

## Driving Continuous Improvement — Developing and Implementing the Rocky View Schools' Three-Year Education Plan

*Greg Bass<sup>1</sup>, John M. Burger, Murray Besenski, Kevin Wittewaall<sup>2</sup>*

*(1. Deputy Minister, Alberta Education; 2. Rocky View Schools, Alberta, Canada)*

**Abstract:** This paper describes the strategic planning undertaken by a school jurisdiction in Alberta, Canada, that details how community engagement and transparent accountability processes are being linked to emergent learning theory and 21st Century learning objectives to move the division into excellent and improving accountability outcomes including student achievement results. Educational research and leadership theory have progressed to the point that well informed educational leaders can use dynamic, community-based strategic planning to guide their organization to higher levels of performance and improved student results. This paper helps to clarify how continuous improvement can be achieved through highly engaged and engaging strategic planning, well integrated with emergent educational theory and data-informed decision-making.

**Key words:** education policy and leadership, education planning, 21st century learning, technology implementation, systems development

### 1. The Three-Year Planning Process and Community Engagement

In Alberta, the Education Ministry requires public authorities to produce a strategic plan that is ‘in a form acceptable to the Minister’ and is legislated through the Government Accountability Act. School jurisdictions are required to produce rolling three-year plans that look at a three-year term, but are updated annually. These plans must be in alignment to the business plan of the Alberta Department of Education as all authorities are responsible for the measures, outcomes, and goals of the province’s plan. The Accountability Pillar Online Reporting Instrument (APORI) is produced annually and demonstrates the performance of a school jurisdiction (and of the individual schools in that jurisdiction) relative to provincial benchmarks and incorporates year over year performance of the jurisdiction. These measures, embedded in the business plan, are both quantitative (large-scale assessments) and qualitative (survey data of grade 4, 7, and 10 students and parents and all certificated staff). Each school jurisdiction, therefore, is responsible for demonstrating growth or maintaining high results in each area, on an annual basis.

Alberta is a province of approximately 3.5M people and 600,000 students. There are 62 public school boards, which include both public and catholic authorities, as well as public and catholic francophone authorities. Each board is locally-elected (every three years with all municipal official elections) and accountable to the Minister for meeting the standards of education as outlined in the Alberta School Act. The boards also are autonomous entities that are accountable to the local electors and form the corporate governance structure of the organization. Within

---

John M. Burger, Ph.D., Director of Schools, Research and Data Analytics; research areas: educational leadership, value-added data analytics, factors affecting student achievement and high school completion. E-mail: [jburger@rockyview.ab.ca](mailto:jburger@rockyview.ab.ca).

that scope, another primary role is to hire and evaluate their superintendent of schools, who also operates within a dual accountability role, both to the Minister of Education, and to the corporate board.

Within this context, superintendents are responsible for development of the vision and strategic direction of the organization, as approved by the board of trustees, and must ensure compliance with provincial business plan requirements. In short, each board and superintendent can construct a plan that reflects the unique nature of the organization, as long as all other requirements of the province are met. The vast majority of school boards, over 50 at last count, simply adopt Alberta Education's business plan structure. In other words, if the province's plan has three goals, the school board plan has the same three goals.

It is at this point that Rocky View Schools' (RVS) story begins.

Following the hire of a new Superintendent early in 2007, it was obvious that both the Board of Trustees and school principals had little knowledge, interest, and ownership of RVS' three-year plan. It was seen as a compliance document that successfully helped the jurisdiction to navigate through the compliance meetings held annually with Alberta Education officials. It was written in a week through the contracted services of a consultant, and stated the same goals, outcomes, and measures of Alberta Education. School education plans were very divergent and were not anchored in performance expectations via parallel data-analysis. The school plans were more anecdotal than strategic, and emerged at a time when local, school, or site-based autonomy was viewed as a panacea of school improvement, coupled with a mentality of competition with other schools, both RVS and Catholic schools, for student market share.

Upon reflection of this situation, some critical questions emerged:

(1) If all schools are independently pursuing their own goals, how do central office leaders support all of the divergent paths?

(2) If schools were functioning as independent entities, was RVS a school system or a system of loosely connected schools?

(3) With local autonomy trumping jurisdictional alignment, was educational leadership articulated and was RVS performing as well as could be expected as measured through provincial requirements?

(4) Was local autonomy, premised upon a competitive spirit, really the answer for system improvement?

(5) Would a common, collaboratively-constructed vision based on more transformational models of educational leadership move the division from good to great? If so, how would we know what worked best for improved student growth?

To move forward, the Superintendent designed a process to develop the next iteration of the RVS education plan for Board approval in April, 2007. The Board was shocked to read that the request was to build a plan for launch not until September 1, 2008, as this was a radical departure from a quickly written plan, which in previous years was then approved quickly by the Board. The process called for 200 stakeholders — parents, school council members, local politicians, business leaders, students, teachers, support staff, principals, and central office staff — to build a bold, new vision for RVS, starting with the essential question, "What does education need to look like in RVS in 2011 and beyond?" Committing to providing three full days of time from May 2007 to February 2008, participants were divided into four heterogeneous cohorts of 50 people each.

The first day for each cohort was spent learning of the process to follow, the requirements of the accountability act, and how to write goals, outcomes, measures, and strategies. In the afternoon each cohort responded to the essential question above, with any idea considered a good idea. Following the first round of cohort meetings, the feedback from all groups was pulled together and divided into eight themes, loosely

interpreted as priority areas. The second session saw each cohort use the priority areas to construct goal statements. Following this round of meetings, a rough draft of RVS' proposed goal areas was crafted and presented to all 200 participants, who were pulled together for the last session of the three-day exercise. In addition to suggesting further revision and refinement, day three also saw participants asked to identify potential outcomes for each goal, and suggest ways in which RVS' performance could be measured.

By March, 2008, a solid draft of the plan was near completion. The over-arching theme identified by participants was that RVS needed to meet the needs of a much different learner than of the past, as well as to prepare today's learner for a world and a future much different than past generations. Looking to anchor RVS' direction with research, RVS turned to the Metiri Group and its Dimension 21 Framework, as an underpinning of the plan <http://metiri.com/d21-dimensions21-measure-21st-century-skills-21st-century-learning>. The jurisdiction's direction was cemented with the release of a new vision, mission, motto, and belief statements, as well as its Portrait of a 21st Century Learner, which pictorialized the characteristics of the 21st Century learner as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Portrait of a 21st Century Learner

Committing to the document, holistically and strategically for the full three years, a new logo, official colors, a flag, mascot, and website followed shortly. RVS also doubled its commitment to professional development, moving from a structure of five days to a professional learning model of 10 days. All teaching staff was provided with a Mac book and the jurisdiction aggressively bolstered its technology broadband infrastructure to support 40,000 independent devices. What it meant to be a 21st Century leader, a 21st Century teacher, a 21st Century student, and a 21st Century organization also was constructed.

To promote a culture of system thinking, a comprehensive accountability framework and reporting structure was introduced. School-level education plans and school annual results reports were aligned to RVS' new goal

structure, emphasizing comprehensive results reporting in the fall of each year. This systems process saw RVS shift to “defined autonomy” (Waters and Marzano, 2006) whereby the goals, outcomes, and measures were non-negotiable, but principals used the same collaborative approach to build local strategies within their plan to reflect the local context. A jurisdictional survey process too was administered for all parents, students, and staff (grade 4 and up) to inform RVS about its progress in implementing the plan. Alberta Education’s provincial goals, outcomes, and measures were woven into the “made-in-Rocky-View” Three-Year Education Plan.

Having witnessed tremendous growth both in provincial and RVS data sets, the “shift” to becoming a 21st C learning organization has been well-seeded as part of the RVS culture today. RVS continues to strive to prepare students for their future, not our past.

During the 2010–11 school year, a second labor-intensive eight month process to build the next three-year plan was completed. The *2011–14 Three-Year Education Plan*, entitled “The Power to Enrich”, is focused on evolving and aligning instructional design with the Rocky View Learning Model, discussed in the following section, and fostering excellence in all its forms. It is built on the understanding that now that students are engaged, RVS must deliver on strong 21st Century pedagogy for students to flourish. The new plan, phase two of a nine-year transformation process, was built leveraging the power of social media, in which RVS reached out and collaborated with over 20,000 people, both directly and indirectly. RVS is very excited about where the jurisdiction is today and where it is headed.

## 2. The RVS Learning Model

Goal Three of the 2011–14 RVS Education Plan speaks to the importance of instructional design and practice as fundamental to achieving 21st Century learning. In order to move schools and classrooms towards an education system that prepares students for the 21st Century, Rocky View Schools developed its Learning Model, as seen in Figure 2.

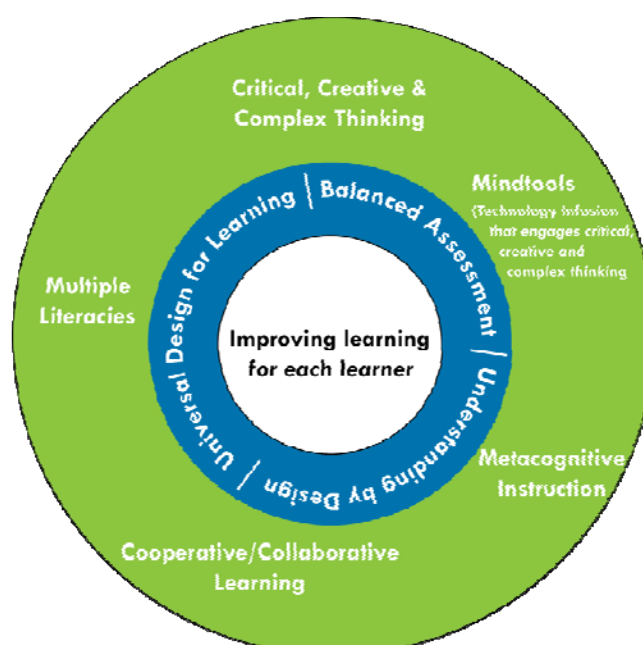


Figure 2 RVS' Learning Model

Three integrated instructional components are keys to the RVS Learning Model. The components, largely drawn from the Understanding by Design model (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005) coordinated under the RVS Learning Model, include: (1) clear curricular learning targets and outcomes, (2) effective teaching strategies, and (3) effective, balanced and comprehensive classroom assessment. Key strategies focus on providing multiple learning pathways and empowering all learners regardless of where and when learning transpires. RVS recognizes that gains in student achievement are realized when teachers provide a strong and purposeful instructional design that ensures all learners are engaged through a variety of strategies, settings, and formats. Likewise, balanced and holistic assessment strategies that engage students as partners in formative assessment processes will be keys to further enhancing the successes being achieved by RVS and to providing important data to support action research and program evaluation (Stiggins, 1994; Burger and Krueger, 2003; Burger, Nadirova and Besenski, 2011).

The RVS Learning Model has some similarities to the strategies reported for the Sanger School District in California, that over a seven year period transitioned out of Program Improvement status under the No Child Left Behind legislation. Hakuta (2011, p. 168) observed that Sanger “...attributes the improvement primarily to a turnaround process supporting the development of professional learning communities focused on student learning, data, and instructional strategies.”

Similarly, RVS is pursuing its 21st Century Learning Model strategically by providing professional learning opportunities for teachers to understand and effectively use the Model. In addition, the jurisdiction is implementing a new policy on Assessment and Communication of Student Learning and accompanying procedures that will better inform stakeholders of student learning, progress, and performance (see [http://www.rockyview.ab.ca/board\\_policies/boardpolicies/curriculum/HK-Assessment-CommunicationofStudentLearning20090604.pdf/view](http://www.rockyview.ab.ca/board_policies/boardpolicies/curriculum/HK-Assessment-CommunicationofStudentLearning20090604.pdf/view)). To bolster understanding, a repository of effective strategies regarding the reporting of student progress based on authentic assessment and providing professional learning opportunities for teachers to effectively implement and assess individual learner profiles for students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 is underway, as is a common reporting model for each grade level.

The RVS emphasis on the Learning Model additionally is supported in each school education plan so that instructional design and practice transcends the classroom and encompasses 21st Century competencies, enabling learning to be authentic, in-depth, and in an area of student interest. RVS will inspire learners to go beyond the immediate learning environment to construct and deepen their knowledge and understanding from both local and more global contexts.

Underlying this work is the development of Communities of Practice (COPs) to document, report, and share promising teaching practices throughout the jurisdiction. COPs are multi-faceted, but include developing inquiry-based, authentic learning models that exemplify the integration of trans-disciplinary practices across the curriculum. In addition RVS is creating and publishing a repository of inquiry-based, authentic learning projects, and is linking schools to community resources through the jurisdictional volunteer program to facilitate authentic learning experiences.

In summary, clear curricular targets grounded in 21st Century learning, effective instruction and balanced, holistic student assessment generating data with optimal utility are key drivers for continuing improvement in RVS.

### 3. Technology Infrastructure for Moving Forward

Goal 4 of the current Rocky View Schools Three-Year Education Plan focuses on technology infrastructure and supports for plan implementation. A key question is, “How can a publicly funded K-12 school division create learning environments that enable the acquisition of 21st C competencies?” First, all RVS schools have been equipped with standard technologies including, teacher laptops/projectors/sound systems and fast wireless Internet throughout the school. Second, teachers are designing engaging personalized learning that meets student’s needs. They also are supported by funding their innovation proposals, while a culture of learning and sharing is being fostered. Third, an array of low cost Web 2.0 tools and engaging digital educational content are being adopted. Fourth, students bring their own electronic devices to school, while schools reduce their reliance on paper-based resources such as photocopying and text books so schools can decommission computer labs. Together these strategies have positioned RVS to be able to achieve goal four.

### 4. Developing Leadership for Plan Implementation

In order for all of the goals in Rocky View Schools’ Three Year Education Plan to be actualized, it is imperative to focus attention on developing school-based leadership. Increasing the leadership capacity of system and school-based administrators is foundational for successful implementation. The divisional Three Year Education Plan implementation required the development of a vision of what teaching and learning should look like, i.e., the Rocky View Learning Model discussed above. RVS supported school-based administrators, who with their school educational community shared the responsibility for developing, communicating, implementing, supporting, monitoring, and evaluating a School Education Plan that is in direct alignment with the system Three Year Education Plan. This nesting of leadership is crucial for moving the organization forward in an integrated manner.

School-based administrators and central office administrators serve as instructional leaders, combining pressure and support with capacity building (Fullan, 2006) to achieve the goals of School Education Plans and engage the school community as partners. All administrators engage with students, staff, parents and other stakeholders in the education of children, and establish partnerships with key community institutions and organizations that promote and support the welfare of all students.

In order to facilitate a common language directed towards leadership and improvement, school board trustees, central office administrators and school-based administrators were trained in two Franklin Covey programs; *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and *Leadership: Great Leaders, Great Teams, Great Results*. What attracted Rocky View Schools to the 7 Habits Program are the program principles that are designed to yield greater productivity, improved communication, strengthened relationships, increased influence, and a laser-like focus on critical priorities. Carrying this philosophy further with additional training in the program *Leadership: Great Leaders, Great Teams, Great Results* was deemed vital as:

No organization has ever become great without exceptional leadership — without leaders who can connect the efforts of their team to the critical objectives of the organization, who can tap the full potential of each individual on their team, who can align systems and clarify purposes, and who can inspire trust. It takes a “mind-set, skill-set, tool-set” approach to develop leaders who can unleash the talent and capability of their team against the organization’s highest priorities (Covey, 2011, p. 2).

The high degree of community participation in the development and implementation of Rocky View School's Three Year Plan required administrators to demonstrate transformational leadership (Stewart, 2006). Transformational leadership focuses on how administrators and teachers improve the teaching and learning process by ensuring the focal point is the school goals, the curriculum, instruction and the whole school environment. Finally, the focus on the competencies required of a 21st Century Learner (Figure 1) helped Rocky View Schools to ensure that professional learning for administrators and teachers supported the teaching and learning process.

## **5. Developing a Data-Rich Learning Organization**

Outcome 4.2 in the RVS Education Plan is, "Accelerate innovation, research, and organizational development to achieve operational efficiencies." A key strategy to achieve this outcome involves developing a system-wide, balanced, and integrated student information system (SIS) that supports readily available diagnostic data of individual student achievement variables. An effective SIS must include data on more than student achievement. Data on the student's affective relationships with school, ability levels, aptitudes and interests are needed to have a comprehensive picture of a student's orientation to schooling. The SIS also must provide aggregated data at the classroom, school, and jurisdictional levels to inform decision-making within each context.

Related to the strategy of building a comprehensive SIS is the work to foster RVS as a research organization and ensuring innovative projects focus on action research as key stimulants to action research and innovation. Clearly, relevant, comprehensive and timely student data will be fundamental to achieving this outcome. A Student Information System represents a vital component of organizational intelligence. Historically, educational organizations, especially at the central office level, have had limited access to student data. With the development of broadband telecommunications and enhanced analytical tools, student data and information can now be shared between schools and central office to create data and information rich environments for value-added decision-making. Relational SIS databases will increasingly inform decisions such as optimal uses of limited resources and what works for enhancing student learning.

## **6. Indicators of Success**

School division performance is highly visible to anyone via the jurisdiction's Accountability Pillar report provided by the Alberta Department of Education (see <http://www.rockyview.ab.ca/publications/annualeducationresultsreports>). These reports are based on a combination of quantitative data and qualitative survey measures. The 2010-11 report provided below, considered holistically and in conjunction with additional survey data collected by the school division, provides important insight into the division's performance and related strengths and challenges. As Figure 3 indicates, RVS is performing at a high level, but more importantly the division is on a growth and improvement trajectory. The division is improving or improving significantly in 9 of 16 accountability measures and is attaining high or very high achievement in 10 of the 16 accountability measures. While this level of achievement is the envy of many jurisdictions, RVS will continue to focus on continuous improvement.



Goal	Measure	Measure Category Evaluation	Jurisdictional Results			Provincial Results			Measure Evaluation		
			Current	Prev. Year	3 Year Avg.	Current	Prev. Year	3 Year Avg.	Achievement	Improvement	Overall
High Quality Learning Opportunities for All	Safe and Caring	Good	86.6	85.7	84.9	88.1	87.6	86.6	High	Improved Significantly	Good
	Program of Studies	Good	82.2	82.7	81.2	80.9	80.5	80.1	Very High	Improved	Excellent
	Education Quality		86.8	86.2	85.8	89.4	89.2	88.9	Intermediate	Improved	Good
	Drop-Out Rate		2.8	2.2	3.2	4.2	4.3	4.7	High	Improved	Good
	High School Completion		80.5	79.1	78.8	72.6	71.5	71.1	High	Improved	Good
Excellence in Learner Outcomes	PAT - Acceptable	Good	82.5	82.7	80.8	79.3	79.1	78.0	Intermediate	Improved	Good
	PAT - Excellence		17.1	16.5	15.1	19.6	19.4	18.5	Intermediate	Improved Significantly	Good
	Diploma - Acceptable	N/A	85.8	88.5	88.1	82.6	83.4	84.0	Intermediate	Declined	Issue
	Diploma - Excellence		20.2	21.9	21.2	18.7	19.0	18.9	Intermediate	Maintained	Acceptable
	Diploma - Participation Rate		59.0	57.1	59.0	54.9	53.5	53.5	High	Maintained	Good
	Rutherford Scholarship		58.7	59.8	59.9	59.6	56.9	57.0	Intermediate	Maintained	Acceptable
	Transition Rate	Good	59.5	63.1	61.8	59.3	59.8	59.3	High	Declined	Acceptable
	Work Preparation		74.0	74.8	74.8	80.1	79.9	79.8	Intermediate	Maintained	Acceptable
	Citizenship		78.3	77.5	76.2	81.9	81.4	79.9	High	Improved Significantly	Good
Highly Responsive & Responsible Jurisdiction	Parental Involvement	Good	76.8	78.8	77.5	79.9	80.0	79.4	Intermediate	Maintained	Acceptable
	School Improvement	Good	77.9	76.4	75.6	80.1	79.9	78.8	High	Improved Significantly	Good

Figure 3 Rocky View Schools 2010-11 Accountability Pillar Report

## 7. Conclusion

Educational research and leadership theory have progressed to the point that well informed educational leaders can use dynamic, community-based strategic planning to guide their organization to higher levels of performance and improved student results. This paper helps to clarify how continuous improvement can be achieved through highly engaged and engaging strategic planning, well integrated with emergent educational theory and data-informed decision-making.

## References

- Burger J. M. and Krueger M. (2003). "A balanced approach to high-stakes achievement testing: An analysis of the literature with policy implications", *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, Vol. 7, No. 4, available online at: <http://iejll.synergiesprairies.ca/iejll/index.php/iejll/article/view/413>.
- Burger J., Nadirova A. and Besenski M. (2011). "Toward more comprehensive approaches to student assessment: Classroom-based assessment as an enhancement to large-scale tests", *The American Educational Research Association Conference*, New Orleans, April.
- Covey S. R. (2010). *Seven Habits Revisited*, New York. Finkelstein Press.
- Fullan M. (2006). *Turnaround Leadership*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



- Lemke C., Coughlin E. and Reifsneider D. (2009). *Technology in Schools: What the Research Says — An Update*, Culver City, CA: Commissioned by Cisco.
- Lemke C., Coughlin E., Thadani V. and Martin C. (2003). *EnGauge 21st Century Skills: Literacy in the Digital Age*, Metiri Group. Los Angeles, CA.
- Hakuta Kenji (2011). "Educating language minority students and affirming their equal rights: Research and practical perspectives", *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 40, No. 4.
- Rocky View Schools (2011). "Three year education plan", available online at: <http://www.rockyview.ab.ca/publications/threeyearplans>.
- Stewart J. (2006). "Transformational leadership: An evolving concept examined through the works of Burns, Bass, Avolio, and Leithwood", *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, No. 54, available online at: <http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/articles/stewart.html>.
- Stiggins R. (1994). *Student-centered Classroom Assessment*, New York: Merrill.
- Waters J. T. and Marzano, R. (2006). "School district leadership that works: The effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement", *Working Paper*, Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, Denver, CO.
- Wiggins G. and McTighe J. (2005). *Understanding by Design* (2nd ed.), Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.