Standards for School Leaders Get New Thumbs Up

By Lynn Olson

A coalition of education groups came together in the mid-1990s to draft model standards for school leaders that would refocus the profession on student learning.

Since then, the resulting Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards have been used or adapted by more than 40 states to guide their own preparation, licensure, and evaluation programs for principals and superintendents.

Now, the standards have been revised for the first time since they were initially adopted in 1996. And the big news is how little has changed.

“Basically, the general footprint—the standards that were in place, with some wording changes—were pretty good, as far as creating a policy framework,” said Lois Adams-Rodgers, the deputy executive director of the Washington-based Council of Chief State School Officers. The council received a two-year, $300,000 grant from the Wallace Foundation to update the ISLLC Standards for School Leaders.

“We made the investment because there’s a lot more known now from the research in terms of understanding what leaders do to impact teaching and learning, and that needed to be embedded in the standards,” said Richard D. Laine, the director of education programs for the New York City-based foundation, which also underwrites coverage of leadership issues in Education Week.

Research Base

To revise the standards, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, the coalition that first developed the standards with CCSSO playing a lead role, convened an expert panel to examine the research base for the standards. It also solicited advice from its members, representing 10 national education organizations, ranging from the National Association of Secondary School Principals to the National School Boards Association. And it worked with state education agencies to review current state standards and leadership policies.

The NPBEA board approved the revised standards in December.

One change to the standards, now renamed the Educational Leadership Policy Standards, is the detailed guidance underneath each one. When the standards were first adopted, they included a long list of indicators to suggest the types of knowledge and behaviors that school leaders who met the standards might exhibit.

“Those were initially only intended as examples to illustrate the standards,” said Richard A. Flanary, the director of professional-development services for the Reston, Va.-based secondary school principals’ group, who co-chaired the NPBEA steering committee that oversaw the revisions. “But they became the de facto standards, and that was never intended.”

Those indicators have now been replaced with a much shorter list of “functions” that help clarify the standards based on the research, but that do not resemble a checklist.

Setting Priorities

Ann Duffy, the director of policy development for Georgia’s Leadership Institute for School Improvement, said the initial list of indicators was “overwhelming in application.”

Focus on Instruction

The Educational Leadership Policy Standards include six standards, followed by “functions” that provide detailed guidance on what the standards mean. Here is an example:

STANDARD 2: An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

FUNCTIONS
A. Nurture and sustain a culture of collaboration, trust, learning, and high expectations.
B. Create a comprehensive, rigorous, and coherent curricular program.
C. Create a personalized and motivating learning environment for students.
D. Supervise instruction.
E. Develop assessment and accountability systems to monitor student progress.
F. Develop the instructional and leadership capacity of staff.
G. Maximize time spent on quality instruction.
H. Promote the use of the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching and learning.
I. Monitor and evaluate the impact of the instructional program.

SOURCE: National Policy Board for Educational Administration

The standards “can’t be all things to all people,” she said. “So one of the challenges for a state is to figure out how you’re going to prioritize inside those standards to drive change.”

Georgia, for example, has focused on how administrators can actually lead change; create a performance-management system that holds adults, as well as students, accountable for results; and develop competence in leading curriculum, instruction, and assessment within their schools.

“In Georgia,” Ms. Duffy said, “ISLLC has been the basis of state certification for years, and many school districts created evaluation protocols aligned to the ISLLC standards.”

A majority of administrator-preparation programs in Georgia are also accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education based on standards informed by ISLLC.

“What ISLLC has done is given some alignment between what’s happened in district and state policy,” Ms. Duffy added, “and given some way to have a national conversation.”

In Iowa, the standards have had a “huge impact,” said Troyce L. Fisher, the director of a Wallace Foundation leadership grant for the School Administrators of Iowa. In November, the state board of education adopted the standards, along with 35 criteria for meeting them, as the basis for state licensure. And all principals and superintendents are evaluated based on the standards and criteria.

“Our mentoring and induction program that we offer at the state level is linked to those standards,” Mr. Fisher said. “So is the principal-leadership academy. So we’re hoping to get coherence; it’s just foundational now.”

‘Laundry List’?

But not everyone is as positive about the standards’ impact.

“In the abstract, the notion of these standards is fine,” said Frederick M. Hess, the director of education-policy studies for the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank. “The problem is when you try to systematize it into some kind of licensure or testing system for what you need to be able to lead.”

Mr. Hess, who has written several studies critical of principal-preparation programs, said the skills that principals need might vary by context.

“The idea that we can come up, bureaucratically, with a laundry list that’s going to fit small schools and big schools is the problem,” he said. “There’s a tendency to go to the kitchen sink on this, and there aren’t 90,000 principals with kitchen-sink attributes, so it might make it hard to find the right fit for the job.”

Others question whether the standards are driving principals’ behavior.

A qualitative study of seven randomly selected elementary school principals in Illinois, conducted by education professor Susan Stratton of Northern Illinois University and Susan Seabright-Smith, the superintendent of the Lostant, Ill., community school district, found that while the principals were familiar with the standards, they “were so preoccupied by immediate problems of diversity, special education, discipline, changing demographics in the community, state mandates, and accountability that their actions depended on those needs and how best to handle the existing situations irrespective of the ISLLC standards.”

Joseph F. Murphy, a professor of education at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tenn., who chaired the research panel that informed the ISLLC revisions, said there’s much more to be done to ensure people have a deep understanding of the standards.

“What the standards did was to push us onto the right path,” he argued. “Now, we’ve only come a short distance, but every step we move, at least we’re on the path of learning and teaching, which is not where we were 10 years ago.”