BC's Strong Districts and their Leadership Project

Executive Summary

Kenneth Leithwood, Victoria Handford and Airini

Executive Summary

Objectives

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to test the efficacy of nine Characteristics that previous research has suggested help account for the contribution that districts make to their students' success and, in particular, to closing achievement gaps among those students (Leithwood, 2010; 2011; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood & McCullough, 2017). The study also aimed to deepen understanding about the features of each district Characteristic in its most effective state. In addition, the study assessed the extent to which a selected set of school, classroom and family Conditions significantly mediate district effects on students' cognitive and socio-emotional capacities. Data collected by the study provided answers to seven more specific questions as a means of accomplishing the overall objectives for the study.

The results reported in this summary corroborate the value of the nine Characteristics of high-performing districts. These results also provide additional evidence about the key contributions of school-level leadership and recommend focused attention by districts on the development of such leadership. As well, results point to the importance of focusing school improvement efforts on a large handful of school, classroom and family conditions, each of which makes demonstrably significant contributions to student achievement and well-being.

By most international standards, the BC school system is high-performing, and is one of the three provinces in Canada that always rank very high in the results of testing programs such as TIMMS, PISA and PIRLS. Typically, the performance of BC students on the Pan-Canadian tests of achievement, sponsored by the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, is also exceptional. So, it is not surprising that there is considerable interest in determining what accounts for such success. While this study was not designed to accomplish this objective, it does provide insights about what districts might do to enhance the performance of BC students even further.

Equity and human rights concerns are top-of-mind among educational policy makers and practitioners, and the framework for this study was built on evidence about what districts and schools do to provide equitable outcomes for all students.

Framework Guiding the Study

The framework for the study (Figure 1) identified both primary and secondary causal-relationships between three sets of variables. Nine Characteristics of high-performing districts are assumed to influence student success through 12 Conditions in the school, classroom and family. These 12 Conditions also have reciprocal effects on one another as well as both individual and combined effects on student outcomes, including: math and language achievement, student well-being and student engagement.

District Characteristics included: Mission, vision and goals for students; Coherent instructional guidance; Deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions; Learning-oriented organizational improvement processes; Professional development for all members; Alignment; Approaches to leadership development; Policy-oriented board of

trustees; and Relationships between and among all stakeholders. Conditions in the school, as a whole, included: School leadership; Academic emphasis; Disciplinary climate; Safe and orderly environments; Collaborative structures and cultures; Organization for Planning; and Instruction. Classroom Conditions included: Instruction; Uses of instructional time; Teachers' commitment; Teacher trust in others; and Collective teacher efficacy. Family Conditions (family educational culture) included parent expectations for their children's success at school, forms of communication between parents and children at home, and parents' social capital related to schooling.

Figure 1. Framework for Study
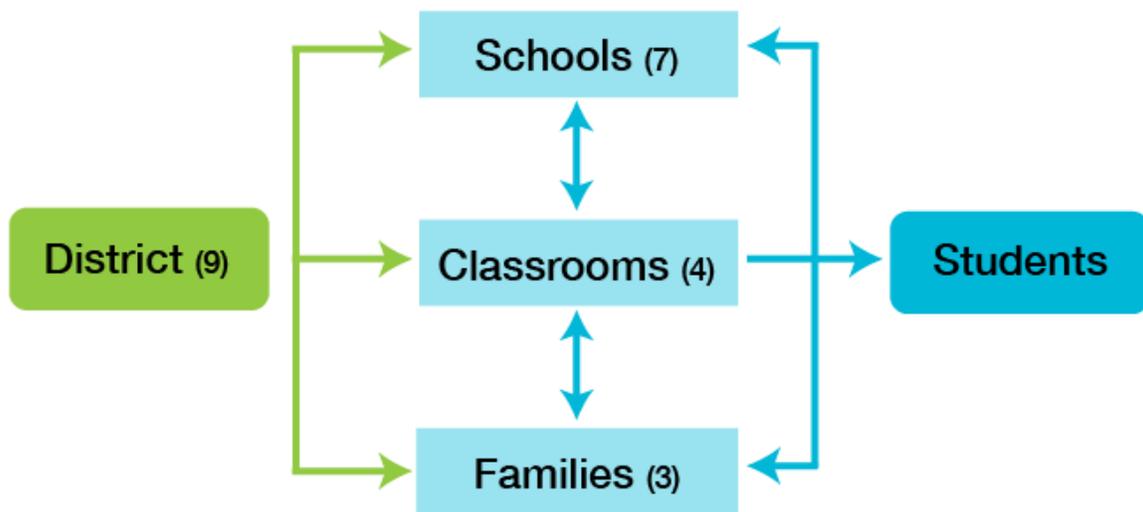
Methods

Data for the study were collected through both interviews and surveys. Hour-long interviews about the current status of district Characteristics were collected from 37 principals and vice-principals selected from districts volunteering to participate in the project. Two sets of survey data were collected from district and school leaders in 21 of the province's 60 school districts. One survey for principals and vice-principals collected information about the 12 school, classroom and family Conditions serving as mediators in the study. A second survey collected data from both district and school leaders about the current status of the nine district Characteristics.

Provincial data were used to estimate students' cognitive and socio-emotional capacities across each of the 21 districts participating in the study. Cognitive capacities in math and language were estimated for Grade 4 and 7 students using results from the *Foundation Skills Assessment*,[1]

---

[1] *Foundation Skills Assessment* results were used for the study in the face of decreasing participation rates in the province as well as controversies, at the time, about the validity and reliability of these results. We do not adopt a position on the controversies. But possible challenges to the reliability and validity of *Foundation Skills Assessment* data could be viewed as one limitation of the study.

Secondary students' cognitive capacities were estimated using results from grades 10 and 12 English tests; grade 10 math tests (both Foundations and Pre-calculus, as well as Apprenticeship and Workplace). District graduation rates were included, as well. Students' socio-emotional capacities were measured using domain-specific conceptions of student well-being and engagement. Each of the cognitive and socio-emotional capacities was represented by a one-year score (the latest year for which data were available) and a five-year change score. Change scores eliminate most challenges to district comparisons based on SES, ethnicity and wealth, for example, without the use of many control variables.

Because the district was the unit of interest in this study, the small sample size (21) placed significant constraints on the types of statistical analyses of quantitative data that could be conducted to answer causal questions; correlations and a new method - the calculation of "Power Indices" **-** were used for this purpose.

This sample of 21 districts did not include many of the province's largest districts, especially those in the lower mainland. The effects of such a restricted sample are difficult to know**,** but it does represent a limitation of the study. It does seem clear, however, that the mean response to several of the nine district Characteristics likely would have been different with a more representative sample of districts. For example, responses to the features of Professional Leadership depend on districts having relatively formal and codified procedures for attracting, recruiting, selecting and developing leaders at all levels**;** something much more likely**,** and more necessary**,** in large **(**as compared with small**)** districts.

Results

Data from the study provided responses to seven questions. Quantitative data were used to answer the first six of these questions while interview results were used to answer the seventh. Reference is made throughout this summary of findings to the results of a parallel study undertaken in Ontario with many of the same objectives and data collection strategies.

1. *On average, just how well developed are British Columbia school districts?*

All nine district Characteristics were at least moderately well-developed in the province's school districts at the time of the study. Three of the nine Characteristics were especially well-developed: Mission, Vision and Goals for Students, Extent of Alignment and Coherent Instructional Programs. While Uses of Evidence was rated the least well-developed of the nine Characteristics, there was also more variation (a larger standard deviation) in responses to this Characteristic than all but one of the others (Elected Leadership).

2. *On average, how well developed are those Conditions in schools, classrooms and families prior research indicates make significant contributions to student success?*

All school, classroom and family Conditions measured by the survey were at least moderately well developed in the province's schools. Safe and Orderly Environments and School Leadership were the most fully developed while Classroom Instruction and Organization of Planning and Instructional Time were least well developed. There was significant agreement among respondents

about these results, although there was more variation in responses to the two less well-developed Conditions than nine of the remaining ten.

3. ***Do those Conditions in schools, classrooms and families identified in prior research as making significant contributions to student success have comparable effects in BC districts?***

The overall answer to this question is a guarded 'yes.' All Conditions were significantly related to at least one of the cognitive or socio-emotional outcomes measured in the study and several of these Conditions had significant relationships with considerably more than just one outcome measure; Collective Teacher Efficacy and Academic Emphasis were especially pervasive.

4. ***How large are the effects of School Leadership on student cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes?***

Most studies of the direct effects of School Leadership report small but significant effects on student outcomes. This was the case in this study for Grade 4 math achievement, Grade 10 Math (Workplace and Apprenticeship) achievement, as well as Grade 4 student Well-Being.

Leadership effects are generally considered to be indirect, that is, through their influence on mediating variables (e.g., the Conditions measured in this study). The results indicated a significant influence of School Leadership on the majority of the 12 school, classrooms and family Conditions. These effects were due to the Instructional dimension of School Leadership followed closely by the Relational and Organizational dimensions of School Leadership[2]. School Leadership effects on the multiple types of cognitive and socio-emotional student outcomes included in the study were mediated most powerfully by leaders who worked especially at ensuring Safe and Orderly Environments in their schools and optimizing the Uses of Instructional Time in classrooms.

5. ***How large are the effects of the nine district Characteristics on student cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes?***

The analysis of direct effects of the nine district Characteristics on student outcomes did not produce significant results for any of the high school student achievement measures or for either student Well-being or student Engagement. However, there were significant direct relationships between several district Characteristics and measures of Math achievement in grades 4 and 7. Specifically, Uses of Multiple Forms of Evidence for Decision Making had a significant relationship with 5-year changes in Grade 4 Math achievement. District-provided Professional Development, as well as Relationships (aggregate) made significant contributions to 1-year measure of Grade 7 Math achievement.

With respect to indirect effects, seven of the nine district characteristics had a significant influence on the aggregate measure of school, classroom and family Conditions. These results

---

[2] While the Moral Stewardship description was unrelated to the student outcome measures, we appreciate the value of attention to morals and ethics for reasons not always associated with student learning outcomes. Moral dimensions may relate to public confidence in the educational system itself, as well as may make contributions to collective trust among colleagues and leaders.

point to Coherent Instructional Guidance and Uses of Evidence as influencing the largest number of Conditions followed closely by Professional Leadership Development and Alignment.

There was no significant effect of any district Characteristics on School Leadership, arguably the Condition one might expect district Characteristics to influence most. To be clear, this result represents an average influence on school leadership across all districts in the study and there is considerable variation in such effects among districts. So, some districts are having important effects on the improvement of school leadership. A stretch-goal would be that all districts have significantly positive influences on this Condition.

6. To what extent are students' cognitive and socio-emotional capacities related?

Evidence from the study provides a very short answer to this question about the extent to which the achievement and well-being outcomes are related. Although the study used "domain specific" measures, there were only two significant correlations between measures of well-being and their corresponding achievement measures. The combined Grade 10 and 12 measure of English achievement was significantly related to well-being in this subject area. Grade 10 Math (Foundations and Pre-calculus) achievement was significantly related to well-being in Math.

With respect to student engagement, the combined Grade 10 and 12 student engagement measure was significantly related to Grade 10 and 12 combined English achievement, Grade 10 math achievement (Foundations and Pre-calculus) and 2016 graduation rates.

7. How do School Leaders understand their districts' work and its helpfulness to them?

The answer to this question was based on approximately hour-long interviews with 37 principals and vice-principals from across the province to a series of ten questions about the work of their districts. It is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research involves large swaths of context-relevant conversation, which is then coded into themes. Once themes are identified, quotes or thoughts are even more finely coded. Quotes are then used as sample statements that serve to illuminate the general thinking in a code that appears to be significant. Those interviewed were provided with the questions that would be asked ahead of time, via email. It can be assumed that there was at least some consideration of how to answer the questions prior to answering them.

Principals and vice-principals are well-positioned to answer these questions. However, they are "close observers whose daily lives are impacted", they are not "in the chairs" of those doing district work. Their perceptions are not uniformly or consistently informed by content and context knowledge. They are, however, experienced educators, they have been promoted, and they have experienced leadership development of which British Columbia is proud. Their voices offer insight. Where the voices represent a lack of knowledge or experience, this is because the views are different, not because they are somehow "less than**.**" The scope of the work is different. And while the answers may not reflect system leaders' views, there was some significant commonalities in the data that should not be dismissed. This executive summary touches on the highlights of answers to questions about approaches to eight of the nine district Characteristics serving as the focus of this study. Interviewees claimed little knowledge about the work of their trustees, the one

district Characteristic not addressed in this summary. This summary is also limited to what interviewees considered to be approaches that were helpful to their school's improvement efforts.

Broadly Shared Mission, Vision and Goals for Students

The introduction to questions about this district Characteristic was as follows: "Many districts go through some process to establish a set of overall directions for the district often including a mission, a vision and sometimes more specific goals intended to serve as priorities for schools in their improvement work". Interviewees were then asked to (a) briefly describe what their district had done about this and (b) how it had influenced, either positively or negatively, the school improvement work of the interviewee and her/his staff.

Responses to this question indicated that for a district's vision, mission and goals to have meaning in schools, it needed to be developed through a highly participatory process including extensive engagement by school staffs and sometimes members of the wider school community in a well-orchestrated and relatively prolonged process. Highly participative approaches to building district vision, alongside alignment of school goals and processes to district goals and a substantial amount of staff buy-in to the vision had a significant influence on the nature and direction of improvement efforts in schools.

Coherent Instructional Guidance

One way or another, districts often provide guidance to school staffs about priorities for their instructional work, as well as advocate for particular approaches to instruction to be used by teachers. Respondents were asked what their districts had done about this and what influence it has had on their work and the work of their staff.

In most the districts, interviewees indicated positive effects on instruction when:

- access to professional development was linked with improved instruction and cohesiveness among the staff;
- district-established processes for improving instruction encouraged innovative teaching practices based on research;
- schools received financial support from the district when district directions were followed in the classrooms.

Deliberate and Consistent Uses of Multiple Sources of Evidence to Inform Decisions

Interviewees were asked what their districts had done about uses of evidence and how has this influenced their work and the work of their teachers. Districts were helpful to schools, interviewees indicated, when they had data warehouses and when they provided assistance to schools in accessing and interpreting data about their own schools. Districts were also helpful when they included one or more staff members with evidence-related expertise who could provide guidance to schools about the interpretation and use of data. District-developed assessment teams able to work with schools were viewed as important resources.

When asked about evidence provided uniquely by the district, many interviewees pointed to the *Tell Them from Me* (TTFM) surveys. Some schools and some districts were reported to use parent satisfaction surveys and mention was made of diagnostic evidence collected to help diagnose student needs (e.g., PM benchmarks, whole class reading assessments).

Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes

Responses to questions about the nature of district and school improvement processes in their districts revealed considerable variation in the sophistication of district approaches to organizational improvement. Both capacity development of school staffs and increased student success was our lens for judging "sophistication", a lens justified by previous evidence about how high performing districts go about organizational improvement with their schools.

Relatively sophisticated approaches to improvement by BC districts began with the development of a district strategic plan followed by an expectation that schools would align their own improvement goals with district goals included in that plan. Within this general approach, districts varied in (a) the levels of participation by school staffs in the creation of their strategic plans, (b) the extent of interaction that occurred between school and district staffs as school responses were being crafted and (c) the extent to which some form of systematic data were required to justify the focus for school improvement plans. Each of these three dimensions of variation in approaches to improvement are also dimensions of variation in the extent of potential capacity development resulting from the improvement process.

The most sophisticated approach to organizational improvement, described by interviewees from one district, required school improvement plans to take the form a "theory of action." At least conceptually, a theory of action consists of a series of "if-then" propositions (e.g., *if our Grade 4 teachers have opportunities to view model lessons of especially effective math instruction, then they will begin to improve their own instruction in math; if our Grade 4 teachers improve their instruction in math, then our math results on the Foundation Skills Assessment will increase*). A school improvement plan designed as a theory of action would include a large number of such propositions so that each component of the improvement strategy is linked to the end goal (some positive impact on students) however indirectly. And each proposition needs to be justified with evidence or - lacking evidence - at least logic or theory. Such an approach demands a high

level of discipline in the creation of a plan and bringing such discipline to a plan requires considerable learning in order to justify the plan's propositions.

Variations in overall approaches to organizational improvement aside, interviewees identified at least six district actions as helpful to their school improvement efforts. These actions included:

- the creation of instructional leadership teams to support schools
- assistance in the provision and interpretation of relevant data
- provision of external expertise in key content areas
- provision of choice in how resources for purchasing technology were spent
- a superintendent that listened carefully to expressions of need by those in schools
- effectively sharing the message around the strategic plan and development of plans that are simpler and more focused.

Professional Development for All Members

Interviewees were asked what was their district's primary orientation to professional development and how had this orientation had influenced their work and the work of their teachers. Direct responses to this question featured considerable variation in the amount, the focus and the value of professional development. In comparison with much of the research evidence about effective PD. Some districts were "doing it right". Interview evidence indicated that PD in these districts was relatively plentiful, sufficiently comprehensive to allow for differences in PD needs among teachers and administrators, and carefully aligned to the capacities that staffs would need to move the district and school improvement agenda forward. A substantial proportion of this PD was "job embedded", allowing opportunities for participants to develop the knowledge and skills needed to successfully implement new practices in their own school and classroom contexts. At the school level, professional development was aimed more at general capacity building, whereas the majority of interviewees reported that when it was primarily directed by the district, it was usually aligned with district and school improvement priorities.

Budgets, Structures, Personnel Policies and Procedures and Uses of Time are Aligned with the District's Mission, Vision and Goals

Interviewees were asked "What areas of your own district appear to be well aligned? Are there areas that still need work? and What difference does this alignment (and misalignment) make to your own leadership and the instructional work of your teachers?" Most interviewees believed their school and district budgets were significantly aligned. Most interviewees also spoke about the alignment of personnel resources with district (if not school) priorities for contributing to student success. Staff required to support key priorities for district improvement were hired. Alignment of budget to the school improvement plan and alignment of school activities to the district plan showed the importance of continuity district-wide and school-wide.

The majority of the interviewees noted that, when there was alignment, everybody was "on the same page" and it sent a clear message about the importance of an initiative or an activity.

Respondents, in sum, agreed that alignment makes a big difference to work in schools and elements of the organization that are misaligned really stand in the way of effective education – improvement efforts "grind" to a halt.

Comprehensive Approaches to Leadership Development

This section summarizes responses to questions about district approaches to leadership recruitment, selection, initial preparation, and both the professional development and performance appraisal of incumbent leaders. Variations in approaches to leadership development were extensive. Interviewees were asked about the most common components of leadership development including how early encouragement to consider a formal leadership role was provided, processes to help prepare for application for a formal leadership position, the nature of the leadership selection process, subsequent support available for those selected, and evaluation of those in formal leadership roles, primarily principals and vice-principals. Evidence from the interviews indicates districts do not approach leadership development in the same way. Some districts had extensive programs that were aimed at skill-development that showed some consideration for stage of career, and others seemed to have no widely known and supported approach for leadership development, at least according to the principals who were interviewed. A few districts had experimented with promising approaches but had not yet had the opportunity to follow through on these enough to reap the potential benefits of their approaches.

Several districts were reported to have very well developed and carefully implemented leadership development processes. Effective ways of encouraging people to consider assuming formal school leadership positions were both indirect and direct. Interviewees pointed to the importance of being encouraged (multiple times often) by others (e.g. principals and superintendents) to consider the move from teacher to administrator and informal observations or conversations which helped them to better understand the nature of the job. Direct encouragement to consider formal leadership roles included being asked to be part of a school or district committee for the experience and being "tapped on the shoulder", a process with considerable influence, according to the available research.

Selection and hiring processes were reported as very uneven. But evidence points to the value of processes that (a) are well known to candidates, including the qualities needed to be successful, (b) allow for both internal and external candidates to apply, (c) entail significant data collection about candidates including references and some process to assess the candidates abilities and dispositions such as an interview, (d) are enacted by a selection committee that includes representative from multiple professional and support roles in the district. The selection process may be for a single position or to create a pool of eligible candidates for a set of positions not fully known at the time of selection to the pool. When a pool is selected, it is important to be clear to successful candidates about the lifespan of that pool; some districts select pools that have no life at the end of a selection cycle while others place candidates in a pool until they are actually placed in a position. Neither of these options seems superior. It is the understanding those selected into a

pool have about the duration of the pool that needs to be clear to avoid unnecessary confusion and frustration.

Initial preparation processes for leaders reported by most interviewees was the short course (week-long seminar held on the UBC campus) for new administrators which is organized and operated by a provincial organization. Informal processes including mentoring and opportunities for leadership roles in school and serving on district and school committees were sometimes also mentioned. Present in the data but not with high frequency were comments about in-district professional learning opportunities that were both helpful and formative in the growing understandings of school leadership. A few interviewees identified book studies or use of the growth plan as important learning opportunities. Taken together, learning to lead is a multi-faceted, ongoing process where the needs of the leader change considerably over time, so different opportunities are appropriate at different stages. Principals describing their beginnings describe opportunities in a variety of ways. Of importance is that there are opportunities, some districts providing more and more varied opportunities than other districts may provide.

Once placed in a principal or vice-principal position, interviewees described very uneven approaches to both evaluation and ongoing support, with some districts having very public and transparent processes and others where the process is either a mystery or may not exist. Performance appraisal for teachers in British Columbia is not a generalized expectation; it occurs when a teacher encounters significant difficulty, and is overseen at all steps by the relevant union. This makes performance appraisal of principals and vice-principals an interesting issue, as it is not a part of reality until they reach this stage. This context matters. A lot was said about 360 degree evaluation processes which typically include the collection of survey data from multiple stakeholder groups about the school leaders performance, analysis by district staff of the themes appearing in these data and then the communication of these themes and recommendations for consideration by the evaluated leader. Interviewees in several districts reported versions of such an approach to evaluation every three to five years and spoke quite positively about its value. Interviewees in one district also noted that evaluation was very thorough and done twice a year; once at the beginning of the year and then again at the end of the year. As part of this process, the superintendent spent two days at school interviewing about 25 staff and the principal. The principal's growth plan was used in the process as the superintendent, in collaboration with the principal, identified goals and submitted an evaluation draft to the district. Ongoing conversations regarding the evaluation were carried out between the superintendent and the principal.

Ongoing support for those in school leadership roles was quite extensive in some districts. Especially valuable, according to the interviewees, were mentoring experiences, close working relationships with a district supervisor, a variety of formal professional development programs, both in-house and delivered by provincial organizations, and participation in a network of colleagues willing to provide advice and support on an "as needed" basis.

Relationships

Interviewees were asked about the quality of relationships among district office leaders, between district and school-level leaders and between schools and parents.

According to most of the interviewees, the current status of relationships among their district office leaders was quite good. Good, productive or ideal relationships among senior district leaders were characterized by interviewees as collaborative, with a collective focus on the districts' vision and goals or "moral purpose". Such relationships were a consequence of high levels of trust, transparency in decision making, considerable respect for one another and a sense of being part of a team. When district leaders had good relationships, school-level leaders heard the same messages from all members of the district team.

Most interviewees were also quite positive about the quality of the relationships they had with their district colleagues. High quality relationships with district colleagues, meant a collaborative, rather than top-down, approach to decision making, ease of access to district leaders for consultation, a respectful disposition on the part of senior leaders toward the concerns, perspectives and preferences of school-level leaders.

Interviewees were also asked about the advice and support they received from their district colleagues about school/parent relationships. Some interviewees identified that advice focused on building positive relationships with parents and the community, and involving them in decision making, while there were many principals who indicated advice and support related to school/parent relationships was weak to non-existent. Considerable evidence now suggests that schools can significantly improve the success of their students by helping to improve the quality of family educational cultures in the homes of some of their neediest students. Interviewees had nothing to say about this type of work or guidelines that might have been provided by their districts related to such work.

Findings Common to the British Columbia and Ontario District Studies

We were asked to compare BC and Ontario data. It is, after all, a replication study. And while there are things that we have learned that inform Strong Districts, comparison is something we do with some reluctance. Comparisons are always fraught with 'buts or not so's, exceptions and oversimplifications. Ontario and BC are provinces with many similarities, but also many differences. Just as every school leadership situation is slightly different, every district, every province…every reality is "unique in all the world" to quote The Little Prince (Exupery). We will, with this hesitation in mind, offer some considerations that might serve some purpose. Before we provide this comparison, we do want to contextualize.

We think of both provinces as progressive, economically successful, and diverse. The Table below provides enough information to assist with clarifying some data that is considered relevant when saying the provinces are "the same, but different".

Table 1

Relating the Context of British Columbia and Ontario by the Numbers

Topic of Comparison	British Columbia	Ontario
Population (2016)	4,648,055	13,448,494
	2.5 million reside in the Greater Vancouver area (GVA)	6.418 million reside in the Greater Toronto area (GTA)
Immigration Description	GVA: 712,000 people reported speaking an immigrant language most often at home	GTA: 1,800,000 people reported speaking an immigrant language most often at home
Ranking in Canada as Immigration Destination	Vancouver (GVA): #2	Toronto (GTA): #1
Other cities in Top Five Immigration Destination cities in Canada	None	Ottawa (256,000) Hamilton (177,000)
Area of Province	944,735 km²	1,076,000 km²
	364,764 miles²	415,598 miles²
Population identified as living in a rural/remote location in 2011	609,363 (14% of the population)	1,806,036 (14% of the population)
# of publically funded provincial district organizations	One	Four (plus one) • Public, English (31) • Public, French (4) • Public, English Catholic (29) • Public, French Catholic (8) • Ministry, other (4)
# of district school boards	60	76
GDP per capita (C$)	47,579	48,971
Indigenous population	232,290; 5.4% (First Nation; Métis) of total provincial population	301,425; 2.4% (First Nation, Métis, Inuit) of total provincial population
# First Nation communities	198	126
Official Language	English	English
Largest School District	Surrey (+70,000)	Toronto (+250,000)
Smallest School District	Stikine (+200)	Moose Factory (+300)*
*The Ministry/other school districts may be smaller than Moose Factory		

Sample size matter**s** in quantitative research. Larger is better**,** and the BC study included only 21 districts; whereas the Ontario study included a larger, but still modest, 45 districts. This section summarizes findings that were common to both studies on the grounds that such findings are likely to be more robust than is the case when results of the two studies are considered separately. The seven research questions used to organize the results of both studies provide the framework for this section.

1. On average, how well developed are school districts in the province?
Both studies reported the current-status of the nine district Characteristics to be at least moderately well-developed.

2. On average, how well developed are those Conditions in schools, classrooms and families prior research indicates make significant contributions to student success?
All school, classroom and family Conditions measured by the surveys were at least moderately well developed in both provinces' schools. The best developed of these Conditions in both provinces was Safe and Orderly Environments with School Leadership ranking third, just below Teacher Commitment. The two least well-developed Conditions were also the same in both provinces - Classroom Instruction and Organization of Planning and Instructional Time.

3. Do those Conditions in schools, classrooms and families identified in prior research as making significant contributions to student success have comparable effects in the province?
Both studies provided an unequivocal 'yes' to this question.

4. How large are the effects of School Leadership on student cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes?
Results of the BC study are in the same direction as the Ontario study, although the effects of School Leadership on student outcomes were stronger in the Ontario, as compared with the BC study.

5. How large are the effects of the nine district Characteristics on students' cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes?
Both studies reported seven district Characteristics with significant indirect influence on student outcomes through mediating school, classroom and family Conditions. The BC study found significant direct effects of district Characteristics on math achievement, in particular, with three district Characteristics having the largest effects including Use of Multiple Forms of Evidence for Decision Making, District-provided Professional Development and Relationships. Ontario results found district effects on both language and math achievement; Mission, Vision and Goals for Students as well as Coherent Instructional Guidance made the largest contribution of these results.

8.   To what extent are students' cognitive and socio-emotional capacities related?
Both studies reported some significant relationships between student achievement and domain-specific conception of well-being (feelings of well-being about achievement in math and language). Significant correlations between secondary English and Math achievement and secondary student well-being in those subjects were reported in the BC study. Results of the Ontario study indicated significant relationships between student well-being and engagement especially in mathematics.

9.   How do School Leaders understand their districts' work and its helpfulness to them?
Evidence used to answer this question in both studies were interview data from principals and vice-principals. These data paint a picture of how districts enact each of the nine district Characteristics in ways that respondents perceived to be helpful (and not helpful) for their own school improvement work. Comparisons of results across the two studies is complicated by the nuanced and context-sensitive nature of these data. There are, however, clear points of agreement among the two samples of respondents about what districts do that is helpful to their own improvement work. Districts are perceived to be helpful when they:

- Engage school staffs and other stakeholders, as fully as possible, in decision making about strategic district directions;
- Work with school staffs to identify district priorities consistent with local school priorities;
- Carefully align district policies and procedures in support of district and school priorities;
- Maintain support for a small, manageable number of district and school priorities over the time realistically needed for their implementation;
- Provide school staffs with considerable autonomy and support in the implementation of agreed on district and school priorities;
- Maintain a laser-like focus on the improvement of instruction in schools;
- Use multiple forms of credible evidence, in a transparent way, to make decisions and help school staffs develop the capacity to make effective use of available evidence for their own improvement purposes;
- Do whatever it takes to identify, appoint and further develop highly effective school leaders
- Facilitate non-hierarchical forms of communication and trustworthy relationships among district and school leaders.

Recommendations

One of the overall goals of the study was to determine the extent to which the results of earlier and parallel studies[3] about the direct effects of the nine district Characteristics on student outcomes could be replicated. The study did replicate the overall results of those earlier studies.

1. ***Results from this study provide further evidence about the efficacy of the nine district Characteristics. District leaders should consider how these characteristics could best be used as a framework for, and focus of, their improvement efforts.***

Among the most important results from this study is evidence of significant effects, on most student outcomes included in the study, of all 12 school, classroom and family Conditions serving as mediators of district effects. These results are entirely consistent with much evidence collected in many other contexts. The quantity and consistency of these findings overwhelms evidence available about other "levers" for change such as specific programs, for example. This evidence justifies four recommendations for district leaders to consider.

2. ***Districts should set, as a priority for supporting the improvement work of their schools, learning more about how to improve the status of the 12 Conditions included in the study and developing resource material that schools can use in their efforts to further develop selected Conditions as part of their school improvement efforts.***

3. ***Districts should reflect the important contribution to student success of the 12 Conditions by including specific training for school leaders in how to diagnose and improve the status of each of the Conditions in their organizations.***

4. ***Districts and their schools should avoid an exclusive focus on any one of the 12 Conditions on the grounds that it is some sort of "silver bullet" for all schools. All 12 Conditions have the potential to significantly help improve student success and the choice of which one or several to focus on at a given time should depend on judgements about what would be most helpful in individual school contexts.***

School Leadership, measured using an instrument based on the BCPVP conception of effective school leadership, made modest but significant direct contributions to most measures of student achievement. Several dimensions of this conception of leadership (especially Instructional Leadership) were responsible for the bulk of these contribution while one (Moral Stewardship) made no contribution.

5. ***Data from this study may be the first empirical test of the predictive validity of BCPVP's conception of leadership. These results should prompt to rethink, adapt or re-confirm the current conception of effective school leadership in BC.***

---

[3] Leithwood, 2010; 2011, 2013; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood & McCullough, 2017.

School Leadership had a significant influence on those school, classroom and family conditions associated with student success by this and many prior studies. However, this study found wide variation across districts in their contributions to School Leadership.

6. ***Districts should reassess what they are doing to nurture the development of their school leaders ensuring that the explicit focus of their development efforts are consistent with the practices identified as effective by current research and that the means they are using for leadership development are as effective as possible. There is likely no single improvement focus for a district that will make as large a difference to its performance as a focus on School Leadership development.***

Appendix

Further Context
Context matters. British Columbia and Ontario both have significant education histories, some of it is brilliant, some of it is not; some of it is similar, some of it is not. We encourage consideration of context in all research, without negating the information the research provides about "next steps" informed by the data itself. Critical consideration is not circumvented by research, but it should be informed by that research.

The Last Word: Leadership Matters. Business as usual is not an option.
School leadership matters. A "whatever it takes" attitude that encourages purposeful, passionate and positive school leadership is essential. Leaders learn through successes and failures when they are in the chair. Leaders learn through formal processes, such as study groups, courses and presentations. Beyond this, leaders nearly all identify a formative experience of leadership that taught them "how this all-important task is done". District leaders are positioned to provide these essential leadership lessons. Strong leaders model for other leaders. Beware! District leaders are watched carefully. Make sure your practice is conscious. Leadership is situational – a leader at Microsoft really does not 'have what it takes' to lead a school system without considerable re-culturing and recognition of the unique reality of schools and school districts.

District leadership in and of itself serves purposes far beyond modelling. Hambrick, in his work on what he calls 'top management teams' states "their task is extremely complex and has multiple elements….Top teams are bombarded with information, much of it ambiguous and unstructured. Signals are often contradictory and open to various interpretations." (1995, p. 112). We began this summary with a simple Figure, one that makes it all seem so simple. This, of course, is essential for research, but misleading for practitioners, who wonder "why is my day so busy" when they see these things.

The context is inclusive, but not exhaustive. Figure 2 below illustrates that district leadership is complex, and is charged with supporting the entire educational environment. Specifically, the district is central to enabling the school principal. It performs critical, complex tasks that, done purposefully and masterfully, stabilize the schooling environment: creating predictability and forward planning. The 'noise' that serves to distract the cohesive, organized voice of planful improvement, requires buffering; laser-like focus on pathways that serve the vital purposes schools fulfill in educating our children is an essential role of district leadership.

Figure 2. The School District Context
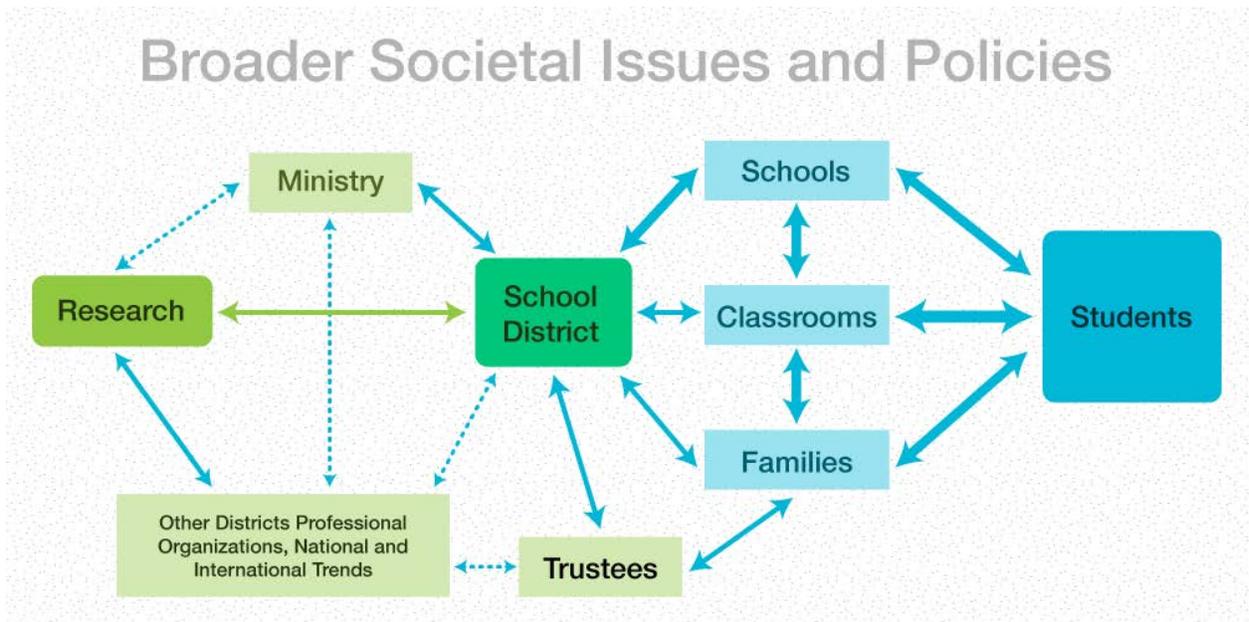
References

Hambrick, D.C. (1995). Fragmentation and the other problems CEOs have with their top management teams. *California Management Review*, 37(3), 110-127.

Leithwood, K., (2010). Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective at closing the achievement gap. *Leadership and Policy in Schools,* 9(3), 245-291.

Leithwood, K. (2011). *Characteristics of high performing school systems in Ontario: Part 1.* Toronto*:* Final report of research submitted to the Institute for Educational Leadership, Toronto.

Leithwood, K. (2013). *Strong districts and their leadership*. Toronto: Paper commissioned by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education, Toronto.

Leithwood, K., Azah, V. (2016). Characteristics of high performing school districts. *Leadership and Policy in Schools,* 16(1), 27-53.

Leithwood, K., McCullough, C. (2017). *Strong districts and their leadership project*. Toronto: Final report of research submitted to the Council of Ontario Directors of Education and the Ontario Ministry of Education.