THE LEARNING SCHOOL DISTRICT:
A POSTMODERN APPROACH TO SCHOOL DISTRICT GOVERNANCE

BY

DR. JEAN BROWN
Faculty of Education, Memorial University

DR. DAVID DIBBON
Faculty of Education, Memorial University

DR. BRUCE SHEPPARD
Avalon West School District

Paper presented at CSSE in Halifax, NS

May 2003
Introduction

The research reported in this paper is set in the context of a focussed research agenda on organizational learning that we have pursued over the last decade to determine the nature of leadership required to bring about change in schools and school districts (Brown & Sheppard, 1999; Dibbon, 1999 & 2000; Elliott, 2000; Sheppard & Brown, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 1999ba. 1999b, 1998a, 1998b, 1997, 1996; Sheppard, Brown, Genge, & Walters 1996). We began this research after having concluded that good schools could not be created by political mandates; or by ill conceived, simplistic solutions, such as back-to-basics, standardized testing, teacher assessment; or accountability models. In the early stages of our research we focused on the leadership of the principal (Brown, 1994; Sheppard, 1996). This led us to the conclusion that while competent leadership provided by the principal is important, it is not sufficient to sustain the level of professional learning required for meaningful change. Our findings were supportive of a growing body of research suggesting that changing school practices is very much dependent upon the level of organizational learning that is fostered by team leadership (Cousins, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Fullan, 1998; Leithwood & Aitken, 1995; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinback, 1999; Leithwood & Louis, 1999; Leithwood, Leonard & Sharratt, 1997; Louis, 1994; Mitchell, Sackney & Walker, 1996; Prestine & Dole, 1995).

In all our work, we have accepted the definition of organizational learning put forward by DiBella, Nevis, and Gould (1996) as the capacity (or processes) within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience. Within the context of this definition, we have assessed the capacity of organizational learning through measures of each of Senge’s (1990) five disciplines: personal mastery; team learning, mental models, shared vision; and systems thinking.

We have also learned, however, that team leadership that facilitates organizational learning is not easy to replicate. In fact, it is quite naive to assume that all educators endorse team leadership or organizational learning as a means of successful change. After having been in our role as critical research friends in 25 schools and four school districts for several years, we concluded that both team leadership and organizational learning are often viewed as just another project or another school improvement process that is accepted as positive by some and ineffective by others. We learned, as well, that without the principal’s endorsement and support, it is highly unlikely that teachers will be successful in leading a shift toward team leadership and organizational learning. Furthermore, we determined that even when principals are committed to making a shift to team leadership and organizational learning many experience difficulty. The ability of principals to make the shift is quite dependent upon their understanding of leadership theories, the extent to which potential followers view team leadership as appropriate, the level of support provided by district office leaders, and their ability to deal with other contextual variables. Organizational learning is a means to developing successful schools, but it will not occur by simply stating that we want it to be so.
Lessons Learned

The aforementioned conclusions led us to focus our research on developing an understanding of the factors that inhibit or facilitate team leadership and organizational learning in schools. From this research, we have derived the following lessons:

**Lesson One**: External pressures or interventions can be substantial catalysts of change, but do not create sufficient tension to facilitate change in all schools. Shared knowledge structures stored in the long-term memories of schools (Senge’s (1990) mental models) are huge impediments to learning. These knowledge structures create a “groupthink” image of the school that allows teachers to believe that change is not required. As a result, they accept traditional models of leadership as well as traditional classroom practices. Successes in the more innovative schools appear to be dependent upon school leaders who foster school cultures of shared leadership that are facilitative of learning throughout the whole school community.

**Lesson Two**: In difficult organizational environments, the formation of a leadership team may be essential; however, such a team does not necessarily foster leadership to facilitate learning. If such teams are simply contrived school structures that are subject to the decision-making powers of the principal, they neither serve as effective catalysts of change, nor as effective agents to ensure continuity of focus. However, where school teams are empowered to provide the necessary leadership, they function as champions of the change process.

**Lesson Three**: In spite of the evidence that team leadership is positively related to improved organizational learning and school success, it is rather difficult in some schools to change the existing culture of leadership. A commitment from the principal and other key organizational participants to change to a model of team leadership is just a small first step. The principal must be committed to organizational learning and must provide strong leadership in order to overcome organizational resistance. The actions required of the leader may even result in a leadership paradox as the formal leader may be required to unilaterally dictate that the leadership model will be changing to team leadership.

**Lesson Four**: Dysfunctional organizational learning patterns can be minimized through the action research process. Knowledge acquired through internal or external sources can be passively accepted without any meaningful learning and promises may not result in action. The result of such inaction and non-learning may go unnoticed without an established action research process. In the more innovative schools, action research cycles of meaningful assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation ensure commitment and accountability. In spite of its effectiveness, implementation of an action research process is rather difficult in the early stages. Participants who have little previous experience with such a process find the level of accountability that is inherent in the model to be quite threatening. As a result, without the pressure and support of a champion, action research is likely to be abandoned in the early stages.

**Lesson Five**: Before a shared vision can be developed, a school must define its boundaries between internal and external constituents. While boundary definition becomes difficult in public schools, the extent of “openness” of the system boundaries must be addressed. It appears
that organizational boundaries are based in context and that each school must define its boundaries in order to determine the constituent groups that must share its organizational vision and those groups that must be consulted.

**Lesson Six:** Individual learning is essential to organizational learning (Senge’s (1990) personal mastery). Individuals bring new knowledge to the school while they pursue their personal educational goals. Conversely, individuals who perceive that their learning is not supported feel undervalued. This leads to lowered levels of morale, lack of trust, the creation of divisive thinking, and reduces the possibility of genuine team learning.

**Lesson Seven:** An established and accepted bureaucratic hierarchy reduces trust, initiative, and creativity therefore inhibiting organizational learning; however, hierarchy is clearly the most basic structure within which schools operate as public institutions under the jurisdiction of school districts and provincial governments. It appears that while hierarchies may enslave us, they also provide structure and regularity to peoples’ work lives through duties, responsibilities, and routines. “They fulfill our deep needs for order and security (Leavitt, 2003, p. 98)...and it is unrealistic to expect that we will do away with them in the foreseeable future. (p. 102). If organizational learning is to occur in schools, the inhibiting aspects of hierarchical authoritarianism must be reduced.

Because schools generally operate under the jurisdiction of school boards, several of the lessons learned from our research at the school level suggest that school district leadership is critical in fostering change at the school level (See Elliot, 2000; & Dibbon, 2003b) for evidence of district impact on organizational learning at the school level). A learning district can create sufficient tension to facilitate change in all schools. A learning district (Dibbon, 2003a) can provide the professional learning opportunities to build leadership capacity throughout the district and can encourage risk taking that would allow school principals to foster meaningful leadership teams in schools. District leaders can also provide support to these teams to ensure that leadership is shared and that they are truly empowered to bring about change. Because districts hold the legislative authority to set policy and mandate new directions, senior administrators have the legitimate power to mandate a team leadership model, to develop infrastructure that will foster organizational learning (example, a strategic learning plan that includes a clearly articulated vision) and to adopt tools such an action research model for implementation of planned change.

Attempting to facilitate district-level organizational learning, however, has its own challenges. One member of this research team moved from the role of researcher to CEO of one of the districts where we had been conducting research. Both the research evidence and the practical indicators revealed that the traditional hierarchical authoritarianism was deeply ingrained in the organizational culture of the district. While the new CEO held a clear perspective that while hierarchy inhibited organizational learning, it became readily apparent that it was wise to accept the following conclusion by Leavitt (2003):

> Even the most modern of managers must inevitably exercise some degree of authority some of the time; [however], successful executives know almost intuitively how to be
both engaging and authoritative. They know that authority is the immutable baseline, the sine qua non of organizational life” (p. 102).

As a result, the CEO accepted that if organizational learning were to occur in the district, it would have to operate within the reality of the hierarchy. The focus would have to be on reducing the negative impacts of that reality. As he worked with district and school staff to establish learning as a way of working, it became readily apparent that the school board trustees would have to be included in this shift as well, a view supported by Newton and Tunison (2003):

Even as school systems are moving toward the implementation of organizational learning, board governance typically remains wedded to traditional notions of control through policy articulation and management through policy implementation. This is an inappropriate model of governance for learning organizations or learning communities…. A school or school system cannot become a learning organization or a learning community with a governance team that opts out of the learning organization. (p. 2)

School Trustees Study

Achievement testing, greater participation of parents, maintaining infrastructure, school closures, fewer resources, creating safe schools, providing technology rich schools and dealing with issues of diversity are some of the issues facing school districts and their elected trustees. How do school trustees deal with such issues of governance?

There is an assumption among some that school trustees are not dealing with the most important issues – that of student performance and achievement. Dawson and Quinn (2001) writing in The School Administrator, an American Association of School Administrators newsletter, observe that school boards devote less than 20 percent of their time on these issues. The literature also assumes that few trustees have curriculum or specific program knowledge, leading many to avoid curriculum or instructional policy-making. This is consistent with an earlier Canadian (Saskatchewan) study by Walker (1996). He concluded that trustees lean on their backgrounds, their community connections, fellow trustees, family members and the advice of their director to make decisions that are aligned with their personal principles and convictions within the economic constraints and measured by personal rules and policy consistency. This enables them to engage in practical matters but is it sufficient preparation to make them good governors? Is this why many shy away from dealing with student issues? If so, what can be done to develop their capacity to learn and improve in this area?

There is consensus that trustees need to govern through policies, leaving the administration of the system to its paid staff. For volunteers in nonprofit organizations (which school trustees are), it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Kouri (1999) relates issues of power, understanding, and information. Our study investigates whether policy governance improves when school boards operate as learning organizations.

Our preliminary understanding based on the literature leads us to believe that traditionally trustees follow a linear-rational model of decision-making, relying predominantly on prior...
knowledge. Since, we are told, few have curriculum or specific program knowledge, this means most avoid curriculum or instructional policy-making committees. In an attempt to overcome this deficiency, this rural district has adopted an organizational learning framework as their district strategic plan. This requires challenging their old model and intentionally introducing a more iterative model of decision-making more conducive to working in a learning organization. In this paper we examine the elected trustees as they attempt to govern in a learning environment. This is another piece in our investigation of the nature of leadership required to bring about change.

We approach this study as researchers in educational administration, involved with research on organizational learning (Senge, 1990) since 1995, and with this school district for the past five years. Our focus began with 13 schools (Sheppard and Brown, 2000), and moved to all schools in the district in 2002. The district is committed through its strategic plan to becoming a learning organization, as defined by Dibbon (2000), Leithwood (2000), Senge (1990), and Sheppard and Brown (2000). We find that the five inter-related disciplines are effective in our work with teachers and with trustees -- systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning.

In our work on the elected school trustees, we have conducted a comprehensive literature review. Our preliminary work suggests that there is little research on how school trustees learn, and how they obtain the information they need. We have found very little research on schools boards as learning organizations.

**Research Methodology**

Until the beginning of the 2002 school year, the district had worked mainly on establishing organizational learning principles in schools, and with teachers, and administrators. However, as a part of its evolving and iterative organizational learning plan, it has now includes school trustees in this process. Although the longer serving school trustees had some awareness of the concept of learning organizations, our preliminary survey indicated that as a group their conceptual knowledge was poor. We have completed Phase One of a study, which consisted of a two-day professional development session we conducted at a School Trustees Retreat and Workshop. The structure of the sessions provided numerous structured opportunities to collect data from each of the trustees surrounding their preferred leadership style and how they were practicing the five learning disciplines noted above. We have also completed Phase Two\(^1\), a follow-up telephone interview with the trustees. Interview protocols were developed to interview trustees about their information needs and whether they are being met. We seek to discover if trustees are attempting to implement practices consistent with that of a learning organization.

**Results**

\(^1\) Some trustees were away from the district and have not yet been interviewed but they will be included before we make the transition to Phase Three.
In this draft paper we will share some of our preliminary findings. At this stage, of the analysis we feel the best way to introduce you to the background and workings of the district is to introduce you to the people who are serving in the role of trustee and who are actively involved in the Board decision making processes. As such we have developed a series of profile that should help you understand the realities in which these people volunteer. To mask identities and ensure confidentiality, the profiles are composites of the actors and they are intended to provide an overview of the main findings. We have integrated comments and details so that the four profiles that follow are not reflecting any one trustee.

Harry
Harry White is in the medical profession and works in the regional health care facility in a management position. He has training and experience in hospital administration and believes this background is useful in his role as a trustee. He has been with this Board since it was created six years ago (through restructuring of boards) but he previously served on one of the boards that amalgamated. He is impressed overall with his colleagues on the board, and believe they share a common vision: “the best education for children in the district, as best we can provide.” He commented, “If there is heated debate, it is for the children in the long run. Trustees bring issues to the table, there is debate, and then someone will say, “Now, remember it is for the child.”

Harry is impressed with the senior administration, and depends on them to provide information required for board meetings. A package of information is delivered to his house five days prior to the meeting, and Harry describes it as “a big help.” However, it is the Committees that Harry sees as being the focus of most learning. He believes that his main source of information comes through committee work, and through the senior administrators in the district professional office. For example, there was some public controversy about problems in the implementation of the new mathematics curriculum. The media picked it up and as a member of the Program Committee, Harry was confronted with the question of whether or not the program ought to be changed. He approached the matter with a feeling that the new curriculum was a mistake. However, the matter was placed on the agenda of the Program Committee, and the Assistant Director of Programs arranged a number of presentations (study sessions) given by her and three program specialists, to cover all levels of mathematics education (k-12). At the end of the sessions, Harry realized that he had not been fully informed prior to these sessions. He changed his views and supported the implementation of the new mathematics curriculum. The committee also became aware of concerns regarding the link between mathematics achievement and homework. The Committee is currently studying this problem and plan to formally communicate their findings to all parents.

Harry is aware that there is a widespread view in society that the trustee just rubber-stamps decisions already made by the Department of Education and senior administration, but he believes that trustees make a difference. Harry is aware that some boards have been “authoritative.” Harry describes this Board as “consultative” in that the senior staff members develop options that are put to trustees, and the trustees are then able to decide. The school board’s preferred option is often different than that of the school community. He believes that the school board wants what is best for students, but they have to consider “the dollar factor.” Parents, on the other hand, think of the local situation and feel that decisions are made before the consultation process even begins. He commented, “It is difficult for the two to come together.”
Financial accountability (the “dollar factor”) is a major concern, Harry believes, for all school boards in the Province. Although he feels there is a common vision among the trustees directed at the education of the students -- the best possible education for students -- there are varying opinions of what this means. He thinks of it in terms of the best possible interests of students, in the context of fiscal responsibility and personal commitments to the community.

Janice
Janice is keenly interested in the politics of education. She is a provincial leader in education, and is a member of the executive of the Newfoundland and Labrador School Board Association (NLSBA). She strongly supports the orientation session for new trustees provided by the association, and explains how important it was in helping her understand the difference between the trustees role in policy development and governance, as opposed to the senior administration’s role in operations. Because of her involvement with the NLSBA, Janice has attended the conferences of the Atlantic School Board Association and the Canadian School Board Association. These, she explain, are excellent learning experiences and she has heard “powerful speakers” at the conferences sponsored by these associations. Janice also represents the school board on the regional economic development board, and explains that this participation is useful to her as a trustee as it has helped her consolidate municipal, economic and social concerns.

Janice has a great deal of respect for the Director. She has worked with other Directors and saw them as good directors with the ability to bring people together, but she believes the current director has organizational strengths that the others did not have generally feels that “we are lucky to have him.” One of his strongest asset, she believes, is his ability to listen to his senior staff. Janice has worked with directors who are unable to do this. In her view, the current director “knows he is the boss” but “is comfortable with having his senior staff involved”. The assistant directors attend Board meetings, a fact that impresses Janice as she has served on Boards where no other senior staff member but the Director could attend Board meetings (at the insistence of the Director). Janice appreciates the current director’s approach to invite staff members to present to the school board members, stating that “insecure directors won’t let this happen”. She also believes that the current Director’s creation of a General Academic Council (all school district personnel and all school principals) that meets monthly is a good idea.

Janice’s interest in political agendas has made her very aware of the activities of the local member of the House of Assembly (MHA). She observed that the local MHA is making “political promises that can’t be realized.” She would be very pleased if the MHA could find extra resources, but when that does not happen, people are sometimes disappointed and blame the Board. Janice was clearly troubled by a school board meeting at which the results of a vote meant the closure of a community school. The trustees had been forewarned and did not expect the meeting “to be friendly”. However, a group of community members were so angry that the RCMP had to be called in. Janice would like to avoid such situations. She knows that some members of the public believe that trustees are “brainwashed by administration.” Janice disagrees: “The Director and Assistant Directors do explain things but people in the community are not listening. The fact is that local people don’t want the children bussed.”
Janice feels that differences of viewpoints are tolerated within the School Board meetings. She singled out the value of study sessions for trustees, which encouraged “open and frank” discussions. She explained that trustees can’t feel free and be open to the exploration of new ideas in public meetings. There is more openness in closed or privileged meetings, but the most open is the study session where new alternatives can be explored. The Director is usually present at study sessions and also engages in the discussion. She feels that there is a general feeling of openness in the Board and that her fellow trustees are interested in learning. She concluded, “There is generally a willingness to learn but some people have personal agendas they are pushing. Overall, most want to work and will listen.”

Matthew
Mathew White is in his first term as a school trustee. He lives in a large rural community and is employed as a public servant. His only previous involvement in education has been his experience with his own 5 children. As a result of this experience he feels he is relatively well informed about schools. He understands that he has not been elected because he knows how to run a school or a school district but he thinks his major role is to oversee the operations and policy of the board so that schools are run in an effective way. He is well aware of the fact that he doesn’t have access to the detailed pedagogical information/data that district office staff has but he does expect them to share with him and the other board members. To date he is very pleased with this level of sharing and he has indicated that he has a high degree of trust for the CEO and his staff. In fact he feels that the entire school board shares this trust, “I think we’ve come to trust his view…and when he makes a decision most people are prepared to say well we know where he is coming from and he has an established track record”

He credits the district office staff with having the foresight to create a collaborative environment for trustees. He sees this collaboration occurring informally before, and after board and committee meetings. He notes that collaboration also occurs formally at committee and board meetings and at such events as retreats, and conferences. Mathew claims that the committee structure and the informal networking that occur before and after meetings has enable him to develop relationships with other trustees and other district office staff. He also notes that this collaborative atmosphere prevails at most if not all meetings. He claims that while people often disagree with positions taken on an issue and it is common practice for these positions to be challenged and debated, but rarely does the conversation get personal. One of the things he has noticed is that for the most part, trustees and district office people behave very civilly towards each other, even if they happen to be holding opposing views.

Mathew believes that the district has its act together and that there is a shared vision, although he is not 100% clear as to what the vision, mission and goals are and how they are communicated. He has a keen interest in what goes on in schools and thinks that professional development for teachers and principals is important and worth fighting for, he says “we made it a line item in our budget and when things got tight we fought to keep it there, and so far we have succeeded.” He also feels strongly that it is important for teachers to have models of good teaching that they can refer to from time to time. He is delighted that the district has produced a video highlighting exemplary teaching practices in the district and is advocating that another be produced at the intermediate-secondary level. In his view this is one of the most significant initiatives the district has taken in his term in office and the reason he gave is that it was modeling the type of teaching
that was expected. His biggest concern is that the board is too caught up in the politics of school closures and that has resulted in not enough focus on dealing with issues surrounding teaching and learning.

Katherine

Katherine is a retired educator who has agreed to serve on the school board because she believes it is her civic duty to give back to the community. When she was first elected Katherine admitted that despite her many years in the school system she was pretty naive about the role of a trustee. Even after she was first elected she thought it was her job to respond to the local community, that, that was her first allegiance. Now she believes it is not as simple as that. Now in her second term she believes it is critical that trustees take a system-wide perspective when they are making decisions. She says she didn’t always hold this opinion but after her first year on the board, after being cornered by many special interest groups she had an “ah ha” moment and said to herself “this is just not working for me.” Now, she feels that “it is not acceptable for trustees to defend local practices at the expense of the larger community.”

She believes that there is a shared vision of what the board is about. She says “we have a student first philosophy and let me tell you that can be a problem for us because while we as a board make decisions that are based on what is best for students, our critics often take the opposite stand on an issue and they use the same argument and actually accuse us of not thinking about the student”. This she said relates to what she considers to be one of the biggest challenges of the board – “to educate constituents about why and how we make certain decisions. We try, don’t get me wrong, but sometimes I think that some people’s minds are frozen in time and in some communities I don’t think we can have an impact on one person, and I’m not sure how we get beyond this?”

Katherine has a high level of respect for the district office staff, both current and former employees and credits them for having created an acceptable working environment for trustees. In her opinion their views are listened to and valued and she believes that the current (and former CEO) is concerned that she be well informed on issues and remain current on what is happening in other school districts across the province and the country. She said that her primary source of information is district office staff and that they are very efficient at keeping her informed. Her second source of information is “keeping her ear to the ground”, talking with members of the public, be it at the mall or at a house party, and by attending public forums and town hall meetings like the ones that are currently ongoing. She is also a little concerned that discussions about school closures are taking energy away from talking about the real issues. In her view the restructuring decisions are important but she wishes that they could “just get past it and move on….Perhaps then we can continue the dialogue but talk about the type of schools that we want for our children. Unfortunately not as many people will be interested in that conversation but it is one we should have”.

Conclusion

We are at the very early stages of analysis, and the points made below are only some of the themes that are appearing. They are introduced for discussion purposes and for feedback from
others at this conference who may be engaged in similar studies. They are listed in no particular order and they raise questions that need to be pursued further.

**Theme One: Orientation Sessions for New Trustees.** Orientation sessions as provided by the NLSBA appear to be a useful strategy. Trustees all agreed that this one-day session prepared them for their role by helping them distinguish between the role of the trustee and the role of the senior administrators. They also were consistent in being able to define the differences in the role of the Chair of the Board and the Director.

**Theme Two: School Board Culture.** Trustees revealed that the culture of school boards differ, and can, over time, change. A number served in school boards quite different from that of their current board. Even in this Board, the culture has become more open, according to the views of those interviewed. To understand the culture of school boards is as complex as understanding the culture of any other organization. Although it takes strong leadership to change the culture of an elected school board, this study indicates that it can happen, even in a relatively short time (4 years).

**Theme Three: Leadership.** The Director is a crucial player in determining the culture of a school board. All those interviewed referred to the Director on numerous occasions and attribute many of the positive changes to his collaborative leadership style that engages both trustees and professional in meaningful decision-making. There is also evidence of a high degree of trust in the Director’s abilities to run an effective and efficient school district and to advise the Board wisely. Equally important is the chair of the school board. It is obvious in this school board that the Director and the Chair respect each other and work closely together. Other trustees identified this closeness as being a point of leverage for the Board.

**Theme Four: Lack of Public Understanding of the Role of the Trustee.** Most trustees feel that the general public poorly understands the role of the trustee. Even former educators who upon retirement joined the elected board expressed the view that they had not fully understood the role of the trustee until they were in the position for about a year. They work hard to learn about the situations and issues they face, and are frustrated by the public perception that they are rubber-stamping decisions already made by the provincial Department of Education or the senior administration in the district.

**Theme Five: Individual Learning.** School trustees, as individuals, held a strong desire to learn new things about education and governance and all agreed that learning was if they were to be effective as a governing body. They were pleased with the amount of support they were receiving for professional development, and they recognized it as being important for professional staff and teachers. The most important sources we have identified are:

- Senior administrators (through provision of information to make decisions, and the development of various options).
- Committee work (both by being on committees and by being informed by other committees).
- Study sessions (non-decision-making meetings for clarification and open discussion).
- Conferences and orientation sessions (through school board associations).
- Informally, through conversations with other trustees and senior administrators.
References


