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Standards for school leadership: Gateway to a stronger profession?



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Abstract

Recruitment, preparation, continuing professional learning and recognition of school leaders are widespread concerns for policymakers and practitioners. Standards for school leadership are a notable development in Australia and overseas for addressing these concerns. In Australia, many quality sets of standards for teachers and school leaders have been developed but they are not profession-wide. This paper is based on a project ACER was commissioned to undertake by Teaching Australia in June 2005. Our brief was to review approaches to standards and options for a national system for assessment against school leadership standards for prospective and established school leaders. The review examined in detail five professional learning systems, one from Australia and four from overseas. A central component to these systems is the presence of standards for school leadership to guide professional preparation and the ongoing learning of school leaders. A key focus of this session is how the profession can play a much stronger role in providing a standards-guided professional learning system.

Introduction

The need to strengthen preparation and professional development programs for school leaders is recognised nationally and internationally (Huber, 2004). The current OECD international activity *Improving School Leadership* is testament to growing interest and investment in this field (see Anderson et al., 2007, McKenzie, Mulford & Anderson, 2007). Fuelling such concerns is the changing context within which school leaders work, characterised by increasing complexity in expectations of school leaders and greater demands for accountability. The quality of school leadership has seldom

mattered more. School leaders are expected not only to manage schools well but to know how to develop their schools as organisations with the capacity to constantly review and improve their performance.

Traditional methods for preparing school leaders and promoting ongoing professional learning have not been standing up very well to these demands. In the USA, Levine (2005) has written a damning critique of the capacity of university degree programs as a pathway to preparing future school administrators. In Australia until recently, it would have been difficult to point to any systematic programs for preparing school leaders across most states and territories. The field was typified by brief courses, often unrelated to each other and rarely sequential over time. Future leaders caught what they could on the run. It has been possible to gain school principal positions with little formal training in school leadership.

Many countries recognise that they need to overhaul structures and programs for the preparation and ongoing learning of school leaders. Internationally, a notable feature in this overhaul is the use of standards for school leadership as a framework for developing preparation and professional development systems for school leaders.

Standards are seen as a means of clarifying what school leaders should know and be able to do, based where possible on a synthesis of research and professional judgement. The assumption is that a set of carefully prepared, valid standards can give clearer direction to prospective school leaders as they plan their professional learning. They can also provide challenging goals for established school leaders to aim for over time.

The ACER Review of standards for school leadership

In 2005, ACER was commissioned by Teaching Australia to conduct a review of national and international approaches to developing standards for prospective and established school leaders including approaches to the certification of school leaders who meet those standards (Ingvarson, Anderson, Gronn & Jackson, 2006). The purpose of the review was to inform the deliberations of the Board of Directors of Teaching Australia as it considered options for the development and implementation of national standards for school leadership. This paper summarises the findings of that literature review.

The review showed that, while it might not be possible to argue that there is a strong school leadership profession in Australia currently, there is a strong desire among members of principal associations to move in that direction. That claim needs to be carefully qualified. In the sense used here, one of the key markers of a profession is its capacity to operate its own professional learning system; that is, its capacity to:

- a develop standards that describe what school leaders should know and be able to do and what counts as meeting the standards
- b provide an *infrastructure for professional learning* that enables school leaders to develop the attributes and capabilities embodied in the standards
- c operate a system for assessing and providing professional certification to school leaders who meet the standards
- d gain *recognition* from school authorities for members who gain professional certification.

Collectively, these basic components form what might be called a *standards-*

guided professional learning system. They can be applied to any profession. Taken together, these components form a standards 'system' of interdependent and mutually supportive parts. The four elements of standards, professional learning, certification and recognition are interlinked. Take one away and the system loses its capacity to function effectively as an instrument for encouraging and recognising evidence of professional learning.

'Certification', as the term was used in this review, is an endorsement that standards of practice have been met. That endorsement might be awarded by different agencies, such as a government or an employing authority, or a professional body. Advanced certification by a professional body, is usually a voluntary process.

There is no professional certification system for the teaching and school leadership profession in Australia. Each education sector authority prepares school leaders in its own way to work in its own system. What are the possibilities of the teaching profession not only developing, but operating, a national system for the professional development of its school leaders and principals; a system guided by profession-wide standards whose certification holds respect and credibility with all education authorities as a valid indicator of demonstrated leadership abilities?

One of the main purposes of our review was to explore the extent to which it might be possible to move toward a standards-guided professional learning system for school leaders in Australia. We used the four components of such a system to provide a structure for our review.

Examples of standards-guided professional learning systems for school leaders

Australia has had a vigorous period of standards development over the past fifteen years or so. Professional associations and employing authorities have both been active. Every Australian State and Territory education authority has some form of standards for school leadership. However, only a few of these efforts reflect a deep understanding of what standards are and what is involved in developing standards that are usable. By definition, standards are measures – they are tools we use in almost every sphere of life to make appropriate precise judgements and decisions in a context of shared meanings and values. As yet, most leadership standards in Australia would need further development before they could form the basis of a professional learning system for school leaders.

From our literature search we chose to review in depth five examples of systems where there was evidence of the standards being used for professional learning and recognition purposes. These systems included:

- 1 Western Australia: Performance Standards for School Leaders (Department of Education, Leadership Centre; Murdoch University and Edith Cowan University)
- 2 England: National Standards for Headteachers (National College for School Leadership, NCSL)
- 3 The Netherlands: Professional Standard for Educational Leaders in Primary Education (Dutch Principal Academy, DPA otherwise known as Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, NSA)
- 4 Scotland: The Standard for Headship (Scottish Executive)

- 5 Connecticut, USA: Standards for School Leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, ISLLC and Connecticut State Board of Education, USA).

These systems were chosen because they offered potential models for a national approach to leadership standards. We developed a set of questions to structure our review of each system. This set included questions such as:

- Who developed the standards for school leadership and for what purposes?
- How is professional learning organised to assist prospective or established school leaders to attain the standards?
- How do the activities or programs engage school leaders in effective professional learning?
- What forms of evidence are used to assess whether the standards have been attained?

The remainder of this paper provides a brief overview of what we found and ways the profession can play a much stronger role in a standards-guided professional learning system.

Contemporary research on school leadership and its implications for standards

In the past, leadership, has not been a field of research noted for its capacity for steadily building a sound knowledge base, or a commonly agreed upon definition of leadership. However, our reading of the literature was that there is increasing confidence that essential elements of effective leadership practices can be identified, giving some hope to those who seek to develop standards for leadership that have some validity.

Professional work is a blend of values and expertise, and developers of professional standards have to weave the two together. Standards writers have to ask hard questions of researchers if the standards are to have validity and credibility. These are questions about the knowledge base of professional practice, not opinions about the personality traits and characteristics of good principals. Hard questions focus on what we know about the relationship between leadership practices and student learning. More realistic questions, perhaps, focus on the relationship between leadership practices and improvements in school culture, or in the quality of teaching. These questions focus instead on the conditions that principals should be accountable for developing in their schools over time. They attempt to identify reasonable expectations for what principals should be able to achieve over time.

A challenge for those who would develop standards for school leadership is locating where the locus of authority ultimately rests about defining the work of school leaders – with the democratic authority base of duly elected governments, or with research and the consensus of professional associations. The answer is that ultimately it necessarily rests with the public and our system of democratic government and ministerial authority, as it does for all professions. However, the level of ownership and commitment to professional standards within a profession will depend on the extent to which members of the profession are entrusted with their development.

The idea that professions develop their own standards to the exclusion of other stakeholders has long gone, if it was ever true. Instead, the rationale that a profession presents to the public for some autonomy in developing professional standards is that the public should place trust in the profession to

define and enforce its own standards in return for full and open accounts of its practices, especially its quality assurance practices. This is an argument based on the importance of a sense of ownership in gaining commitment from a profession to a set of professional standards. The public does not seek to micromanage professions, but it has a right to demand accounts of its practice and responsiveness to its concerns.

Developing standards for school leadership

The ACER review provides an introduction to standards and the steps that are involved in writing standards that are valid and useful for professional learning and certification purposes. Standards writers need a guiding concept of leadership to frame their deliberations. The review illustrates three steps that are involved in developing a complete set of standards for school leaders. The first step describes what good leadership practice is, the second identifies how evidence about leadership practice can be gathered and the third describes what counts as meeting the standard. It is common to find sets of standards that do not go beyond the first step. Consequently, the standards can mean what anyone chooses them to mean, limiting their usefulness in providing a common language to talk about practice and professional learning.

The report reviews how each of the five systems went about developing leadership standards, who was involved in that development and what was included in the standards. Although there was some variation in details across the five countries, there was considerable commonality in the core features of effective leadership practices. Standards did not vary markedly according to what might be thought of as very different national and cultural contexts, although it is

necessary to recognise that most of our cases of standards systems were from English-speaking countries.

Recent versions of school leadership standards resist the temptation to scope out the full practice of leadership and management in schools. They focus first on quality student learning, and move outwards to identify implications for what school leaders should know and be able to do. This trend is paralleled by a shift in professional learning approaches from acquisition of information to application and critical reflection on that information in a given school context. Mentor and coaching relationships, self-assessment-type tools and portfolio entries, are commonly used approaches.

The ACER review indicated that leadership standards are beginning to look more like professional standards rather than the old lists of dozens of competencies and job descriptions in past sets of competencies (Leithwood & Steinbach, forthcoming). The latter usually had no clear guiding concept of school leadership underpinning them, showing how the work of school leaders was presumed to link to quality learning opportunities for students. The main organisers in recent sets of leadership standards are more parsimonious and interesting, as researchers and school leaders refine and reorganise their concepts of what effective school leaders know and do. This effort is made possible by researchers as they synthesise those aspects of school leaders' work that establish the conditions for effective teaching and learning (e.g. Mulford, 2005). The following aspects are taken from a synthesis by Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004):

- developing a deep understanding of how to support teachers
- managing the curriculum in ways that promote student learning

- developing the ability to transform schools into more effective organisations that foster powerful teaching and learning for all students.

How each system attempted to link school leadership standards to professional learning was the next area of focus for the review.

How are standards linked to professional learning?

Each of the five systems reviewed was trying to build stronger links between their standards and their system for professional learning. Most of the systems 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, we did not find this was common practice among professional preparation programs for school leaders in Australia.

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 how to ensure school leaders took the initiative in using the standards to guide their professional learning and to receive feedback and evaluation about their practice in relation to the standards.

We found clear differences between the five systems that had significance for the Board of Directors of Teaching Australia, as they considered options about the long-term functions of the Board. The question here was how to create an effective infrastructure to support the professional preparation of teachers and school leaders who wished to move into school leadership. Our review indicated two clearly different paths to follow.

At a basic level, the most 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. It seems the obvious thing to do. The usual thinking is, 'They need professional development; therefore let us develop a course to meet their need.' Considerable effort often goes into the development of these courses, as with courses developed by the National College for School Leadership in England. Sometimes the leadership standards agency develops and provides the courses itself, as in WA. Sometimes the agency develops the course but contracts out provision to other providers, as with the NCSL. And sometimes the agency invites others to provide courses, but the agency assesses the courses and gives its accreditation to those who meet its standards for courses. This means an agency's efforts focus on trying to ensure the quality of the course or 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 change is to happen.

Recent attacks on the quality of traditional course-based programs for preparing school leaders, particularly in the United States of America, highlight the need for alternative routes and professional learning offerings in school leadership (Levine, 2005). An accumulation of academic credits and courses is no guarantee of capability

or achievement in the workplace. We found instead that professional associations of school leaders are increasingly becoming providers of a wider range of alternative professional learning activities. Particularly important are the activities, networks and other forms of support that associations in the United States of America provide locally to support candidates for national professional certification.

One of the main purposes for developing standards is to clarify what aspiring and established school leaders should get better at. Well-written, valid leadership standards map out the deep structure of what effective school leaders need to learn how to do over time. The most important limitation with the 'course' mode of thinking about professional learning is its poor match with standards in this developmental sense. Standards draw attention to the need to focus first on the person and their long-term development, rather than focusing on the course.

It is in the nature of standards that they represent long-term personal and professional learning goals. One does not learn, for example, how to lead and manage change in a single course, or over a brief span of time. Neither does one learn how to share leadership, or how to provide leadership in curriculum and teaching through a set of unrelated courses. Learning to lead and manage change requires opportunities to do just that in the workplace. This is not to say that courses are unnecessary or unimportant. A short course on the research related to educational change would be very valuable at a time when a prospective school had the responsibility to lead a change initiative with a team of colleagues and to learn from the experience. Courses and other activities can be critically important when a person is actively seeking the professional development they think they need to build up

a record of accomplishment and achievement in relation to professional standards – for example, a portfolio containing evidence of engagement in several leadership efforts, with reflections on what one has learned about oneself as a result of engaging in those initiatives.

Instead of focusing quality assurance efforts on the 'course', the professional certification model focuses on ensuring the quality of the certification. The lesson from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) experience is that if you get the standards and certification right, together with recognition for that certification, then a professional learning and support infrastructure will develop to meet the demand from teachers for effective learning experiences and support.

The proposed American Board for Leadership in Education model, based on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards provided a promising, alternative approach to linking standards to professional learning. In this model, the standards agency develops a highly respected professional certification process based on evidence of performance. The ACER review shows how preparation for professional certification places teachers and school leaders in a more proactive position in relation to planning and providing their own professional learning.

Assessing and recognising attainment of the standards

Finally, the ACER review examined approaches used to judge whether the standards had been met in each of the five systems. As these judgements may affect the outcome of high stakes decision making, it is vital that the judgement process is rigorous and fair.

This was possibly the weakest component of most systems. We found that the validity of the certification in most systems remains uncertain, as little research appears to have been conducted as yet to check:

- a the validity of the methods for gathering evidence as measures of the intention embodied in the relevant standards (i.e. the 'fit' between the assessment tasks and the relevant standards)
- b how well the assessment tasks as a group provide evidence that covers the standards domain as a whole (i.e. the extent to which it is appropriate to generalise from the evidence to the candidate's performance generally)
- c the quality of training for judges and the consistency between judges in making assessments of the evidence (i.e. reliability)
- d the methods used in setting the performance standards (i.e. in determining the level of performance that meets the standard for each assessment task, and the level of performance needed overall for certification).

Most of the systems included in the review would struggle to show how they addressed, let alone met, these psychometric standards, except the NBPTS, and perhaps, the Dutch model. When high stakes decisions have to be made about people's future it is imperative that the processes for making judgements can stand up to scrutiny in terms of these psychometric standards. In the absence of such evidence, any certification, whether it is provided by a government agency or a professional body will quickly collapse under legal scrutiny.

Future directions?

The question of linking standards to professional certification is something

for long-term consideration by the teaching profession in Australia. Our review suggested that there are two clear choices for professional standards bodies – whether they conceive of themselves primarily as course accreditation agencies or as providers of professional certification. In considering future options around certification, these questions will need to be addressed:

- Which agency/ies 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 assesses 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 provide professional learning support. From the five systems reviewed here, we concluded that, if the objective is to develop and implement professional-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.

The brief for this review was to examine national and international developments in school leadership

standards and assessment for prospective and established school leaders. We 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.

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