

School Leader Standards From ISLLC to PSEL: Notes on Their Development and the Work Ahead

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It has been more than 20 years since Scott Thomson and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) initiated the creation of professional standards for school leaders. In retrospect, the beginning of the work was an amazingly low-keyed, straight-forward, noncontentious effort to forge standards that states could use to strengthen school leadership. Using a “committee of the whole” approach, the ad hoc Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) developed the first set of standards in 1996 (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 1996). These first ISLLC standards were endorsed by each of the consortium’s 24 state members. In 2008, the NPBEA decided to update the 1996 ISLLC standards. It constituted a task force that revised the standards, and the board approved them before the end of that year (CCSSO, 2008). In 2014, responding to growth in the knowledge base and changes in the job of school leadership, it was decided to further update the standards. Through the work of several committees representing research, practice, and policy arms of the profession, as well as through several public and stakeholder reviews, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) were created and approved by NPBEA in late 2015 (NPBEA, 2015).¹

PSEL 2015 represents a significant step forward in the history of the standards. This version of the standards stands on the solid building blocks of the 1996 and 2008 ISLLC standards and extends and elaborates them. PSEL 2015 looks to the future and to the leadership required to address the challenges and opportunities to come. As with preceding versions of the standards, PSEL 2015 holds great potential to advance the profession of school leadership and promote students’ success in school. Yet, as we have learned from more than 20 years of living and working with the ISLLC standards, the real contributions of PSEL 2015 will come with the hard work that follows their development and approval.

In this essay, we examine briefly developments in several important elements of the standards, from ISLLC to PSEL. We outline three crucial areas of work that lie ahead and conclude with a discussion of the important roles that higher education can play in this work.

Developments in the Standards

Several important elements of the standards have developed from ISLLC to PSEL. These developments stand to enhance the prospects that the standards will contribute to advancement of the profession and student success. Here we look at four elements.

Foundations of Knowledge About School Leadership

First, the development of school leader standards during the past 20 years has been driven by dynamic, expanding, and deepening foundations of knowledge. This knowledge, from both research and practice, anchors leadership on understandings of good schools and elements of schools and classrooms that promote student success (Murphy, 2017). As understanding of what is required for students to succeed has evolved, as has understanding of what is required of leadership for such success, so too have the standards.

This evolution is illustrated in the movement away from the near monopoly enjoyed by academic research in developing the standards and toward a more inclusive fund of knowledge from both research and the practice of leadership. There has been a shift from an emphasis on the management sciences and their focus on discrete functions of leadership (e.g., personnel administration, budgeting, facilities management, etc.) to an emphasis on leadership of the core function of schooling—student instruction. Moreover, the emphasis has shifted toward more systemic and organizational perspectives on leadership. These developments better reflect the realities of schools and leadership practice.

Just as important has been the greater infusion of knowledge and values from practicing school leaders. In addition to current academic research on leadership, PSEL 2015 drew on the wisdom and experience of nearly 1,000 practicing school leaders (not to mention the feedback from hundreds of practicing educators as part of public reviews). Indeed, the professional associations played larger roles in the development of PSEL 2015 than earlier versions of the standards. This infusion of knowledge from practice has led to a more comprehensive, useful, and potentially influential knowledge base. Arguably, greater involvement of practicing school leaders and greater inclusion of knowledge from practice lend credibility and legitimacy to the standards as expressions of practicing members of the profession itself.

Vision of School Leadership

A second element of the standards that has evolved is the vision they convey of school leadership. Initially reflecting a managerial view of leadership, the standards have come to embody a more positive, future-oriented, and aspirational vision of leadership. This vision is derived from growing knowledge of effective schools and leadership that moves from deficit-oriented, corrective thinking about students, schooling, and the functions of leadership toward more asset-based,

¹NPBEA member organizations included at the time the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, American Association of School Administrations, Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation, CCSSO, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, National School Boards Association, and UCEA.

growth-oriented thinking (Murphy, Seashore Louis, & Smylie, 2017). This places new emphases on service and its moral underpinnings, on the best interests of others, and on “building up” human capacity and community.

While anchored in knowledge of effective schools and leadership in the present, the standards always have looked ahead to opportunities and challenges for schools and leadership in the future. Each version has provided a vision for school leadership to develop. PSEL’s emphases on positive leadership, equity and ethics, balancing high academic expectations and rigor with care and support for students, and leadership for continuous school improvement are important now but will be even more important in the future. Moreover, the standards have been consistently aspirational in at least two ways. To reiterate, they always have presented a sense of what leadership will need to look like to engage effectively the opportunities and challenges of the future. And since their first iteration, the standards have presented school leadership in terms of levels of high accomplishment to which we should aspire.

A Statement of Principles and Values

The standards also have become oriented more explicitly toward principles of practice and professional values. As such, they are neither abstractions too vague to be useful nor lists of discrete knowledge, skills, and behaviors that may limit professional discretion and necessary variation in practice. As statements of principles and values, the standards provide clear direction without being overly prescriptive and restrictive of practice across situations, settings, and time. As statements of principles and values, the standards provide both direction and room for improvement.

From their inception, the standards also have been inclusive. They were written to apply to all school leaders regardless of role or level within the education system. Historically, the standards have acknowledged variations that correspond to different leadership roles. Each version has reaffirmed the belief expressed in the ISLLC 1996 standards that the central aspects of leadership are the same for all school leadership roles. As such, it was from the beginning most important to focus the standards on the “heart and soul” of effective leadership (CCSSO, 1996, p. 8). Consistent with the orientation toward principles and values, this focus on the central functions continues to provide a common focus for professional advancement, providing direction and latitude for role and situation-specific practice and its improvement.

Emphasis on Student Success

From their inception, the standards have been directed toward those aspects of leadership that directly or indirectly promote student success. All three versions anchor each standard on student success. Yet, small but important changes in the wording of the standards have strengthened this emphasis. One change involved moving from attention given in 1996 to the success of “all students” toward attention in 2008 and 2015 to the success of “every student” and “each student.” This change defines a leader’s responsibility not simply as improving the overall collective or the average success of students in school but as ensuring that each and every individual student succeeds. This

change in emphasis mirrors the elevation in PSEL of equity as a crucial dimension of leadership work.

Another important change has occurred in the language of student success. From the beginning, the standards have left the definition of student success ambiguous and flexible, letting states, districts, and schools give it specific meaning. But as success has been defined almost singularly as academic achievement, notably increases in standardized test scores, it became important to stress that student success can and should be construed more broadly. Whereas the 1996 and 2008 versions of the standards referred generally to “student success” as the focus of leadership work, PSEL 2015 frames student success as both “academic success” and student “well-being.” While maintaining ambiguity and flexibility for local definition, this new language makes clear that while student academic achievement is crucial to promote, so too are other aspects of student learning and development, including social, psychological, and emotional development as facets of well-being. This more comprehensive expression of student success parallels the dual emphasis that PSEL places on leadership for supporting high-quality, intellectually rigorous curricula, instruction, and assessment and for cultivating inclusive, caring, and supportive school communities for students.

An Evolving “Theory-of-Action”

The standards have developed to reflect a growing understanding of pathways, or points of leverage, by which they can influence school leadership. ISLLC 1996 simply noted the prospect of standards to provide “an especially appropriate and particularly powerful leverage point for reform” and to “drive improvement efforts along a variety of fronts,” noting in particular licensure, preparation program approval, and candidate assessment (CCSSO, 1996, p. 7). Critically, the standards were linked early on to preparation programs for school leaders, and the work to keep preparation programs aligned to the standards continues. ISLLC 2008 introduced a more elaborated logic, emphasizing the standards’ contributions to state policy making. ISLLC 2008 considered standards “a foundational piece for policy makers as they assess current goals, regulations, policies, and practices of educational leaders” (CCSSO, 2008, p. 4). Accordingly, standards could inform all elements of “an aligned and cohesive system” of policies concerning leader development, helping states set expectations for preparation, licensure, hiring, induction, and career-long professional development.

PSEL 2015 set forth a more systemic and potentially more efficacious “theory-of-action” of how standards might function to enhance leadership practice and outcomes (NPBEA, 2015, pp. 5-6). Following the general logic from other human service professions, this theory-of-action contends that standards can have direct influence on members of a profession by creating expectations for practice and outcomes. Standards can have indirect influence on practice and outcomes by shaping the actions of professional associations and the system of supporting institutions involved in member preparation and development. They also can have indirect influence by serving as a foundation for policy and regulations regarding the profession and its practice, including those concerning initial preparation, certification, program accreditation, professional

development, and evaluation. Finally, standards can shape public expectations for a profession, its members, and the institutions that support them.

PSEL 2015 describes several specific ways in which the standards can advance professional practice and outcomes for school leaders. Following ISLLC 2008, standards can guide states and leadership preparation programs to identify and develop specific knowledge, skills, dispositions, and other qualities required of school leaders to achieve student success in school. States can use standards to ensure that policies and programs set consistent expectations for school leaders over the course of their careers from “initial preparation, [to] recruitment and hiring, to induction and mentoring, to evaluation and career-long professional learning” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 6). The standards also can be used to guide the “operationalization” of practice and outcomes and the development of tools for leadership development, evaluation, and accountability.

PSEL’s more expansive theory-of-action suggests how standards can inform the work of other important actors in the profession. For example, standards can communicate what is important about school leadership to professional associations, school districts, and schools themselves. They can guide district-level systems of development, support, and accountability for school-level leadership, helping to ensure that central offices serve the needs of schools to the benefit of students. Standards can guide professional associations and other entities in their support and development of practicing school leaders and work to help shape policy development. Importantly, standards can communicate to the public, particularly parents and communities, what they should expect from the practice and outcomes of school leaders and what they should expect from those actors that develop, support, and regulate school leaders. Even as it presents a more systemic theory-of-action, PSEL 2015 continues to emphasize the role of standards as a common statement of expectations for the present and the future. PSEL 2015 continues to emphasize that standards can bring direction, coherence, and alignment across different programs and policies and among different actors that compose and relate to the profession.

Of course, it is one thing to have a robust theory-of-action for standards to advance the practice and outcomes of school leadership. It is another to enact that theory in practice (Argyris & Schön, 1974). We return to this important point shortly when we come to discuss the work ahead. First, we consider one more development.

Shifting Centers of Gravity

Across the history of the standards, we have seen shifts in several “centers of gravity.” We have noted shifts in orientations toward leadership and shifts toward greater reliance on knowledge and values from practice. We have noted shifts from focusing the standards primarily on policy making to establishing them as a source for the profession broadly constituted. We also have noted that the standards have drawn attention to a wider array of actors and points of leverage.

One of the most important shifts has been in ownership of and responsibility for the standards. In a formal, operational sense, ownership and responsibility have passed from CCSO,

an organization supporting the heads of state departments of elementary and secondary education, to NPBEA, an alliance of a broader array of professional organizations concerning school leadership (of which CCSO is a member). Along with the growing involvement of professional associations and practicing members of the profession in the development of the standards, this shift in ownership and responsibility moves school leader standards closer to the standards of other human service professions as the work of the profession, by the profession, and for the profession (NPBEA, 2015). Practically, this shift distributes responsibility for the standards to a broader range of institutional actors represented by NPBEA. We must be cautious, knowing that when responsibility becomes diffused among many, it is more difficult to get things done. As the axiom goes, “When everyone is responsible, no one is responsible.” Yet, it is arguably true that expanding ownership and responsibility for the standards can help promote, given good management thereof, advancement of the profession.

The Work Ahead

In the introduction to this essay, we made the point that simply developing and adopting standards—“having” them—is important but not enough for them to contribute meaningfully to advancement of the profession. The contributions of standards come primarily from the hard work that follows development and adoption. They come as a “theory-of-action” becomes a “theory-in-practice” (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Certainly, as an expression by a profession of what should be expected of it, standards may possess some inherent influence, some moral force—practicing school leaders and their associations speak! Beyond this potential, the power of the school leader standards comes from what is done with them across the array of actors that constitute and support the profession.

Now we take a look at three big next steps. In the last section of this essay, we look at the role that higher education may play in this work. It is important to note that during the past 20 years we have grown in understanding more and less effective processes by which standards may be developed, communicated, and employed. From the history of working with school leader standards, and from documents associated with the standards, we can trace both macro and micro storylines about the knowledge and values that have supported the evolution of the standards. We have a reasonably clear understanding of problems and successes that, if taken seriously, can inform the work ahead.

Bringing the Standards to Life

As with preceding versions of the standards, a major challenge following the development and adoption of PSEL 2015 is to animate them, to bring them to life. In the past two years this work has begun on several fronts. It is only a beginning. The two versions of the ISLLC standards have been used voluntarily as frameworks for policy on education leadership in 45 states and the District of Columbia. These states will need to adopt PSEL 2015 and adapt their frameworks accordingly. To date, to our knowledge, states’ movement to PSEL has been slow going and needs to be encouraged. So too, work to promote PSEL as a framework for programs of initial preparation of school

leaders and ongoing professional development provided by higher education, school districts, professional associations, and other entities should be encouraged. NPBEA recently began an advocacy campaign for PSEL that involves its member organizations and will encourage states to adopt PSEL. We are hopeful for its success.

Bringing PSEL to life also can be encouraged by efforts to align to them other standards concerning school leadership and its development. For example, recent standards for the work of principal supervisors are anchored on PSEL 2015 (CCSSO, 2015). As the Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards for review of school leadership preparation programs were anchored on the ISLLC standards (e.g., NPBEA, 2011), the new National Educational Leadership Preparation or NELP standards are linked to PSEL 2015. Due for release in early 2018, the NELP standards will tie review and accreditation of educational leadership programs to PSEL through the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation.

Another way to bring PSEL 2015 to life is through developing various “tools” that states, districts, professional associations, and higher education, among others, can use to act upon the standards. An early example of such a tool was the certification examination developed by the Educational Testing Service through CCSSO to use the ISLLC standards in determining the fitness for employment of school leader preparation program graduates. Recently, the American Institutes for Research’s Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (2016) developed a manual to help states and others adapt their current leadership standards to PSEL 2015. CCSSO and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform Center at the University of Florida (2017) prepared a report for states and professional preparation programs that identifies knowledge, skills, and dispositions of principals, consistent with PSEL, that promote the success of students with disabilities. Other types of tools that could be developed include model competency and practice assessment systems, curriculum for professional development, and so forth. Faculty members at the University of Delaware have begun to help that state realign its statewide principal assessment instrument to PSEL.

Continuous Inquiry, Learning, and Improvement

Another area of work ahead involves continuous inquiry, learning, and improvement of the standards. As discussed earlier, the substantive evolution of the standards has been guided by growth in knowledge from research and the practice of school leadership. Such inquiry will need to continue if school leader standards are to reflect the most current, efficacious knowledge of effective schools and leadership now and in the future.

It should be said that after more than 20 years since their inception, very little has been written about the school leader standards themselves. To be sure, descriptive and promotional pieces as well as some critiques have appeared in academic and practitioner literatures. The content of the standards has been validated through reviews of literature. But lessons on processes of development and enactment have been learned primarily from the lived experiences of working with the

standards rather than systemic investigation. And few of these lessons have been recorded. There have been almost no tests of the theory-of-action that drives the standards or of the theory-in-practice. Few analyses have been conducted of the use of the standards or of their impact on policy, programs, or practicing school leaders. Peer-reviewed work is conspicuous by its absence. Empirical understandings are rudimentary at best. In short, while we know a great deal about effective schools and leadership, we really do not have much systematic evidence and understanding about how much difference the standards make, explanations for their impact, and how to improve their impact. Whereas a good amount of money has been available for development, relatively little money has been available for such inquiry.

There is also important work to be done to tie new learning from inquiry into processes of using and updating the standards. PSEL 2015 stresses the need for school leaders to use inquiry and data for continuous school improvement, among other purposes. Yet, no such processes are in place for ongoing assessment of the standards, their use, and their impact that may inform their ongoing improvement. Development of the standards has been driven by episodic recognition that in the presence of new knowledge about school leadership, changing conditions, and new challenges, they needed to be updated.

Institutional Stewardship

A third area of work concerns the cultivation of institutional stewardship for the standards. As alluded to earlier, although developed by the NPBEA, for reasons having to do with funding and administration of the work, school leader standards were first part of the portfolio of CCSSO. With the development of PSEL 2015, “ownership” of the standards was “returned” to the NPBEA. And since this change, NPBEA has wrestled with what it will do with the standards beyond being a repository for them. In initiating its advocacy campaign, NPBEA took an important step in the promotion and care of the standards. Another step it can take is to seek and secure funding for using the standards and for studying their impact.

Among the most important things that the NPBEA can do is to engage its member organizations with the standards. As a national alliance, an umbrella organization, of major membership organizations committed to the advancement of school and school-system leadership, the NPBEA can exercise convening, coordinating, and accountability functions to encourage its member organizations to own the standards and engage in the work the board lacks the organizational, financial, and human capacity to perform. It makes sense that as the standards have become statements of expectations of the school leader profession, the professional associations that comprise the board take responsibility for them. The NPBEA is the central body that can promote such institutional stewardship.

The Role of Higher Education

For any set of standards to advance a profession and its contributions, the work of many is required. As in other professions, professional associations, members themselves, the entities that support the profession, and governmental

bodies play a part. We conclude this essay with a few thoughts about the role of higher education in the work ahead. Higher education has been central to the creation and ongoing development of school leader standards. And higher education is uniquely positioned to promote and care for the standards and to further their contributions to professional practice and outcomes.

Some time ago, Ernest Boyer (1990) argued for the importance of four forms of scholarship to be performed across different institutions that compose the “system” of higher education. These forms remain particularly relevant to work of the standards. The *scholarship of discovery* involves disciplined, investigative efforts to generate new knowledge. The *scholarship of integration* draws together, interprets, and brings new insight and meaning to existing knowledge. The *scholarship of application* applies knowledge through service to addressing problems of interest to the larger community. The *scholarship of teaching* concerns the communication of knowledge and, through communication, extending and transforming knowledge.

These four types of scholarship align closely with the work ahead for the standards. The scholarship of discovery will be needed to continue to generate new knowledge of effective schools and leadership, as well as new knowledge of the use and impact of the standards in professional advancement. The scholarship of integration has played a central role in developing the standards during the past 20 years and will continue to play a central role. As knowledge from academic research and professional practice expands and deepens, the scholarship of integration will become even more important to bring together and give meaning a greater amount and range of knowledge. The scholarship of application is crucial to developing programs, policies, and tools to bring the standards to life. It is also important for the role that higher education might play, with others, in continuously improving the standards over time. And finally, the scholarship of teaching not only is important with regard to higher education’s work to prepare aspiring school leaders and provide professional development opportunities for practicing school leaders, but also lies at the heart of policy advising and collaboration in policy making, in working with professional associations and other entities, and importantly, in public informing.

Beyond these types of scholarship, higher education can make other contributions. Notably, institutions of higher education can perform an important convening function, that is, bringing other entities together around the work of the standards, leveraging partnerships, and bridging and boundary-spanning. In this regard, higher education institutions can help manage and coordinate joint work with others. Moreover, institutions of higher education may have greater access to certain resources than other entities in the profession of school leadership to engage the work of the standards. This may be particularly true with regard to resources for knowledge production and integration and for professional, public, and policy informing.

The encouraging thing about the role of higher education in the work of the standards is it is not too big a stretch beyond what higher education, across different types of institutions,

can and should be doing now. Higher education can and should engage the scholarships of discovery, integration, application, and teaching. And, in the field of educational leadership, it can, and we think should, focus these scholarships in meaningful ways on the work of the standards and their role in advancing school leadership.

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