

Supporting the Well-being of Educational System Leaders



By Celia Caetano-Gomes, Winnipeg School Division, Donna Davidson, Mountain View School Division, and Ken Klassen, MASS

The World Health Organization (2013) has defined mental health as, “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community,” (page 6).¹

When considering the well-being of professionals, it is important to reflect on the work environment and membership organizations, which contribute to the well-being of employees and individuals. Established in 1968, the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS) provides leadership and responsive support to superintendents, assistant superintendents and directors in public education. This work contributes to and promotes the well-being of senior administrators in Manitoba’s public education system.

Mental health and well-being are increasingly recognized across the country as a fundamental basis for flourishing as an individual or as an organization. Healthy Families BC (2017) identified key strategies to well-being as, “connect, be active, notice, keep learning and give,” (paragraph 3).²

These same strategies can be applied to the organization, priority areas and advocacy of MASS. The Manitoba Association of School Superintendents has articulated core beliefs about public education and has committed to leading learning, improving student achievement and advocating for equity. These core values contribute to the well-being and culture of the organization and its members.

Connecting and building relationships

MASS supports educational system leaders (superintendents, assistant superintendents and directors) to learn together, collaborate and advocate for public education. The organization supports new members with the transition to the role of educational system leader, offers opportunities to work on priority areas and leads professional learning. Through these opportunities, members are encouraged to connect and build relationships while sharing experiences and successes across 37 school divisions.

One of the central mandates of this organization has always been to provide job-related services and supports to senior administrators as they manage their increasingly-complex and challenging roles as educational

and organizational leaders. This includes support for individual member concerns, such as contracts and conditions of employment, providing targeted professional learning in both leadership and management, and advocating on behalf of members for a diverse and inclusive public education system based on equity and quality.

All the activities of this organization take place within a broader desire to bring individual members together in a meaningful way, to create caring and supportive networks and to forge a common sense of purpose and commitment as a group. Senior administrators face daily decisions in their home divisions, which are challenging at many levels, including personal and ethical engagement in “doing the right things, for the right reasons, at the right time.” Meeting and sharing in a supportive group environment helps individual members grow both professionally and personally.

As an organization, MASS strives to be democratic and non-hierarchical. In a membership that includes superintendents, assistant superintendents and directors, no distinction is made based on role. It is common for assistant superintendents to chair committees and regional groups, and they are just as likely as superintendents to be elected to serve as MASS president.

A commitment to nurturing relationships has been well established by this organization. The executive invites new members to a welcoming dinner and a mentoring program to ensure that new members are well-supported and integrated into the membership. Professional learning opportunities purposefully mix new and veteran members as they learn from each other. All events are planned carefully to address priority areas, share division perspectives and strengthen the senior administration network.

Noticing within and across systems and roles

MASS's Summer Institute brings members and educational partners together to work with a national or global facilitator to reflect on research and the Manitoba context. Through conversations, reflection and critical thinking, members are challenged to gain perspective and develop plans of action. This process models the element of noticing what is around us and acknowledging strengths and experiences.

For example, the 2017 Summer Institute with Simon Breakspear offered members the opportunity to reflect on programs currently being offered in school divisions to support student learning while using strategies to be mindful and honouring of those that have impacted students and staff. It is this commitment that contributes to the well-being of members and the organization.

Through member services, MASS provides additional supports to new members as they enter senior school administration positions. This mentorship program provides an overview of public education in Manitoba, legislation and budgets, policy development and job-embedded training. The well-being of new senior administrators is linked to strong supports within and outside the workplace. MASS fulfills this role by connecting new members with an experienced superintendent and establishing opportunities to learn from the broader senior administration network.

In addition to the mentorship program, the ethical leadership initiative supported members working in small cohorts to reflect on their role, study ethical decision-making cycles, analyse case studies and develop core values. This initiative led to shared understanding, a culture of trust and strengthened sense of belonging.

Job-embedded learning that is just in time and relevant, strengthens the value and engagement of superintendents. The structured mentorship, ethical leadership initiative and Summer Institute contribute to personal and professional growth while building on the expertise of its members and collective responsibility.

Keep learning

Coming together to learn together is critical to the success of any professional organization. MASS values the importance of professional learning and this is evident in the plethora of professional learning opportunities provided by the organization. The Leadership Development Committee spearheads one of these learning opportunities, the leadership development series. The goals of the leadership development sessions address both learning and networking. Each leadership development session focuses on either a managerial undertaking or an educational leadership aspect of the school system leader's role.

The leadership development sessions are purposefully designed to hear voices from the field, followed by input from an external or internal source, and then they are completed with group discussions regarding the information and what it means to each member, as a leader. Over the past five years, the sessions have addressed topics such as student success, human resources, financial resources, political realities, instructional leadership, crisis management, communication and the law, and managing the message. The sessions allowed for opportunities to network and to share the topic material with others as it related to each leader's current circumstance.

The Professional Learning Committee coordinates presenters, book clubs, activities and discussions with the support of other MASS priority committees. This committee is critical in ensuring a strong focus on addressing student and system learning, as well as identifying and strengthening effective practices. In the past, we have targeted mathematical learning programs, early years models, outreach programs, mental health interventions, EAL strategies and Indigenous education policies and initiatives. Members have reported that the leadership development and professional learning opportunities are invaluable as they share, reflect and learn from each other thus strengthening their ability to lead effectively and in turn contribute to their well-being.

Giving and advocating for public education

Advocacy is one of the organization's core mandates. MASS is committed to giving back, and influencing the political agenda to support and ensure equitable and quality educational programming is available to all Manitoba children. Advocacy for strong and broad support for public education brings members together with a common purpose and mission.

At the local level, MASS facilitates understanding of fundamental and emergent societal and educational issues among our members. The organization supports individual members to develop a strong voice for public education in their school communities. MASS produced a series of videos on the importance of public education. These videos were extremely informative and supported members in advocating for a robust, diverse, publicly-funded education system for all children.

Additionally, position and discussion papers are published by MASS and are instrumental in supporting members as they advocate for strategies pertinent to address issues or challenge of public education. Whether it be early learning, Indigenous education, mental health or student assessment, the papers are a valuable resource for leaders of school systems, as they strive to meet the diverse learning needs of all Manitoba children and address the issues facing public education.

MASS meets regularly with educational partners to advocate for the importance of providing quality public education. MASS embraces a "can do" mindset and members thoughtfully, deliberately and unequivocally strive to make education reform a priority. By working tirelessly with other educational stakeholders, a strong culture of valuing education is created and an alliance of advocating for all Manitoba children is strengthened.

Membership in the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) and Canadian Education Association (CEA), provides MASS with an opportunity to contribute to a national and international voice on public education. CASSA is a national organization and its purpose is to promote and support quality education for the success of each student, while CEA is a network of educators in Canada with a focus on education and student learning.

Involvement with CEA offers members another forum to share their views on the

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importance of education and raise awareness of Manitoba issues and successes. Memberships in CASSA and CEA provide MASS members with relevant and pertinent research on best-practices, latest policy issues in education, as well as an opportunity to influence educational direction in Canada.

Being active

On a daily basis, members face the very real occupational hazard of sitting in back-to-back meetings from early morning to late in the evening. MASS recognizes that our events should not replicate this environment. Planning for all professional learning events and members' sessions includes consideration of improving the emotional and even physical well-being of members.

Agendas are reviewed to ensure there is a balance of structured learning, responding to individual and group members' feedback and opportunities for making connections with colleagues. Interaction has become increasingly important, with round table talk and large group discussion replacing longer formal presentations.

To combat the negative physical impact of a traditional meeting structure, MASS encourages members to *Get a Life*—an initiative that emphasizes the importance of physical and emotional health and a better work-life balance. Short interactive sessions of 20 to 30 minutes have included physical fitness, yoga mindfulness and healthy cooking with student chefs. The Summer Institute also builds in time for golf, cycling, walking or self-directed physical activity during non-learning times. Members are encouraged to bring their families and events for the evening are planned with families in mind.

MASS and the future: Building on well-being

As we look ahead to the future, MASS will continue to pursue meaningful leadership opportunities for members. The purpose and design of the organization have contributed to the well-being of members and it is the responsibility of the executive to advocate and bring the voice of all members across the different regions to the discussion. It is only through this ongoing commitment that all members will feel their priorities and challenges are being represented.

Through fostering relationships and identifying a common vision, members are engaged in professional learning, advocacy and personal growth. It is key to continue to identify MASS leaders to facilitate learning for members and build on each others' experiences in areas such as Indigenous learners and education, mental health, inclusion and early learning. By acknowledging the strengths and experience of members in the organization, MASS further contributes to the well-being of senior administrators.

MASS has established a strong network of educational partners provincially and nationally which will need to be strengthened. With the evolving complex nature of education and its learners, it is integral that partners and agencies work together to address barriers and identify strategic plans of action. It is through ongoing efforts of the MASS president, vice-president and directors that new partners will be identified and nurtured. As such, these networks will offer opportunities for connecting and shared advocacy.

Senior school administrators will continue to be faced with unique challenges, competing portfolios and increased public accountability, which may isolate them from other staff in their own organization. MASS will continue to contribute to the well-being of its members by creating a culture of trust, collaboration and

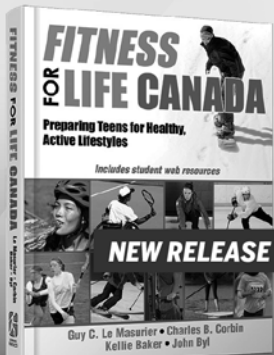
strong leadership. Core values, member sessions and position papers bring the members together and lead to a strengthened sense of purpose across school divisions.

Through MASS organized initiatives, education system leaders have an opportunity to learn, problem-solve and flourish together. The well-being of its members will have a significant impact on the superintendents, assistant superintendents and directors' ability to advocate for equity and quality public education. It is only through purposeful attention to learning and leading that MASS and its members will continue to thrive and together contribute to the well-being of the educational system leaders network. ■

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