Building out Leadership: Understanding the Foundations of

ISLLC Standards for School Leaders 2014

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Through the auspices of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) and under the direction of Scott Thomson from the NPBEA and Joseph Murphy from Vanderbilt University the ISLLC Standards were originally developed in 1994-95 and released in 1996. They were updated in 2008 in a version that provided an important but modest update to the initially crafted Standards. The current (2014) version provides a more substantial reformulation. As was the case with the 2008 revision, the 2014 reformulation builds on the 1996 framework. However, since knowledge of effective school leadership has grown significantly over the last 20 years, the current Standards have been recast to better display the expanding body of research and best practice. Some of the components of the 2014 Standards have been given more prominence and have had more indicators added to clarify their meaning. This prioritization and clarification is most noticeable in the domains of leadership of the school's instructional program and cultural leadership and in the enrichment of the core dynamic of the Standards: leadership for learning.

Core Understandings

The Standards rest upon three sources of information. The bulk of the material is empirical evidence about effective leadership and leadership in high-performance schools. But the standards development committee also used craft knowledge from the practice of school administration, knowledge conveyed indirectly through the literature and directly through the voices of school practitioners at the school and district levels. Material was also drawn from the quarry of values and beliefs, especially around the domains of professional norms and ethical responsibilities of leaders. We recognized that the bulk of the forces that shape students emanate outside of school. But the focus of the Standards is on the considerable power that schools have to improve the lives of students. And the focus is on the work of people in formal leadership positions. We understand that others exercise leadership inside schools. However, these Standards are primarily about what those in formal leadership positions can do to improve student learning.

It is important to emphasize that the ISLLC Standards are designed for all education leaders at the school and district levels. We also note that they apply at every phase of leadership, from preparation for a job, to professional learning, to the evaluation of leaders. As such, they are general, they push the professional in specific directions, i.e., toward learning-focused work. However, this generality means that much more detail is required to operationalize the Standards at different career stages (e.g., beginning principal) and at varied points of influence (e.g., program accreditation). That is, the Standards are written at a grain size above action. Each dimension in the Standards requires more explicit detail to be brought to life (e.g., in preparation programs, in evaluation systems for principals).

In terms of categorization, the committee that developed the Standards sought to find the balance between two dynamics: the idea of mutually exclusive categories from science and the reality of the messy and complex work in the world of practice. But in a larger sense, it is best to think of the Standards as a system. Ideas wind around each other in ways that make the dimensions more powerful even while examined alone. And the whole of the Standards is more than the sum of the parts.

The Intellectual Scaffolding

A major goal in this article is to make clear the undergirding architecture on which the empirical evidence, craft knowledge, values, and the insights of children and parents rest. The overarching framework is one that highlights community, justice, and improvement in schools and the role of leaders in bringing these powerful concepts into existence in the service of learning (Beck & Murphy, 1994; Murphy, 1990; 2002). We find in this comprehensive framework three powerful metaphors for school leaders: community builder, moral steward, and educator.

The job of the administrator as community builder unfolds in three distinct but related dimensions. One venue is with parents and members of the extended school environment. Here the role of the administrator is to nurture the development of open systems where access and voice are honored. On a second level, the struggle is to foster the evolution of communities of learning among professional staff. Finally, an unrelenting focus on the creation of caring learning environments for youngsters is a central aspect of the community building function of school leaders (Murphy & Torre, 2014).

The metaphor of the administrator as moral steward takes on many forms. At the heart of the concept is the acknowledgment that school leadership is a profession with and of values. As moral stewards, school leaders will be much more heavily invested in purpose-defining activities than simply in managing existing arrangements. This means that people who want to affect society as school leaders must be directed by a powerful portfolio of beliefs and values anchored in justice.

Inside the metaphor of leader as educator there is a recognition that "the deep significance of the task of the school administrator is to be found in the pedagogic ground of its vocation" (Evans, 1991, p. 17), that a key to reculturing is changing the profession's compass from management to education. The educator metaphor legitimates Bill Greenfield's (1995) proposition that "although numerous sources might be cultivated, norms rooted in the ethos and culture of teaching as a profession provide the most effective basis for leadership in a school" (p. 75). It fuses the core technology into the lifeblood of school leadership. It repositions leading from management to learning (Murphy et al., 2007).

The more focused framework supporting the Standards consists of the two universal pillars of effective schools: academic press and productive community (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, 2013). Academic press or challenge is rooted in the research on leaders and teachers who develop schools and classrooms where all students reach ambitious targets of learning. On the leadership front, work is defined in four spheres: commitment to, knowledge of, involvement with and in, and responsibility for learning and teaching. Academic press is a product of specific actions (e.g., behaviors, policies, systems, and structures) that ingrain and nourish rigor and challenge in schools.

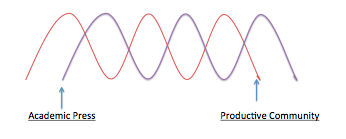


Figure 1

The concept of academic press is constructed from the research on the importance of principals and superintendents understanding three critical assignments. To begin with, they are active in enriching instructional capacity in schools and districts including securing quality teachers, ensuring the on-going learning of those teachers, and supporting them with an assortment of resources. Leaders are continuously engaged in promoting instruction that maximizes expectations and challenge. Finally, on the curriculum and assessment elements of the core technology, leaders are obsessed with maximizing opportunities to learn and rigor (Murphy, 1990; forthcoming).

Community is a construct that is defined in a variety of overlapping ways. It consists of ingredients such as membership, integration, and influence. Community stands in juxtaposition to institutionalism and hierarchy as an organizational frame of reference. As we noted above, community leadership plays out in an integrated manner across three domains: community of care for students, community of professionalism for teachers, and communities of engagement for parents (Murphy & Torre, 2014).

Analysts have uncovered a good deal of knowledge about what supportive communities of pastoral care for students look like and how they function. We learn that supportive learning community is defined by essential norms (e.g., care). These norms combine to produce intermediate outcomes such as student learning dispositions, which, in turn, leader to academic engagement. All of this powers student learning. To begin with, communities of pastoral care "foster productive learning by removing developmentally hazardous conditions" (Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns, & Bolton, 2007, p. 210). They suppress factors that undermine hopes for success, such as the formation of dysfunctional and oppositional peer cultures. Personalization damps down aspects of schooling that push students away from engaging the work of "doing school" well. A supportive learning community provides a protective cove while attacking social problems that place students in peril. It helps buffer home stress, community problems, and individual characteristics that foster social marginalization and academic disengagement. Concomitantly, supportive learning environments create assets, social and human capital, to draw youngsters into the hard work that is required to be successful in school. They transform schools into places where assets such as care and warmth are stockpiled to assist in helping students reach ambitious learning targets.

A professional learning community is characterized by six core elements (shared mission, shared work, collaboration, trust, ownership, and shared accountability). It is these ingredients that define professional learning culture and produce the social control and social capital needed to promote teacher learning and foster the growth of professional norms. A community of practice works by adding capital to the school. One dimension of this capital is knowledge. Thus professional community promotes learning, intellectual capital (e.g., deeper content knowledge, enriched pedagogical skills). The other dimension is professional cultural capital. A community of practice deepens professional norms and accompanying attitudes (e.g., commitment). Increased capital, in turn, leads to changes in the ways teachers conduct their work with students. Practice is improved in two core fields of action, classroom climate and instruction. More effective instruction and an enhanced climate lead to better learning outcomes for students.

The third sphere of community work for school leaders is forging communities of engagement for parents. On the broadest level it includes setting a vision and goals for parent involvement, increasing trust, and building collaboration. More concretely, it requires leaders to understand and engage with stakeholders' needs and priorities and to advocate for the interests of those stakeholders and their children.

Finally, we know that academic press and community work best when they are viewed as an amalgam or conceptualized as two strands of DNA that wrap around each other to work best (Murphy 2013). There are some differences in the literature, however, about the relative importance of each strand and the order in which they load into the success equation. What is not in question is the fact that both need to be present and that the specific context will help determine issues of importance and timing.

Conclusion

As we noted above, the Standards need to come to life in use, as they inform the development of policy and practice (e.g., state regulations that shape program accreditation and the evaluation of principals or professional development for superintendents provided by associations, universities, or private entities). While the research on the use and impact of the Standards is considerably less robust than we would like, it is fair to assert that they have blanketed the profession of school leadership. In particular, they provide the policy scaffolding for school leadership in 45 states and the District of Columbia (McCarthy, Shelton, & Murphy, 2014). Our belief is that the portrait in the current Standards will continue to provide the North Star for the profession of school leadership, although one that shines even more brightly than before.

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