

Formative Assessment of the Implementation of
Saskatchewan Reads

Executive Report
Presented to the Ministry of Education

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Two Versions of this Report

This formative assessment study is reported in two versions for two different audiences. This briefer executive version features a concise description of this study, the general findings of the study, and 10 recommendations for the consideration of members of the Ministry's staff, the Provincial Leadership Team, and others in senior leadership positions.

The extended version parallels the executive report in organization, but adds a detailed description of the findings as well as additional exemplars and sub-recommendations. It provides a clearer connection between the findings and the recommendations. The extended version is of interest to Ministry staff and those who lead division level reading teams.

Introduction

This formative assessment study of the implementation of *Saskatchewan Reads* is intended to inform the next steps in bringing *Saskatchewan Reads* to life across the province. It focuses upon the efforts of three school divisions and provides information regarding the progress made in the first year of *Saskatchewan Reads* implementation. As an appreciative inquiry, this study has found, analyzed, and described exemplary practices that might be replicated. It has also identified significant challenges to be addressed as well as determined the value and impact of *Saskatchewan Reads* to date. This executive report offers highlights of the findings and detailed recommendations for consideration of Ministry and sector leaders. A longer version of this report appears in a separate document. Considerations for developing future formative assessments of *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* and other related initiatives are included in Appendix A.

Saskatchewan Reads has its roots in the provincial government's *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth, Vision 2020 and Beyond* (2012) that outlined a clear goal for reading achievement. "By June 2020, 80% of students will be at grade level or above in reading, writing, and mathematics." This was followed by *Student First* consultations and the formation of the Provincial Leadership Team (PLT). The PLT is made up of all 28 directors of education, Ministry officials, and some representatives of First Nations and Métis educational jurisdictions. The PLT developed the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) that was later approved by all 28 school boards and the government of Saskatchewan. In April 2014, the Provincial Reading Team (PRT) was formed to "identify and implement a unified set of provincial high impact reading assessment, instruction and intervention strategies in 2014-15" (ESSP). Reading achievement in the primary grades was identified as a focus based upon research indicating the importance of students achieving grade level in reading by the end of Grade 3 (Fiester, 2010). The fruit of the PRT's work is *Saskatchewan Reads*.

Implementation efforts to date include significant work at the provincial level including workshops to introduce *Saskatchewan Reads*; the development of a website with documents, videos, and other supportive resources; an environmental scan; the initiation of a Reading Advisory Committee; development of the Provincial Administrator Reading Team (PART) that created *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators*; and the establishment of an ongoing provincial oversight team. In addition to the above, the crucial day-to-day work of improving teaching and leadership practices has been undertaken by school divisions under the leadership of division reading teams.

Since the beginning of the reading improvement initiative, results for Grade 3 achievement in reading have been gathered in order to obtain a provincial view of progress toward the government's 2020 goal. The number of school divisions contributing Grade 3 reading data and the percentage of students reported to be achieving at or above grade level has been increasing since the development of the ESSP. In June 2016, all 28 school divisions reported that overall, 74% of Grade 3 students were reading at or above grade level. This has risen from the initial 65% reading at or above grade level as reported in the data from 18 school divisions in June 2013. Caution regarding

these results must be exercised for although achievement data are usually generated by individual teachers using reputable assessment tools, it is often without the benefit of strong efforts to develop inter-rater reliability.

Methodology

The formative assessment process began with the researcher developing an understanding of the elements of *Saskatchewan Reads*. Rubrics and conversation guides were designed to capture the essence of the teaching and leadership practices in *Saskatchewan Reads* and *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators*. A review of research regarding leadership and implementation practices confirmed the significance of these practices.

This study focused on implementation efforts in three school divisions that were selected using criteria established to fulfill the intentions of this study. After an initial meeting with each division's leaders, the researcher then spent three or four days in each of the divisions observing primary classrooms, interviewing teachers, principals, and division leaders in various roles. The meetings of principals, division reading teams, and a senior administrator team were also observed. Due to the appreciative nature of this study, the researcher was very conscious of finding positive exemplars of classroom and leadership practice that could be highlighted in this report (see Shine a Light exemplars).

Initial data analysis focused discretely upon each individual school division and was guided by the use of the rubrics regarding classroom and leadership practices. The researcher then met with each division's team to check the accuracy of the data, to discuss the findings, and to determine recommendations for that division. The final step in the analysis was to synthesize the findings and recommendations from the three division reports into a single report intended to address the provincial picture.

Limitations of this study include a focus on only three of the 28 school divisions and on a limited number of schools within each division. The appreciative nature of the study and the criteria used to select the divisions also ensures a focus on strong implementation work. The advantage of this approach is that it identifies strong practice that can be considered for replication by other divisions and illustrates that success in the Saskatchewan context is possible.

See Appendix B for a more complete description of the methodology used in this study.

General Findings

Progress to Date

The school divisions that participated in this study are off to a strong start in their journey to improve their students' reading achievement. Sustainable improvement takes time and focus, and *Saskatchewan Reads* is just nicely into its second year of implementation. It is only since the fall of 2016 that leaders have had access to the implementation/leadership practices described in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators*. It is important to note

that the schools participating in this study that have a high percentage of students achieving the provincial goal indicate that their efforts at the school and sometimes the division level were initiated at least six or seven years ago and have been developing and sustained through to the present.

Classroom Practices

Consistent, coherent teaching practices that employ high impact assessment and instructional approaches within the gradual release of responsibility model were observed in the schools where students' reading achievement is at or beyond the provincial goal. It was striking to see that some schools and one small school division have established a shared teaching practice achieved through strong collaboration among teachers and leaders. In these schools, students experience consistent language and processes that assist in their learning from year to year. New teachers come to understand how instruction in their new school works and their practice quickly aligns with the professional norm in the school. Schools observed in the study are in the process of improving their classroom practices, often in ways that stress teacher collaboration in learning to use and practice high impact assessment and instructional approaches.

Although some leaders report that teachers' use of the approaches in the gradual release of responsibility model are just developing, strong moves are being made by divisions to establish a more powerful, more consistent teaching practice. One very significant practice from one of the participating divisions was to set and then pursue a non-negotiable instructional goal that would serve to accomplish the student reading goal.

It is clear from the experiences of participants in this study that improving classroom practice is challenging work that requires effort, resources, focus, and skilled leadership over time. The identification of proven implementation/leadership practices in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* is a huge step forward.

Leadership Practices

School leaders and teachers in the three divisions believe that they are going in the right direction with their implementation work. The "Compelling Why and Shared Beliefs" work at the division and school levels has been important. Both individual and collective efficacy is present in successful schools and conditions seem right for continued growth of this powerful phenomenon (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Reeves, 2011). Focus and alignment are improving, and momentum is developing toward a more tightly-coupled (Marzano & Waters, 2009) system where all functions contribute to the learning goal.

The new role of Lead Learner has been widely accepted and is in place in the most successful schools. Teachers' professional learning is moving toward a more refined practice that features ongoing, intensive, job-embedded, and collaborative learning opportunities. Leaders are working to develop cultures that are conducive to students' success. They increasingly understand that a strong professional community is connected to improved instructional practice as well as students' learning success (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Teachers and leaders are using data to inform instruction, professional

learning, and school and division planning. The strong emphasis by all three divisions on the professional learning of principals and vice-principals bodes well for future success as these leaders will set the conditions for success in their schools. Principals and teachers, to their great credit, are increasingly focusing upon instructional approaches and leadership practices that bring *Saskatchewan Reads* to life, even though demands from other aspects of their professional work have not diminished and have likely increased.

Teamwork in each division has been crucial to success. The division reading teams in each of the three divisions are powerful assets in the effort to achieve reading success. Members of these teams are knowledgeable, passionate, and influential. The researcher encountered senior administrative teams in the three divisions that are also dedicated to this work and ensuring that it is sustained. School level teacher data teams, professional learning communities (PLC), and other kinds of learning-focused teams rely heavily upon the leadership of teachers in lead teacher and learning coach roles. The existence of these roles provides credible teacher leadership and ensures a strong approach to leadership development in the Lead Learner role that will provide the next generation of principals and senior leaders.

The Value and Impact of *Saskatchewan Reads*

Teachers and leaders in the three school divisions involved in the implementation study place a high value on *Saskatchewan Reads*. In the schools observed, *Saskatchewan Reads* is just beginning to have an effect on pedagogy and students' reading success. Many successful schools began their journeys toward improvement as many as six or seven years ago. It is clear, however, that teachers and leaders see that practices outlined in *Saskatchewan Reads* validate and clarify their developing teaching practices and affirm the work of their school and division. They have also appreciated the "sharp focus" and the common language for instruction. They have found the resources to be accessible, useful, and especially helpful for new teachers. The website merits special mention as educators in Saskatchewan and beyond have made frequent visits to the website to access demonstration videos and other resources.

Teachers and leaders have noted that it is important to be a part of a provincial initiative and see *Saskatchewan Reads* as a unifying force across the province. It was very important that the French version arrived at the same time as the English version. All three divisions indicated that they were working to extend the classroom practices outlined in *Saskatchewan Reads* to the middle years and high school grades, an important indication of the influence of this work.

Leaders in the three divisions have found *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* to be a very useful guide to leading the implementation. The leadership practices espoused in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* have been the focus for the professional learning of leaders in the three school divisions during this current school year.

In short, *Saskatchewan Reads* is valued and its true impact will be seen over time if the provincial sector "sticks with it."

Next Steps: Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to guide the next steps in implementing *Saskatchewan Reads* and to address the challenges identified in the study (see Appendix C). Recommendations are introduced with pointed quotations and one or more “Shine a Light” exemplars drawn from the practice of one or more of the three divisions. Each of the 10 general recommendations is most often accompanied by more specific sub-recommendations. The recommendations are interdependent and will deliver the greatest impact if implemented in concert. For example, powerful professional learning for teachers often depends upon the principal’s leadership, a strong collaborative culture, and an analysis of student data that indicates what teachers need to learn if students are to succeed.

The first recommendation focuses on the development of a more powerful, coherent teaching practice, the primary goal of *Saskatchewan Reads*. All of the other nine recommendations provide the means to strengthened pedagogy. Therefore, first things first!

Recommendation #1: Invest in More Powerful, More Coherent Teaching Practice

“The quality of teaching is the most important in-school factor that affects student learning and achievement.”

(Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016, p. 1)

Shine a Light: A coherent, consistent instructional practice was observed in schools that successfully achieved the provincial goal. Such a practice was also achieved across the schools in one smaller school division that has achieved the provincial goal. The benefits for students are apparent as knowledge of how they learn and of the reading strategies they employ carry over from one year to the next.

Shine a Light: In addition to having the provincial sector student achievement goal for reading, one school division has adopted a non-negotiable instructional goal for its teachers. Teachers are to learn and use the instructional approaches within the gradual release of responsibility model as the means to achieving the student learning goal.

Shine a Light: One school used an incredible array of formative assessment data to plan precise instruction and intervention that responded to students needs. The staff used Fountas & Pinnell data featured on a school data wall, tracked students’ errors and rate of reading during guided reading, and used forms to capture the key points of PLC discussions and decisions regarding next steps in each child’s instruction.

1. That Ministry, division, teacher, and post-secondary leaders strengthen their efforts to improve teachers’ classroom practices and strive to establish a more powerful, coherent instructional practice for literacy learning among Saskatchewan teachers. Such a practice would include the high impact practices outlined in *Saskatchewan Reads* as its foundation, but would also encourage teachers to continually extend

their teaching repertoires to better meet diverse learning needs and achieve other valued learning outcomes in the curriculum.

- 1.1 That the example of establishing and achieving a non-negotiable instructional goal utilized in one school division be adopted by other school divisions that seek a high level of consistent teaching practice with accompanying high levels of achievement in reading across all of its schools (Marzano & Waters, 2009).
- 1.2 That the provincial colleges of education ensure that undergraduate students in education learn to practice the approaches associated with nurturing learning environments, strong assessment, the gradual release of responsibility, and appropriate interventions as a fundamental outcome of their B. Ed. Programs.
- 1.2 That once practicing teachers have achieved a refined level of practice in the *Saskatchewan Reads* practices, they should be encouraged to expand their instructional repertoires and actively experiment through collective action research with what Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) describe as “next” practices. Such practices would help students to meet the wide array of learning outcomes within our provincial curriculum (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2008; Hattie, 2009; Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2015; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; etc.).

Recommendation #2: Persist!

“... we are beginning to appreciate that successful schools, districts, and larger systems have “resolute leadership” that stays with the focus, especially during rough periods ...”

(Fullan, 2010, p. 4)

Shine a Light: Some of the most successful schools and a very successful division that participated in the study have been working on their reading initiatives for six or seven years. They started from a place where student achievement was not satisfactory. These schools have taken the long view and have gradually improved their instructional and leadership skills to the point where a large percentage of students are successful readers.

2. That the Ministry and school divisions persist in the implementation of *Saskatchewan Reads* by emphasizing development of the leadership practices outlined in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators*. Historically, the education sector in our province has rarely, if ever, established an ongoing focus on a limited number of priorities. It is vital that strong implementation work continues and that improvements in teaching and leadership practices be sustained. Participants in the study were clear that the sector must “Stick with it!”

Recommendation #3: Focus, Align, and Monitor in Pursuit of the Reading Goal

“The compelling conclusion of the research is that schools with higher levels of focus not only have higher levels of student achievement but also are better able to implement other essential leadership and teaching strategies.”

(Reeves, 2011, p. 51)

Shine a Light: Schools and divisions observed placed a limit on the number of goals that are featured in their learning improvement and strategic plans. When goals beyond reading and graduation rates were included, they tend to be complementary goals such as student engagement, attendance, and early childhood development.

Shine a Light: Two schools from different divisions displayed the school’s goals alongside the division’s goals and the provincial goals from the ESSP. This goal alignment across three levels makes a powerful statement of the value of alignment.

3. That all educational partners and especially those in senior leadership positions in school divisions, the Ministry, First Nations and Métis educational jurisdictions, and the colleges of education, evaluate and reorient their current organizational focus, alignment, and deployment of resources toward achieving the reading goal. Historically, our sector has overloaded our professionals with too many, often unrelated initiatives. The power of focus and alignment across organizational levels and tight-coupling across functions has rarely been realized.
- 3.1 That the Ministry and school divisions continue their efforts on behalf of all students, but that they also focus targeted resources (expertise and other as needed) to schools and divisions that are struggling to achieve the provincial reading goal. Three instructive examples of targeting resources are *Following Their Voices*, New Zealand’s Literacy Professional Development Project (Meissel, Parr, & Timperley, 2016), and the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (Fullan, 2010).
- 3.2 That PLT members consider the question of whether or not the organizational functions and levels of the overall sector and of each division are tightly coupled enough to achieve the reading goal in all schools. Do all organizational functions and levels align to achieve this goal? (See Marzano & Waters, 2009 for a discussion of schools and divisions as loosely-coupled organizations and Wagner, 2012 re: PISA-leading Singapore as an unusually tightly-coupled system).
- 3.3 That the sector and divisions maintain and if necessary, strengthen their focus on the reading goal. Questions about whether the focus is clear enough and whether the alignment is strong enough need to be frequently asked. A key part of strengthening the focus on the reading goal is “weeding” our educational garden of old priorities, diversions, and anything else that will distract the partners from achieving the reading goal (Reeves, 2011, p. 43). Maintaining focus on the reading goal will be a huge challenge in the face of the yet undefined transformational change.

- 3.4 That in addition to the close monitoring of students' reading achievement, leaders and PLC's engage in constructive and frequent monitoring of teaching and leadership practices (Reeves, 2011). Data regarding the state of professional practices will allow for more precise implementation plans and practices. This recommendation complements Recommendation 1.1 (establish non-negotiable instructional goals).
- 3.5 That the newly formed provincial oversight team and the existing division reading teams continue their work as a means of ensuring ongoing focus, energy, alignment, and monitoring necessary to achieve the provincial reading goal.
- 3.6 That the PLT employ the principle of reciprocal accountability (Elmore, 2000) in developing its plans. If we ask more of people we should provide the means to do the work. Higher expectations should align with an investment in professional capacity.
- 3.7 That the two provincial universities strengthen their connections to the provincial education sector's work. This includes preparation of teachers in the assessment and instructional approaches in *Saskatchewan Reads*, preparation of school leaders in the Lead Learner role, and the conduct of research complementary to the goals of the ESSP including studies of pedagogy, leadership, and implementation. The example of the close connection between the field and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) in achieving educational success might be explored as the universities consider their roles in advancing students' learning in Saskatchewan.
- 3.8 That the PLT invite the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) to strengthen its connection to the implementation of *Saskatchewan Reads*. The emphasis in this initiative on developing collaborative cultures that feature teacher leadership and a more shared professional practice is a matter of great interest to the Federation.

Recommendation #4: Develop Leaders of Learning

"The most powerful way that school leaders can make a difference to the learning of their students is by promoting and participating in the professional learning and development of their teachers. The average impact (0.84) of these leadership practices on student outcomes was twice that of any other leadership dimension."
(Robinson, 2011, p. 104)

Shine a Light: One principal sees his most important role as supporting the learning of his staff members. He learns "side by side" with them. Because he is not a literacy development expert, he learns about classroom practices with his teachers.

Shine a Light: Principals and vice-principals in all three school divisions participate in professional learning about the classroom and leadership practices in *Saskatchewan Reads* and *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* at their regularly scheduled school administrators meeting. At one session observed by the researcher, leaders focused upon

conferencing within the independent reading approach. The session was interactive, featured knowledge from acknowledged leaders in the field, and ensured learning at school through the assignment of follow-up Walk Throughs during the following month. Principals and vice-principals were to bring the Walk Through forms employed during classroom observations to the next meeting for further discussion.

4. That school divisions continue to focus upon and intensify the professional learning of their school and division leaders within the Lead Learner role espoused by *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators*. The power of this role is prominent in research (Fullan, 2014; Robinson, 2011) and has shown its power in this study.
- 4.1 That the Ministry and division leaders enable the role of Lead Learner by recognizing that the adoption of learning leadership will require significant time and energy by school leaders and that the traditional managerial duties of school-based administrators should be reviewed and significantly reduced. The example of the state of Hawaii's (Fullan & Quinn, 2016) successful effort to significantly reduce principals' managerial tasks should be explored for replication here.
- 4.2 That the provincial universities explore the approaches in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* within their graduate programs in educational administration.
- 4.3 That provincial organizations ensure the prominence of the leadership practices in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* in League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents of Saskatchewan (LEADS) conferences and modules, the Saskatchewan Principals' Short Course, and other leadership learning opportunities.
- 4.4 That leadership for learning (Lead Learner role) be added to the Enduring Strategies in the Education Sector Strategic Plan.
- 4.5 That the PLT apply the leadership practices in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* to future learning improvement initiatives. Such an application would provide coherence as the goals of the ESSP are advanced. These practices are rooted in the research that connects leadership practices to students' learning success and could be applied widely to improvement on a variety of learning outcomes. (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Reeves, 2011; Robinson, 2011; etc.)

Recommendation #5: Instill Shared Beliefs and Efficacy

“When we expect that we have an impact on student achievement, we are right. When we expect that we are impotent, we are also right.”
(Reeves, 2008, p. 7)

Shine a Light: Early in this school year, administrator groups explored their “Compelling Whys and Shared Beliefs” and most took this exercise back to their staffs using the *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* module on this topic. The result of this work is that some schools prominently posted their shared beliefs about reading on the

walls of their school. One school added a provocative “So What?” after each belief as a challenge to align practice with their beliefs.

Shine a Light: Efficacy was clearly expressed by a teacher at one community school. “Kids know they can read. Teachers know they can teach kids to read. These kids will not be a statistic.”

5. That all divisions and their schools continue efforts to explicitly develop and articulate “Compelling Whys and Shared Beliefs” for literacy learning as well as challenge teachers and leaders to align their professional practices with these beliefs. Getting almost all staff on board is needed to take full advantage of the benefits of collective efficacy (Fisher, Frey & Hattie, 2016; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Reeves, 2011).
- 5.1 That Saskatchewan schools with excellent results, especially those schools whose students live in lower socio-economic communities and who often belong to minority groups, be studied and case studies written for use in the development of leaders. Professionals should know that within the Saskatchewan context, socio-economic status is not destiny and that teaching and leadership skills are the key determinant of students’ success.

Recommendation #6: Engage Teachers in Powerful Professional Learning

“Rigorous research suggests that sustained and intensive professional learning for teachers is related to student-achievement gains.”
(Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 9)

“Processes for active inquiry, learning and experimenting have to become teachers’ core business of thinking as a professional.”
(Timperley, 2011, xviii)

Shine a Light: At one community school, a team of three teachers is assigned to two large Grade 1 classes. This results in joint planning and frequent team teaching. One member of the team is a new teacher while the others are highly regarded veterans. This is a strong example of how a new teacher is being inducted into a collaborative culture and is supported in her early development through job-embedded professional learning.

Shine a Light: One school began the school year with an in-depth analysis of student data. This analysis was used to plan teachers’ professional learning so that teachers were learning what was needed to address students’ learning needs.

6. That school divisions, the STF, and the provincial universities ensure that teachers have ongoing opportunities to develop their professional knowledge and skills regarding students’ reading. Special attention should be taken to employ the research on teachers’ professional learning that contributes to students’ learning success. Such research points to professional learning that is intensive, ongoing, collaborative, aligned with improvement priorities, and focused on student

learning. (Darling-Hammond et al, 2009; Joyce & Calhoun, 2010; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Timperley, 2011).

- 6.1 That professional learning opportunities be differentiated to meet teachers' learning needs and experience with special focus on new teacher induction and the renewal of teachers in mid-career (e.g. Ontario's Teacher Learning and Leadership Program see Campbell et al., 2016).
- 6.2 That school and division leaders ensure that teachers have regular opportunities to observe other teachers and to have their peers observe them. Having specific professional learning goals and data collection tools enhance these opportunities.
- 6.3 That Ministry and school division leaders protect the roles intended to promote teachers' professional learning as the province's fiscal concerns are addressed. Lead teacher and learning coach roles are valued by teachers and principals and are seen to make a significant contribution to teachers' professional learning (see *Following Their Voices* utilization of provincial facilitators and school-based facilitators and Sharratt & Fullan, 2012 re: Parameter 2: embedded literacy coaches).

Recommendation #7: Build Strong Professional Communities

“ ... we emphasize the importance of professional community, largely because accumulating evidence shows that it is related to improved instruction, students' achievement, and shared leadership ...”
(Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 33)

Shine a Light: One school has established grade-level Professional Learning Communities (PLC) that meet every six days within the school day. Each PLC meets under the leadership of a school-based lead teacher. A school-based administrator is often a participant in these meetings. These meetings focus upon student data and appropriate instructional follow-up or intervention. Forms that capture the discussion and direction set for the students' learning are used to record decisions and ensure proper follow-up.

7. That the Ministry, school divisions, and schools build upon the success of collaborative cultures and literacy teams already established, and seek to have strong professional communities in every school and organizational unit.
- 7.1 That the Ministry, school divisions, universities, and the STF ensure that their policies, procedures, and practices encourage and enable the development of strong collaborative teaching practice across the province.
- 7.2 That school and division leaders ensure that structures, processes, and time needed for teachers to engage in collaborative work be protected and enhanced.

- 7.3 That Ministry and division leaders enhance and consciously develop teacher leadership through division and provincial initiatives. Lead teachers, embedded literacy coaches, and school-based instructional facilitators have proven to be a successful, but endangered role.
- 7.4 That the Ministry, colleges of education, the STF, and school divisions ensure that the policies and practices related to teachers' undergraduate learning and induction into the profession encourage and enable collaborative teaching practice. The placement of teacher candidates and new teachers into practicum, internships, and early teaching assignments should provide them with opportunities for learning and support within successful professional communities.
- 7.5 That divisions and schools continue to develop collaborative relationships with parents, community members, and organizations in support of students' literacy learning.

Recommendation #8: Employ Data to Improve Teaching, Learning & Implementation

“... to optimize classroom teacher effectiveness, we need to know on an ongoing basis that every child is learning by making ongoing assessments and by incorporating that information about each child's learning into daily instruction ...”
(Sharratt & Fullan, 2010, p. 29)

“... data are meaningless unless we consider the causes that lead to the outcomes – that is the actions of teachers, school leaders, and policymakers.”
(Reeves, 2011, p. 29)

Shine a Light: One division's reading team, made up almost entirely of teachers, developed Walk Through forms that school and division leaders use to gather data on teachers' use of the instructional approaches in the gradual release of responsibility model. The use of these forms contributed to a more consistent instructional practice and to deeper understanding by leaders of the instructional practices.

Shine a Light: Leaders in one school division conducted an analysis of two schools with similar socio-economic situations but with very different student reading performances. They used a Venne diagram to identify common features as well as differences that could be addressed in developing a plan for the under-performing school. Another division effectively displays its grade level reading results using distribution graphs that clearly illustrate the reading level of all students.

Shine a Light: One community school uses graduated and accelerated goals for Grade 1-3 students because students often enter this school with little book experience and with less developed oral language than would be expected. The goals progress through the grades as students catch up: Grade 1 - 60% reading at or above grade level; Grade 2 - 75%; Grade 3 - 90%. This approach illustrates that it takes the efforts of all of the

primary teachers to get students to grade level. It also ensures that Grade 1 teachers are not disheartened when only about 60% of their students achieve grade level in reading.

8. That school divisions emphasize the achievement of more refined levels of practice by teachers, principals, and division leaders in analyzing and responding to data that informs teaching, leadership, and implementation.
- 8.1 That school, division, and sector leaders advocate and provide the means for teachers to engage in co-assessment (side-by-side assessment by teachers within schools, within divisions, within the province) of students' ability to read. Such a practice will build fidelity in using the selected assessment procedure and will help to ensure consistency in assessment practice that will allow all partners to trust the data.
- 8.2 That the use of data to inform professional judgment be expanded and refined to include the use of data to understand the state of teachers' and leaders' professional practice. Rubrics for teaching and leadership practices that will assist in determining (including self-assessment) teachers' and leaders' levels of use of powerful teaching and leadership practices may be useful in gathering and analyzing this data.
- 8.3 That schools and divisions consider the use of growth goals and accelerated goals in addition to the grade level achievement targets. Growth goals are of value to teachers when students start school with well below expected levels of oral language and book knowledge. Accelerated goals (more than a year's normal growth) will also need to be employed for these students if they are to reach grade level expectations by the end of Grade 3. Growth goals are also vital for students who meet or exceed grade level in order to keep them growing.
- 8.4 That the sector periodically review its implementation efforts and that school divisions also periodically undertake their own self-assessment of their implementation efforts (Timperley, 2011) by collecting data using the tools (rubrics and conversation guides) produced for this formative assessment as well as others that could be developed. If divisions would benefit from an external perspective, Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit (SELU) or Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit (SIDRU) might be contracted to conduct a formative assessment.
- 8.5 That leaders use data to create urgency and to challenge teachers and leaders who may be stuck in their practice.
- 8.6 That division and school leaders employ the use of various graphical representations of students' and schools' reading achievement such as distribution graphs and Venne diagrams in the analysis of reading and implementation data. The use of data walls illustrating students' current levels of reading achievement is also recommended.

Recommendation #9: Address All Elements in Implementation

“The nine high-focus schools that did especially well were initially among the lowest performing schools in the district, yet they moved beyond the state and district averages in a relatively short time and sustained their achievement levels. The explanation for better performance in our view lies in more carefully focused attention to the details in each of the 14 improvement areas, or what we call the 14 parameters.”

(Sharratt & Fullan, 2012, p. 9)

Shine a Light: One school has a detailed School Literacy Plan that addresses many factors in planning for success. The thoroughness of this plan and the resulting action ensured that a high percentage of students successfully learned to read.

9. That sector, division, and school leaders address all elements of Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators in the implementation of Saskatchewan Reads. The interdependence of the factors in successful implementation demands that all receive attention.

Recommendation #10: Develop a Provincial Perspective

Teachers and leaders who participated in this study have noted that it is important to be a part of a provincial initiative and see Saskatchewan Reads as a unifying force across the province.

(This study p. 5)

“Top-down change from governments does not lead to whole system change (all schools improving); nor does bottom-up change, where every school has autonomy result in much progress. A new strategy, Leadership from the Middle (LftM), is emerging that shows more promise for achieving greater coherence and impact across the systems. LftM involves strengthening districts and networks of schools, working together on specific problems to build pedagogical capacity and collective expertise linked to measurable impact on student achievement.”

(Fullan, 2015, p. 1)

Shine a Light: The early work of the PLT on the provincial education sector strategic plan and of the PRT and the PART on Saskatchewan Reads and Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators offers a glimpse of the potential for collaboration across the school divisions of the province. Saskatchewan now has a common educational plan, common goals, a more unified approach to teaching our students how to read, and a more unified approach to leading our schools. Some members of the PRT and the PART mentioned how much they appreciate having found colleagues whom they now contact for ideas and support in their work. A network of educators across school divisions in pursuit of the reading goal has been established and represents a strong initial step toward a provincial perspective that merits extension and strengthening.

10. That school, division, and provincial leaders from the Ministry, First Nations and Métis jurisdictions, the universities, the STF, and the Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA) consciously develop a stronger provincial perspective and

invest more deeply in cross-jurisdictional joint work and professional relationships as they strive to improve the learning success of all Saskatchewan students.

- 10.1 That provincial leaders consider the example of the PLT, the PRT, and the PART as a route to building the overall provincial system's capacity for future success. Such teams would be strengthened with the early participation of university faculty.
- 10.2 That provincial leaders study and consider the implementation of "Leadership from the Middle" as explained by Fullan (2015). Such an approach addresses the current economic environment where the Ministry lacks the capacity to lead learning improvement and where most divisions will be challenged to find the necessary resources and capacity to lead their own improvement initiatives. Pooling expertise and resources to build capacity across the province offers hope of continued progress.
- 10.3 That provincial leaders from school divisions and the Ministry reach across division boundaries and build pedagogical and leadership capacity where it is most needed. The example of the *Following Their Voices* initiative offers a strong example.
- 10.4 That school and division leaders develop federations of two or more schools that establish collaborative partnerships with a strong connecting structure. Chapman and Mujis found that the most successful of such federations consist of a high-performing school with one or more low-performing schools (in Rincon-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016).
- 10.5 That members of the provincial education sector seek professional relationships and partnerships dedicated to students' learning improvement that extend beyond our provincial boundaries. Strong connections to jurisdictions with stronger learning performances as well as those with common challenges will yield new, more powerful approaches to pedagogy, leadership, and implementation.

Conclusion

The formative assessment of the implementation of *Saskatchewan Reads* focused on the implementation efforts of three school divisions. As an appreciative study, strong classroom and leadership practices were observed and have been shared in this report. *Saskatchewan Reads* and *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* are highly valued by staff in the three divisions and will be central in achieving the provincial student reading achievement goal. This study sets forth ten general and other more specific sub-recommendations designed to address the challenges identified in this study. Enacting these recommendations will assist in the full and successful implementation of *Saskatchewan Reads* and in achieving the goal of having at least 80% of Saskatchewan students reading at or above grade level by 2020.

Saskatchewan Reads is off to a good start and holds great promise. The sector must persist in its efforts to develop classroom and leadership practices that will bring *Saskatchewan Reads* to life and thus ensure our students' learning success.

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Appendix A: Considerations for Future Formative Assessments

Based upon the experience of conducting this formative assessment, the researcher recommends the following considerations for future formative assessment projects:

1. Those who designed the initiative should be engaged in determining the measures of implementation success. The process of designing the rubrics for this study serve as a good example. This process ensured that the researcher developed a thorough understanding of the initiative.
2. The researcher in this kind of inquiry should be grounded in the experiences of classrooms and schools. The opportunity to observe students, teachers, and leaders at work is most valuable in determining the state of implementation. Understanding this context is vital for making actionable recommendations.
3. The experiences of professionals in the Saskatchewan context should be enriched with the perspectives of research and best practice from other places. Although there are unique aspects to our Saskatchewan experience, teaching and leading in other places bear striking similarities to our experience.
4. A future formative assessment of *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* should employ the rubrics and conversation guides developed for this study. These tools might be revised and improved to ensure their currency and utility. The rubrics should be placed on the *Saskatchewan Reads* website so that they are accessible to all who would like to use them.
5. A future implementation study should involve a larger number of school divisions and schools to get the most accurate possible view of the state of implementation.
6. This study recommends that the PLT and school divisions conduct periodic self-assessments of their implementation work at the provincial and division levels. The provincial oversight committee should provide the tools and advice on the conduct of such assessments.
7. *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* presents research-proven leadership practices that apply to almost all learning improvement efforts. By using these practices in other initiatives, those who work in schools and divisions will see and appreciate the coherence. The tools used in determining levels of use of the leadership/implementation practices in this study could be applied to other learning improvement initiatives.

Appendix B: Methodology of This Study

The formative assessment process began with the researcher developing an understanding of the elements of *Saskatchewan Reads*. Rubrics for the classroom practices outlined within *Saskatchewan Reads* and the leadership practices outlined in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* were developed with some members of the PRT and the PART. Conversation outlines for various roles were developed focusing on the practices outlined in *Saskatchewan Reads* and *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators*.

The development of the leadership/implementation practices rubrics were preceded by the researcher's review of the research regarding the connection between leadership practices and students' learning success (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2011; Robinson, 2011) as well as the implementation practices of leading educational jurisdictions (Bishop, O'Sullivan, & Berryman, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Sahlberg, 2015; Sharratt & Fullan, 2012; Tucker, 2012). This review of research confirmed that the leadership practices outlined in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* represent best leadership practices that facilitate students' achievement.

This study focused on implementation efforts in three school divisions. In discussion with provincial leaders, a number of criteria were determined to guide the selection of the divisions to be engaged in this appreciative study. These criteria included strong initial implementation work and perhaps some growth in student achievement in reading, a significant proportion of First Nations and Métis students, varying student enrolment sizes, different geographical areas of the province, varying approaches to implementation, and willingness to participate.

Initial information about each division's approach to implementation was obtained from an initial meeting with each division's literacy leader or team and a review of the three divisions' websites. The researcher then spent three or four days in each of the divisions observing primary classrooms, interviewing teachers, principals, and division leaders in various roles. Opportunities to observe two principals' meetings, two division reading team meetings, and one senior administrative team meeting offered an opportunity to obtain information and insights from leaders. The researcher also attended a meeting of the new provincial oversight team with members of the PRT and PART in December 2016. Due to the appreciative nature of this study, the researcher was very conscious of finding positive exemplars of classroom and leadership practice that could be highlighted in this report (see Shine a Light exemplars).

Initial data analysis was focused discretely upon each individual school division and was guided by the use of the rubrics regarding classroom and leadership practices. A document outlining findings, supporting data, and recommendations was developed for each of the three participating school divisions. The researcher returned to each school division to meet with a leadership team to ensure that the data utilized was correct and to discuss the data, findings, and recommendations for their division. Team members offered their support, critique, and ideas to refine the recommendations. The final step in the analysis was to synthesize the findings and recommendations from the three division reports into a single report intended to address the provincial picture.

Several limitations of this study must be identified. It is obvious that studying the efforts of three of the 28 school divisions and a limited number of schools within each division does not reveal a complete provincial picture. The appreciative nature of the study and the criteria used to select the divisions also ensures a focus on strong implementation work. The advantage of this approach is that it identifies strong practice that can be considered for replication by other divisions. This study also shows that success in the Saskatchewan context is possible, but only with the efforts required to change classroom and leadership practices displayed by participating divisions.

Appendix C: Challenges to Implementation

A number of significant challenges to implementation were identified in this study by the researcher and by the participants. The recommendations that will address each challenge are identified in brackets at the end of each challenge description.

1. ***Establishing a more powerful and consistent teaching practice:*** The classroom practices employed by teachers are the key to students achieving high levels of reading achievement. All of the leadership/implementation practices outlined in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* are designed to improve teachers' classroom practices as described in *Saskatchewan Reads*. Establishing a more consistent, shared teaching practice that is founded upon high impact assessment and instructional approaches is vital to success. This is the key challenge. Participants in the study made special mention of the need to assist teachers who are new to the profession as well as more veteran teachers who seem stuck and are not keen to drop established practices that are not working. (See Recommendations #1 and 2-10)
2. ***The inability to stick with an initiative:*** The education sector in Saskatchewan, as in most jurisdictions, has been notorious for its short attention span and failure to sustain the effort required for learning improvement across the province. Too often the sector moves on to the next challenge without actually achieving its previous improvement goal. Even when strong student results are achieved, it can be challenging to maintain these results when personnel move, leadership changes, or when new initiatives demand attention. One leader expressed it this way: "Anyone can get an A once. Can you, however, continue to get A's in the future?" A huge challenge will be for the Saskatchewan education sector to stick with its improvement initiatives, including *Saskatchewan Reads*, through to the achievement of its goal and then to sustain these improvements. (see Recommendations #2 and 3)
3. ***Achieving organizational focus:*** The efforts of the three school divisions illustrate the importance of achieving a clear focus on the student learning goal. This focus comes from having all three levels of the system set common goals and processes (e.g. *Saskatchewan Reads*) and then organizing the various functions within their organizations to accomplish the goal. The education sector in Saskatchewan has not traditionally been well aligned to achieve learning outcomes. Concern was expressed by participants in this study regarding leaders becoming distracted from students' learning if they become caught up in political and governance issues often associated with the yet undefined transformational change. New larger school divisions or a change from elected to appointed school boards would require significant attention to developing new cultures, to synthesizing local agreements, and to developing new Board policies and administrative procedures. Would leaders be able to maintain their newly found focus on students' learning? (see Recommendations #2 and 3)
4. ***Developing leadership practices connected to student learning success:*** Traditional approaches to school leadership have not had a large positive effect on teaching practice or student achievement. The leadership practices identified in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* have a strong research base that connects their use to

improved learning (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2011; Robinson, 2011). Significant professional learning is required if principals and other school leaders are to become skilled in the Lead Learner role and therefore better support teachers in learning and using the classroom practices outlined in *Saskatchewan Reads*. The many duties that already fill principals' days must be reviewed and some eliminated to ensure that they have time to do the things that matter most for students' success. (see Recommendation #4)

5. ***Believing in students' ability to learn and in teachers' ability to teach them:*** Too often teachers and leaders have not really believed that students from poor and marginalized communities could learn successfully in large numbers. The research underpinning *Following Their Voices* illustrates this lack of faith in students' ability to learn and in professionals' own ability to teach them well. Although many educators in this study possess supportive beliefs, some leaders expressed doubts about whether or not all teachers share these beliefs. The growing research on the power of efficacy strongly supports the efforts within *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* to address Compelling Whys and Shared Beliefs. Developing shared beliefs that actually support students' learning is another substantial challenge that must be addressed if students are to become successful readers. (see Recommendations #4 and 7)
6. ***Engaging in powerful professional learning that improves professional practice:*** Learning improvement depends upon teachers and leaders learning new skills. Too often teachers and leaders in Saskatchewan have experienced professional learning opportunities that do not result in improved professional practice. The deepening body of research on effective professional learning has identified the attributes of professional learning that does make a positive difference in teachers' and leaders' professional practices. Although the school divisions in this study are making strides toward more effective professional learning, it remains a challenge to engage teachers and leaders in their professional learning in ways that make a significant difference for students' learning success. The varying needs of new and veteran teachers must be recognized even as professional learning becomes more responsive to the state of students' learning. (see Recommendations #6, 7, 8, and 4)
7. ***Developing stronger professional communities:*** Associated with strong classroom practices is the need to develop a more collaborative teaching practice as the norm in Saskatchewan. A strong professional community not only exerts an influence on teachers' practices, it has also been found to have a direct impact on students' learning success (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). The tradition rooted in Saskatchewan's one-room schoolhouses is that teachers have usually taught with their doors closed and made their own pedagogical decisions. Self-reliance has often been valued above collaboration. Another key challenge, then, is to develop a much more collaborative teaching profession. (See Recommendations # 6, 7, 10)
8. ***Utilizing data to improve learning, teaching, and implementation:*** Teachers and principals participating in this study have embraced the use of data in planning students' learning. Strong examples were observed in all three school divisions.

Fewer examples, however, of the use of data in planning instructional improvement and in planning implementation efforts were found. More needs to be known about how teachers actually teach and how leaders lead if successful plans are to be developed. (see Recommendations 1, 3, and 8)

9. ***Implementation is complicated:*** One particular school observed in this study developed and used a remarkably detailed literacy improvement plan. All factors that could be addressed were considered and appropriate actions were then planned and carried out. This school's work shows that there is no silver bullet for reading improvement and that all facets of implementation proposed in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* must be addressed. This is a tremendous challenge to leaders, but one that Saskatchewan educational leaders are now better equipped to tackle. (see Recommendation #9)
10. ***Taking advantage of new provincial partners and perspectives:*** Recent developments of the ESSP and *Saskatchewan Reads* provide strong examples of good things that can happen when we pool our knowledge and resources in pursuit of common goals. Too often in the past, we have not looked beyond the borders of school divisions to learn about our colleagues' practices and challenges. One participant in the study articulated her hope that educators take ownership for the learning of all of the province's children and youth. How do we move from "my kids" in a classroom to "our kids" from one school to "our kids" for a division and finally to "our kids" for the province? How do we ensure that all members of the educational community extend their concern for learning success to all students in our province? How do we create a truly provincial system that ensures the success of all students? Learning to work together for the good of all Saskatchewan students is a new challenge worth pursuing. (see Recommendations #1, 8, and 10)
11. ***Diminishing resources for education:*** Achieving and then sustaining challenging learning goals is more difficult in the face of what is strongly perceived by study participants to be diminishing resources. The loss of instructional consultants, the lack of books for some classroom and school libraries, teachers purchasing classroom resources out of their own pockets, seemingly not enough staff to address increasing enrolments, and a focus on keeping class sizes manageable were common elements of the strong theme voiced by many informants in varying roles. A related issue is ensuring that precious resources, especially human resources, are focused to ensure success. Resources may need to be targeted toward schools and divisions that are having difficulty achieving the provincial goal. (see Recommendations #3 and 10)
12. ***Capacity to engage in other improvement initiatives:*** As the sector adds writing, math, and other improvement initiatives, can strong performance in reading be maintained? Much of the work on reading should transfer very nicely to other initiatives. The gradual release of responsibility model has wide application for learning outcomes beyond reading. Strong formative assessment has almost universal application. The leadership practices in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* should serve the sector well and provide some coherence as it extends its improvement work. It will, nonetheless, be a great challenge to maintain

strength in reading performance while we tackle other new learning challenges. (see Recommendation #1 and 4)

- 13. *The increasing diversity of our student body:*** This challenge was mentioned often by participants in the study. Although some schools in the study have accomplished high levels of reading success among its First Nations and Métis students, too many schools have not been able to achieve this. New students who are refugees often come from traumatic situations and require emotional support as well as instruction in English as an additional language. Teachers perceive that the range of achievement of students has widened and the necessity to differentiate learning approaches for students has risen significantly in recent years. The needs of children in the inner city schools who face the challenges associated with poverty and marginalization are substantial. Student transiency is an associated challenge in these schools with up to half of the students turning over in some schools in a given school year. Associated with increasing student diversity is the challenge of students' behavior getting in the way of their learning and the learning of their fellow students. This challenge was widely voiced by school and division staff members and is perceived to be a growing challenge. (see Recommendations #1, 5, and 6)
- 14. *Geography:*** One of the three school divisions is spread out over a large area. It is a challenge for planning professional learning and for personal contact by division leaders with distant schools. With great distances and sparse population, very small schools with triple graded classes are sometimes necessary. Teachers are sometimes challenged to find a partner for collaboration when no one else is teaching the same grade level. When very small numbers per grade exist, a single student can also dramatically skew assessment results. (see Recommendation #7 and 10)
- 15. *Replication of successful practice in other schools and divisions:*** Can the success of some schools and divisions be replicated in neighbouring schools or divisions? Can lessons learned here be applied to other school divisions? Context is important, but lessons learned from this study as well as from educational research are converging. The basics for strong implementation are expressed in *Saskatchewan Reads for Administrators* and the success of some schools and divisions can be replicated with thoughtful study of what might work in each context. Educators would be wise to apply lessons learned from beyond their own schools and then to share the results of their own implementation work with the wider system. (see Recommendations # 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10)