



## What can New Zealand learn from Edmonton?

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### Introduction

New Zealand introduced school-based management in 1989, with the most devolved system of educational administration amongst developed countries. New Zealand schools operate as largely separate entities, without also belonging in a day-to-day sense to a school district or local authority. Thus, principal appointments are made by the school's board of trustees, elected by the school's parents and largely composed of parents.<sup>1</sup> Schools operate within a framework of government regulations that include a national curriculum, national secondary qualifications, and requirements for schools to have a strategic plan with annual plans and targets related to it, and they receive a three-yearly review. That review is conducted by a separate entity from the Ministry of Education. School accountability (or, legally, board accountability) is enacted through this review process, and through avoiding financial issues or problems with the board or between the board and principal. While the Ministry of Education receives a school's annual report and often discusses it with the principal, it has no formal authority to work with principals in a formative way. Since 2001, it has been able to step in where serious risks to school quality or sustainability are identified through analysis of adverse indicators, including the reviews, or school boards seek help; in 2005, it intervened, usually through contracted expertise, in around 4 percent of schools.

Like Edmonton, which started to shift to school-based management in the 1970s, educational decentralisation in New Zealand was not introduced because of poor student achievement levels or public mistrust of educators. Its introduction stemmed from two different and sometimes conflicting sources: a longstanding interest in bringing schools and their communities closer, and the sweeping reform of the whole New Zealand public sector, based on the New Public Management framework.<sup>2</sup> There was faith that shifting resources and decisions about the use of

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<sup>1</sup> Each school board comprises five or more elected trustees, the principal, a staff representative elected by staff, and in secondary schools, a student representative. State-integrated schools (mostly Catholic and other originally church-run schools, as well as some special character schools such as Steiner schools) also include proprietor's representatives. Boards can co-opt members, and many do. Nonparents have been eligible for election since 1992, but few have offered themselves. Nonparents are usually members of school boards through co-option or appointment.

<sup>2</sup> Boston, J. (1991). The theoretical underpinnings of public sector restructuring in New Zealand. In J. Boston, J. Martin, J. Pallot, & P. Walsh (Eds.), *Reshaping the state—New Zealand's bureaucratic revolution* (pp. 1–26). Auckland: Oxford University Press; Wylie, C. (1995a). Contrary currents: The application of the public sector reform framework in education. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 30(2), 149–164.

those resources to each school related to the particular needs of students and communities would result in better educational decisions. The Prime Minister introduced the changes by stating that the reform “will lead to improved learning opportunities for the children of this country. The reformed administration will be sufficiently flexible and responsive to meet the particular needs of Māori education.”<sup>3</sup> There was also a belief among Treasury and other officials that such decisions would be more fiscally efficient, and that therefore the educational dollar could go further.<sup>4</sup>

These underpinning assumptions have not been realised in the 18 years since New Zealand’s radical shift. Secondary qualification levels and the retention of students in secondary school either dipped somewhat or showed little improvement until the introduction of a new standards-based qualification in 2002. It is only recently, after the Ministry of Education took the lead in providing research-based professional development, new assessment tools that could quickly identify gaps in student learning, and resources that teachers could use to meet those identified needs that New Zealand saw gains at the primary level, particularly for low-performing students. Māori student achievement has shared in these gains: but 53 percent of Māori boys still left school with no qualifications in 2005.<sup>5</sup> Although schools have raised an increasing amount of money for their own use, their level of dissatisfaction with funding levels has also increased, reflecting the difficulty of meeting widening community and government expectations, and covering the cost of ICT and administrative support.<sup>6</sup>

I have followed the New Zealand reforms since they began, to see what impact they actually had, and how things changed in schools, and for schools.<sup>7</sup> I’ve also discussed our reforms with researchers, policy makers, and school staff from other countries: the questions they asked about what became to be taken for granted in New Zealand paralleled the growing awareness among some policy makers, researchers, school advisers, and educators that our version of school self-management was not only on the extreme end of the continuum, but was also making it harder to tackle systemic issues such as disparities in educational achievement, disparities in school capacity and capability, and the demands of school administration that frustrated principals’ desire

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<sup>3</sup> Minister of Education. (1988). *Tomorrow’s Schools—the reform of education administration in New Zealand*. Wellington: Government Print.

<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding the availability to New Zealand officials developing the New Zealand reforms of an English report prepared for that country’s move to school-based management that foresaw additional costs and the need to fund schools for the additional administrative work. This and other information about the development of the New Zealand reforms, and initial hopes and fears among different groups—including parents being less sanguine than officials or the Minister that these reforms would in fact improve standards of education are in Wylie, C. (1995b). The shift to school-based management in New Zealand—the school view. In D. S. G. Carter & M. H. O’Neill (Eds.), *Case studies in educational change: An international perspective* (pp. 61–80). London, Falmer Press.

<sup>5</sup> (forthcoming). *Educational leadership: Best evidence synthesis*.

<sup>6</sup> The Ministry of Education is currently undertaking work to address some of these issues, which were clearly identified in its 2006 review of schools’ operational funding.

<sup>7</sup> NZCER’s periodic national surveys and other studies related to changes in the principal’s role, school boards, and school funding are available on [www.nzcer.org.nz](http://www.nzcer.org.nz)

to focus on educational leadership.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes, it seemed as if school self-management was an end in itself, the main point of New Zealand education, rather than student learning.<sup>9</sup>

So I became interested in the experiences of other educational systems that had shifted to school self-management. The issue was not whether school self-management was “good” or “bad”—all forms of management have their own particular tensions or shortcomings. The issue was how we could build on what we had achieved, and improve it.

I first heard of the Edmonton Public Schools’ form of school self-management in 2002: it then compared favourably with New Zealand and two other systems that had made this shift at a similar time, England and Chicago.<sup>10</sup> Why? While principals seemed to relish their responsibility for a school as much as their New Zealand counterparts, they were also contributing to the development of district policy and understanding of issues, and to the development of district capacity. They were accountable for their school performance within the set of district priorities, and they were personally reviewed every three years by the district superintendent, who was a respected educator. There did not appear to be the same sense of distance and distrust between schools and government agencies that had become apparent in New Zealand.

This year I had the opportunity to find out more about how Edmonton Public Schools (EPS) connects principals within a wider system, so that there is a sense of a shared responsibility, not only for goals such as improved rates of students completing high school, but also for the wellbeing of individual schools. It is a system that has high expectations of itself, and it also has a high profile. I was impressed by the candour with which people spoke, and by the fact that any issues and shortcomings they identified concerned them precisely because of these high expectations.

In this paper, I describe my impressions, with some comparisons with New Zealand, and thoughts about what we might learn from Edmonton. I use the word “impressions” because I am not basing this paper on comprehensive research, but on interviews and discussions, and available district and Alberta state documentation, other relevant material, and research. In late April I spent a week in Edmonton, interviewing eight experienced principals, six central [district] office senior staff, and the EPS Board chair. I had discussions with University of Alberta academics and graduate students (all with EPS experience) and an Alberta Education senior manager. I also attended a board meeting, where the new superintendent was announced. I am very grateful to

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<sup>8</sup> Hodgen, E., & Wylie, C. (2005). *Stress and wellbeing among New Zealand principals*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research; Wylie, C. (2007). *School governance in New Zealand: How is it working?* Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

<sup>9</sup> This was underlined for me when I undertook a review of special education policy for the Government in 2000: some of the issues around meeting student needs could not be resolved unless there was some pooling of resources and specialist support, a consistent infrastructure in place, and more accountability of principals and boards for accepting students with special needs; but the New Zealand system lacked the mechanisms to bring about improvements of a substantial nature. Wylie, C. (2000). *Picking up the pieces. Review of Special Education 2000*. Wellington: Ministry of Education?

<sup>10</sup> Wylie, C. (2002). *The local and systemic roles of school trustees*. Paper presented at NZARE conference, Palmerston North. Available on [www.nzcer.org.nz](http://www.nzcer.org.nz)

EPS for the permission to undertake these interviews, the time people gave me, and to Lorne Parker, Supervisor for Research Support Services and Resource Development Services, for arranging the interviews.

I start with an outline of the Alberta provincial context that EPS operates within. Next I look at the characteristics of EPS and its current priorities, the framework of school choice, and the role of parents and the community. Then I focus on the aspects that are particularly important for New Zealand now: how to build leadership capability and capacity, how to use expertise collectively, and how to build and sustain interconnections between different roles so that there is continual learning, challenge, and a shared sense of responsibility. I finish with some thoughts about what we could gain from considering the experiences of EPS.

## The provincial context for Edmonton Public Schools

The Canadian province of Alberta has around four million people, much the same population as New Zealand. It is a strong performer on international and national educational assessments, probably stronger than New Zealand, which also tends to score above the average on international assessments. But like New Zealand, it has one of the wider ranges of scores in relation to differences in socioeconomic status.

Alberta is currently experiencing a boom economy, largely due to its energy resources. This boom is attracting a more diverse group of migrants and raising prices. While it is one of the richer Canadian provinces, it also experiences periodic “busts”.

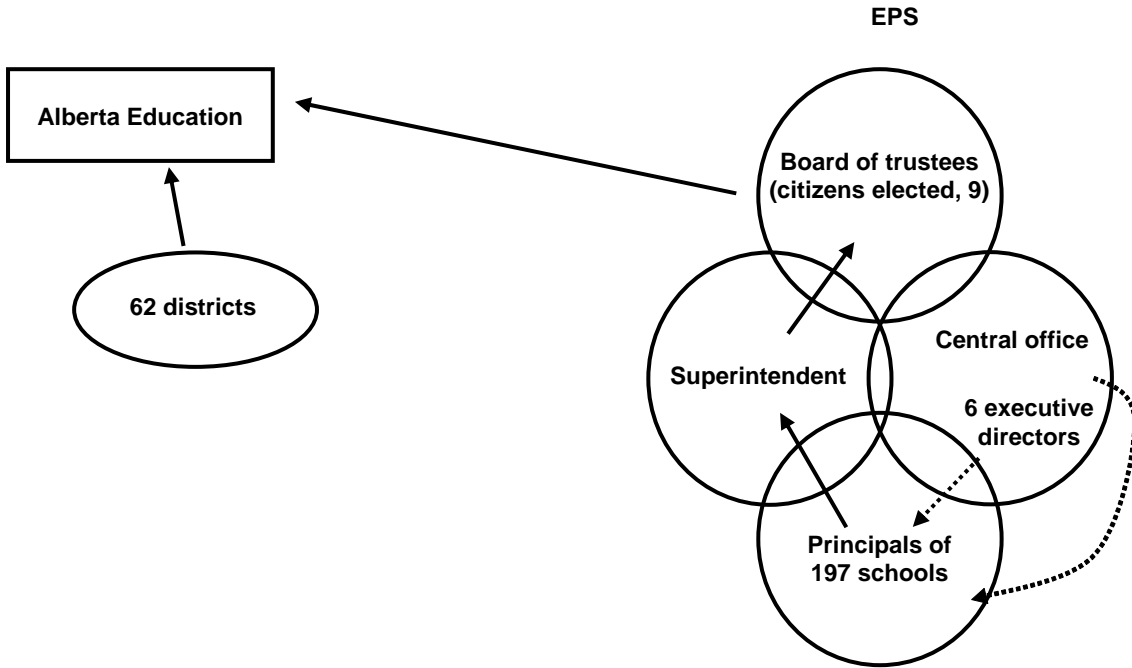
EPS is the second largest of its 62 school districts, ranging in size from those with just a few schools, to several hundred. Each district is governed by a board of trustees elected by all adults eligible to vote in the local body elections held at the same time, every three years. Most of the districts comprise public schools, with a substantial minority of Catholic school districts.

Some of those I spoke with found it ironic that I was interested in what New Zealand could learn from Alberta, since 1990s cutbacks to state funding of public services, including education, were associated with the provincial government’s reference to New Zealand as a precursor for its approach.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, some things in the Albertan Government approach were familiar to me: the legacy of underfunding for infrastructure, and the emphasis on strategic planning and reporting, including measurable performance of entities funded by the province. But Alberta is much more structured than in New Zealand. Schools are accountable to their district superintendent who is accountable to the district’s board of trustees; districts are accountable to the province.

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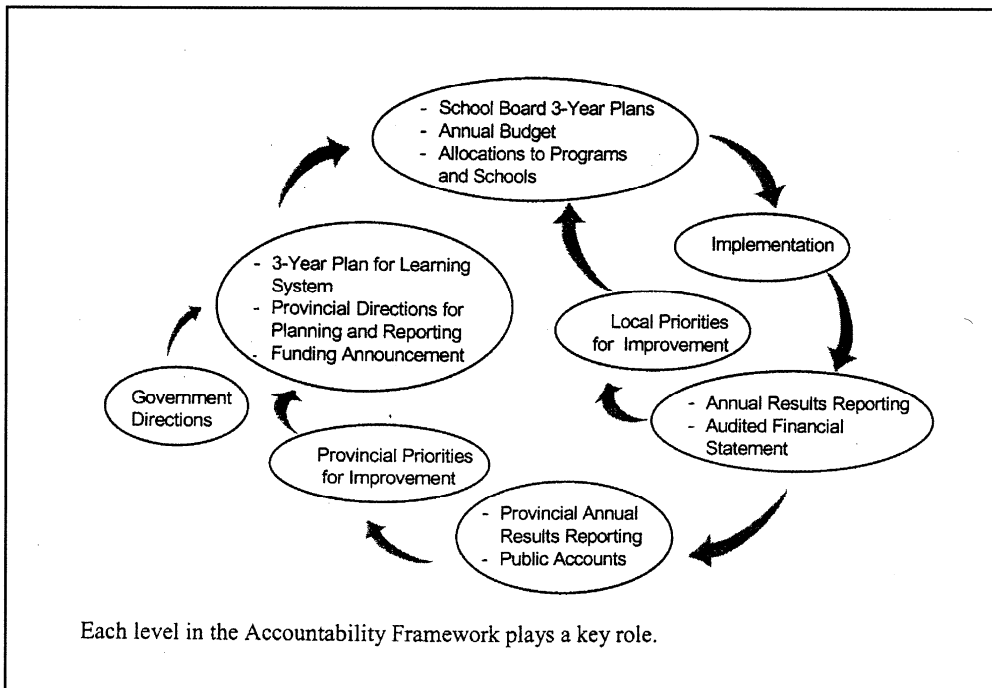
<sup>11</sup> Taylor, A. (2001). Devolution and control in Alberta. *Encounters on Education*, 2, 72–89.

Figure 1 Relations between province and districts, and within EPS



However, the province education accountability framework is envisaged not just as a review of performance, but also as a connected flow of information to guide priorities.

Figure 2 Alberta Learning's Accountability Framework Cycle



This framework has been in place since the mid 1990s. It was tightened several years ago, with an increase in the number of required measures boards use to report their results, and the introduction of “collaborative planning”:

The performance of school jurisdictions will be assessed on the accountability measures, and results will be evaluated against specific and well-defined targets. If a target level is not achieved or results do not show improvement, the school jurisdiction and Alberta Learning will work collaboratively to develop strategies to improve results.<sup>12</sup>

The measures that districts must use are quantitative; they go beyond student achievement (provincial exams aligned with the provincial curriculum, taken by students in Years 3, 6, and 9, and developed with teacher input and marked by teachers). The measures are “safe and caring” schools (measured by aggregating student and teacher survey responses); student learning opportunities (which are measured by the dropout rate, high school completion rate); student learning achievement (both above a minimal level, and at high levels), and preparation for lifelong learning, world of work, citizenship (measured by the rate of transition to tertiary institutions within four years of starting high school and survey views); parental involvement and school improvement (measured by survey views). The surveys include students, teachers, and parents. Boards can also add their own questions to the provincial surveys. The annual result “scorecard” for each district is available on the Alberta Education website, and in each board’s annual report, which also contains local measures. The measures are, of necessity, fairly broad-brush. The province aggregates all this data into an overall picture each year, with a single page summary that evaluates the level of achievement and improvement.<sup>13</sup> No research was available on whether some of the measures attract more provincial attention and collaborative work with school boards than others, and therefore, whether some were seen as more important to school boards to manage. It was not clear to me either whether the collaborative approach—which is to be commended—was in fact that; and what penalties might occur if agreed change did not eventuate.

An interesting new measure of student achievement is being introduced to the accountability framework. This measure is not an external one-off examination, but teacher reports of grade level achievement. Underlying this is a sophisticated framework seeking to build capability in formative assessment and using robust qualitative measures of student performance, linking student results with school planning, the allocation of school resources, and the practice of

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<sup>12</sup> From the Alberta Learning 2003/04 *Funding Manual for School Authorities*, quoted in Alberta School Boards Association. (2004). *Students are our bottom line. Technical report*. Edmonton: Author. (available on [www.asba.ab.ca](http://www.asba.ab.ca)). Alberta Learning has since changed its name to the more traditional Alberta Education.

<sup>13</sup> One puzzling thing about this scorecard is the description of some very small changes as “improved significantly” (e.g., the high school completion rate, where the current three-year completion rate was 70.4 for the 2006–07 year, cf. 70.4 in the previous year, and 69.1 for the previous three-year average); or “declined significantly” (e.g., the proportion with excellent scores on the provincial assessment results for the current year 19.1, cf. 19.4 in the previous year, and the previous three-year average).

teachers working together.<sup>14</sup> Unlike other measures on the accountability “pillar”, there will be no targets set for district-aggregated grade level achievement (GLA) scores. There is a recognition in its introduction that one of the drawbacks of the mandated provincial measures is that they can be seen as someone else’s, and that the targets agreed to by districts are more likely to be ones they are confident of achieving, rather than “stretch” ones. However, the Alberta Teachers’ Association has expressed reservations about the GLA scheme, seeing it as imposing a further layer of reporting, and noting that pilots showed no real benefits.<sup>15</sup> One wonders whether there will be pressure in a few years to include these new measures in district report cards, with targets.

The measures of accountability that are mandated and have targets are not without their critics. Concerns have been raised that there is an overemphasis on what can be tested or simplistic measures, and assumptions made about the quality of education based on information about only some parts of the curriculum and the province’s desired educational outcomes. While the province and districts do not rank schools against each other, some media and the Fraser Institute, a conservative organisation, do, and some schools may use the results to market themselves. Some criticise the student assessments as adding an additional layer of testing that is more for reporting than formative learning purposes, and on comparisons between districts, without any commensurate accounting for the support given to districts (and presumably, at district level, schools) to enable them to achieve targets.<sup>16</sup>

Site-based management was introduced throughout Alberta in the mid 1990s, and to accompany it, the state restricted the proportion of state funding that districts could use for “central” office functions. This was originally no more than 4 percent in large districts, but has increased in recent years with the realisation that schools needed more co-ordinated support if the increased emphasis on accountability was to be used to improve schools, and that some functions required some ongoing specialist capacity. Smaller districts were seen as having more difficulty in providing schools with the range of support and capability building that larger districts could provide.

Alberta state base funding for districts is on a per student basis, again similar to New Zealand. Additional funding is for “differential costs”; this includes student characteristics (e.g., the proportion of the student population that has low socioeconomic status; students with special needs), and district characteristics (including cost differences; small schools “by necessity”; and intradistrict distances). There is also “provincial priority targeted funding”, most on a per capita basis, with current priorities including reduction of class sizes, a student health initiative, high speed networking, and the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISII).

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<sup>14</sup> Alberta Education. (2006). *Grade level of achievement reporting: Teacher and administrator handbook* (available on [www.education.gov.ab.ca](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca)). Looking at student performance in relation to grade levels necessitates a clear understanding of the curriculum aims at that level; it is likely to raise some questions about curriculum areas where progression is not always linear, and issues about whether all students could have the same trajectory of development over time.

<sup>15</sup> Alberta Teachers’ Association. (2006, February). Student assessment and evaluation: The Alberta teaching profession’s view. *Issues in Education*, 4, available on [www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca).

<sup>16</sup> Alberta Teachers’ Association. (2006, February). *Handle with care: Futures being built. Proceedings of 1<sup>st</sup> invitational symposium on educational accountability*, Edmonton (available on [www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca)).

The latter is an interesting project to deepen professional capability. It provides funding for districts and schools to undertake their own projects to improve student learning, within a framework that encourages some of the practices that are now being emphasised worldwide: using good data to identify issues in children's learning; teachers working together and learning from each other; and cycles of analysis, decisions, action, data collection to see what difference the action has made, reflection, analysis, etc. Schools use a common proposal and reporting framework, and districts are then responsible for aggregating these reports to the province, for the purposes of both accountability and common learning. The measures used to gauge change in practice, student engagement in learning, and learning, have not been mandated. On the whole, the additional resources as well as the active learning approach AISI brought to participating districts and schools has made some differences to teacher practices, with some improvements in student learning, particularly for students at risk, in science and early literacy, and at the stages of early school, transition to high school, and high school completion.<sup>17</sup> Unlike GLA, which the Alberta Teachers' Association describes as unilaterally imposed, representatives of districts, the union, the school boards' association and university education departments were included in the development of AISI, and remain included in "Education Partners" steering and working groups.

The state funding framework also includes capital funding. To encourage the efficient use of school buildings and property, it penalises districts that have more than a given proportion of unused space per student. This formula is a source of some difficulty for both EPS and individual school principals.

School boards have expressed concern at their increasing difficulty in managing with the provincial money they receive. Forty-two percent of the school boards ran a deficit in 2005, cf. 11 percent in 2001; the percentage rise in teacher salaries has been higher than the percentage rise in base per student funding since 1995; there is a significant backlog of deferred maintenance; and there have been marked increases in charges to parents for instruction resources and transportation.<sup>18</sup>

## Edmonton Public Schools

The Edmonton Public Schools district serves over 80,000 students in 197 schools. The district has a higher proportion (26 percent in 2003) of students living beneath the poverty line than Alberta as a whole, and 7 percent of its students were Aboriginal.<sup>19</sup> It has an increasing number of students who are English language learners (in New Zealand, English as a second language learners). Most of its student achievement results are higher than the province as a whole, with some unevenness. The rate of high school completion within three years remains below the

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<sup>17</sup> Parsons, J., McRae, P., Taylor, L., with Larson, N., & Servage, L. (2006). *Celebrating school improvement. Six lessons learnt from Alberta's AISI projects*. Edmonton: School Improvement Press.

<sup>18</sup> Alberta School Boards Association. (2006). *Missing the mark—funding shortfalls in Alberta's public education system* (available on [www.asba.ab.ca](http://www.asba.ab.ca)).

<sup>19</sup> McBeath, A. (2003). *Choice, accountability, and performance in the public schools: How Edmonton does it and why*. Presentation 11 July, 2003, Halifax, hosted by AIMS and the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education. [http://www.aims.ca/library/ep\\_accountabilityinpublicschools\\_macbeath.pdf](http://www.aims.ca/library/ep_accountabilityinpublicschools_macbeath.pdf)



provincial average, reflecting somewhat its different demographics. EPS has improved this rate through some concerted effort, and in the face of an economy which has easily available and sometimes well-paid work to tempt adolescents to leave school. While there was considerable pride in EPS, people did not think they could rest on their laurels; or take for granted the sustainability of their district culture of effort, support, and focus on achievement.

Its three current priorities were:<sup>20</sup>

- To improve achievement of all students in core subjects with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy.
- To ensure high-quality teaching and learning.
- To achieve high standards of citizenship, conduct, safety, and well-being of students and staff.

The new superintendent particularly identified the challenges of improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students, new immigrants learning English, and those who are “on the fringes of our organisation” when his appointment was announced in April.<sup>21</sup> The strategy of increasing high school completion rates extends as far back as providing full-day kindergarten in low-income areas (after a successful AISI-funded pilot), and includes programmes for those who have completed three years of school but have not gained a diploma.<sup>22</sup> One innovative programme is the City Central project, a collaboration of a number of schools that have pooled some of their money to provide across-school services, including community groups who provide students with additional learning experiences and mentoring, and support for parents. The district pays for the co-ordinator of the project.

However, EPS has also signalled that there are some areas in which it can make progress only with additional funding from the province. As Edmonton grows, but with uneven geographical impacts—primarily increases in the new outlying suburbs, and decreases in the inner city area—a quarter of the students do not have a school in their neighbourhood, and a quarter take a bus to school. In the face of rising costs, driver shortages (with better paid jobs available), and increased demand, EPS is struggling to maintain, let alone expand, its current level of bus services. Decreased population in the inner city means not only unused space, but also costly space (over and above maintenance costs), since the provincial funding is related to the amount of space used, and access to money for capital works and renovations depends on all existing schools being at least 85 percent full. This seems to be the only provincial indicator in the accountability pillar that is focused on schools, rather than students, or teachers or parents; and which sets a standard for each unit rather than allowing an aggregate. But the result is that difficulty filling some schools has repercussions for the district as a whole.

EPS recently announced a Ten-Year Facilities Plan 2008–2017, which gives an order in which it will review the viability of each school annually in relation to given benchmarks. Those that meet

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<sup>20</sup> Edmonton Public Schools. (2006). *Edmonton Public Schools' Annual Education Results Report* (available on [www.epsb.ca](http://www.epsb.ca)).

<sup>21</sup> *Edmonton Journal*, 25 April 2007, B6. New superintendent focuses on fringe students.

<sup>22</sup> Edmonton Public Schools. (2007). *Three year education plan 2007–2010* (available on [www.epsb.ca](http://www.epsb.ca)).

few of these benchmarks will have a sustainability review, which could result in school closure, programme closure, redesignating attendance areas, creating a multi-campus site, or a continuation of the status quo. Those that meet some but not all of the benchmarks will go into the three-year capital plan for upgrading (over a third of the city schools are 50 years old or more and “require significant renovations to maintain a quality learning environment”) or reduction.

### *School choice*

School choice is available throughout Alberta, dependent on availability of space and programme desired. Districts are funded on actual enrolments, not on the school-aged population within their boundaries.

School choice for students means a right to attend their neighbourhood school, and also the right to choose another school. Their acceptance at a nonneighbourhood school depends on the availability of places at that school, and in the programme they would like to access. Programmes may have established entrance criteria. Balloting is used to decide who can attend oversubscribed programmes. Student choice also depends on the affordability of transport (public bus system passes are subsidised). In 2003, 64 percent of EPS high school students, 54 percent of junior high school students, and 48 percent of elementary students did not go to their local school. There are no district figures available for whether choice patterns differ in relation to family income; and whether, for example, the students in the “high end” International Baccalaureate programme are more likely to not be local.

What strikes a New Zealander is that choice is associated with particular named programmes, such as the Logos Christian programme, or the International Baccalaureate diploma. The more than 30 programmes outlined in the EPS 2007–08 Choice guide for parents include quite a few bilingual programmes, as well as one-off specialist programmes, e.g. for dance, and a school for pregnant or parenting teens. School choice for the district means a consideration of the diversity and location of programmes, either responding to an identified need, where the ongoing viability of setting up a programme is evident, or asking schools to take on popular programmes in areas of the city where they are not currently offered, or suggesting that they take them on where the school roll is falling. Choice is not left to individual schools or parental fads. Offering choice does allow EPS to include some private schools in the public fold—as New Zealand has done through its policy of integration. The “public” term in the district’s name was not seen as a default, but as something important that needed to be safeguarded by ensuring that it remained high quality and could meet different aspirations. EPS does not include Catholic schools, however: they come under the province, and form their own jurisdictions.<sup>23</sup> The Edmonton Catholic school district includes 84 schools, with around 32,000 students; it also offers a choice of programmes among its schools. EPS staff did not think that there was overt competition between the two systems, nor with the adjacent districts.

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<sup>23</sup> The Catholic Education Board in New Zealand does not allocate funding for the schools it supports—that goes to each school separately. However, it does provide support, networking, and has the right to put “proprietor’s representatives” on each board. They do not form the majority on the board, but this does open up the potential for some more systemic oversight, e.g. in relation to principal appointments and appraisals.

School choice for principals means ensuring that the school offers a range of programmes that will attract a good range of students, in sufficient numbers to either keep the school viable or expand its roll. It also means an awareness of how the school appears to people outside it as well as inside it, and attention to indicators that people might use to make decisions. High schools liked to be able to offer programmes geared to high achievers, to give evidence of “quality” at the academic end, as well as catering for wide interests. There was a general feeling among those I spoke with that while principals had been more competitive than they were currently, competition for student numbers or desirable kinds of students still occurs. Principal salaries include a per student weighting, which would be some incentive; but more to the point was the per student base funding each additional student brought with them for the school.

How the school appeared to others occasioned some thoughtful comments about the tension between the district’s commitment to openness, and the care with which principals presented their school plan and results at the trustees’ meetings. Although individual school results are available, there was in fact little reporting at the district level using schools as the unit of analysis (e.g., x percent were in deficit, or the range of school achievement results in terms of school characteristics). This is different from New Zealand where, as well as student performance, schools are often the unit of analysis when we are looking at *system* performance. Although we do not create league tables, it seems natural to us now to think of schools as the unit of administration, as if they were not part of something wider.

### *The role of parents and the community*

When Alberta moved to school-based management, there was interest in parent input into their child’s school, but not in having responsibility for the governance of each school or, as noneducators, making decisions on school principal and staff. Every school must have a school council, whose prime role is to provide advice, with the intention of two-way flows of information and discussion of school issues.<sup>24</sup> Principals saw value in this channel, and it was important for them to have good relationships with parents. School councils were now likely to be consulted about the kind of person they would like to see leading their school when the principalship became vacant, as were the staff and existing principal. School council members are not elected by parents, and were not seen by principals as always representative of their school community, particularly if the school’s named programme/s meant the school included some diverse communities. Principals did not rely solely on the school council to communicate with parents, or invite their participation in the school. The provincial accountability pillar includes a dimension of parental involvement, not in terms of voluntary contributions or governance, but in terms of satisfaction with their involvement in decisions on their child’s education.

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<sup>24</sup> Legislation exists about school councils, but it remains purposefully unspecific, other than requirements for them to exist, to include the principal, a staff representative and, at secondary schools, a student, with a broad mandate to provide a vehicle for parents to work with the school to support student learning, that will differ from school to school. The Alberta School Resource manual gives advice on how to recruit and retain council members, noting the existence of high turnover among school council members, and that “effective recruiting needs to be an ongoing, year round strategy” (p. 28; the manual was revised in 2007). (available on <http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/parents/scm.pdf>).

School councils also raise money for their school, though often a separate legal body was established to do so. Many schools could raise quite substantial sums through staffing the Edmonton casino for a day or two: the casino offered a number of slots each year for voluntary organisations to raise money this way. However, the decision to do so was left to each school council, and in some schools, the casino option was not acceptable to parents. In this respect, parents had more say than they do in New Zealand, partly because while we also rely on gambling to provide additional school funds: principals apply to the lottery board and community trusts on behalf of the school, without having to gain the money through voluntary work. Principals did enlist voluntary organisations and others to provide their school with support (there is a substantial mentoring programme run by the Big Brothers and Sisters programme, for example). Additional money raised by a school can be used for enhancements to its programmes—e.g. musical instruments, excursions, but not, as in New Zealand, to employ additional teachers.

The New Zealand system of every school having their own board did not appeal to any of those I spoke with. They saw it as having less flexibility than their own system, both for principals and the district as a whole, as being too narrowly focused, as inefficient, and as running the risk of framing schools as parents' responsibility and interest, rather than the wider community, including local authorities and businesses. The Albertan system of having every citizen able to vote for those on their district's education board underlined an important value that the general quality of education was important for all.

Just over a quarter of those eligible had voted for a ward candidate in the 2004 EPS board elections, which was somewhat less than the 42 percent who had voted at the same time for the city council, but is much the same as the estimated quarter of (only) parents who voted in the 2004 New Zealand trustee elections.

The board's governance role includes setting the district policy, usually based on reports and recommendations from the central office. The board also appoints the superintendent—though the Minister of Education's approval is needed, and has on occasion in other districts been withheld, indicating some oversight at the provincial level. The board provides what one person described as a "buffer" between the district and the provincial government, and community. It advocates for the district with the provincial government. Its role is particularly important in trying to secure more funding. The board also works with Edmonton city and through the Alberta School Boards Association to get understanding and support. It is also a conduit of government policy, and its role was to implement that policy, with local customisation. Priorities are set after the election of each board, and in the case of EPS included discussion with a wide range of "stakeholders", including students, staff, community members, business and city leaders, and post-secondary institutions.

Its twice-monthly meetings are open to parents; as are the meetings with four to five schools at a time to discuss their proposed budget in spring, and then their results for the previous year in the following fall, as the budget is finalised. Trustees also have four to five ward meetings each year at which parents and community members can raise any issues, and have information. The district

also has committees that include parents, ideally from school councils so that the two-way exchange of issues and information is occurring. One recent example was on cybersafety.

Quite properly given its governance role, the EPS Board of Trustees does not tend to play a large role in school affairs.<sup>25</sup> The board was seen less as a source of advice and support, than as an audience with a legitimate right to know at an overall or high level that what was happening was in line with its priorities, and that issues were being addressed. The board was not seen as educational experts, so some of the role of EPS staff was to try to ensure that they had an understanding of learning and the contexts of schools, e.g. that it was easier to meet high targets in a school with middle-class students than in a school serving low-income students, that student performance could vary year to year, or that the provincial assessments gave some indication of student progress, but not the total picture.

### *Growing district leaders*

EPS central office sees itself as having the responsibility to ensure that the district not only has good principals and teachers who can take leading roles in their schools, but that it will have enough of these in the future. Because principals and teachers move in and out of the district central office, and the senior staff of the district are largely drawn from their ranks, growing teacher and principal capability and capacity is also about growing central office capability and capacity.

Currently, EPS has no difficulty attracting teachers. Indeed, the University of Alberta supplies more new teachers than there are vacancies. This may change with a sizeable proportion coming near to retirement. While Edmonton is favoured by its size, it also uses that size well, through an approach to teaching and leadership as professions attached to the district rather than jobs attached to individual schools. This approach allows it to offer a good variety of roles over the course of an educational career—and to make the most use of that expertise itself. Opportunities include participation in district committees, and resource development and professional development roles (called consultancy) with the central office. It also includes, as with other Alberta districts, secondment to Alberta Education, which is located in Edmonton.

The district central office vets new teachers to the district, who go into a pool for principals to choose from. Strictly speaking, principals do not hire and fire teachers, since their contract is with the district, but principals do choose who they want to appoint, and they can work with the human resources section of the central office if they have come to the end of the road in terms of teacher performance. As in New Zealand, teacher dismissal is not done lightly, and must be backed with evidence. EPS provides some support for new teachers, and it takes responsibility for ensuring that it has enough school leaders able to take on the demands of school-based management.

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<sup>25</sup> Some thought the board was playing more of a role than it formerly had. The EPS Board, though, was generally thought of as less prone to micromanaging or approaching things on the basis of “politics” or personalities than boards in smaller rural districts.

Worldwide, there has been growing attention to the increasingly complex role of principalship, and the need to ensure that the role remains attractive and open to good educators who can make the most of it. In New Zealand, we have been more concerned about openness than readiness for the role. There are no requirements other than being a registered teacher. Just under a quarter of our primary school principals have not undertaken any school management roles. School boards make the decision on principal appointments. They have a set of abstract standards available to them, and are urged to employ expert advice, but they do not have to do so, nor to take the advice if they do. Most primary principals, and just under half the secondary principals, think there is inadequate career progression for principals in New Zealand. Just over half the secondary school trustees whose board had appointed a principal in the last three years were happy with the quality of their shortlisted applicants.

It is only now that the Government is to fund courses for aspiring principals, and it is only in the last few years that the Government has funded a course for first time principals, and offered a five-day development programme for principals with five or more years' experience. Both the latter are voluntary.

So a New Zealand visitor is particularly struck by the careful way in which EPS fosters leadership, vets those interested, and gives them initial support. EPS provides annual "education and development programmes" for first, aspiring leaders, and then, aspiring principals. These programmes are not open to all-comers. The criteria for applicants include a range of teaching experiences, community, and extracurricular roles, including district and professional committees, and instructional and operational leadership. Applications are ranked individually by five principals, with the cut-off point on the rankings decided by central office senior staff and the Superintendent. The cut-off point may vary each year, depending on the number of applicants. There are around 80 applicants for the leadership training course, which takes around 25 in each of two sections a year; and around 45 to 50 applicants for 20 to 25 positions on the principals' course. Feedback is given to those who do not make the cut, identifying areas they need to develop, and the human resources department gives advice on how to fill out the application rubrics.

These programmes enable the district to decide who to add to its pool of potential principals, whom it will consider in its annual matching of candidates with vacancies (positions that become vacant during the school year are filled on an acting basis, which also gives opportunities for both aspirants and the district to assess competence). Vacancies are notified to all principals and those who have been added to the pool; and decided by the superintendent with advice from the executive directors.

Principals coming from outside EPS are rare. They join first time principals in a programme for their first year, since it is considered important that they are supported to understand the EPS system—and culture. These programmes are also opportunities to forge relationships of interest and support that will continue during principals' careers—some with their fellows, some with those who teach them or take them through operational matters; these include other principals and central office staff, and their assigned mentor. Mentors are experienced principals who apply to

take on the role—so that mentoring is an honour, a form of recognition as well as a contribution to the profession and district. Mentoring also has a structure, with expectations of a half-day a month, and availability in between. When I visited, a number of those I spoke with had recently met with new principals they were mentoring to support them as they worked on their first school budget plan, which is a key piece in EPS planning and accountability.

Principals do not get a permanent appointment to EPS as a principal if they do not prove themselves over their first two years. Evidence used to decide confirmation includes surveys of parents and staff. Even with EPS's careful screening, preparation, and support, and usually a leeway of a third year probation if there are some issues to be addressed, there are a few each year who were not confirmed. While that would have been disappointing to the individuals concerned, it should also mean that schools are not left with principals who would continue to struggle to lead their schools in a sustainable way.

However, as in New Zealand, the newest principals are more likely to go to some of the most challenging schools: small elementary schools, and ones facing sustainability reviews. Some of those I spoke to said while this could be seen as a “what doesn't kill you makes you stronger” situation, they felt it meant some wastage, perhaps more so in the past, before the district had realised the need to provide better support. In these situations, principals had to focus more on working with often angry parents, rather than on building their own instructional and operational knowledge. A prime reason why the least experienced principals went to these schools was that their roll numbers meant the lowest salary level;<sup>26</sup> some I spoke to suggested that if experienced principals from larger schools kept their salary level, they would be more likely to take on such situations.

There seems to be less difficulty in attracting principals to schools in other challenging situations, or having principals accept a request to do so from the central office. Principals may be more interested in taking on such situations if they see them leading onto a school they desired or a central office position; and it was said that central office staff had sometimes made promises, but that since these were dependent on individuals, these promises were not always kept or able to be kept.

### *Supporting principals*

EPS does not assume that principals get all they need to sustain them in their initial programme and support. In New Zealand, we leave ongoing professional support largely to principals themselves, using websites to store information for principals, with the recent introduction of chatrooms. Most principals belong to the local principals' association, linked into national organisations, with the separate primary and secondary unions having principal groups within them, and most principals also belong to principal-only national organisations, which receive some government funding to provide advice and conferences. These groups have periodic meetings with government officials to raise issues, and they usually have representatives on

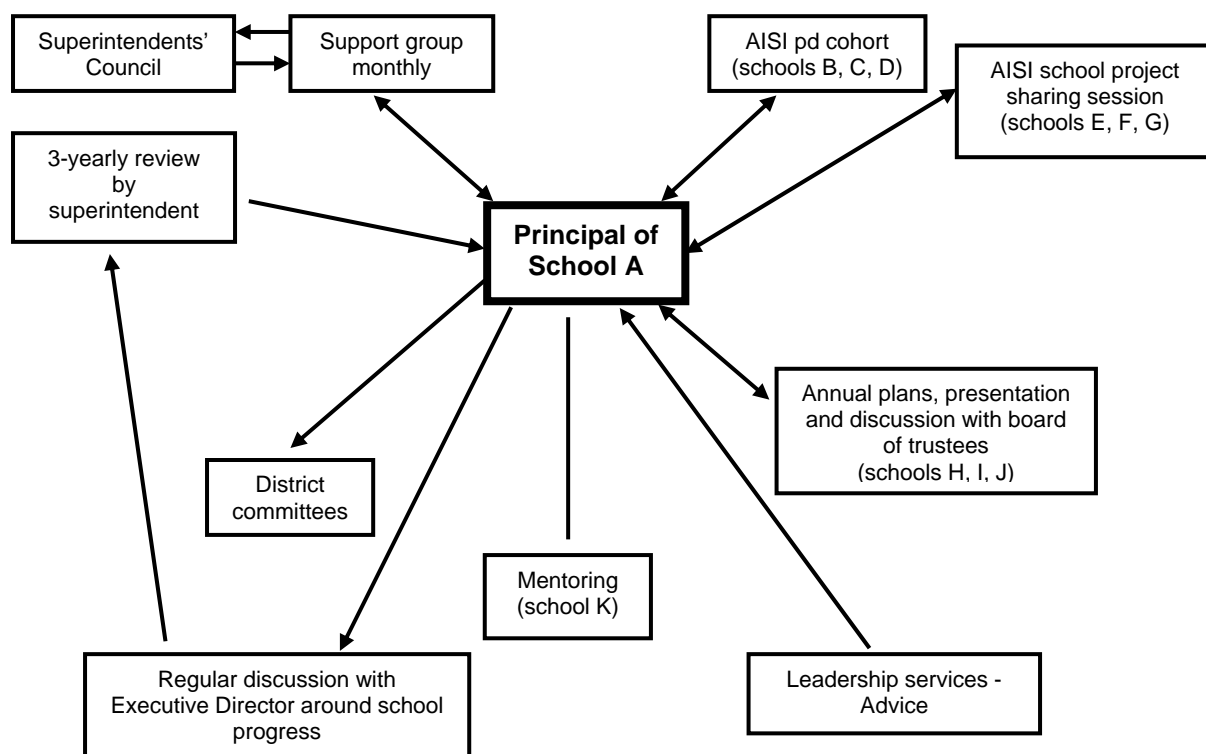
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<sup>26</sup> Since retirement pay levels reflect salary levels of the last five years of service, there is also a disincentive for those close to retirement to move to smaller schools, unless that is their sole choice.

government consultative groups. Their relations with government agency regional offices can include meetings, and sometimes joint work, but the regularity and depth of these depend on both the regional office and the energy of the local groups. Thus we have something of a variable quilt of support and two-way information flows: sometimes thick and warm; sometimes fraying.

So again I was struck by a more systemic approach to supporting and building school capacity and capability in EPS, ensuring that principals were not left isolated, and that their issues (both individual and collective) could be raised within an ongoing work programme. This did not mean that these issues were always resolved as some thought they should be, but that there were connections between different roles and responsibilities, and expectations of those connections. Although I describe these connections as a form of support for principals, because of these connections they were also part of the enactment or realisation of the district culture, of the sense that while principals were accountable to the central office, that office was also responsible for ensuring that they could do a good job.

Figure 3 **Principal learning and support**



Each principal is part of a central office-decided support group, which meets once a month. Each group decides its own programme; generally it includes sharing of news and issues. Central office staff may be invited to talk to an issue. In some groups, there was real collaboration, e.g. around sharing information about students transferring, and deciding to share resources. Discussion also occurs of any issues sent to the group by the central office or report back from the principal who represented the group on the Superintendents' Council, and identification of views to be taken to the next superintendents' meeting by the principal representing the support group. Some groups



are more cohesive than others, with it being easier to maintain cohesion and openness among groups that are not too big (one group had over 30 principals). On the whole, principals spoke positively of these support groups.

The district approach to AISI had also grouped schools, originally as “trios”; schools were now deciding their own “cohorts”, based on common focuses or, sometimes, the close relationships between principals. These groups could be as large as seven or as small as two. These schools could share professional development, visit one another, and discuss common issues or learnings. Principals also spoke positively about these groupings, speaking of the challenges they got from each other through the cohort work, which gave them the chance to discuss not only successes but also issues, and “what-ifs”.

There had been some resistance to the district originally deciding the groupings; the present setup was preferred, although some schools were slower than others to find partners, and others needed help to find partners. Not all the districts’ schools are now involved in AISI projects.

Principals and senior leaders from schools taking part in AISI projects report on their projects in groups of four that are not in their AISI cohort, using a common format which allows for questions and common learning; the audience includes executive directors and central office staff. Schools that are working with the same theme (e.g. differentiated instruction) will be grouped together, again allowing experiences to be shared.

Meetings at which four to five principals spoke to and answered trustees questions about their business plans (in spring) and results (in the autumn) also provided a way for principals to hear about what was happening in other schools, and make connections. These groupings of schools were not the same as the cohorts, and they occurred on school sites, allowing the opportunity to “get out of your own sandbox”.

Thus there is a structure in place to ensure that principals are not left isolated, or able to remain out of touch with what others are tackling and thinking.

Central office also provides principals with advice. Most principals bought a yearly contract which enabled them to get as much advice from the Leadership Services section as they needed. This contract was mandatory for first time principals; and recommended for schools with high proportions of students with special needs, and high schools, because they were more likely to be dealing with expulsions. The advice sought is often to consider the ramifications of a decision before it is made, usually a decision involving parents, or the interpretation of district policy. If a parent complains to the district, the school is charged for the central office services after the first two calls to the school, giving an incentive to make well-founded decisions.

The principals I spoke with had also served or were serving on district committees. They valued these for the wider knowledge and contacts they could gain, as well as wanting to contribute to district directions.

Membership of the Superintendents' Council is decided by the superintendent, and includes both less and more experienced principals. Members meet for half a day twice a month (their school is paid for their time), and provide advice.

School visits by the superintendent or the executive directors, which are part of the accountability framework, had also been experienced as opportunities to get new insights and discuss the school's issues in thoughtful ways, depending on the central office staff's approach:

Executive Directors have to ask good questions otherwise the review is superficial; the school plan just sits on the shelf. X\_\_\_\_ said 'We can do the politically correct thing, or I can close the book and ask you a couple of questions: what would people say about this school in a negative sense; and what are you doing about it?' That was tremendous.

My Executive Director asks very hard questions, challenges that push us forward. I don't feel threatened—they want me to be a success. That looks good for them, reflects well on them.

The executive directors also met once a month to discuss what they were seeing in the schools they had visited that month around a particular theme, so that knowledge was further shared and thought about within the district.

### *Principals and EPS*

Principals spoke of themselves as district employees, and this meant more than the literal truth that their contract was with the central office. When Edmonton introduced school-based management, principals were contracted to individual schools. It is telling that that changed as the system evolved to provide it with more flexibility and accountability.

Being a district employee means that principals felt accountable to the superintendent, they felt they could be asked to take different positions or move to another school; and it also meant that they felt they had a role beyond their own school in sharing their own expertise and working with their colleagues and central office staff. The central office staff to whom they are accountable are all former principals, and most of the others in senior positions there have had senior school management roles. This shared experience is valuable in many ways, since it creates understanding, and it allows and uses continuity of knowledge and relationships, allowing for quicker responses. Because EPS works at interconnections, reputations would also precede central office staff, so it was not the place to shift someone who had not succeeded in a school leadership role if they were to take on a central leadership responsibility.

Principals are within the same orbit as the central office staff. *All* are district employees. This is strikingly different from New Zealand, where principals are employed by the board of their own school only. Their "own" school *is* largely their own orbit; the Ministry of Education and other government agencies concerned with education have other orbits, with occasional intersections. There is no common phrase within which we embrace both schools and the agencies that fund, support, or evaluate them. They are often treated as opposed entities, or entities with discrete domains. Government officials talk of "talking with the sector" as if schools belonged to something different.

Some of this difference between the two systems reflects different roles. The EPS central office takes the overview, to plan district priorities and targets, and to allocate the money it receives from the province and some other sources. But principals are included in this work: they serve on committees that work on deciding these allocation formulae, priorities, and targets. In addition, the twice-monthly Superintendents' Committee brought together principals representing each of the principal support groups (geographically based for elementary and junior high schools, with one group for the high schools), to raise issues from their groups, and to comment on draft central office reports and proposals and issues. This committee was said, however, to have become more of a recipient of information than having timely input, and this change was lamented by principals, with concern expressed that it could signal some weakening of the determination to have two-way flows, to take an inclusive approach rather than treat different roles as needing distinct boundaries.

EPS central office also monitors school performance through analysis of school monthly accounts, results on the district's (including the province's) measures, and progress on the school's plan. This analysis is used in regular school visits made by the six executive directors to discuss the school's performance and issues. Other information that can be used by the executive directors might be consistent trends in issues with particular schools raised by parents or communities. The district provides parents with an avenue to complain if a principal's decision seems unfair. School expulsions are decided by the superintendent, on advice from central office staff and a report from the principal of the school concerned. The central office also supports the district board of trustees in its advocacy role in seeking more resourcing from the province, provides data analysis for individual schools and the district as a whole, and research-based information.

Services including maintenance, curriculum resources, advice, and professional development are also provided: on a cost-recovery basis. People providing advice or professional development, and heading the development of resources have been principals or teachers: such experience is often also a step towards the principalship, building an understanding of both "central office" and a wider perspective. But these sections are also gaining from their knowledge and reputation. These sections have an incentive to make what they provide as useful and user-friendly as possible, since schools are billed for what they use. The greater purchasing power of the district as a whole enables them to bring in some "big names" that schools could not afford on their own. Schools also contract in external expertise, and they have been increasingly encouraged to share their own, through the AISI project and funding, which groups schools in clusters, and through the various ways in which principals are connected and work together.

Again, what strikes a New Zealander is the connections made across these different activities: the ability to house support and accountability under the same roof, rather than take the route we took of separate agencies and contracting out (e.g., support services to the colleges of education, now housed in universities). The involvement of principals in decision making at reasonably high levels is also impressive. One could also see that it takes some determination to keep the interconnectedness, and that it needs to be a reality in a number of dimensions, as part of an ongoing culture.

### *Principal accountability*

The importance of having a strong superintendent who actively led the district, particularly the principals, was a consistent theme during my visit to EPS. In its formative years of developing and then maturing school-based management and school choice, EPS enjoyed a continuity of long-serving strong superintendents. This sense of purposeful leadership was missed in recent years, with a series of acting appointments and a brief superintendency of someone from outside EPS who was not such an active leader as EPS was used to. The principals were keen to see a return to strong leadership.

Such leadership was based on moral authority, earned respect for someone from whom principals felt they kept learning and being challenged in a meaningful way, as much as the position itself, and the role of the superintendent as the principal's direct employer. It was undermined if principals felt that others in the central office were instructing them, they were getting different messages from different people in the central office, or they were being micromanaged. A flattened hierarchy from the cuts of the mid 1990s had left principals with a direct relationship to the superintendent, rather than working with geographically based assistant superintendents, but it was not possible for one person to sustain the kinds of working relationships principals were used to. EPS has six executive directors, all of whom had also been EPS principals and taken other roles within the district before they took these positions. Each of these was now working with around 33 principals, but their status in terms of their authority remained unclear, allowing principals to challenge some of their requests.

Nonetheless, the principals did expect to be accountable to the district, and they thought it important that there were limits placed on individual principal autonomy. They wanted the central office to first work with principals who were struggling or bucking core rules, and they wanted central office to remove principals from that role (and not just from their current school) if they continued to break a rule or compound a problem. They wanted a superintendent who was able to make hard decisions. They were well aware through their experiences of operating in a school choice system (competing for students) and their experiences of the district budget—the budget for all the schools—being affected on a few occasions by principals not managing financially, and by the ongoing difficulty of having schools with less than 85 percent occupancy (while others were turning students away) that the EPS schools were not standalone franchises, but interconnected. What was important to them was retaining the flexibility to customise common frameworks, and make decisions that took into account their individual school make-up and issues.

A few years before, in the early days of AISI (which began in 2000) the then superintendent had brought in an external contractor to deliver a programme focused on instructional leadership and professional learning communities. The contractor did not customise the programme sufficiently for some of the principals I spoke with. A requirement that principals spend 50 percent of their time in classrooms, to drive home the importance of their role in working with teachers, met with resistance not because principals thought they should not be instructional leaders, but because this seemed too mechanical a measure, too much of a “tick-box” approach. One person knew of two principals who had indeed taken this requirement literally, because they were coming up for their

three-yearly superintendent's review. But this was not the norm. Principals used this target more as a way to reflect on how they spent their time, to think about how well they knew what their teachers were doing, and the best way to get that knowledge, and work with teachers, or in the case of larger schools, work with heads of department and senior staff, to sustain good teaching or improve it, and ensure that teachers were focused on school targets.

The school plans (annual, within a three to five-year rolling plan) were also approached as frameworks, rather than tight scripts. They were taken seriously in the sense that the principals took a systematic approach to their schools, and saw these as useful tools. They served as the basis for staff and school council discussion of what was going well in the school, what could be improved, and what that might mean for (re)allocation of resources. Prioritisation of resources was never easy, and it could be easier to focus on the short term than the long term.

Having to discuss the school plan twice within six months with trustees, once in spring as a plan, and once in autumn, when the results of the previous school year's student performance and satisfaction surveys were known, did seem inefficient to principals. Ideally, they would have liked to use their results as they formed their school plan for the current year, and to decide the plan in one set of discussions and decisions, rather than two.

The school plans must address each of the district's three priorities, and set measures and indicators for each of these priority areas. Thus, there is a clear frame for the executive director to discuss the school's progress throughout the year, and for that information to be used in the three-yearly performance review by the superintendent. These measures include quantitative measures of student performance and staff and parent satisfaction; they may also include things like analysis of the principal's classroom observations and feedback to teachers.

My impression was that the principals and central office staff thought that it was important to have measures and indicators, and they were used to a system where many of these were mandatory. The main use of these measures and indicators was formative: to further develop the quality of teaching and learning, and to provide a common focus for discussion that should be useful to both the principal and the central office. This did not seem to be a system like the school targets in the US or England, which have more mechanical and adverse consequences if they are not met—and not just for the principals involved.<sup>27</sup> I did not hear of gaming occurring (e.g. concentrating on the “bubble” students who are close to achieving a state standard rather than all, to the detriment of both low and high performers), nor of teaching to the test, or assessment driving instruction.

A formative accountability approach was consistent with the inquiry learning and collaborative, open approach that has come with AISI. There was general enthusiasm about the changes in EPS that had occurred as a result of the funding that allowed teachers to work together during the school day (and some schools were finishing early on Thursdays for this purpose), professional

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<sup>27</sup> A sober account of the negative and unintended downstream impacts of the Texas reforms that were used as a model for NCLB is given by Nelson, S. W., McGhee, M. W., Meno, L. R., & Slater, C. L. (2007). Fulfilling the promise of educational accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 88(9), 702–709.

development (including the more “embedded” work of in-school inquiry learning), and a focus on the use of assessment data for learning. People spoke of having more of a common language around assessment and learning, and more open school cultures, of people acting as coaches for one another.

Even with this formative approach, the inevitable tensions between school-based managers and those who allocate funding, decide on common frameworks, and assess principals’ performance were present. Sometimes central office staff spoke of the difficulty of principals wanting to do their own thing, or of wanting things that would suit their school, regardless of a wider district cost. Sometimes principals spoke of central office staff wanting things that they did not see the need for, or that were too much “one size fits all”. But on the whole, I had the impression that these tensions were at a manageable or periodic level, and that there was not strong interest in swinging the pendulum further one way or the other. There was more interest in how to develop capability, how to use knowledge wisely and efficiently in all dimensions of the district’s work. As one central office staffer put it:

The truth is it doesn’t matter what accountability system you have. Quality depends on the staff—if they’re not strong teachers, then you get subversion. It’s all about promoting and developing knowledge.

Nonetheless, if a school was seen to be struggling, it was the central office’s responsibility to first monitor and support, provide coaching, and then to put pressure on the principal. It was noted that it was not always easy to be clear whether a school’s issues were due to the school itself, or the principal, but either way, the central office saw that it had the responsibility to get positive change.

### *What can we learn from Edmonton?*

Worldwide, school self-management makes sense in terms of responsiveness to particular needs and configurations—of the school context and its past history. Yet it is also clear now that on its own, it is unlikely to make much difference to the quality of education,<sup>28</sup> or to making educational opportunity more equitable. To be responsive, to make real gains in student learning, especially for low performers, school staff need to be knowledgeable. That knowledge needs systemic nurturance and continuing support. Elmore (2004) has made the point in his analysis of the realities of school improvement that systems need to develop capacity, and support as much as they demand.<sup>29</sup>

What I see in Edmonton is a system of self-managing schools that is doing well, and tackling challenging issues, and that has approached this development of capacity and support, as well as demand or pressure, in a more coherent way than we have in New Zealand. While some of the

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<sup>28</sup> E.g., Walberg, H. J., Paik, S. J., Komukai, A., & Freeman, K. (2000). Decentralization: An international perspective. *Educational HORIZONS, Winter*, 155–166, “...conditions in classrooms and schools have far more substantial and consistent causal bearings on learning than how decision-making responsibilities are divided among units of government”.

<sup>29</sup> Elmore, R. E. (2004). *School reform from the inside out*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

same tensions we have in New Zealand are also present in Edmonton, they appear to be less corrosive. Thus it appears to me that we can challenge what we have come to take for granted, and improve it, without thinking that to do so is to seek the impossible, or to mean an utter transformation of our system. The question is not to reinvent Edmonton here, but to draw from it some operating principles that could develop the capability of our schools and system to make the most of self-management.

These principles are:

- Ensuring that the responsibility for school and student performance/progress is felt to be shared, encouraging open discussion: seeing schools and the Ministry of Education and other government agencies as sharing the same orbit.
- Clear lines of accountability, minimising the opportunities for mixed messages or micromanagement.
- Accountability that occurs within regular discussions of progress, that is largely formative, and consistent with what we know now about the best conditions for learning, but within a clear framework of values and goals.
- Interconnections between schools and the authority that works with it, based on:
  - the importance of timely two-way flow of information and issues
  - the authority having a relationship with each principal that promotes support and challenge
  - using principal knowledge beyond their school—expecting principals to act as contributors to a wider system.
- Principals having an incentive to act with other principals as a community of practice (e.g., perhaps through sharing a limited resource whose misuse by one has implications for all).
- Structured connections among principals that build their knowledge through joint work, stimulus, dialogue, and support.
- The authority taking responsibility to develop school leader and principal capability and capacity, and to do its best to ensure that every school can appoint a principal who is ready for the role, and can work well in that particular school.

The challenge for New Zealand is that these principles of interconnection (over time and through relationships) and coherence (seeing the issue of capability and capacity not just as matters of principal supply, but of making the most use of educational expertise throughout the system) run up against our lack of district equivalents. If it became difficult for one superintendent to work formatively but with the strength of the employer with 197 principals, how much more overwhelming to think of the Ministry of Education in Wellington having this strong relationship with almost eight times the number of schools, and without the authority of being the principals' employer! We have also made self-management more difficult for ourselves by limiting accountability (of school boards, not principals) to three-yearly reviews by the Education Review Office, which may send different messages than the Ministry of Education, or have them differently interpreted.

If we want to make the most of school self-management, and do it more efficiently, we need to think about the benefits of having a single authority to whom principals are accountable, and with

whom they work to ensure continual knowledge sharing and building. That authority would need to be big enough to provide a diverse career for educational leaders, but small enough to allow people to know each other, through work in different roles over time. We also need to think about revisiting the employment and appraisal of principals by individual school boards. I would suggest thinking about creating districts in New Zealand, and thinking of the forms it would suit us to see these principles in action.

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