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STRATEGY AND REALITY

The Role of the Principal (Reprise)

In February 2008 Minister of Education Kathleen Wynne restated the importance of school leadership in her discussion paper *Energizing Ontario Education*. The paper states, “School principals have a special responsibility to focus on what it takes to implement the core priorities identified earlier in this paper. We will support principals’ development in this regard with a more comprehensive leadership strategy.”

As the 2008-09 school year begins Catholic school leaders will be interested in two publications that will be released in the next few weeks. The first is a two-page summary of the consultations on the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS). It reports the advice given to a Ministry team by principals’ associations, supervisory officers’ organizations, directors’ councils and teacher unions. The second is the comprehensive research report from the Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) *Succession Planning: Schools and School Boards* (SPSSB). The IEL commissioned The Learning Partnership to review practices in 20 Ontario school boards and to provide advice to the education community.

Before peeking at the contents of the OLS and SPSSB papers, it is important to revisit the 2005 discussion paper from the Education Partnership Table, *Leading Education: New Supports for Principals and Vice-Principals*. The paper, originated by then Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy is more commonly known as “the role of the principal” paper. The topics included: Freeing Up Principals as Instructional Leaders; Initiatives to Lessen Administrative Workloads; Initiatives to Improve Instructional Excellence; Training and Support; Enhanced Say for Principals and Vice-Principals; Professional Respect and Security; and Definition of the Role of Principal.

Twenty-two initiatives were created from the role of the principal paper. In August 2007 the Ministry reported on the status of those initiatives. The most significant was the change in the funding formula to provide more vice-principals and full-time principals. A year later it is clear that the vast majority of the additional funding was used to remedy financial shortfalls in many school boards. The number of twinned and teaching principals has increased in some boards and there has been no sight of the ninety full-time vice-principals that should have been added to the system. This is one case where the strategy was not realized.

In January 2008 CPCO reported survey results from 1,052 members that indicated their top priority was the allocation of principals and vice-principals. This result was directly related to instructional and management responsibilities. The survey also

reported that job security remained an important issue for members because of declining enrolment and the ongoing grievances against the assignment of principals to board positions. Job security was also cited as a strong deterrent for teachers considering administrative positions.

In the role of the principal paper the Ministry had proposed “standards for personal service contracts be set in regulation”; “a standard basis for performance appraisals” and “earned security for those who have met performance appraisal requirements.” CPCO had recommended that job security and dispute resolution should be included in the standards for personal service contracts. To date there has been no progress on any standards nor is there a timeline for drafting regulations. With regard to principal performance appraisal, a pilot program ran in 20 boards and the remaining boards have been invited to join the pilot during 2008-09. Meanwhile declining enrolment and the continuing loss of principal positions in boards has heightened the anxiety among new and prospective school administrators.

One goal in the role of the principal paper was to “define the role, power, responsibilities and obligations of principals and vice-principals to ensure coherent and consistent expectations.” The strategy was to examine regulation and legislation to clarify the definition of principal and responsibilities. Although there has been no action on this strategy, it remains a key factor in resolving the grievances concerning board-assigned principals. The government should have an interest since many of the new board positions were created to lead Ministry initiatives.

Another initiative in the role of the principal paper was to develop and implement a board self-review tool which included a component dealing with the role of principals in the board management team. The tool was introduced at the IEL symposium in December 2006 and remains available on the IEL website. There has been no concerted effort to implement this strategy and the role of principals in board management remains unchanged in most places.

The creation of a virtual organization of school and system leaders was also identified as an initiative. The Institute for Education Leadership was born on Feb. 14, 2006 and it has successfully realized an important strategy from the role of the principal paper. The soon to be released report on succession planning contains significant advice for the Ministry and school boards. One component of the report is “Expectations of the Principal’s Role” and it covers instructional leadership, operational management,

work-life balance, working conditions and job security. The SPSSB paper advises boards to balance administrative and instructional responsibilities and increase administrative support – important strategies that need to be realized in most boards.

Finally we have the Ontario Leadership Strategy which contains seven components: Ideal Profile of Principal/Vice-Principal; Attracting, Recruiting and Retaining the Right People; Making the Role More Attractive and Manageable; Career Long Supports; Support From Supervisory Officers; Aligning and Integrating Ministry Initiatives to Support Leadership Development; and Moving Forward. Within these components are nineteen action items including a number that are significant to principals and vice-principals.

- Create an effective practices document dealing with critical issues such as terms and conditions of employment, participatory decision-making and others.
- Establish a principal performance appraisal model that focuses on growth and learning.
- Align and connect Ministry initiatives to make the role of the principal more manageable.
- Flow funds to boards to support their leadership development needs conditional on alignment with an identified priority.
- Support mentoring for new principals and vice-principals.

While the OLS reprises previous initiatives from the role of the principal paper it also demonstrates an intention to

tackle significant matters that affect principals and vice-principals. Other important signals include the Minister’s appointment of Ken Thurston as special advisor on leadership, the new four million dollar grant for school boards to provide mentoring for new administrators and the Premier’s personal interest in leadership development.

One of the most important leadership developments of this school year will be the introduction of the Leadership Framework across the province. Originally created by the Ministry of Education, CPCO and OCSOA have developed a version for principals and supervisory officers in the Catholic school system. The framework is a core component of the *Mentoring for New Administrators* initiative but it is also a solid foundation for experienced administrators to enhance their own practice. It is no surprise that the draft Principal Performance Appraisal model is aligned with the Leadership Framework.

The professional learning staff at CPCO has already organized a number of consultations and in-services with boards and principal associations to introduce the Catholic Leadership Framework. The staff has also developed a model for aligning initiatives by identifying common themes and activities. This approach is supported by the Ministry and encouraged as a means of improving practices in a manageable way. In the end this will likely become the most significant strategy to handle the reality of the role of the principal.



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