

# Discussion Paper: Contextual Literacy

## Introduction

Contextual Literacy is a critical leadership competency that emphasizes the ability of system leaders to navigate and influence the complex web of relationships, structures, and systems that define public education. It is about understanding how internal and external systems operate, how they intersect, and how change happens across multiple layers of policy, governance, community, and culture.

For school district leaders, contextual literacy is both a mindset and a skillset. It requires fluency in the “language” of governance, labour relations, finance, Indigenous protocols, and community partnerships. Leaders must be able to connect seemingly disconnected systems and communicate effectively across professional, cultural, and political boundaries. They must also forecast and respond to change—locally, provincially, nationally, and globally—while remaining grounded in the unique needs and identities of their communities.

This competency is rooted in respect for place and history. It honours Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and it demands communication practices that build authentic relationships. In practice, contextual literacy is about seeing both the forest and the trees: understanding the broader political and social ecosystem while remaining deeply attentive to local realities and relationships.

## Considerations for Leaders

### 1. Lead Self

- Cultivate deep understanding of internal district systems and how they function together (e.g., human resources, board governance, IT infrastructure).
- Build authentic relationships with colleagues across departments to support collaboration and mutual understanding.
- Learn and use the contextual language and frameworks that align with various internal systems.
- Identify and apply appropriate theories of change within district systems and understand their mechanisms for impact.

## 2. Lead Teams

- Support teams in understanding how their work connects to, and is impacted by, other internal systems.
- Help teams translate their practices into language and structures understood by other teams or departments.
- Lead efforts to connect internal systems in ways that promote coherence, mutual support, and collaboration.
- Guide teams in recognizing points of dysfunction and adapting practices to restore system health.

## 3. Lead Organizations

- Build strong relationships with leaders in external systems (e.g., unions, government agencies, Indigenous communities, partner organizations).
- Advocate effectively for the district in public forums, aligning internal priorities with broader political, economic, and social realities.
- Forecast and plan for changes in external environments, ensuring the district is both responsive and proactive.
- Lead district-wide change initiatives grounded in a deep understanding of internal systems and external pressures.
- Ensure that the district not only adapts to change, but actively influences the social, political, and economic systems that shape its context.

## Reflective Questions for Leaders and Teams

1. How well do we understand the internal systems that drive our district? Where are we strong, and where do we need greater clarity?
2. What external systems (government, union, community, economic) most influence our work—and how are we engaging with them?
3. In what ways do we help teams translate their work across systems to support coherence, connection, and collaboration?
4. How do we honour Indigenous language, protocol, and worldview in our communications and systems design?
5. Are we building systems that allow us not only to respond to change, but to influence it in service of equity and student success?