

A Week in the Life of Alberta School Leaders

An ATA Research Update: July 2014



The Alberta
Teachers' Association



Council for
School Leadership

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ISBN 978-1-927074-22-0

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Foreword

Summer is the time of year when professors and graduate students who are leaving the Faculty of Education—whether retiring, graduating, or for another reason—clear out their work spaces, bringing closure to years of deep commitment and hard work. It has become common practice in the Education buildings for those leaving the Faculty to, when packing up their offices, assemble neatly arranged piles of books and journals on hallway tables for interested colleagues and those new to our Faculty. I often pause to look at these piles, imagining potential treasures to be found. Though I need not collect such things at this stage in my career, I always find something that intrigues me.

Recently, I serendipitously glanced at works cleared out of a colleague's office and the book at the top of the pile, *Conversation with a Dean: The Life and Times of H. T. Coutts*, caught my attention. A quote from the foreword of this book, written over 30 years ago, seemed relevant as I was considering the ensuing study on school leadership: "The notion of leadership is among the most elusive and complex ideas encountered in social, political, and organizational endeavours, and especially is it so in the field of education" (W. H. Hodysh & R. G. McIntosh, 1982). I paused, wondering what a study called *A Week in the Life of Alberta School Leaders* might have said 30 years ago. This reflection rekindled my long-held belief that there is a productive comparison to be made between the life of a Dean of Education and the life of a school leader. This comparative has been a meaningful one for decades, though reflecting different realities over time in the rapidly evolving world of education.

I often find myself thinking about what it means to be an educational leader. This is likely related to the fact that, after serving as Dean of our Faculty for more than a decade, I recently announced that I would not be seeking another term. Entering transition times causes us to be more reflective about the past as well as the future.

As I read *A Week in the Life of Alberta School Leaders* (which I find particularly well written, engaging and highly thought provoking), I found notable intersections between the work of school principals and my own work as Dean. I was particularly struck by the reported challenges of school leaders, including uncertain student enrollments, rapidly changing student demographics, budget reductions and the notion of "a high degree of responsibility but relatively little power." I also found myself relating to the shift over the past years whereby leaders of schools and leaders of Faculties of Education have moved from exciting primary roles as academic leaders of educational collectives, to their ever-broadening current roles as administrators and managers of a complex set of operational issues. Whether or not we are comfortable with the degree to which this has occurred—and I believe we should be very uncomfortable with it—those of us in post-secondary must address the actual demands and roles of school leaders as we navigate our responsibilities for contributing to principal and teacher preparation.

While the mission of a Faculty of Education and the scholars within it is to study, transform and build on current theory and practice, offering new insights and possibilities to leadership within and across educational contexts, we are simultaneously held responsible for providing relevant preparation for those entering today's schools as leaders. How can one balance these two competing needs? Indeed, regardless of the decades between then and now, Dr Hodysh and Dr McIntosh's observation concerning the elusive and complex work of educational leaders remains current!

Though the issue of educational leadership permeates temporal boundaries, *A Week in the Life of Alberta School Leaders* is a timely study and I was delighted to be invited to write this piece to introduce it. I commend the researchers on an appropriate and creative design for a study which focuses on our most precious resources, people and time. The study is soundly underpinned by its

excellent use of current and relevant literature in the area of educational administration and leadership. Notably, some of Canada's new scholars in educational administration, such as Paul Newton (University of Alberta), David Burgess (University of Saskatchewan) and Gus Riveros (Western), also address the tension between instructional leadership and managerial roles of school administrators that this study reveals.

A Week in the Life of Alberta School Leaders outlines some very concerning realities and challenges; yet, it also leads me to a place of optimism when I consider possibilities based on the implications and needs that are highlighted. It takes my thoughts to Alberta's not too distant past, when our Faculties of Education, the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Ministry of Education and school districts worked collaboratively to develop and facilitate thoughtful and innovative initiatives. We solved problems in collaborative fashion and were the envy of other provinces as we did so. I am an advocate for a return to such a collaborative model, and the sooner the better.

One key reason for my optimism is that I hold great faith in the amazing people in this province who are charged with leading and shaping what Albertans have come to expect: exemplary learning conditions for children and youth. I am inspired by what I have observed this year as schools begin to embrace a rethinking of curriculum and pedagogy in our schools. At the helm of these exciting changes are our school leaders working alongside teachers. When they are provided with appropriate "space and support," then they and we can come together once again to respond to the identified current challenges of their work lives.

Fern Snart

Dean of Education, University of Alberta

Preface

If education reformers could hang their hats on one lever of school improvement it would be leadership—specifically the role of the school principal—as a catalyst for innovation and reform.

Building the leadership capacity of school principals has always been a key priority for the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). For the last decade the Association has been working with Alberta Education and other education partners to develop provincial standards for school administrators. This, in part, stemmed from the *Alberta Commission on Learning 2003 Report's* recommendation to “develop a principal quality practice standard and to identify the knowledge, skills and attributes required of principals.” Along the same lines, in 2009, then Education Minister Hancock released the *Principal Quality Practice Guideline* for voluntary implementation and announced that a School Leadership Framework was in development to support and “promote its future use as a provincial requirement.” However, with the recent release of Jeff Johnson's Task Force on Teaching Excellence recommendations it appears at the time of this publication that the Minister had no intentions of approving the framework that was prepared for him through a long, mindful and very deliberate process involving the Association, Alberta Education and a broad spectrum of other education partners.

Notwithstanding these developments, the Association has adopted the *Principal Quality Practice Guideline* as the standard for school leaders and collaborated with school jurisdictions and administrators across the province on initiatives to support the leadership development, professional growth and evaluation of school administrators. One of these collaborative efforts included a research project published in 2010 that examined the supports needed for the meaningful supervision and evaluation of school principals, *Evaluating the School Principal: A Professional Model for Enhancing the Leadership Practices of Alberta's School Administrators*.

To further support the development of school principals and bolster that support with solid evidence and research that reflects the lived realities of Alberta's school principals, the Association undertook a time diary study that included 31 principals, vice-principals and assistant principals who, in May 2013, agreed to keep a 24-hour diary for seven consecutive days. The detailed analysis of this data in the context of a comprehensive literature review constitutes this report.

As with all Association research initiatives, a collaborative effort is behind this project. J-C Couture, who oversees the ATA's research projects, designed and coordinated the study, which was undertaken by lead researcher Laura Servage, a doctoral candidate at the University of Alberta. Harlan James, recently retired from the Association after 33 years of service, oversaw production of the final publication.

The study's finding that school leaders work, on average, nearly 60 hours a week points to one of a number of challenges faced by school leaders in meeting the expectations of their work. The fact that the leaders in this study were only able to commit to 4.7 hours a week to instructional leadership certainly suggests that, given the current conditions under which schools in Alberta operate, school leaders will continue to struggle to be the sorts of leaders they aspire to be.

Gordon R Thomas
Executive Secretary

Background

The Role of the School Leader in Alberta

The work of school leaders is complex and challenging, and the contemporary school principal performs many roles, including instructional leader, facilities manager, data analyst, social worker, fiscal manager and promoter. Over time, principals have increasingly been expected to have managerial skills. As Normore (2006, 46) observes, until the mid-1970s, school principals were essentially “line officers for the superintendent’s office” whose role was “narrowly” but “clearly” defined. They had relatively little overall authority and correspondingly little responsibility. Even though the idea persists that school leaders should be spearheading educational transformation, most school leaders today spend the preponderance of their time carrying out managerial and administrative tasks (Sackney and Walker 2006).

The notion that school leaders should be managers is, perhaps, inevitable in an era in which governments are increasingly controlling such aspects of education as curriculum, funding and professional development while at the same time insisting that operational and budgeting decisions be made locally (Hargreaves 2009; Olssen, Codd and O’Neill 2004). Alberta Education has acknowledged that the decentralization of operations management and accountability means that school administrators must master multiple competencies, including “school mission and goal development, issue identification, priority-setting, school improvement planning, financial and human resource management and development, information gathering and data-based decision-making, public and community relations and educational accountability and reporting system requirements” (Alberta Education 2009, 3).

An environment of centralized control and localized accountability means that school leaders have a high degree of responsibility but relatively little power. Principals have scant

control over the resources that they are given and no control whatsoever over the diverse needs of the students that populate their classrooms (Mitchell and Castle 2005). In their review of the relevant literature, Poirel, Lapointe and Yvon (2012, 304) concluded that the most significant source of stress for administrators is that they have little control over their workload, their time, and the rules and policies that govern their possible responses.

Stress and Burnout

Fink (2011) and Normore (2006), among others, suggest that the high level of responsibility and stress associated with the role of school leader contributes to the challenge that some school boards face in attracting and retaining strong, effective leaders. The problem is particularly serious in rural areas where the relatively small population limits the pool of potential school leaders (De Ruyck 2005; Wallin 2007). Persistent stress can lead to burnout, a sustained state that, as Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001, 399) observe, has three dimensions: (1) *emotional exhaustion*, the “feeling of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources”; (2) *depersonalization*, which results in “negative, calloused” responses to others; and (3) *reduced efficacy or accomplishment*, the sense that one is unable to achieve outcomes and lacks control over the resources needed to do so. The authors also observe that burnout can lead to a “withdrawal” from work, whether in the form of sick leave, stress leave, absenteeism or low commitment. Burned-out workers may also contaminate a workplace by engaging in ineffective work practices and poisoning interpersonal relationships.

Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001, 407) go on to observe that the research supports the “general notion that burnout is a response to overload. Experienced workload and time pressure are strongly and consistently related to burnout, particularly the exhaustion dimension.” In the same paper, the authors review the

research on burnout by occupation, concluding that educators experience high levels of emotional exhaustion. This finding is echoed in a recent Canadian study by Duxbury and Higgins (2013), who studied the ability of people in different occupations to balance their work, life and caregiving responsibilities. The sample included a large group of Alberta teachers who, the authors found, worked longer hours and experienced more work overload than the other professionals in the study. The authors concluded that work overload has a profound impact on an employee's overall ability to function:

Overload is strongly linked to increased absenteeism, poorer physical and mental health, increased intent to turnover and higher benefits costs. Employees who are overloaded are also less likely to accept a promotion and attend career-relevant training, and they often cut corners at work. Finally, employees who are time crunched and whose demands are unrelenting (eg, no time to reflect, no down time) are more likely to find these demands overwhelming (28).

Gmelch and Swent (1984) developed an index specifically designed to measure the job-related stress of school administrators. The index measures four types of stress:

1. *Role-based stress*, which stems from the fact that administrators have responsibilities that are not always clearly defined and that may result in conflicting demands.
2. *Task-based stress*, which resides in the countless administrative tasks that administrators must juggle throughout the school day.
3. *Boundary-spanning stress*, which results from dealing with the external environment. Examples include responding to legislation, handling legal concerns and gaining public support.
4. *Conflict-mediation stress*, which is inherent in working with parents and staff, disciplining students and resolving problems with stakeholders.

Although the time diary study described here did not attempt to measure specific types of stress and the effect of each on an administrator's ability to achieve a work-life

balance, it nevertheless provides some insight into the factors that create stress for administrators and that lead to work overload.

Standards of Practice for School Leaders in Alberta

The Government of Alberta is in the process of legislating guidelines for evaluating school leaders. The impetus for such guidelines was a recommendation by the Alberta Commission on Learning (2003, 46) to the effect that the province "develop a quality practice standard and identify the knowledge, skills and attributes required for principals." In the spring of 2009, Alberta Education issued the *Principal Quality Practice Guideline* and asked school boards to implement it on a voluntary basis. Meanwhile, the government concluded that this guideline should be incorporated into a broader school leadership framework that would set out such other requirements for the principalship as preparation; induction; ongoing professional development; and growth, supervision and evaluation.

In 2010, an advisory committee that was struck to develop the framework released an updated version of the practice guideline entitled *Provincial Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders* (Alberta Education 2010b). The document discusses the complex role of school leaders in terms of seven interrelated competencies. Each competency is accompanied by descriptors, which can be used to develop measurable outcomes. The seven competencies are as follows:

1. Fostering Effective Relationships
2. Embodying Visionary Leadership
3. Leading a Learning Community
4. Providing Instructional Leadership
5. Developing and Facilitating Leadership
6. Managing School Operations and Resources
7. Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context

Although the government has not formally adopted the practice competencies, many school boards in Alberta are already using them to ensure that school leaders receive appropriate professional development. For its part, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has carried

out two pilot projects to field-test the seven competencies. In the first, the ATA helped Livingstone Range School Division No 68 develop a process for evaluating assistant principals. In the second, the ATA worked with Black Gold Regional Division No 18 to develop practices and policies on administrator growth, supervision and evaluation that relate to the competencies (ATA 2013). Many questions remain concerning how the competencies will be implemented and how they will be used to evaluate school leaders. The ATA is adamant that the competencies be used for the purposes of formative rather than summative assessment (ATA 2010). The ATA also believes that school leaders should be directly involved in setting the leadership goals for their school.

Previous Studies on the Workload of School Leaders

Although many studies have examined the overall workload of school leaders, few have documented in detail the activities that administrators undertake in a typical day. Horng, Klasik and Loeb (2009, 1) conclude that “surprisingly little is known about what principals do on a day-to-day basis and how this varies across schools.” Following is a summary of some recent attempts to identify the numerous tasks that administrators undertake each day:

- Tink (2004) surveyed 21 school leaders in Alberta’s Foothills School Division No 38. In addition to collecting demographic information, the survey asked participants to estimate how much time they spent carrying out activities in 26 categories, each of which corresponded to a specific district policy. Participants also diarized their activities over a two-week period.
- Mitchell and Castle (2005) studied 12 elementary school principals in Ontario. Although small, the study was in-depth: participants were interviewed individually, observed on the job and invited to take part in focus groups. Although the researchers studied a range of activities, they focused on instructional leadership. The researchers sorted their observations into two broad categories: *understanding* and *action*. The study

was unique in that it took into account both observable behaviours and self-reports. The latter are useful because they provide insight into what participants were thinking when they undertook certain actions.

- Horng, Klasik and Loeb (2009) shadowed 65 high school, elementary and middle school principals for one day and recorded the activities they undertook during each five-minute period. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between the behaviour of administrators and school outcomes. While shedding a great deal of light on the kinds of activities that school leaders undertake, the study did not provide any insight into why administrators did what they did.
- Maiden and Harrold (1988) shadowed four school leaders on the job for one week and sorted their activities into 34 categories. The authors concluded that leaders’ work is highly fragmented and subject to frequent interruptions. They found that leaders undertake an average of 84 tasks per day, few of which last longer than five minutes.

Study Method

The study sample comprised 31 principals, vice-principals and assistant principals who, in May 2013, agreed to keep a 24-hour diary for seven consecutive days. Participants were asked to record their activities in 15-minute increments using the coding guide shown in Appendix A. The guide contained 14 codes: 10 for recording work activities and 4 for recording personal activities. The researchers concluded that having relatively few codes would simplify the data-collection process.

Although researchers encouraged participants to document periods in which they were multitasking, most participants entered only one code for each 15-minute period. In addition to coding, participants were encouraged to write brief notes documenting, among other matters, the extent to which they used technology. Some administrators provided a great deal of detail about their days while others provided none at all. The details helped researchers understand how participants interpreted the codes.

Once all the diaries had been collected, researchers entered the codes that participants had provided into a spreadsheet. Researchers then tallied the number of work and nonwork activities in which participants had engaged in each of three discrete periods: workdays, evenings and weekends. This exercise allowed researchers to calculate how many hours participants had spent on work-related tasks outside of regular school hours. Researchers also analyzed participants' comments to gain more insight into the kinds of activities that administrators were undertaking and to get a sense of how many administrators were multitasking.

In addition to keeping a time diary, participants were asked to fill out a one-page survey designed to collect demographic data. The survey also contained some short, open-response questions that prompted participants to comment on the strengths of their school, the challenges facing it and the nature of the community in which it operated. Although brief, these responses suggest that, in general, schools are facing three major challenges: student diversity, budget cuts and rapid population change.

Study Sample

Of the 31 diaries submitted, two were incomplete. As a result, only 29 diaries were analyzed. Of the 29 participants who completed diaries, two did not fill out a survey. The demographic data is therefore based on a sample of 27. The composition of this sample was as follows:

- Six principals and vice-principals from one large Edmonton high school with a student population of more than 2,000
- Six principals and vice-principals from schools in Fort McMurray
- Fifteen principals and vice-principals from schools in the Calgary area

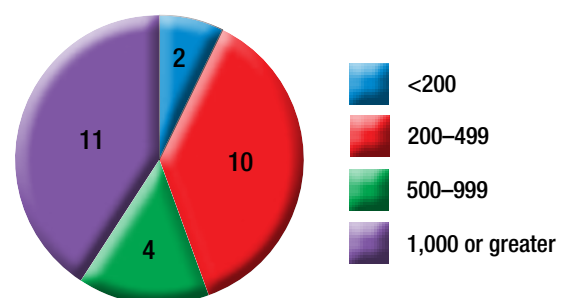
Because all participants worked in urban schools, the results of this study cannot be extrapolated to apply to rural school leaders. Indeed, the literature on the principalship clearly suggests that rural and urban schools have distinctive needs and challenges. If this study is repeated, it should ideally involve a

larger sample consisting of school leaders from a variety of settings: urban, rural and remote. Data from the surveys suggest that participants were from schools that served students from high, low and mixed socioeconomic backgrounds. Many participants also noted that the student populations they served were highly diverse. Participants from the Calgary area, in particular, noted that one of their central challenges was serving many students whose first language was not English.

Ten participants were middle school or high school principals. Of the ten, six were from the same Edmonton high school, one was in charge of a 7–12 school and three came from dedicated middle schools. The seventeen remaining participants were in charge of elementary schools. Two of the seventeen headed up schools having large dedicated special needs programs. Seven participants reported that they taught during the week of the study. On average, participants were assigned to teach slightly more than two hours per week, and the teaching load ranged from a high of twelve hours to a low of two hours. Participants were not asked to document the specifics of their teaching assignment, just the time devoted to it during the week.

Because most participants were from urban settings, the schools they served tended to be large, as shown in Figure 1. A slight majority of the schools with which participants were associated were secondary. The smallest high school served 800 students, while the largest served approximately 2,300.

Figure 1: Participants by Student Population of the School in Which They Serve (N=27)



Findings

Like teachers, school leaders spend much time outside of normal school hours on job-related activities, time that often goes unrecognized. To determine how much time participants spend on work-related activities, researchers assigned all work-related activities reported in the diaries to one of the following discrete time blocks:

- **Workdays:** The 40 hours spent at school, Monday through Friday, from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM
- **Weekends:** The 62 hours from Friday at 4:00 PM to the following Monday at 6:00 AM
- **Evenings:** The remaining 66 hours of the workweek, consisting of time before school, time after school (except on Friday, as noted above) and nights

This analysis revealed that, on average, school leaders spend 58.5 hours on work-related activities. Figure 2 shows how many of these hours, on average, fell within each of the three time blocks.

A pilot study of 20 Calgary-area teachers in 2011 revealed that teachers put in an average of 55.7 hours per week on work-related activities, about three hours less than the school leaders in the current study (ATA 2012). Compared with teachers, leaders tend to work their extra hours in the evenings rather than on weekends. (Leaders in this study put in 5.3 hours of weekend work compared with the 8.2 hours of weekend work reported by teachers in the 2011 study.) An average of 15.6 hours of evening work per week means that administrators typically work 11-hour days. The current study suggests that, while leaders spend somewhat more time than teachers physically present at the school and more time during the weekday participating in meetings and in school and jurisdictional events, they do not take as much work home on weekends. Given principals' managerial role and the fact that they do not prepare lessons and grade student assignments, the finding that they put in less time than teachers on weekends makes sense. However,

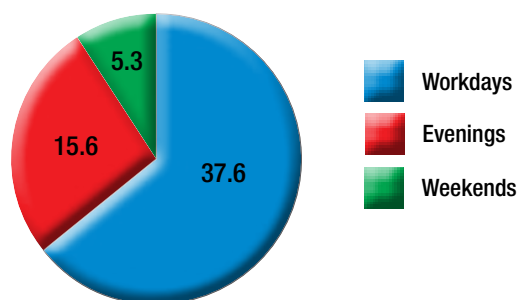
some leaders teach for part of the day. Only one participant reported spending time on the weekend preparing lessons and grading assignments.

School Leaders' Work Activities

Table 1 summarizes the average amount of time, per week, that participants spent on coded activities, both work-related and personal, in each of the three time blocks.

Researchers defined a leader's typical workday to be 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM, Monday through Friday, a work period that approximates average office hours. Principals reported that they were frequently in their schools before and after these hours. Most participants stated that they arrived at school between 7:00 and 8:00 AM. However, several reported that they often made phone calls related to operations management (OM) and student affairs (SA) while driving to school, an indication that their workday had already begun. Participants tended to end their school day at about 4:00 PM approximately half the time. On other weekday evenings they might work as late as 9:00 PM, a pattern that echoes that found in a study of Calgary teachers (ATA 2012). Evening work for principals includes attending school events and meetings (AH) as

Figure 2: Average Number of Hours Per Week That Principals Spend on Work-Related Activities in Each Time Block



well as fostering external relations (ER). The number of evenings that school leaders work varies from week to week, depending on the school calendar.

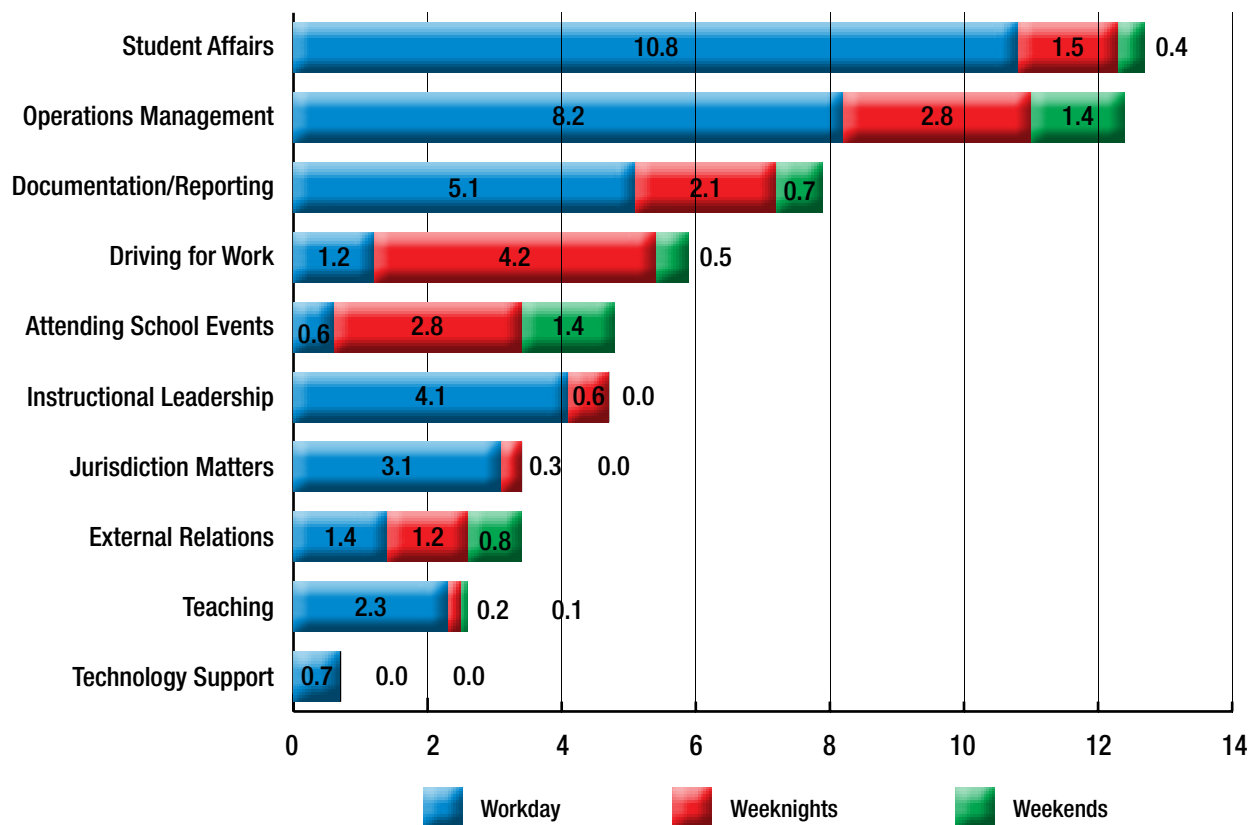
Participants spent the preponderance of their time on issues related to student affairs (SA) (about 13 hours per week) and on managing the

school facility (OM) (about 12 hours per week). Based on participants' comments, the activities associated with student affairs included meetings and ad hoc interventions to address students' special needs and behavioural issues. Two participants documented major incidents that involved arranging for an outside agency to

Table 1: Average Hours Spent Per Week on Coded Activities in Each Time Block

		Workdays <i>40 hours possible</i>			Evenings <i>66 hours possible</i>			Weekends <i>62 hours possible</i>		
Code	Explanation	Average	Max	Min	Average	Max	Min	Average	Max	Min
Personal Activities										
HF	Home/Family	0.6	3.0	0.0	13.6	21.2	6.8	19.7	37.7	2.0
PB	Personal Break	1.6	4.2	0.0	0.9	5.5	0.0	1.2	8.0	0.0
RR	Rest and Relaxation	0.2	1.5	0.0	6.2	20.8	0.0	11.5	34.0	0.0
ZZ	Sleep	0.0	0.0	0.0	29.7	37.2	24.2	24.3	35.5	20.25
	Totals	2.4			50.4			56.7		
Work-Related Activities										
OM	Operations Management	8.2	16.8	1.0	2.8	8.5	0.0	1.4	5.0	0.0
IL	Instructional Leadership	4.1	16.2	0.0	0.6	4.8	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0
TS	Technology Support	0.7	2.5	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
DR	Documentation/ Reporting	5.1	15.0	0.0	2.1	10.2	0.0	0.7	5.5	0.0
SA	Student Affairs	10.8	26.0	3.0	1.5	5.0	0.0	0.4	2.8	0.0
AH	Attending School Events	0.6	6.5	0.0	2.8	17.8	0.0	1.4	7.5	0.0
JR	Jurisdictional Matters	3.1	8.0	0.0	0.3	2.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
ER	External Relations	1.4	7.2	0.0	1.2	9.5	0.0	0.8	16.2	0.0
DW	Driving for Work	1.2	3.2	0.0	4.2	12.5	0.0	0.5	3.0	0.0
TE	Teaching	2.3	12.2	0.0	0.2	3.0	0.0	0.1	4.0	0.0
	Totals	37.5			15.7			5.3		

Figure 3: Average Hours Per Week Spent in Each Time Block on Specific Work-Related Activities



intervene. Resolving these situations took between two and six hours. Other time devoted to student affairs was more positive: meeting with students to discuss their programs, planning extracurricular activities and events (such as student awards ceremonies) and driving students to extracurricular activities. Activities associated with operations management included handling building-related issues (such as checking the stage before an assembly), supervising students, consulting with office staff, dealing with staffing issues and carrying out safety drills. Many participants reported that they dealt with operations management issues in the time just before and just after school. School leaders might, for example, make work-related telephone calls while driving or carrying out school-related errands. One administrator reported spending an hour purchasing groceries for the school's breakfast program.

Many participants reported that, given their other responsibilities, they had difficulty making time for instructional leadership, a problem that is well-documented in the literature (Tink 2004). Participants spent an average of 4.7 hours per week on instructional leadership (IL). Because few participants commented on their instructional leadership activities, exactly what these activities entailed remains unclear. Participants reported spending an average of 8 hours per week on documentation and reporting (DR), approximately 3 hours of which occurred in the evenings and on weekends. Activities associated with documentation and reporting included reviewing a new reporting structure, writing grant proposals, working with the police on a report, signing off on field trip permissions and tracking student transportation patterns.

Based on their diary entries, school leaders switch tasks, on average, every 30 to 60 minutes during the school day and in the evenings. Not

surprisingly, their focus is more sustained during structured activities such as jurisdictional meetings, staff meetings and school functions. Most instances of multitasking involved making work-related calls while driving and conducting operations management business during home or family activities.

Given that relatively few participants chose to record instances of multitasking activity and given that the coding categories tend to overlap, the workday of the typical school leader is probably considerably more fragmented than the data suggest. Furthermore, the data offer little insight into whether school leaders switched tasks intentionally or whether they were responding to the demands of the moment. Participants, however, were clearly very busy. Just how busy is captured in the comments that some participants made about the difficulty of finding time to complete the survey. One participant wrote, “I attempted to do this survey twice before being able to complete it. The weeks were too full of early morning meetings, too full of late nights at the school and too many system commitments. Combined with my regular workload, I simply didn’t have time to collect and reflect on the data.” Another participant wrote, “This may not seem like a typical week, but none of the weeks are typical. We’ve had assemblies, field trips, field tests for

provincial achievement tests (PATs), PAT exams and difficulty finding substitute teachers every week since the survey began.”

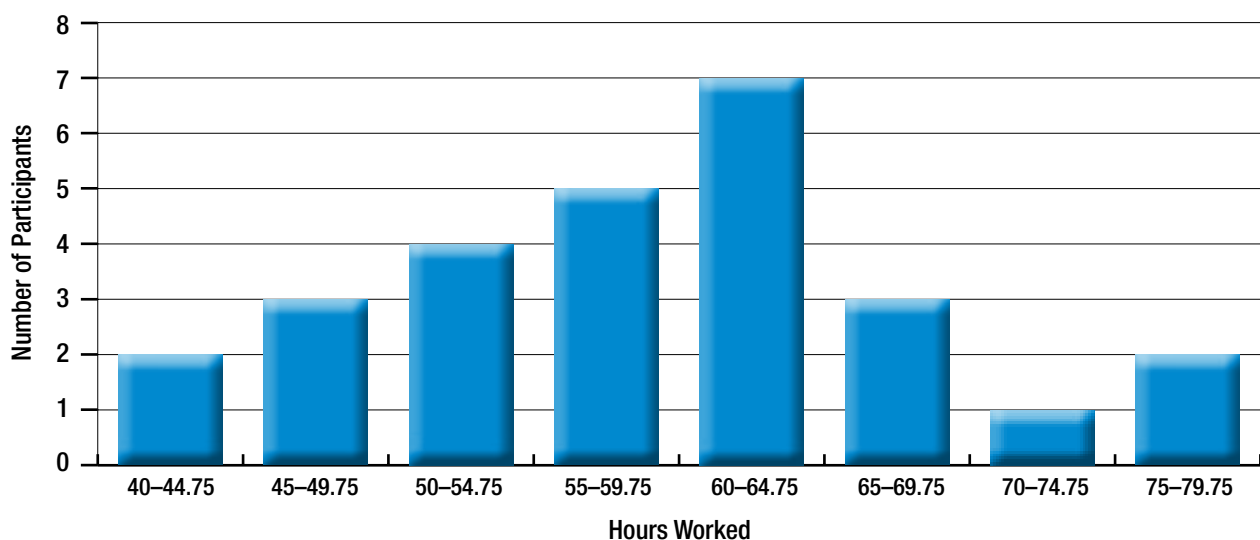
The number of hours worked by individual participants ranged from a low of 42 to a high of 80. For the week of the study, all participants put in between 35 and 40 hours during the regular school day (8:00 AM to 4:00 PM). Any personal breaks that leaders took during the day tended to be sporadic and short (seldom longer than 30 minutes). The amount of time that participants worked is shown in Figure 4.

Personal Activities

During the workweek, school leaders, unsurprisingly, tended to spend far fewer hours on home and personal activities than they did on work-related activities. Figure 5 shows the number of hours per week that school leaders spent, in each of the three time blocks, on the personal activities for which codes were assigned.

School leaders slept an average of 7.4 hours per weeknight (Monday through Thursday) and an average of 8.1 hours on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. They spent an average of 3.4 hours per weeknight and an average of 6.6 hours per day on weekends engaged in home

Figure 4: Hours Worked by School Leaders in a Week (N=27)



and family activities. On weeknights, participants spent an average of 1.5 hours per day on rest and relaxation, an amount that increased to an average of 3.8 hours per day on weekends. Participants did not provide much information on the activities in which they engaged during their personal time nor on how restorative these activities were. Understanding the role that personal activities play in helping school leaders achieve a work–life balance would require a more comprehensive study involving focus groups.

Challenges

Participants were asked to complete a brief survey that asked them to comment on the strengths of and the challenges facing their schools. The survey also prompted participants to add any other information that they thought might help the researchers to contextualize the findings. Although the responses were generally brief, they nonetheless yielded considerable insight into the issues facing urban school leaders.

Budget Cuts

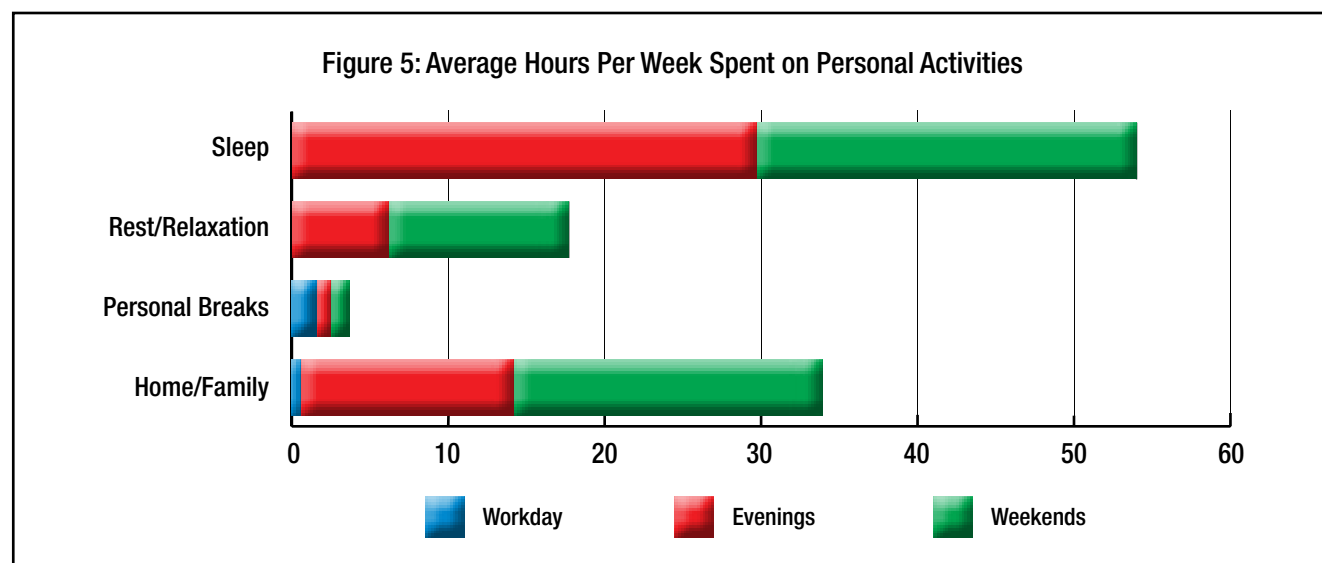
Several respondents commented that, as a result of budget cuts, they had had to eliminate certain programs, increase class sizes and scale back extracurricular programs. Cuts, combined with the expectation that schools offer increasingly diverse programs, made timetabling a major

challenge for some participants. The problems associated with inadequate funding were exacerbated by unstable student populations. One Calgary participant reported that her small elementary school began the year with 240 students (from 56 different countries) and ended the year with 273 students, 156 of whom were different than the students who began the year. Meanwhile the school received funding for only 246 students.

Unstable Enrolments and Diverse Student Needs

Some of the schools from which participants in this small study were drawn were experiencing shrinking enrolments while others were contending with a rapidly expanding student population. School enrolments in Alberta are affected by two key factors: (1) a quasi-market model that forces schools to compete with one another for students and (2) the booming oil industry, which encourages people from across the country and beyond to migrate to Alberta in search of work.

In a large national study of school principals, Cattonar et al (2007) found that the necessity of competing for students affected a significant minority of participants. Some participants in the current study reported that their school's enrolment was shrinking due to competition from other schools and from alternative programs in the system. On the other hand,



schools that offer extremely desirable programs can become victims of their own success, experiencing rapid increases in enrolment and the necessity of dealing with a multitude of highly demanding parents. One participant observed that her school was “growing so fast that [administrators] can’t keep up with the demand and have a waiting list to get in.”

Another administrator in the same city reported that shrinking enrolments were “making it difficult [for the school] to continue to offer quality programming.”

In addition to having to compete for students by offering specialized programs, schools are being called upon to expand their programs to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. School boards that have never adequately supported inclusive programming for special needs students now have to contend with a whole new population of special needs students: immigrants and refugees. Even some of the schools represented in the small current study are showing signs of buckling under the pressure of addressing the needs of new Canadians. Schools are having to supplement language immersion programs, sports programs, arts programs and programs for the gifted with programs and services to meet the needs of a fast-growing student population whose first language is not English and whose families do not understand the culture and expectations of Alberta’s schools. One high school administrator in the study observed that her school has many English as a second language students, special needs students and First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. In addition, the school offers advanced placement, International Baccalaureate and vocational programs. Another participant noted that his school hosts a hockey program, a French immersion program and a large special needs program. Highly diverse student populations require diverse programs, programs that may be difficult to schedule as a result of budget cutbacks and staff reductions.

Transient Communities

People from other countries and from other provinces are immigrating to Alberta because of

its booming economy. Alberta’s population is growing and becoming more transient. Some parts of the province are thriving economically while others are in decline. One participant in the study described the situation as follows:

“The transiency and work life of people in this city make for high needs students who come from other parts of the country and abroad, from split and/or broken homes and/or from homes of shift-working parents.” Another principal stated that among the challenges facing her school are “transiency and large numbers of ‘complex’ students and families.”

In transient communities, schools have difficulty responding to students’ needs and building stable relationships with parents and community. Without such stability, schools are hard-pressed to establish community support networks.

Discussion

In a recent review of research on the work of Canadian school principals, Yashkina (2012) concluded that a principal’s role is influenced by the following factors: (1) changes in school regulations, (2) changes in pedagogy, (3) budget cuts, (4) changing perception of parents regarding their role in education, (5) social changes, (6) demographic changes, (7) increased competition among schools and (8) technological advancements.

The studies that Yashkina synthesized confirm the findings of the current study, namely, that school leaders face a range of formidable challenges, including highly diverse student populations, inadequate funding and a government fixated on accountability and high-stakes testing. Cattonar et al (2007) observe that these challenges are especially daunting for principals relatively new to their role and for those in charge of schools having many high-needs students. Couture and Yashkina (2013, 25) add that school leaders tend to view changes in the immediate environment (such as reforms to school governance, curriculum, assessment and the role of parents) as having more impact on their schools than external forces that shape the economy and society itself. Although the

concerns that leaders report are important, they clearly need to be considered in the context of these larger external forces.

The role of school leader is a complex and demanding one. In addition to managing the school facility, creating a nurturing school culture and monitoring student achievement, school leaders must build relationships with their communities, stakeholders and a range of service providers. Here's how one administrator in the study described the latter task:

Our population spans the entire socioeconomic continuum, and we have a highly supportive and involved school council and parent association that provides outreach support. We work closely with several agencies, including Big Brothers, Big Sisters, various mentorship programs,

Calgary Reads, Families and School Together, Calgary Catholic Social Services and the Women in Need program.

That school leaders must be able to perform a wide range of roles is abundantly clear from this study. What is less clear is how, given the current political climate, school leaders can be prepared to take on these responsibilities. The study suggests that, in the perennial contest between serving as an instructional leader and acting as a manager, school leaders tend to give priority to such managerial functions as reporting, overseeing operations and handling student affairs. As one participant put it, "Sadly, most of my work was management and student affairs. Focusing on teaching, instruction and leadership seems to take a back seat."

Future Studies

Objectives

Future studies on the activities that school leaders perform on a daily basis should be undertaken with a view to helping the government and other stakeholders develop and implement policy on how to coach and evaluate administrators.

The finding that school leaders work, on average, nearly 60 hours a week suggests that school boards will experience increasing difficulty in persuading talented teachers to take on administrative responsibilities. Nor is empirical evidence to the effect that the administrator's role is a stressful and demanding one likely to encourage teachers to apply for administrative positions. The study suggests that, given the current conditions under which schools in Alberta operate, school leaders will continue to struggle to achieve a sustainable work-life balance.

Future studies might also focus on identifying the kinds of professional development and organizational practices that would enhance the resiliency and efficacy of school leaders and build their leadership capacity.

Empirical studies such as the one reported here shed light on the gap between the standards set out in the *Alberta School Leadership Framework: Promoting Growth, Development and Accountability* (Alberta Education 2010a) and the actual working conditions of school leaders. The feasibility of these standards and of the professional development programs designed to help school leaders achieve them should be considered in the context of the constraints that school leaders actually face in working with their schools, districts and communities. A clearer understanding of the activities that constitute a school leader's actual workday will help school boards identify areas in which leaders are strong and areas in which they need to grow. A larger study of the kind reported here could help school boards develop formative and summative evaluation practices for school

leaders that are realistic, uplifting and supportive of long-term professional growth.

Methodology

Following are some recommendations that should be taken into account if this pilot study is repeated on a larger scale in the future:

1. Ask participants to fill out a brief online survey *after* they have completed their time diaries. This post-study survey could include such questions as these:
 - Did you experience any significant disruptions during the week in which you kept a diary?
 - Was the week in which you kept a diary a particularly busy time of year for you, resulting in unusual demands on your time?
 - Did the experience of keeping a diary give you any insights into how you approach your job?
 - Did you encounter any problems in completing the diary?
 - When you were attending to student affairs, exactly what issues were you addressing?
 - What documentation and reports did you work on?
2. Consider adding codes for such activities as writing or answering e-mails and engaging in professional development (both planned and informal). (Alternatively, participants could be asked in the post-study survey suggested above to estimate the time that they spent on these tasks.)
3. Consider using codes that correspond to the seven leadership competencies articulated in the *Alberta School Leadership Framework*. This approach would enable researchers to measure how much time school leaders spend with respect to each competency.
4. Consider adding codes to capture instances in which participants engaged in multitasking and in which they used technology. Without

specific codes for multitasking and technology, tracking time spent on these activities is virtually impossible. Likely due to time constraints, few participants in the pilot study recorded more than one code per time block. On the other hand, researchers found that, when participants *did* enter more than one code per time block, the data analysis became considerably more time-consuming. The best solution might be to address these issues in follow-up focus groups.

5. Ensure that the study sample includes participants from schools of all types: urban, rural, large, small, elementary, junior high and senior high. A large sample of this kind might shed light on whether the type of school in which school leaders are located affects how much time they spend on various activities. Appendix B contains a model that might be useful in selecting schools that represent the range of conditions that school leaders encounter in Alberta.
6. Incorporate into the pre-study survey a question about the number of hours, if any, that school leaders are required to teach.
7. Use Stephen Covey's urgency/importance matrix (Covey, Merrill and Merrill 1994) or some other device to determine the extent to which the activities that school leaders engage in are intentional as opposed to reactive.

Although the *Alberta School Leadership Framework* assumes that the activities that school leaders undertake are always planned, much of a school leader's day may, in fact, be taken up responding to situations of immediate concern. Here are some strategies that might be used to help participants identify activities that are intentional as opposed to those that are spur of the moment:

- Ask participants to indicate, for each diary entry, whether the activity was intentional or unplanned. Alternatively, ask participants to document, for one day only, instances in which they switched tasks or engaged in unplanned activities.
- Have researchers job-shadow a subset of the sample for a day to determine the extent to which observed activities were intentional as opposed to unplanned. Ideally, observers should meet subsequently with the leaders they shadowed to validate their observations.
- Invite participants, once they have completed their diaries, to take part in a focus group. During the focus group (which should be organized as soon as possible after the diaries have been completed), invite participants to reflect on their diaries and to share their observations with other participants.

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Appendix A: Time Diary Codes

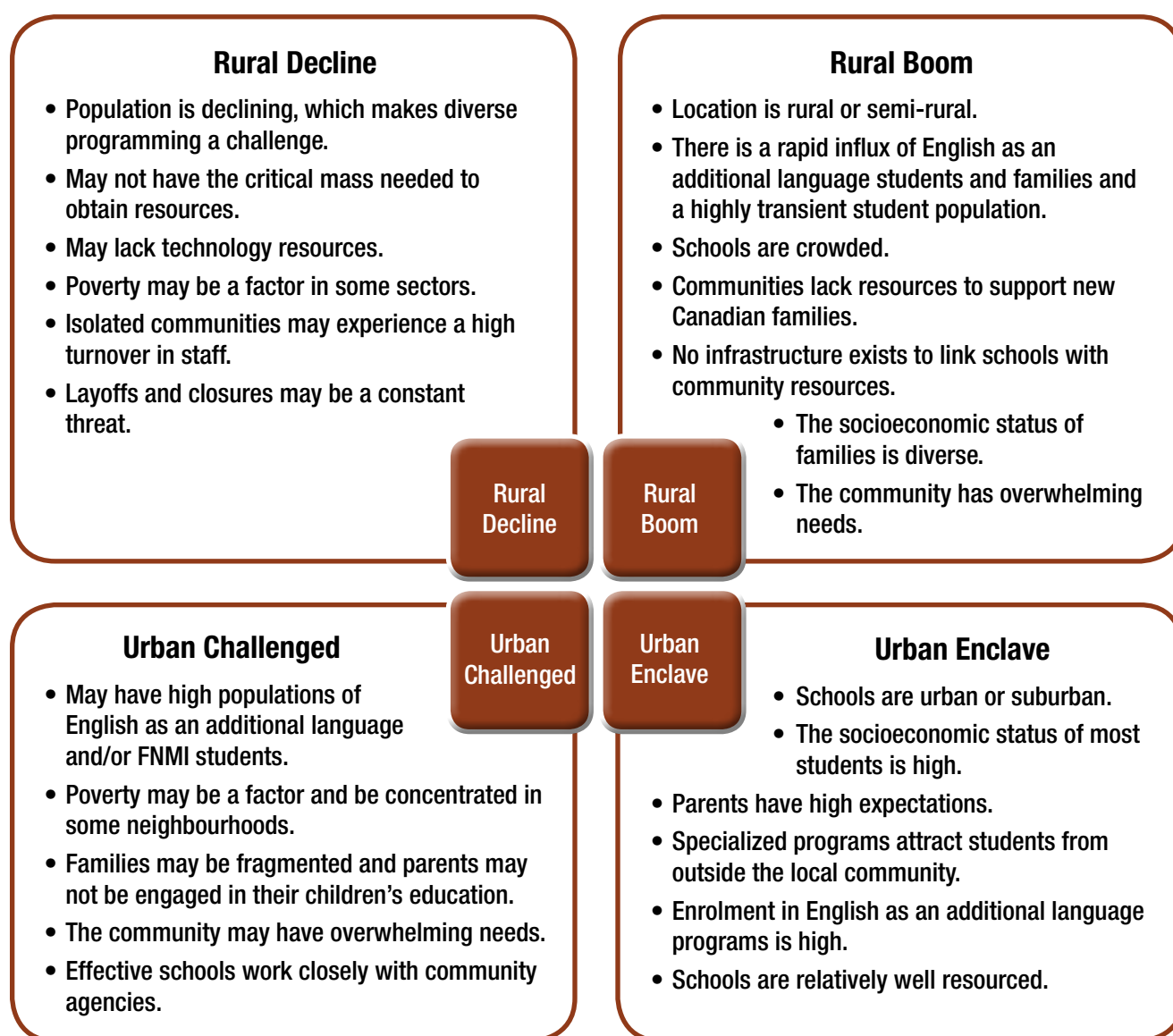
Code	Item	Description
OM	Organizational Management	Activities that contribute to the smooth daily operation of the facility: • Managing budgets, resources and non-instructional staff • Maintaining campus facilities
IL	Instructional Leadership	Activities related to improving teaching and learning conditions: • Conducting classroom observations and walk-throughs • Informally coaching teachers • Developing and supervising teachers and the educational program across the school • Making instructional rounds • Using assessment results to evaluate programs • Facilitating professional development for teachers
TS	Technology Support	• Consulting with school technology specialists and/or colleagues to resolve technical problems • Dealing with staff issues related to hardware and/or software • Overseeing acquisition and evergreening
DR	Documentation and Reporting Management	Completing reports and other paperwork: • Reporting on student behaviour and absences • Organizing field trips • Writing proposals • Filling out accident reports • Creating schedules • Writing reference letters for students
TE	Teaching	Teaching regularly assigned classes: • Instructing students • Marking assignments and tests • Gathering materials for broad-based assessments • Keeping student records • Managing learning resources for the assigned classes
SA	Student Affairs	• Supporting and supervising students • Communicating with families • Dealing with staff concerns about students • Creating and maintaining a safe school environment

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AH	Attending School Activities	• Attending school-hosted activities such as plays, awards nights, school dances, concerts and parent nights
JR	Jurisdictional Relations	• Attending central office meetings • Responding to communications from central office • Communicating with central office to obtain resources for the school
ER	External Relations	• Working with local community members or organizations and parent groups • Carrying out public relations • Fundraising
DW	Driving for Work	• Driving or riding as a passenger outside of regular instructional hours • Commuting to and from work • Driving to professional development days and to evening school events (do not include field trips)
HF	Home, Family and Personal Activities	• Doing housework and yardwork • Making meals and cleaning up • Eating • Caring for self and family • Shopping • Volunteering and carrying out community service • Participating in religious activities • Helping family and friends • Attending medical and dental appointments • Travelling in connection with personal and home activities
PB	Personal Break	• Eating lunch and taking personal breaks from work-related activity • Socializing with staff in the lunch room <i>(If work-related activities are undertaken during lunch hour and recess, they should be assigned the relevant code.)</i>
RR	Rest and Relaxation	• Participating in leisure activities • Exercising • Pursuing hobbies • Engaging in other forms of entertainment <i>(If any part of this leisure time involves watching television or using the Internet, add the letter T.)</i>
ZZ	Sleep	• Sleeping

Appendix B: Modelling Alberta's Schools

The following model suggests how many contemporary schools might be classified with respect to their location and the nature of their student population. Using this model to select schools for the purposes of a study will help to ensure that the sample is truly representative of the types of schools found in Alberta.





This publication is part of an ongoing series of research updates published by the Alberta Teachers' Association. Further background information about the research studies cited in this publication is available from J-C Couture at the Alberta Teachers' Association, 11010 142 Street, Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1; phone 780-447-9400 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 (toll free in Alberta); e-mail jc.couture@ata.ab.ca.