for school leadership

By Dr Lawrence Ingvarson

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ACER has examined national and international developments in school leadership standards and assessment for prospective and established school leaders to assist in identifying options for a national system for assessment. **Lawrence Ingvarson** *explains.*

In recent years, school leaders' work has been characterised by increasing complexity in expectations and greater demands for accountability. The introduction of self-managing schools has entailed the devolution or decentralisation of a number of new responsibilities to school leaders. At the same time, centralisation of curriculum control to national or state levels has often occurred, aligned with system-wide assessment and reporting of student achievement for accountability purposes. New responsibilities for principals include: managing and monitoring curriculum development, assessment and reporting; staff selection and performance management; financial management; mission building and managing reform; managing professional development; school accountability; and community relations and marketing. These additional responsibilities may be having a negative impact on the attractiveness of leadership to potential recruits.

These changes have led to calls for more and better professional preparation programs, and greater attention to programs tailored to the needs of established school principals. Expectations of what teachers and school leaders should know and be able to do change over time and context, as they do in most professions. Standards must reflect those changes. The role of standards developers is to identify what is of central importance in the preparation of school leaders – to identify those features of leadership that are associated with student outcomes. These changes have also called for more attention to be given to the recruitment and selection of suitable school principals and to conditions of work that will increase the retention of effective leaders. Standards have a role to play here also in pointing to fair and valid forms of evidence to assess the performance of school leaders.

A review of standards

ACER was commissioned by Teaching Australia to review approaches to leadership standards and identify options for a national system for assessment against school leadership standards for prospective and established school leaders. In Australia, many quality sets of standards for teachers and school leaders have been developed, but they are not profession-wide.

The review covered leadership standards and certification of two broad career levels: standards for prospective principals and standards for established principals. As a generalisation, the needs of established principals in this area are less catered for than the needs of aspiring school leaders.

The review focused on the following five standards systems, but also draws on many other examples of standards for school leadership in Australia and overseas:

- Western Australia: Performance Standards for School Leaders

- England: National Standards for Headteachers

- The Netherlands: Professional Standard for Educational Leaders in Primary Education

- Scotland: The Standard for Headship

- Connecticut, USA: Standards for School Leaders

Writers of professional standards for school leadership face a challenging task. The field lacks agreement on a definition of leadership and the knowledge base about effective leadership in schools is limited. There is a need to identify what should be common to a set of school leadership standards, or essential features of effective school leadership practices, no matter where school leaders work.

Profession-wide standards may help in setting realistic boundaries to the scope of school leaders' work and what is expected of school leaders. In this way, profession-wide standards might help to address problems relating to the intensification of school leaders' work.

Developing standards for school leadership involves three key steps. A necessary first step is to define the content of the standards, in other words what is to be assessed. Here standards developers need guiding conceptions of what leadership is – what leaders need to know and be able to do. A second step in the development of standards involves deciding how valid evidence about leadership will be gathered. A well-written standard will not be prescriptive about how it should be met. Increasingly, in the countries reviewed for this report, there is a trend toward performance-based methods such as portfolio tasks. Thirdly, identifying whether

a standard has been met also needs consideration. This process involves the development of scales and scoring rubrics, weighting different tasks and sources of evidence, identifying benchmark performances, and training assessors.

The review found four countries apart from Australia that had made concerted efforts to redesign programs for preparing and developing school leaders around standards. While none of the four international systems represents a model that could be translated to the Australian context, as a group they have provided a valuable basis on which to clarify options for the role that the profession in Australia might play in developing a national approach to standards for school leaders.

Most of the systems in the review were aware of the need to develop a professional learning 'program' that included a structured sequenced set of courses for school leaders over time. However, with some significant exceptions, this was not found to be a common practice among professional preparation programs for school leaders in Australia.

Linking standards to professional learning

It is one thing to create standards. It is quite another to ensure they become embedded in everyday thought and practice. The challenge for these systems was to identify the most effective ways to engage school leaders with those standards, especially in ways that supported and improved their practice. In other words, how to ensure school leaders take the initiative in using those standards to guide their professional learning and to receive feedback and evaluation about their practice in relation to the standards.

The common way of thinking about how to link standards to professional learning in the systems we reviewed was to develop a course, or even a set of courses. The limitations in this approach are several. As ever with professional development, the course mode can place the teacher or school leader in a passive role with respect to their professional learning. Others are doing most of the work identifying their needs. Courses are unavoidably front end loaded. There may be plenty of valuable input, but the learning that matters most is in the back end – at the stage when people try to implement their learning in the workplace. This is when follow up support and feedback are essential if learning and implementation are to happen.

In considering options for the future relating to certification, these questions will need to be addressed:

- Which agency, or agencies, will provide certification for prospective and established school leaders who attain national professional standards?

- What forms of evidence are used to assess whether those standards have been attained? Who will develop the methods of assessment?

- Who will assess whether school leaders have attained the standards and how will they be trained to use the standards fairly and reliably?

- Who will provide the professional learning infrastructure to support candidates for certification?

Each of these questions points to areas where the profession can play a much stronger role. In a professional certification system, it is the profession that provides the certification. It is teachers and school leaders who develop the methods of assessment, who conduct the assessments, who set the standards and who provide professional learning support. From the five systems reviewed here, we conclude that if the objective is to develop and implement profession-wide standards for school leaders, the professional certification model is most likely to involve the profession at every level of operation and create the greatest sense of ownership. ■

Standards for School Leadership: A Critical Review of Literature was written by Lawrence Ingvarson, Michelle Anderson, Peter Gronn and Andrew Jackson. It is available from the Teaching Australia website at *www.teachingaustralia.edu.au*