**LEADING EDUCATORS ACROSS THE PLANET (LEAP): 2014**

**Chinooks Edge School Division # 73, Alberta, Canada**

One of the beauties of LEAP was the opportunity it provided to undertake some significant short-term, observational research of choice in another educational jurisdiction. LEAP has the potential to provide the education community with research of significance from varying international systems such as Canada, Finland and England.

This opportunity does not happen very often in our careers. So this was truly an opportunity not to be missed. The research undertaken was for the school's benefit; for the community's awareness; and for my own personal professional development.

The education area my wife, Elizabeth, and I visited was called Chinooks Edge Schools Division # 73.

**Some background to Chinooks Edge School Division # 73:**

Chinooks Edge School Division is Iocated 40 minutes drive north of Calgary and extends up to Red Deer which is 90 minutes drive south of Edmonton. Populations in some of the towns in Chinooks Edge are growing rapidly because of the natural gas and oil reserves; and schools are needing to be very flexible and very responsive to increasing student enrolments. The Central Office recognizes and supports this situation very well.

The land use is mostly grain crops such as wheat and barley with the land flat to undulating which sits above vast reserves of oil and gas. Wells are a very common feature on the landscape and unemployment is low. Cougars, moose, wolves, coyotes, deer and black and grizzly bears inhabit this area (within the last two months before our arrival several locals lost their lives to attacks by a cougar and a grizzly).

The Chinooks Edge Superintendent, appointed by the local Education Board, is responsible for 43 schools including Elementary - Kinder to Year 4; Middle Schools: - Years 5 to 8; High Schools - Years 9 to 12; and several special needs schools.public, private, independent and alternate schools. All are publicly funded and all use the Alberta Province curriculum (similar to NSW with the BOS curriculum).

Chinooks Edge School Division has four Associate Superintendents (AS) covering Administration, Legal, Resources and Student Services and an Instructional Leader (a principal on a two year secondment from their school). Each Associate Superintendent is responsible for 11 schools and they meet with each schools’ executive team every thirty days for updates on their progress with school and personal goals (superintendent goes with the AS several times a year). Central Office is very supportive and quick to respond in providing help for them to reach set goals.

The superintendent conducts a SAT (Superintendents’ Administrators Team meeting) at the Central Office with all COLT (Central Office Leadership Team) present for half the School Division each month. Principals or Vice Principals are actually called ‘administrators’ and both are recognized and valued equally highly and either one goes to these SAT meetings to discuss the ‘usual’ issues of schools. The superintendent has a time at the end of these meetings with only the principals and vice principals present where they can openly talk about any other issues without the COLT members present.

All school staff have their own “Personal Growth” plan (PLP) including Educational Assistants (the equivalent to our School Learning Support Officers). Educational Assistants (EA) were often responsible for the school library for both borrowing and library lessons; and the EAs often ran programs such as social skills for classes as part of their job.

Principals’ salaries are very much the same across all school levels. There is some adjustments made for larger student populations but the difference is not much (certainly not like ours is). All principals teach at least one day per week (0.2) with some as much as half a week (0.5); vice principals are usually half time teaching (0.5)

consultants from Central Office of the Chinooks Division of Schools are most often principals only.

All schools had specialist music, art and sports teachers and their classrooms generally are much larger than ours. Schools needing a casual teacher all pay the one base rate – approximately $260 per day and any variation to the teacher’s pay scale is met by Central Office.

School assemblies are once a term (if that) for any school. Day or weekly notices are usually transmitted to the students via notes or message times for classes over speaker systems - several schools had flat screen TVs as well. Staff meetings existed only on “collaboration” days – our Staff Development Days. Short staff communication meetings were exactly that with the schools observed completed inside ten minutes.

Also, schools are designated with their name and ‘School’ at the end i.e. Spruce View School. Nowhere does it indicate that it is actually a K-12 school.

Any new buildings or renovations required have the architects discussing with the school staff, and most often the town community, in trying to meet students’ (and the towns’) needs. The buildings then become a true community resource which is used during the day, night and weekends by the school and the community. In some instances this occurs at the same time on multiple levels. Olds High School in Olds is an absolute standout of this type of cooperation coming to fruition as a major community asset. There was significant evidence of the strengthening and development of partnerships between schools, universities and businesses and their local and wider communities occurring throughout this school division.

All schools have a gymnasium which is influenced directly by the environment. The gymnasium is a multi-activity area including basketball, volley ball, gymnastics, rock wall climbing, roller blading/skating, indoor soccer and hockey et al. A stage is usually at one end or side and the stage often doubles as the music room/area as it can be closed off from the gymnasium.

All schools had a permanent full or part-time wellbeing/wellness officer qualified in sociology/social work and/or psychology who works with both students and families, conducts social skills, grief and loss, trauma and other programs. ‘School counsellors’ are located in Central Office and are only called by the school to administer tests necessary for assessing a student. The school then looks at the information and determines what supports might be necessary and can ask for support from Central Office through the Associate Superintendent for Student Services.

All schools have their own yellow buses and students stay on them until the morning bell goes and they move straight into class. Departures of an afternoon took several minutes only for the whole school to leave.

But just to make you feel better - in an area that has over 1.2m average cover of snow for more than six months each year and temperatures at or beyond minus 30’ C most days, only one school did not have a flat roof! (Most puzzling – and all principals rolled their eyes when asked the same question. And “Yes!” All the roofs leaked!).

**LEAP Research:**

My LEAP research topic was about the Alberta (Canada) teacher training system; and did it enhance the skills of candidates training as teachers through a long term strategy for enhancing their own capabilities?

While at Olds High School in Olds, I was able to speak extensively to Professor Ed Wanski from the University of Lethbridge at length about the processes that trainee teachers have to undertake in order to be part of the education degree program they offer. Those students who complete a degree in their chosen field of interest or expertise can choose to go through a very competitive process to gain entry into the Education degree course.

He stated that the processes for gaining entry into the Education degree course has changed over the last decade. This is exemplified by a principal of a K - 12 school I visited who stated the following from his own experiences:

*“For the most part the staff here are older teachers, like myself, who have completed a degree and/or teaching qualifications (similar to what NSW has been like). Up to a decade ago a teaching degree and hence teaching career was “something to do because they couldn’t get into their preferred course”.*

*However, newer teachers are most likely to have a double degree which means a four year degree in Arts, Science, Music, History, Literature etc. plus a two year degree in Education.*

*To enter into the Education degree program candidates need to write an application addressing the criteria set for the Education degree. His understanding is that no interviews are conducted and universities choose from the grade averages and written format alone. Three practicums are completed during the two year Education degree plus a near full semester of teaching in the last semester. These comments are also based on teacher training at several other universities but not including the University of Lethbridge and its affiliate colleges (universities).”*

**Background to Education 2500 Course Work:**

Potential education candidates can follow one of two streams. The most common way is to obtain a degree in their chosen field of interest or endeavor (usually a three or four year degree) then move on to a two year education degree (totaling up to six years); or do a double degree simultaneously (five years). By completing either the double combined degree or major degree followed by the Education degree candidates need to have satisfied up to 50 courses over the five years of study. There needs to be at least 60% (30 courses) completed in the chosen first degree. The chosen degree or major degree must include the fields of the Arts, Science, Music or Management and one of these fields must be a subject that can be taught such as Music or Science. The other criteria that needs to be met is that 20 courses of the five year degree work must be in Education (i.e. 40% of the course work).

Candidates who successfully complete both degrees will be eligible to teach Kindergarten to Year 12 across the province of Alberta and the qualifications are recognized across Canada in general.

**Education 2500:**

Firstly, candidates (possible trainee teachers) interested in becoming a teacher undertake the course Education 2500. The Bachelor of Education degree is a very competitive one that majors in English, Science, Social Studies and Physical Education. Successful candidates gaining entry into the Education 2500 course have to have a high grade point average (similar to a good to very good ATAR rating). There is also the expectation that candidates will have good to very good grades in English (at least 75% or higher in the Alberta Diploma exams (similar to the HSC exams) if the candidate is coming straight from high school; or have 3.0 out of a possible 4.0 or better grade from a degree being completed.

This is a course for potential trainee teacher candidates to find out if they are suitable and interested in pursuing teaching as a career. During this semester university staff, schools (and the trainees) have time to see if the candidate is suitable for becoming a teacher as they are immersed into classrooms and general school activities finding out what it is like being in a classroom, providing experiences and opportunities over a sixty hour time frame. This is usually twenty half days in school settings and the candidates have a role in the classroom similar to an Education Assistant (Alberta) or School Learning Support Officer in NSW. Most candidates prepare several lessons and ‘present’ them during this time.

At the end of the Education 2500 course determinations are made for continuation as an Education degree candidate or withdrawn from the program. Thus, potential trainee teachers can be graded as *“highly recommended”* or *“recommended” –* both are admitted to the education course work; *“pass”* – doing well but not suitable to continue as a trainee teacher; or *“fail” –* pursue another career.

The Education 2500 course usually goes across May and June and the University of Lethbridge takes around 200 - 220 successful candidates each August.

**Bachelor of Education**

**Professional Semester 1:**

The first semester consists of eight weeks of education tuition and five weeks of practicum experience.

There is a lot of reflection and journaling by trainee teachers in Semester 1. The course work consists of curriculum seminars, technology, teacher instruction, psychology and lesson preparations. Each of these is a 24 hour module conducted over the first eight weeks.

This is followed by a first practicum in a school which is usually an elementary (primary) school Kindergarten to Year 4. Initially, there are observations; then preparing and teaching a lesson which grows to full days of teaching by the end of week 5.

**Professional Semester 2:**

This semester consists of unit planning around core subject areas for 7 weeks followed by a 6 week full time practicum in a school. Trainee teachers teach what their mentor teacher teaches in the school. For instance: the core subject the trainee teacher is qualified in is Music, but the mentor teacher teaches English and History (middle school and high school) ; or in the elementary school it may be Physical Education or Music and they are training as elementary teachers. This creates challenges with the trainee teachers as they are having to plan lessons and teach them in subject areas they are unfamiliar with.

But the upside is that they become familiar with the basic pattern and format of lesson construction that will hold across most subject areas and also leads them to think about student learning outside of their own subject and where common learning strategies exist.

**Professional Semester 3:**

This semester of sixteen to eighteen weeks, depending on the school (and School Division) is totally dedicated to the trainee teacher teaching full time in their chosen specialty area. The coach/mentor teacher assigned to the trainee teacher relinquishes their class to the trainee teacher who “takes over”. The coach/mentor can co-teach with the trainee teacher or conduct a “demonstration” lesson.

The coach/mentor teacher and the school principal form a training partnership with the trainee teacher and advise, suggest and guide the trainee teacher in enhancing their skills further in this final phase of completing their practical teaching.

The supervisors from the University of Lethbridge follow the trainee teachers throughout their three semesters to be consistent in their judgments and to observe the growth of the trainee teachers.

*The professional learning that I experienced through the LEAP program was beyond "measurement". And the personal experience? ……Couldn’t be measured!*

*(\*\* Adapted from Warren Marks comments).*

*Get out and see what other schools are doing - adapt, adopt or ignore. Just do it!*

**Trevor Mulligan, Urunga Public School, NSW**