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Positive school leadership

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How the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders can be brought to life.

In November 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration — a coalition of nine professional associations — adopted the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), a set of guidelines for the training, certification, hiring, evaluation, and supervision of school principals and superintendents.

PSEL, which replaces the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, has been informed by an extraordinary amount of research into educational leadership over the past 10 years (Murphy, 2017). While it builds upon the solid foundation that the 2008 ISLLC standards provided — especially their emphasis on school mission, vision, and core values — it also gives significant attention to themes that were touched on only briefly in the earlier document.

In the ISLLC standards, for example, issues related to ethics, equity, and culturally responsive schooling were grouped together under a single heading. However, PSEL treats these as discrete topics, each requiring an extensive discussion of its own. Similarly, the new standards offer more detailed guidance related to leadership for curriculum, instruction, and assessment; they give more attention to the need for school leaders to

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create a community of care and support for students; they more fully describe school leaders' responsibility to develop the professional capacity of teachers and staff, and they stress the value of engaging families and community members in student learning.

Not only do the new standards emphasize the personal "virtues" associated with effective leaders (such as integrity and trustworthiness), they are careful also to highlight the social nature of the work, noting ways in which personal relationships and interactions make it possible to lead schools successfully. Similarly, they direct leaders not just to focus on individual student outcomes but also to attend to the needs of students' families and communities.

Finally, and to an even greater degree than the ISLLC standards, PSEL 2015 presents an optimistic view of leadership, one that focuses on human potential, growth, and support in conjunction with a focus on educational rigor and accountability. Instead of relying on a deficit-based perspective, it emphasizes the strengths that individuals and communities bring to K-12 education.

However, as promising as PSEL may seem on paper, these standards will mean little unless and until people bring them to life in their professional practice. In the past, the priority has been to enact such standards *formally*, by incorporating them into the design of principal and superintendent training programs, certification and accreditation requirements, and guidelines for professional development. This approach remains important. Yet, we argue that the real promise of the PSEL standards is to provide a new way to think about leadership and what it looks like in one's everyday work in schools.

Toward a positive perspective

PSEL 2015 is anchored in a conceptual framework that we call Positive School Leadership (PSL). The best way to bring the new standards to life, we believe, is to start by focusing on this underlying perspective, making a serious effort to understand the basic concept before trying to implement its various parts and pieces.

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PSL fuses the best ideas from recent research into positive psychology (Frederickson, 2001; Snyder & Lopez, 2009) and positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). The core breakthrough was the realization that the field of organizational psychology has relied mainly on a deficit model of human behavior. Researchers have tended to focus on ways to correct problems and punish misbehaviors rather than to promote growth. Most important, they have tended to assume that people are essentially untrustworthy and that the best way to achieve organizational goals is to supervise them closely, showing them what needs to be done and telling them how to do it, lest their natural inclinations lead to the dissipation of effort and the unraveling of progress. Further, people who work in organizations have been viewed mainly as passive individuals, not as active members of a community, and their development has been framed in instrumental terms, not seen as a valuable end in itself.

Within the larger field of organizational psychology, the idea of positive-based leadership has taken hold among many scholars who argue that — unlike the deficit model — it provides a useful starting point for efforts to pursue genuine improvements in the workplace. Until recently, however, the positive approach has had little effect on the scholarly literature on schools and educational leadership.

The idea has much to offer, though. Indeed, to the extent that a positive orientation to school leadership has been examined by education researchers, it has been found to have beneficial effects on several critical variables that mediate the relationship between leadership and school performance, including self-esteem and motivation in children and student engagement and learning. Positive leadership has also been associated with growth in teachers' professional knowledge and social capital, and these, in turn, have positive effects on classroom climate and various student outcomes.

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While not a fully inclusive list, the dimensions of PSL include:

#1. A stronger professional calling

If we think about work as some combination of job, career, and professional calling, PSL would tilt heavily toward the latter. To view leadership as a calling involves the feeling of being drawn into and impelled toward a life of service to others and to working toward a broader social good.

#2. A stronger moral framework

Unlike deficit models of organizational psychology, PSL is anchored in a moral framework, a system of principles of right and wrong. It is not ambivalent or agnostic about matters of equity, fairness, and justice. Rather it is principled and puts personal and professional ethics on center stage in leadership practice.

#3. A focus on character and virtue

PSL underscores the critical nature of character and virtue, the mental and moral qualities of the leader. Character states and virtues that are featured in positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship include passion, optimism, authenticity, benevolence, respect, transparency, courage, and resilience.

#4. A focus on the interest of others

PSL requires that leaders at all levels of the educational system act in the best interests of others — children, professional personnel, families, and the community. This does not mean abandoning self-interest but rather requires transcending it.

#5. Personalized relationships

PSL recognizes the importance of policies and structures, but it never drifts from the fundamental understanding that schools are powered by human relationships and that much of leadership occurs through interpersonal interaction. PSL emphasizes the importance of personalism, caring, trust, and respect in leadership relationships and interaction.

#6. Empowerment and community building

PSL features a deeply ingrained understanding that negative and deficit-oriented approaches to educational leadership and to schoolwork generally undermine what education stands for and how people learn and prosper. An essential focus of PSL is growth and the building up of people and groups through learning and empowerment. It proceeds from an optimistic and asset-based view of human nature and potential.

As constituted by such elements, PSL provides a way of translating the leadership work described in PSEL 2015 into effective leadership practice. PSL's focus on professional calling creates the fuel of leader dedication, commitment, and identity. A moral framework and leader character and virtue shine a beacon onto decision making and action. PSL's emphases on service, on the best interests of others, on relationships, on growth and building up, and on empowerment and community provide constant reminders of purposes and efficacious paths to achieving them. PSL reminds us that schooling and educational leadership are not mechanistic technical endeavors but inherently human and human service enterprises.

Our takeaway message is simple: PSEL 2015 provides the profession with a powerful platform to understand the content and qualities of educational leadership work. We can imagine different ways that the standards might translate into practice, some negative and deficit-oriented, some ambivalent and agnostic. PSL provides a superior scaffold for bringing PSEL 2015 to life. Together, PSEL and PSL direct educational leadership toward high-quality, meaningful schooling for all.

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Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015

STANDARD 1. MISSION, VISION, AND CORE VALUES

Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.

STANDARD 2. ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL NORMS

Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

STANDARD 3. EQUITY AND CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

STANDARD 4. CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT

Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

STANDARD 5. COMMUNITY OF CARE AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.

STANDARD 6. PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

STANDARD 7. PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY FOR TEACHERS AND STAFF

Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

STANDARD 8. MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY

Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

STANDARD 9. OPERATIONS AND MANAGEMENT

Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

STANDARD 10. SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

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American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education

American Association of School Administrators

Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation

Council of Chief State School Officers

National Association of Elementary School Principals

National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Council of Professors of Educational Administration
National School Boards Association
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