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Standards for Administrators

by **Larry Lashway**

Like a sailboat trying to make headway against shifting winds, the school-reform movement has spent fifteen years tacking from one direction to another. Now the winds seem to have steadied, and the reform movement shows signs of finding a consistent course. Increasingly, reformers agree that effective change begins with clear, rigorous performance standards.

Today standards are the driving force for school reform, as virtually all states move toward some form of standards-driven accountability. When schools set explicit learning outcomes, students, teachers, and principals have clear accountability for results. When assessment is based on clear standards, student performance guides reform efforts.

The new standards for students have been accompanied by new expectations for educators. While student achievement remains the ultimate measure of success, professional organizations have made progress in developing the performance standards that should govern the actions of teachers and administrators. In the past fifteen years, groups such as the American Association of School Administrators, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration have proposed standards for school leaders. Most recently, the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) has issued a comprehensive set of standards that will be accompanied by a test that some states will use in licensure.

Although most school leaders welcome the idea of standards, the implications for daily practice may not be immediately clear. Aside from their obvious use in preparation programs and licensure, how will leadership standards affect principals on the job? Are standards just a symbolic commitment to quality, or can they serve as a concrete guide for daily decision-making? The works reviewed here provide a variety of perspectives on these questions.

The Education Commission of the States describes the policy implications of standards-driven accountability.

J. Douglas Coutts reports on the relationship between standards and on-the-job success for principals.

John R. Hoyle and colleagues provide a professional development curriculum based on a synthesis of recent leadership standards.

William Sharp and colleagues offer a series of case studies keyed to the ISLLC standards.

The website of the Council of Chief State School Officers offers the full text of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium report on performance standards for school leaders.

The Education Commission of the States. **Designing and Implementing Standards-Based Accountability Systems.** Denver, Colorado: Education Commission of the States, 1998. *Available from:* Education Commission of the States, 707 17th St., Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427. Attention: Gary Frank. (303) 299-3600. \$10.00 plus \$3.00 S&H.

This report from ECS outlines the rationale for standards-driven education and explores the key policy issues that arise. While the authors are most concerned with academic standards for students, their recommendations apply equally well to standards for school leaders.

The essence of standards-driven education is accountability, not just to fix responsibility, but to generate essential data for school improvement. When results are compared to desired outcomes, any discrepancies will trigger questions and proposals for change. Using standards to set expectations for leaders will eventually have an impact on professional development activities.

The report explores a number of policy issues that apply equally well to academic standards and leadership standards. First, everyone involved should be clear on the purpose and scope of the standards. Will they be used just to evaluate new hires, or will they apply to everyone? Will they determine rewards and sanctions? Will they be used in making decisions about professional development?

Second, school personnel must decide how performance and progress will be measured. Current administrative evaluation procedures are seldom aligned to standards, leaving principals with little guidance. Educators must be ready to ask, "How will we recognize that this standard is being met? What are the indicators?"

Third, schools must design followup procedures that apply the lessons that have been learned. In particular, decisions about professional development should be keyed to the assessment, and adequate support for development activities should be provided.

Finally, schools should inform the public about the accountability system, the results, and the improvements that are likely to result. Most members of the public have little awareness of leadership

standards and how their children will benefit.

In putting together an accountability system, policy-makers and school personnel should realize that rigorous standards do not mean rigidity. One-size-fits-all thinking fails to recognize the diversity and individuality of today's leadership cadre. Moreover, because there is not always a clear link between leadership behaviors and student learning, there is no "right" way to develop an accountability system.

The authors make it clear that simply "adopting" or subscribing to leadership standards will accomplish little unless school boards, the central office, and site administrators are prepared to take concrete steps to use them as a basis for decision-making.

Coutts, J. Douglas. **"Why Principals Fail: Are National Professional Standards Valid Measures of Principal Performance?"** *ERS Spectrum* (Fall 1997):20-24. Available from: Educational Research Service, 2000 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201. (703) 243-2100. \$10.00 plus \$3.00 S&H.

Standards for school leadership are based on professional consensus; that is, practitioners and others with expertise in school leadership have agreed that success depends on achievement of the designated standards. Groups such as the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium have created an impressive degree of consensus on essential standards for school leaders.

However, such standards still await the decisive test: empirical evidence that they relate to success in the real world. That is, are school leaders who live up to the standards more likely to succeed on the job? J. Douglas Coutts has provided some preliminary evidence based on a survey of Indiana school superintendents.

Coutts asked the superintendents to think of the principal they had most recently removed because of poor performance, and then to indicate the degree to which this principal met each of the six ISLLC standards. The superintendents were also given a chance to list other factors that may have led to the principal's poor performance.

The superintendents cited all six of the ISLLC standards as factors in the principals' poor performance. The most frequently mentioned standard was number 2, "advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth." The standard least often cited was "understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context."

The "other" category elicited a wide range of reasons, including "lack of people skills," "lazy," "lack of initiative," and "wasn't very smart."

Although Coutts believes his survey supported the validity of the standards, he advises caution in

interpreting the results. Having already identified a principal as a poor performer, superintendents were undoubtedly predisposed to regard him or her as failing to live up to high standards, particularly when the standards were stated in rather abstract terms rather than specific performance indicators. In addition, the study does not reveal whether superintendents were influenced more by standards or by the idiosyncratic factors in the "other" category.

However, this study does represent a valuable first step toward the kind of research that needs to be done with the standards. School districts could do similar research themselves by developing assessments keyed to the standards and correlating the results with on-the-job performance. Principals can only benefit from evaluation that is based on credible professional standards rather than on subjective and unpredictable judgments.

Hoyle, John R., Fenwick W. English, and Betty E. Steffy. **Skills for Successful 21st Century School Leaders: Standards for Peak Performers**. Arlington, Virginia: American Association of School Administrators, 1998. *Available from:* AASA Distribution Center, PO Box 411, Annapolis Junction, MD 20701. (888) 782-2272. \$29.95 plus \$4.50 S&H.

Leadership standards have clear implications for those who aspire to become school leaders and for those who prepare school leaders, but what do they say to those who are already on the job? The authors of this recent volume from AASA provide an answer to that question.

Traditionally, school boards and central-office officials have assumed that once administrators are certified, they will get their professional development through experience, with an occasional seminar or conference for variety. Principals have often been left on their own to determine what they need to know.

On-the-job learning, however, is dictated by the demands of the moment, and the principal's learning horizon may extend only as far as getting through the current dilemma, with little incentive for analysis and reflection. The immediate situation may be resolved, but the principal learns a less-than-optimum solution.

The premise of this book from AASA is that leadership standards offer an important "curriculum" for lifelong professional development, especially as part of a structured program aimed at providing enhanced certification for experienced administrators. (For example, AASA is creating a Leadership Institute for School Administrators, which will culminate in a performance assessment by a national board of examiners.)

The authors have built their book around a synthesis of half a dozen sets of leadership standards. Topics include visionary leadership, policy and governance, communication and community relations, organizational management, curriculum planning and development, instructional management, staff

evaluation and personnel management, staff development, educational research, evaluation and planning, and values and ethics.

In each section the authors summarize the relevant theory and research, explain the importance of the topic to the leader's job, provide specific guidelines and tools, and end with a skill assessment and suggested activities and readings.

While the book is most useful as part of a structured professional development experience that allows for dialogue and interchange, it also provides a lucid guide for individual administrators who want to assess or enhance their own mastery of leadership standards.

Sharp, William L., James K. Walter, and Helen M. Sharp. **Case Studies for School Leaders: Implementing the ISLLC Standards.** Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Technomic Publishing, 1998. *Available from:* Technomic Publishing, 851 New Holland Ave., PO Box 3535, Lancaster, PA 17604. (800) 233-9936. \$44.95.

Today's leadership standards are based on performance: principals must not only have a thorough understanding of leadership demands, they must be able to act in accord with that understanding. As many administrator-preparation programs have learned, gaining those skills requires more than passively absorbing information presented through lectures.

One strategy that helps make the transition from knowledge to action is the case study, which puts critical issues into a story format. A well-crafted case study can highlight the conflicting issues that make real-life dilemmas so difficult to resolve. Most people find stories to be a meaningful way of learning, and many can provide similar examples from their own experience.

The authors of this volume have applied the case-study approach to the new ISLLC standards. Each case is designed to highlight one of the ninety-six performance objectives associated with the standards. For example, the performance objective "recognizes and respects the legitimate authority of others" is illustrated with a case in which a principal is confronted with numerous parental requests to have their children placed in particular classrooms. The issue: Do parents (who presumably know their children better than anyone) have a right to make this choice?

In this case, as in most, the answer is not obvious, the ambiguity provoking considerable reflection and debate. For that reason, case studies are well suited to the ISLLC standards, which are not a simple code of behavior but a sophisticated framework for thinking about professional responsibilities. Although not all the 133 cases in this volume are presented in story form, they collectively succeed in giving concrete meaning to the standards.

The authors have intended the book to be used in administrator-preparation programs or in state

leadership-development programs. Administrators who use the book individually may benefit as well, but case studies work best in a group setting where the conflicting issues can be examined from multiple perspectives. Small groups of principals could easily use the book as a tool for informal professional development sessions; some of the cases will undoubtedly strike a chord in their own schools.

[The website of the Council of Chief State School Officers](#)

Earlier efforts at setting leadership standards have not always had a high profile; many practitioners may be aware that the standards exist but have not actually seen them. This website, maintained by the Council of Chief State School Officers, offers the full report of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium on leadership standards. The material includes the background, the rationale, and a detailed listing of the standards. Each of the six standards is further refined into more specific knowledge, dispositions, and performances.

Because the ISLLC is a broadly based coalition with representation from twenty-four states and virtually all the major professional associations concerned with school leadership, its standards represent a powerful consensus on leadership, and they are likely to be influential in the years to come. Educational Testing Service has developed an assessment based on the standards, and four states have already decided to require the assessment as part of the licensure procedure.

In addition to the ISLLC standards, earlier statements by professional organizations are still available. Collectively, they offer a comprehensive view of professional thinking on leadership standards:

Performance-Based Preparation of Principals: A Framework for Improvement. (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1985). 45 pages. [ED257 211](#).

Principals for Twenty-First Century Schools. (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990). 61 pages. [ED320 223](#)

Principals for Our Changing Schools: The Knowledge and Skill Base. (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1993).

573 pages. [ED354 601](#)

Professional Standards for the Superintendency. (American Association of School Administrators, 1993). 21 pages. [ED368 045](#).

For more information on these reports, including a link to the text of the ISLLC standards, see the [resources page](#) of our Training of School Administrators section.

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