

## **Educational Networks: Structures for Enhancing School Leadership**

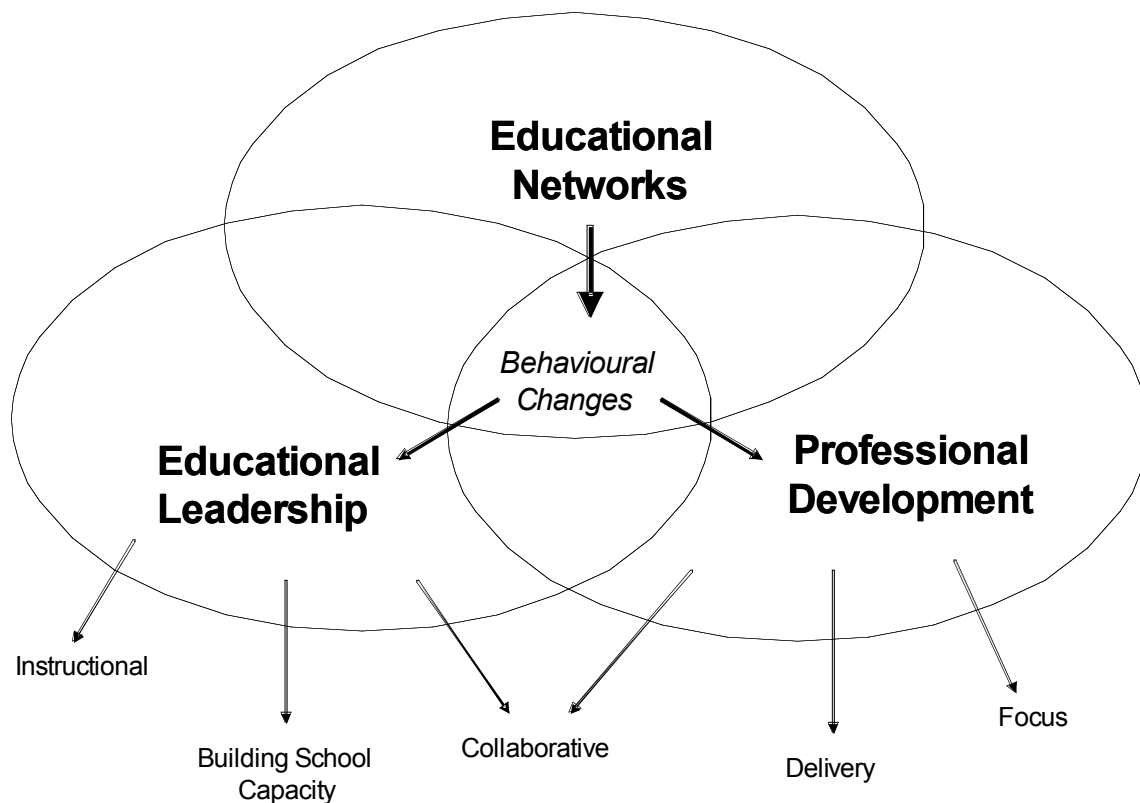
The ultimate goal of educational leadership is to transform a school culture so that student achievement will improve (Hargreaves, 2001). Yet, with the plethora of improvement initiatives bombarding schools it is challenging for school leaders to have the essential intellectual leadership necessary to lead the changes. In this era of unprecedented educational reform, there is an expectation for elementary school principals and vice-principals to restructure, realign, and respond to ever-changing professional, societal and governmental demands (Resnick & Hall, 1998). The perpetual improvement frenzy that surrounds school leaders, further exacerbated by the pressure of public accountability, necessitates the search for an effective and efficient structure and support.

This paper reports the results of a study that investigated the changes in leadership behaviour of elementary principals and vice-principals who had participated in the Network of Performance Based Schools (NPBS) for two or more years (Hoffman, Holden, Neggers, 2006). In British Columbia, in 1999, the NPBS was created as a means of connecting the remote parts of the province with urban centers. Dr. Judy Halbert and Dr. Linda Kaser, initiators and sponsors of the network, wanted schools to collaborate, to share ideas on the concept of assessment and to work on improving student achievement (2004).

As a result of participating in the NPBS, we found that principals and vice-principals indicated that their leadership style had changed. These changes included the way school leaders thought about and approached assessment and instruction. Involvement in the NPBS was a vehicle through which administrators could create conditions that enabled teachers to question their own practice, reflect, and feel comfortable taking risks. The NPBS facilitated discussion and opened up teachers' and supervisors' beliefs and values about what it means to learn. Consequently, they had a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives.

An overwhelming number of respondents perceived that the NPBS was beneficial as a form of effective professional development. Most of the respondents identified a strong connection between professional development and the NPBS in varying ways such as the link between school goals, student assessment and student needs. Changing their view of professional development, since participating in the NPBS, was another salient viewpoint. Most principals and vice-principals indicated that being a part of the NPBS allowed them to create learning communities focused on student needs.

After conducting the study, the researchers discovered that educational networks supported and enhanced behavioural changes in the areas of educational leadership and professional development. The NPBS promoted and facilitated *collaboration* between teachers and administrators and furthermore encouraged a *collaborative* approach to professional development *focused on student needs*. Administrators recognized the expertise that existed within their school and consequently used that expertise to *deliver* professional development. Because of their involvement in the NPBS, we found that principals and vice-principals not only developed their own capacity as *instructional leaders*, but also *built their school's capacity* for learning. Through our research, we now see the value of educational networks. As our diagram indicates, like a rock thrown into water, networks create ripples in leadership behaviour.



To further enhance the growth of educational leadership within our province, districts are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

- Districts should consciously create educational networks in order to support principals' and vice-principals' behavioural changes in the areas of leadership and professional development.
- Districts should promote the implementation of learning communities within schools as a form of effective professional development.
- Districts should provide support and structures to promote instructional leadership

Our study shows that network sponsors must be mindful of the fact that they need strong leadership and a common purpose. With the great number of educational leaders currently retiring in our province, it is essential that we share the wealth of knowledge that exists within our schools, within our districts and beyond. Networks are structures that will take time to create, yet they can meet the knowledge gap, the experience gap, the needs gap and hopefully the student learning gap. If educators are going to make a difference for the students of the future, we need to do so in an informed, thoughtful and networked manner.

## References

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This article is based on Suzanne Hoffman, Dawn Holden and Nicole Neggers' (2006) *An investigation of the impact of educational networks on formal leadership behaviour*. Unpublished Graduating Paper, Educational Administration and Leadership Program, Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. 54pp. An electronic copy is available from any of the authors.