

# Uplifting Leadership for Real School Improvement—The North Coast Initiative for School Improvement: An Australian Telling of a Canadian Story

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*This paper reports on a preliminary Australian adoption and adaptation, in the North Coast region of New South Wales, Australia, of the Townsend and Adams' model of leadership growth for school improvement in Alberta. The Australian adaptation of this Alberta model has been named the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement (NCISI). The participants comprise nine university academics and almost one hundred regional school leaders. Leadership is developed through continuing and regular collaborative-inquiry and generative-dialogue meetings between the academics and school leaders. The aim is to improve school leadership with the primary purpose of improving student outcomes. Provisional evaluation records significant positive changes in school leadership across the region. Convergence and divergence of the Australian and Canadian models are explored. The Australian adaptation requires some modification to suit local education processes and context. In particular, there has been the development of some divergence in approaches, especially in working in individual schools or clusters of schools. While the program has only been running for a comparatively short time, and therefore formal program evaluation is only commencing, preliminary evidence suggests significant traction and success in the Australian context. The paper concludes with some tentative implications for the future development of this model in the Australian context: how can the model be conceptualised and delivered to a wider audience in the years ahead.*

*Cet article porte sur l'adoption et l'adaptation préliminaire du modèle de Townsend et Adam sur le développement du leadership pour l'amélioration des écoles en Alberta. Ce modèle albertain a été mis en œuvre dans la région de la côte nord de la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud en Australie et nommé North Coast Initiative for School Improvement (NCISI). Les participants comptent neuf universitaires et presque cent dirigeants d'écoles régionales. Des réunions continues et régulières, reposant sur la recherche collaborative et le dialogue génératif, ont lieu entre les universitaires et les dirigeants d'école pour avancer le développement du leadership. L'objectif d'améliorer le leadership scolaire vise principalement le rehaussement du rendement des élèves. Les résultats provisoires de l'évaluation révèlent des changements positifs significatifs dans la direction des écoles de toute la région. Nous explorons les points de convergence et de divergence des modèles australien et canadien. L'adaptation australienne nécessite certaines modifications de sorte à convenir aux procédés et au contexte éducatif locaux. Plus particulièrement, une certaine*

*divergence s'est développée dans les approches, notamment quant au travail dans les écoles particulières ou dans les groupements d'écoles. Le programme étant en œuvre depuis une période relativement courte, l'évaluation formelle en est à ses débuts, mais les résultats préliminaires portent à croire qu'il gagne du terrain et connaît un succès dans le contexte australien. L'article conclut en présentant des retombées préliminaires pour le développement à l'avenir de ce modèle en Australie, notamment par rapport à sa conceptualisation et sa prestation à un plus grand public.*

The concepts of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, as they apply to conversations among educators, were piloted in Alberta in the mid 2000s by Australian-born Canadian educator, David Townsend, and his Canadian colleague, Pamela Adams, both from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta). They replaced the term action research with collaborative inquiry, in their work with teams of teachers in schools, in order to better “describe the process as it was experienced by many participants.” For these two education researchers, “collaborative inquiry occurs when a group of individuals commit to exploring an answer to a compelling question through a cyclical process of experimentation, purposeful action, and public reflection” (Townsend & Adams, 2008, p. 55). They extended the practice of generative dialogue from the discipline of counselling, notably as developed by Scharmer (2003). They were among the first to pilot these twin concepts with educators and to apply them to projects that focus on leadership growth.

These concepts underpinned a wide range of successful school improvement projects in Alberta school jurisdictions including Livingstone Range School Division (Townsend & Adams, 2008), Rocky View Schools (Adams, 2014a), Chinook's Edge School Division (Adams, 2014b) and Red Deer Public School District (Townsend, 2015). Their model features an on-going interaction between a school's leadership team and an external team (i.e., external to the school itself, such as a member of a school district's central office, an academic researcher and a principal<sup>1</sup> from another school in the district). This combination of external personnel forms a “triad” of different facets of educational expertise—the educational district office, a faculty of education, and school leaders (Figure 1). Once a month the external team visits each of the schools in a school district with the purpose of providing support for instructional leadership using the collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue methodologies. This embedded and deeply reflective form of professional development has found a home in progressive school districts in Alberta. Successive initiatives have demonstrated consistently that such a purposeful focus on leadership growth has a positive influence on key measures of school improvement (Sun & Leithwood, 2012).

For more than a decade, Alberta was rated as the highest-performing jurisdiction across both the English and French-speaking world on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012, p. 97). So, when Townsend contacted the School of Education at Southern Cross University, Australia, in 2011 and offered to share his experiences of school improvement in Alberta schools with interested academics, the then Head of School had the following response: “What's happening in Alberta is visionary ... with enormous potential for North Coast [New South Wales, Australia] schools. It is a vehicle to allow the School of Education to engage with the New South Wales Department of Education” (Martin Hayden, personal communication, 2011).

Subsequently, in 2013, the Head of School invited local Northern New South Wales school leaders to a two-day “Conversations with David Townsend” symposium. Here Townsend provided

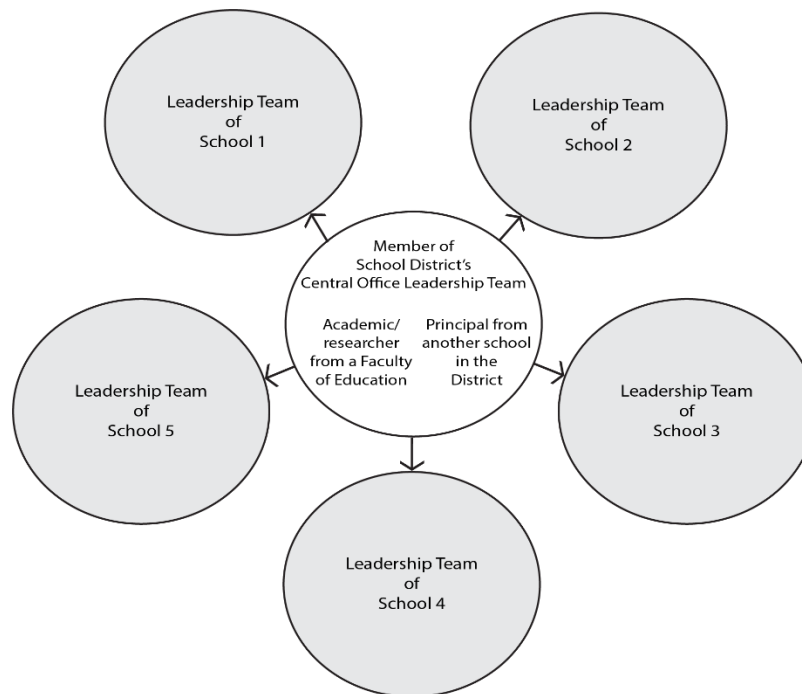


Figure 1: The Townsend and Adams' External Team—the "Triad". Once a month, the External Team meet with the leadership team of each school in the School District.

evidence from Alberta that school improvement can be achieved when universities work with school leaders using the twin collaborative-inquiry, generative-dialogue model. The evaluations from school leaders following this symposium were effusive: "The exploration of how we systematically focus on school improvement through a shared understanding and commitment to our roles and responsibility in the public education system was breath taking"; "No gimmicks! Inspiring. High quality professional relationships. This has been like a re-calibration"; and "Can I be part of this?"

At around the same time, Australia's largest school system, the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education<sup>2</sup>, was in the midst of a period of intense re-development to initiate a range of reforms aimed at

- giving schools more authority to make local decisions to meet local needs;
- enhancing the quality of teaching in its schools; and
- improving learning outcomes for students (NSW Department of Education, 2015).

As a result, a significant number of policy documents have been released since 2011. The key documents are: *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011); *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning: A Blueprint for Action* (NSW Government, 2013); and, the *Performance and Development Framework for Principals, Executives and Teachers in NSW Public Schools* (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2015).

Both NSW North Coast Department of Education school leaders and Southern Cross University academic staff saw potential synergies in the combination of the Alberta experience—

their university’s mandate for engaging with “geographical communities ... of interest for mutual benefit” (Southern Cross University, 2012, p. 8) and the zeitgeist of the NSW educational reform agenda. A collective of interested school leaders and academics began planning, and did so in consultation with David Townsend, an Australian iteration based on evidence of success in Alberta school jurisdictions (Chaseling et al., 2016). A particularly attractive element of the Alberta work for the Australian experience was the potential to focus on developing leadership capacity in local schools as a key driver of whole-school improvement. This aligned well with the Departmental policy, *Local Schools, Local Decisions*. Introduced in 2011, the policy gave New South Wales public schools greater authority for local decision-making while the NSW Department of Education still determined policies and guidelines (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011). Furthermore, in addition to the empirical results emerging from Alberta, the academic staff recognised evidence in the global research literature for the positive role of school leadership in affecting significant and sustainable school change (Ärlestig, Day & Johansson, 2016; Day & Leithwood, 2007; Fullan, 2010, 2014; Gurr & Drysdale, 2016; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Hattie, 2009, 2015; Pollock & Huseman, 2016; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008).

Educational researchers maintain that the performances of large systems and whole societies can be transformed through uplifting leadership—that is, when a real but improbable dream is articulated that inspires people to believe that unprecedented change is a possibility (Hargreaves, Boyle & Harris, 2014; Shirley, 2014). Three elements are considered by such writers to be essential for uplifting leadership. The inspiring dream must:

- reach well beyond numerical targets and must strive to lift people to a better place;
- express a sense of a collective community for which participants feel deep attachment; and
- clearly express the continuity between a valued heritage and a desired future (Hargreaves, Boyle & Harris, 2014).

Furthermore, uplifting leadership requires hard work and action, particularly for turnaround situations. Shirley (2014) explains that Finland, the country with one of the highest performing school systems in the world, has a word that expresses the uplifting characteristics of struggle and resilience: *sisu*.

### **The North Coast Initiative for School Improvement (NCISI)**

Specific cultural and geographical differences notwithstanding, many aspects of Townsend and Adams’ work on leadership growth for school improvement in Alberta resonated with New South Wales school leaders and academics. Of particular note are strong parallels between the education systems of the state of New South Wales and the province of Alberta. In both jurisdictions, the focus is on state and provincial governance and local management of schools. The Australian academics saw the potential in the Alberta model for a systematized initiative that could consolidate and extend the wide range of already existing informal relationships between their university and surrounding regional schools.

Following on-going dialogue between six leaders of the North Coast Department of Education, eight university researchers and David Townsend, the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement (NCISI) was launched in October of 2014. To facilitate the operation of this project, a management committee was established. In the same month, the university ran a conference titled *Professional Growth Through Collaborative Inquiry: What Can We Learn from David*

*Townsend and Alberta Educationalists?* (2014). This brought 76 regional school leaders to the university to hear presentations by four Alberta educators, three of whom participated by Skype. Evaluation data revealed that 100% of participants affirmed both items: “Gained new knowledge and/or skills to apply in my workplace” and “were interested in participating in more workshops on the topic.” Straightaway, 61 school leaders from 23 schools volunteered to participate in this school improvement project. The schools involved ranged from small rural primary schools (from 70 students upwards) to larger urban primary schools (630 students) and high schools from small (340 students) to larger (1,100 students).

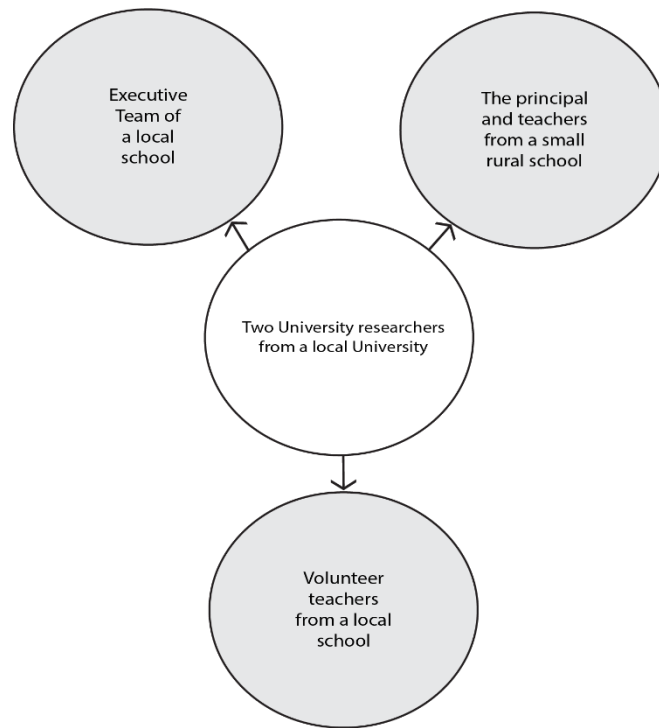
The initial team undertook training in January 2015, supported by a study tour to Alberta in April. They then commenced working collaboratively with schools in late April 2015. Following Townsend and Adams’ practice in Alberta, the combination of personnel formed a “triad” of different educational facets (i.e., a NSW Department of Education leader, a university researcher, and one from a school). Because the Australian iteration was completely reliant on volunteers and was self-funded, two adaptations of the Townsend and Adams’ model were immediately required (Figures 2 and 3). Firstly, while the Canadian model had three-member external teams, the Australian adaptation had six two-member external teams, which each comprised a Department leader and a university researcher. The seventh Australian team comprised two university researchers without the inclusion of a Department leader, one of these was a former Department of Education leader. Secondly, the 61 North Coast school leaders who volunteered to be visited monthly in their schools organised themselves into different groupings. Several combinations of groupings were formed, including

- a school’s executive team (the principal and his or her deputy or deputies);
- the executive teams from two or more schools;
- the principal alone;
- the principal and teaching staff from a small rural school; and
- a group of three teachers from one school faculty.

In practical terms, the Initiative ran monthly meetings of each triad, usually at the work place of the school participants. Underpinning every meeting is a collegial collaborative-inquiry generative-dialogue process. The meetings provided opportunities for the external support group to assist school teams to identify and pursue their professional development goals framed as a guiding question or questions (Adams, 2015). A typical guiding question for a school leadership



*Figure 2:* An Australian External Team comprising a Department leader and a university researcher. Once a month the External Team met with school teams.



*Figure 3:* An Australian External Team comprising two university researchers. Once a month the External Team met with school teams.

team might read as follows: In what ways and to what extent does our purposeful application of selected leadership skills and practices foster the growth of distributed leadership in our school? A key assumption of the Initiative is that student learning will be improved through a comprehensive focus on instructional leadership; indeed, the core and primary purpose of this school improvement initiative, as in Alberta, is firmly anchored on improvement in student performance. This aim frames the development of the guiding question. Once established, the guiding question is foundational to all subsequent conversations. Accordingly, the agenda for each meeting confirms or adjusts the guiding question, and then is based on the same three questions:

1. What have you done since we last met?
2. What have you learnt from this, and what evidence can you share with us?
3. What will you do between now and our next meeting? (Townsend & Adams, 2009, pp. 140-141).

Through the generative dialogue promoted by these questions, school teams are required to: reflect upon the past month's achievements (specifically in relation to the guiding question), refine actions that may hone their professional development goals, and identify actions for the coming month. In these meetings, one member of the external team is responsible for leading the generative dialogue process. A second member acts as recorder. This ensures that a continuing record is generated across subsequent meetings. That record is shared with all participants and forms the basis for subsequent discussions. Importantly, while this record of progression reinforces the evidence-based premise of this approach, it also fosters a strong sense of shared professional responsibility and contributes to a common supportive vision.

In harmony with generative dialogue principles, monthly meetings are conducted in an explicit and carefully cultivated atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and reciprocity. In this regard, feedback is given in a non-threatening way, while criticism and judgement are avoided, as also is gratuitous praise (Townsend & Adams, 2016, pp. 2-3). There is always an assumption of competence with all participants. Feedback focuses on practices, including

- observations rather than inferences;
- the behaviour rather than the person;
- descriptions that consider quantity rather than judgments that are subjective;
- the sharing of ideas rather than the giving of advice or providing answers or solutions; and
- what is said rather than why it was said (Townsend & Adams, 2016, pp. 12-13).

The aim of the conversations is for the school teams to critically reflect on their own performance and to explore solutions in relation to their guiding question. The role of the external team is always to show up when they say they will (i.e., reliability) and to be curious and non-judgemental (i.e., trust and mutual respect).

As the project rolled out, it was identified by the NSW Department of Education as having significant potential, and was therefore funded by the Department in 2015 with an initial seed grant of \$10,000, then followed by a more substantial grant of \$100,000. This funding allowed for an extension of the project through collaborative activities with David Townsend, six professional symposia, and other professional development activities that exposed the project more widely to the North Coast school community, as well as to three clusters of schools at some distance from the North Coast region. By the time the North Coast Initiative was fully running, the triads engaged 97 members of school teams.

While the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement has explicitly adopted the practices and principles that underlie the Townsend and Adams' approach in Alberta, there have been some adaptations. For example, accommodations have been made for the diverse approaches and even for the personalities of the nine academics (a new member had joined the group) who serve on the teams. In addition, each combination of external and school-based team has developed its own approaches. As well as the variety of focus of leadership teams, there have been adaptations of the timing and scheduling of meetings (e.g., before or after school, during school release time, during school hours). Likewise, there has been a diversity of use of recording media and methods (e.g., by tablet, handwritten, computer, mobile phone, interactive whiteboard, video, audio).

### **So What? Does the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement work?**

Implicit in the roll-out of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement is a formal evaluative program. Initially, this needed to focus on the efficacy of the program per se. Ultimately, however, it will focus on the critical outcomes such as measures of improved student school performance.

At this stage, the program has run for around two years. However, the management team has already been collating responses and feedback from schools and executive teams. There is an emerging body of evidence that appears to triangulate towards a positive message. The current evaluation of the Initiative is based on surveys, evaluation data from the symposia, interviews of school participants and notes from meetings. While executive teams have reported that participation in the Initiative has had a positive impact on student outcomes (see fourth bullet, below), solid data on that will still take time to emerge. Nevertheless, as we report the progress,

we note an emerging alignment against the six factors identified by Hargreaves et al. (2014) as being essential for a community or organization to achieve positive development: (a) the development and articulation of a shared dream; (b) the encouragement of creativity and imagination; (c) the encouragement of collaboration with the competition; (d) trust and respect; (e) measuring what is valued rather than valuing in what is measured; and (f) the creation of sustainable success and growth. Later, we address each of these factors in turn.

The most powerful commentary comes from the impact upon the individual and collective experience of school leaders. In the feedback, for example, one principal reported, “As a result of my participation in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement I have become better able to help others do their work, rather than do their work for them.” A deputy principal wrote, “Wow! I’m just blown away with the impact the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement can have on our local students. I walk away just so inspired and more excited than with anything else I’ve experienced in my career to date.”

Much as all might wish for a ‘magic bullet’ in school improvement, this strong response is only at the leadership level. However, reflecting upon Hattie’s (2015, p. 39) comment that “improving [school] outcomes requires a team ... all working in collaboration” on agreed-upon successes, the Initiative’s management committee is confident that the diversity of evidence emerging reflects very positively on the success of such collaboration. In the first two years, the Initiative had achieved notable successes. The following are examples of the Initiatives’ success.

- Monthly (and occasionally bi-monthly), the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement now supports ninety-seven school participants (mostly members of a school executive) from twenty-nine schools, using the planning-for-growth model to collect and analyse the data in their schools so that they use data-driven decisions to improve student outcomes.
- Twenty-two of the twenty-three original schools have continued in the project for the duration of the project and an additional seven schools have joined. Participating principals attest to the Initiative’s benefits. As one principal observed, “Being involved in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement has created a number of ‘light bulb’ moments which have led to very real and positive impacts for students in our school. The collaborative nature of the work helps to generate ideas that may not have otherwise emerged.”
- Nineteen principals have provided evidence of their ability to replicate the approach within their schools. For example, one secondary principal wrote that “now forty-five Executive and thirty-eight teachers have monthly conversations about growing, learning, leading, and leaving legacies for kids.”
- Some data already indicates school improvement. For example, one high school reports that “growth of above 5% in all areas of NAPLAN<sup>3</sup> Year 9 [except numeracy], improved attendance of above 2% for the second year, reduction in suspensions, increased engagement from *Tell Them From Me* survey<sup>4</sup>, increased enrolments particularly Year 7 2017, and increased retention.”
- School leaders and teachers who have attended one or more of the university’s campus-based symposia want to have greater access to the Initiative. Formal evaluation feedback confirms this. For example, “for my continued leadership growth, I would love to hear about further opportunities and be part of this project.” Another principal wrote that “I intend to drive the executive focus and direction away from minutia, to a more positive student outcomes focus.” To meet participation requests, the Initiative has established seventeen



regional ‘satellite’ schools, supported once a term by external team visits. All of the satellite schools have embedded guiding questions throughout their school plans. One school Director from a distant Education district (i.e., some 350 kilometres away) has introduced the Initiative’s collaborative-inquiry, once-a-month-visiting approach to all of her schools.

Many of the principals involved in the Initiative have reflected upon their own learning through the project. Two key ideas emerged. First, school leaders have learned that their work can be more purposeful. One principal noted that “the NCISI keeps me accountable, and gives me traction. NCISI is a ‘big rock’—supports my effectiveness.” Another principal commented thus:

The use of this [collaborative-inquiry] planning-for-growth model makes my work more purposeful, I have the opportunity to give feedback. We are on a journey, bringing instructional leadership to my work and developing my skills. Reflecting on this process is purposeful and allows me to focus on strategies, processes and evidence.

Perhaps even more significantly, nine school leaders declared their involvement in the North Coast Initiative as “the best professional learning” they had ever experienced. Furthermore, principals reported that through the Initiative, they can take charge of educational improvement in their schools. One of the principals at a university-based symposium made the following public comment:

Something that stuck in my brain today was teachers’ use of the excuse of being ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘overworked’ to avoid change. The answer to them is, as Andy Hargreaves<sup>5</sup> said “teachers will need to be the drivers, not the driven.” Get on board!

At a process level, various principals have commented positively on the role of university staff, especially from the perspective of their commitment to school education outcomes. Importantly, the notion that academics can be trusted reflects positively on the efficacy of the Initiative. One principal commented that

Universities mostly came looking for practicum places. The North Coast Initiative for School Improvement is different—it’s the highlight of my month. At no other time is there space for this real talk about the most important issues in education.

This contrasts with what may be regarded as conventional in university-schools relationships and highlights the importance of the focus on school improvement. A senior Departmental educator in the region simply noted “we’re ‘family’ now.” A high school principal stated: “I value the academic input. It has built my confidence. It is reaffirming to develop a relationship that did not exist before.”

On a pragmatic level, the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement has encouraged Department of Education leaders and principals, deputies, and teachers to engage in further studies, notably by enrolling in higher degrees. An empirical outcome of the success of the October 2014 symposium was the School of Education’s Master of Education program, which saw an unprecedented increase in enrolment in the following session from fourteen to seventy-four students (an increase over five-fold), then a further increase in the subsequent session. Over one hundred of these enrolments were NSW Department of Education principals, deputy principals or teachers interested in applying facets of the model to their own practice. One potential

candidate humourously noted: “After today's symposium I am threatening to start my PhD and work on this amazing project.” This has added a new level of critical and evaluative engagement to the Initiative. Higher degrees are still rare for Australian teachers, and this uptake is a direct consequence of involvement in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. Importantly, school principals note that the Initiative is resulting in improvements in both teacher professional identity and student outcomes. One principal, for example, stated that “these sessions are crucial to the shared understandings we now take to our planning and teaching.”

Not only do the school educators benefit from the experience of the Initiative but the university academics have also commented on their own learning. The Initiative's engagement has provided two notable angles for learning and professional development. Engaging purposefully with the region's school communities is recognised to provide exceptional research opportunities; one academic has noted that the “North Coast Initiative for School Improvement group's purposeful debate and publishing program must surely be unprecedented in this School.” Secondly, the academics see the internship-style benefits of working as part of the Initiative. Spending time with school leaders updates the academic's knowledge base and promotes life-long learning, implementing which has always been a source of tension for many academics. One academic reflects that “this project is a win for schools, win for students and win for academics.” The Initiative provides a new model for university engagement with schools, with continuing encouragement from both sides. One former principal, now turned academic, views the relationship from both sides. He notes that “I have never before seen such close relationship between a university and schools.” Another academic explains that “it is a joy to be involved in these conversations with school leaders!”

## **Discussion**

### **A Work in Progress but Pointing in the Right Direction**

There is ample evidence that the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, building from and adapting the Alberta model, has enhanced the capacity of a significant number of school leaders and teachers in a rural region of New South Wales. It has achieved this broadly by providing inspiration through presentations on school improvement, and especially, by engaging with the school communities through the collaborative-inquiry planning for growth model.

The Initiative's aim is to play an enriching and transformative role in North Coast schools. It has enhanced the capacity for school improvement of the great majority of school leaders through its monthly visits that provide personal professional accountability, as well as support and guidance. Empowered to form functional leadership teams, to use research questions, and to be data-driven, school leaders have provided evidence to show that they have become more competent and confident in their roles, that they are now better able to lead the learning in their schools, and that student outcomes are improving. The reflections of the principal of the region's largest public school are a fitting testament to the achievement of the Initiative:

For years educators have talked about improving the work we do in schools. We have worn coloured hats, danced in mathematics and embraced myriad ways to make our students more successful. All of those ideas may have merit in different contexts, and all certainly speak to the willingness of teachers to try new things. We have spent money on programs and hope, ever ready for the next big idea, the next shiny bauble, or the next panacea. ... The Collaborative-Inquiry-Model-for-Professional-Growth,

embedded in the NCISI, is a model for educators that builds on what we know about professional practice, adult learning, and effective schools. It is helping to demonstrate that a group of educators with a shared-common purpose can improve the way we grow professionally and, simultaneously, foster improved student outcomes. ... We are a functional team of people of good will purposefully working together to achieve our agreed upon goals. We are making a difference today in our schools on the North Coast of NSW. We are relentless, committed and inspired by what is happening.

Moving further afield, the Initiative's work appears to have international impact. David Townsend has reported to the Initiative thus:

The Superintendent of [a Canadian (not Alberta)] school district spent a good 15 minutes showing participants selected information from the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement website. Imagine, the Head of Leadership from [a Canadian university], the Dean of Education at [another Canadian university], two Profs from [a third Canadian university], two other Canadian school superintendents, and the president of the Principals' Association, all taking notes and asking questions about North Coast Initiative for School Improvement!!

What may lie behind these early successes? While a detailed critique of the process is currently a work in progress, the Initiative team notes the work of Hargreaves et al. (2014), who maintain that six factors are essential for a community or organization to achieve positive development. All appear to apply to the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement:

- First is the need to develop and articulate an inspiring dream that everyone shares; this is clear in the Initiative. Furthermore, Hargreaves et al. note that such an inspiring dream needs to reach beyond numerical targets; again, the Initiative has behaviour and quality targets in mind—improved student outcomes.
- Secondly, there is a need to encourage creativity and imagination to try something different; this supports innovative change rather than gradual improvement. Taking chances, learning by mistakes, and continual refinement are critical. The monthly engagement between executive teams in their triads ensures such an approach; building on evidence allows lessons to be learnt.
- Thirdly, Hargreaves et al. (2014) encourage collaboration with the competition once something is found to work; the school-system-wide approach of the Initiative ensures this a positive attitude towards success.
- The fourth factor focuses on trust and respect. Hargreaves et al. (2014) wrote “to know your people, draw the best of teams, build trust, stay grounded, avoid cliques and elites, convert weaknesses into strengths, and when difficult conversation must be conducted do so with dignity.” The composition of the triads ensures this, along with rules around the generative dialogue process.
- The fifth factor articulates Hargreaves' oft-quoted aphorism: “Measure what you value, instead of only valuing what you measure.” This ensures genuine targets, shared along with agreed-upon performance indicators, and relies on real and meaningful evidence interpreted intelligently.
- The final factor is the creation of sustainable success and growth, connection with the group's heritage and the appreciation of its assets.

The last factor really leads one's eye to the future of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. The adoption of the Alberta model reflects the capacity of the program for sustainable development. The adaptation of some of the practices of the latter in the former also point to an overall sustainable capacity. The New South Wales education leaders who had travelled to Alberta and observed the Canadian experience in action were keen to replicate it. However, the New South Wales context for such an Initiative was of a geographically smaller region, where two hours' driving can traverse the whole region. Furthermore, this small area is centred upon a regional university with nine academic staff willing to participate voluntarily on teams. This meant that more academics than Departmental leaders were available to take on the large number of schools who pressed to be included.

As in Canada, the feedback from schools was universal in endorsing the participation of an academic, the regularity of visits, and the usefulness of the project in supporting their professional practice. This participation is crucial for those groups visited by teams that did not include a Departmental leader still regularly reported the enhanced engagement and professionalism which they felt. More broadly, the feedback from school executive teams regularly noted the value of the process in helping to inform the written Professional Development Plans required annually of each teacher by their employer (i.e. the State's Department of Education). In the convergence of the two processes (the Initiative and the Professional Development Plans), this employer-mandated requirement was now seen less as an imposition, rather than as something to be comfortably embraced and exceeded.

The challenge lies for the many teachers who do not have close access to a university and the possibility of regular visits by even one academic. Extension of such a program across large distances to these teachers is currently the structural challenge to the Australian project. This matter highlights the importance of local conditions, and of the Initiative to be able to respond to these. While David Townsend is of the view that the Initiative model needs to be as similar as possible within and between jurisdictions, the North Coast Initiative teams have generated diverse models, and demonstrated continuing positive outcomes. While differences in models may be tested against potential differences in efficacy during the evaluative process, it remains to ask whether this is a significant departure from the Alberta model, or whether the educational outcomes will remain equally strong. The North Coast Initiative has organised alternate models of, for example, the triads, but appears to still get the same positive results. If this is so, what is the 'thing' that is making this model work? If it is, for example, the commitment or solidarity of academic, Department of Education and individual school staff, what are the implications for a sustainable or geographically expanding process? Similar questions may be asked of other parts of the Initiative process. Fundamentally, the question becomes, "How can the Initiative be conceptualised and delivered into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" The on-going implementation of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement will allow this question to be examined in further detail.

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## Notes

1. In Australia, the highest authority in a school is the Principal. In some countries, the term ‘Administrator’ or ‘Headmaster’ is used instead.
2. In Australia, the nation’s constitution assigns the control of education to the states and territories. Therefore, the schooling of the nation’s young people is predominantly the responsibility of the six states and two territories which each regulate the schooling that takes place within its jurisdiction. In addition, the Australian Federal Government has a Department of Education and Training, which has responsibility for national policies and programs, even though it does not employ a single teacher.
3. NAPLAN is a national assessment of Australian students’ basic skills which is administered annually for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.
4. The *Tell Them From Me* survey is an official, but voluntary, online suite of surveys that allows students, parents, and teachers opportunities to provide anonymous feedback on their school.
5. The US academic and author of more than 30 books on school improvement. It is significant that a participant at the symposium should reference Hargreaves’ work in relation to the Initiative’s impact.

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