The intent was “to support whole-school initiatives and to direct resources to the implementation of programs that would support current best practice” (Declaration of Interest: CST Letter, June 2009). As

a teaching colleague, not a formal leader, the focus of the role was to build teacher capacity in the areas of numeracy and literacy and to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility regarding student achievement. Another essential component of the CST role was to model and support formative assessment practices, to help classroom teachers create class assessment profiles and use their findings to inform instruction. Each CST was provided a budget that allowed for purchasing resources and arranging for teacher release time to discuss assessment findings and plan collaboratively to support student learning.

Fullan (2011) proposed one of the secrets of change is to “invest in capacity building.” What is capacity building? “Capacity building entails leaders investing in the development of individual and collaborative efficacy of a whole group or system to accomplish significant improve-

ments. In particular, capacity consists of new competencies, new resources (time, ideas, expertise) and new motivation” (Fullan, 2011). Comox Valley is investing in capacity building by supporting teachers in their development of knowledge and skills, in their access to and use of resources and in their motivation to continue to grow professionally and seek best practice to support student learning.

CSTs continue to be a part of the instructional support model in the Comox Valley. They meet regularly, with the Director of Elementary Instruction, as a district curriculum and assessment team, to establish priorities and participate in professional development and in-service. The CSTs then return to their schools to support best practice in assessment, curriculum and instruction through direct collaboration with classroom teachers. “Deep change alters the system in funda-

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Examining the specific actions of school leaders and how they relate to students' academic achievement, Marzano, Waters & McNulty identified 21 responsibilities of school leaders, among them being knowledgeable about curriculum, instruction and assessment practices, motivating others to seek innovation, stimulating curiosity for learning and best practice and challenging the status quo.

mental ways, offering a dramatic shift in direction and requiring new ways of thinking and acting” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). In their extensive meta-analysis, examining the specific actions of school leaders and how they relate to students' academic achievement, Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) identified 21 responsibilities of school leaders. Among the 21 responsibilities, being knowledgeable about curriculum, instruction and assessment practices, motivating others to seek innovation, stimulating curiosity for learning and best practice and challenging the status quo were recognized as priorities for initiating change. Although the CST position is not a formal leadership role, the five responsibilities mentioned above accurately describe the job of curriculum support teachers, leading from where they stand.

While participating in a meeting where CSTs were asked to reflect on ‘what we are doing well’ and also ‘what we need to work on,’ the following themes were revealed. In terms of ‘what is working,’ the CSTs talked about an increased willingness for collaboration and risk-taking among teachers to incorporate new ideas, the prevalence of common language around formative assessment practices, the growth of well-selected resources

and opportunities for in-service, and the quality of resources being made available through the district website and print shop to support assessment practices, numeracy and literacy instruction. With regard to ‘what is next,’ the CSTs identified a need for further progress in the use of assessment findings to inform instruction, a need for developing common practice among teachers regarding the storage and retrieval of assessment findings to be better able to identify trends, and a need for gradual release of responsibility; empowering teachers to pursue these practices independently (School District No. 71 Comox Valley, Curriculum Support Teachers meeting, September 2012).

How have CSTs been able to effectively establish themselves as in-

formal leaders in their schools? Examining leadership from the point of view of the follower, Kouzes and Posner (2007) asked, “What do people look for and admire in a leader? What do people want from someone whose direction they’d be willing to follow?” The authors identified five core leadership practices that aim to answer these pivotal questions: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act and encourage the heart. Kouzes and Posner (2007) declared fundamentally, “Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. It’s the quality of this relationship that matters most when we’re engaged in getting extraordinary things done.” Kouzes and Posner (1992) proposed “People are more willing to follow those who are passionate about their convictions, positive about the future, and enthusiastic about life and work.”

To model the way, CSTs set the example by following through on promises and commitments, expressing personal values and affirming shared ideals. CSTs inspire a shared vision by envisioning a future that reflects the interests of all those involved and empowering others to work for the common good (Kouzes

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Editor

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& Posner, 2007). Kouzes and Posner (1992) stated “When leaders listen with sensitivity to the aspirations of others, they discover the common values that link people together.” CSTs must challenge the process by venturing out, seeking opportunities for innovation, accepting challenges and taking risks. Further, the role of a CST is to enable others to act and encourage the heart. Enabling others to act is described as working effectively with others through collaboration and building trust; treating others with respect and dignity and allowing them to make choices while supporting their decisions (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Kouzes and Posner (1992) explained “Empowerment creates the self-confidence and competency necessary for others to become independent of their leaders.” Encouraging the heart is identified as showing appreciation for individual excellence and creating a spirit of community by celebrating accomplishments (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

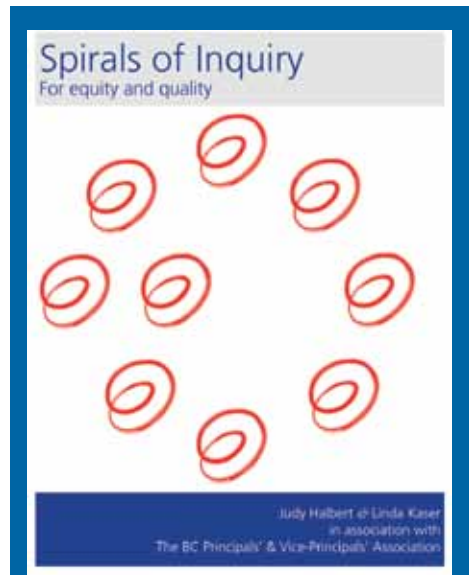
“Catalyzing people’s aspirations doesn’t happen by accident; it requires time, care and strategy” (Senge et. al., 2000). Kaser and Halbert (2009) recommended “school leaders who are leading in a complex period of technological, environmental, social, economic and political change, need to focus their leadership learning and thinking in six critical areas.” The authors described these critical areas as mindsets and put them forward as a framework for leadership thinking: intense moral purpose, trust – relationships first, inquiry – questions before directions, learning for deeper understanding, evidence-seeking in action, and learning-oriented design.

CSTs must go about their responsibilities with a clear sense of moral purpose. What is moral purpose? Fullan (2001) defined it as “acting

with the intention of making a positive difference.” Kaser and Halbert (2009) described moral purpose as sharing deeply held values and developing a strong sense of purpose, having the determination to contribute to a school culture that fosters quality and equity for all learners. Creating an environment of success for all learners requires perseverance and courage. Believing that all children can learn and being committed to supporting the diverse needs of all learners is central to creating a prolific learning culture. Moral purpose can be further described as having a clear sense of direction, building capacity among teachers, and being concerned with sustainability. Kaser and Halbert (2009) determined “Leading the shift away from a sorting system where there is success for some towards a learning system where there is deep learning for all is at the heart of moral purpose.”

Fullan (2011) cautioned negative monitoring and judgmentalism do not build capacity, and discussed the significance of holding “a strong moral position without succumbing to moral superiority.” Criticism does not work as a strategy for change. If teachers feel defamed or undervalued for their efforts they will be less likely to take risks and accept challenges. Fullan (2012) emphasized the importance of seeing potential in others and nurturing a culture of purposeful collaboration. “When peers interact purposefully, their expectations of one another create positive pressure to accomplish goals important to the group” (Fullan, 2012).

To be effective, CSTs must build trust and rapport with their colleagues. Bryk and Schneider (2003) identified that developing relational trust involves four specific consid-



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erations: respect, personal regard, competence in core responsibilities and personal integrity. “When school professionals trust one another and sense support from parents, they feel safe to experiment with new practices” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Respectful interactions are marked by practicing such skills as genuinely listening without interrupting or giving advice, being sensitive to the interests of others and showing consideration for individual needs. Personal regard is described as a willingness to extend oneself, to reach out and go “beyond the formal requirements of a job definition” for the good of the school community (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). The authors connected role competence to the interdependence of school community members. Parents commit their child’s welfare and learning to school staff, trusting in their professional ethics and skills. Teachers depend on the capacity of the school administrator to lead effectively and fairly and to be able to deal with conflict and address problematic issues. “School administrators value good community relations, but achieving this objective requires concerted effort from all school staff” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). What is integrity? “Integrity is reflected when there is a match between words and actions” (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Developing and maintaining relational trust is influenced by perceptions of personal integrity (Bryk and Schneider, 2003).

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) explained in contrast to traditional approaches to change, where change begins with identifying problems, appreciative inquiry is about deliberately building from the positive core. The authors outlined four key components of the appreciative inquiry process: discovering

the best of what is, dreaming the best of what might be, designing and articulating possibilities and enabling possibilities to be built and sustained. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) stated “This shift from problem analysis to positive core analysis is at the heart of positive change.” “A leader with an inquiry mindset approaches school transformation through curiosity and a desire for greater knowledge” (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). As a CST, an inquiry mindset might initially stem from listening to the stories that make up the culture of the school or it could develop from a standpoint of appreciation; identifying existing strengths, resources and capabilities in a school culture and “developing a shared image of potential” (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Positive change begins with an inquiry into positive core strengths (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

Kaser and Halbert (2009) also recognized “Learning-oriented leaders probe into and confront the issues that are keeping the school from moving forward. They want to know what is getting in the way of maximizing learning for every learner.” To shift to “a passionate commitment to learning” Kaser and Halbert (2009) emphasized school leaders not only “need to be knowledgeable about contemporary approaches to learning” they also “need to know the current research on assessment for and as learning and understand the connections among assessment practices, motivation and engagement.” CSTs must be prepared to act as intellectual companions to teachers, working together to identify common values around student learning (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Darling-Hammond et al. (2008) concluded:

Schools that redesign their work around student learning spend a great deal of time thinking through what they value, how they will know if they’ve achieved it and what they must do to create connected learning experiences that enable students to achieve these goals.


Teachers respect and appreciate school leaders who are current in their understanding of student learning, motivation and assessment practices and who are committed to supporting professional growth (Kaser & Halbert, 2009).

Concerning evidence of learning, Kaser and Halbert (2009) emphasized “leaders need to know what kind of evidence to look for to indicate that learning is actually taking place.” CSTs must know what evidence to look for and how to help teachers use that evidence to inform instruction. “An evidence informed mindset requires understanding the role of formative assessment practices, engagement and metacognition in learning” (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Wiliam (2011) identified the essential job of educators is to establish effective learning environments:

The key features of effective learning environments are that they create student engagement that allow teachers, learners and their peers to ensure that the learning is proceeding in the intended direction. The only way we can do this is through assessment.

What is formative assessment? Popham (2008) defined formative assessment as “a series of carefully considered, distinguishable acts on the part of teachers or students or both” and pointed out “the assessments play a role in the process – they are not the process itself.” Formative assessment is not merely a one-time event but an ongoing pro-

cess. Assessment evidence informs instruction. “Creating a school culture where thoughtful evidence sources are used regularly and seamlessly on a daily, weekly, monthly and annual basis is the goal of the evidence-minded leader” (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Considering the evidence, teachers adjust their ongoing lessons and activities to ultimately improve student learning. Within the formative assessment process students also examine the evidence and learn how to use it to adjust or change what they are doing to move their learning forward.

Quality teaching and learning is identified as one of the five key elements in the *BC Education Plan* (2011) necessary for moving forward as a “more innovative education system.” The plan states “Teachers will receive support as they continue to adjust their roles to match what students need” (*BC Education Plan*, 2011). Further, the plan endorses mentoring as “key to supporting teachers’ professional learning, both in their formative years and throughout their careers. Teachers will have increased access to learning opportunities by working with teacher mentors and each other” (*BC Education Plan*, 2011). Through distributed leadership and creative strategies, Comox Valley is actively building capacity and a deeper learning culture. 

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A familiar ring (from 42 years ago)



And then there is the hardy perennial — individualization. We’ve been talking about this for so long that most of us take it for granted; but let’s face it — we have very little individualized instruction taking place in our schools. And yet research has made new approaches available to us.

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Dr. John Wormsbecker
in an address to the Vancouver Secondary School Principals’ Conference
published in *Principals’ Journal*, November 1970

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