

## **The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education: Measuring Learning-Centered Leadership**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Principal leadership assessment and evaluation can be an integral part of a standards-based accountability system and school improvement. When designed accurately, executed in a proactive manner, and properly implemented, it has the power to improve organizational performance and to identify leaders of the future. But the development of effective school leadership has been seriously hampered by the lack of technically sound tools to assess and monitor leaders' performance. This paper presents the research base and conceptual framework for a new principal leadership assessment tool: the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED™). We begin with our definition of leadership and observations about the importance of leadership. We then present our model of school leadership. The VAL-ED™ model is presented along with a conception of leadership behaviors that fits within a larger context of leadership assessment, school performance and student success. With a detailed review of the literature on leadership for learning, we demonstrate how VAL-ED™ contrasts with existing tools by focusing "100 percent" on topics related to instructional leadership and by clearly defining and measuring the leader behaviors that can improve learning.

This article describes the conceptual model and the research base for the construct of learning-centered leadership and then introduces the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED™). This new instrument is designed to measure learning-centered leadership behavior of school principals.

### **CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

Leadership can mean many things. In our work, leadership is defined as “the process of influencing others to achieve mutually agreed upon purposes for the organization” (Patterson, 1993, p.3). First, we note that leadership is a process; it is not a personal trait or characteristic of an individual. Second, leadership involves influence; it requires interactions and relationships among people. Third, leadership involves purpose; it helps organizations and the people affiliated with them, in our case schools, move toward reaching desired goals. This definition of leadership highlights the fact that leadership can be shared amongst multiple actors and relies on complex, organic interrelationships between leaders, helpers, and followers.

The larger framework that informs our work on learning-centered leadership is contained in Figure 1. We begin at the left hand side of the model where we observe that the leadership behaviors we discuss below are heavily shaped by four major conditions: (a) the previous experiences of a leader (e.g., experience as a curriculum coordinator in a district office will likely lead to the use of behaviors different than those featured by a leader who has had considerable experience as an assistant principal); (b) the knowledge base the leader amasses over time; (c) the types of personal characteristics a leader brings to the job (e.g., achievement need, energy level); and (d) the set of values and beliefs that help define a leader (e.g., beliefs about the appropriate role for subordinates in decision processes). Consistent with the best literature in

this area (see Hallinger & Heck, 1999; Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Leithwood, Riedlinger, Bauer, & Jantzi, 2003), we see that the impact of leadership behaviors in terms of valued outcomes is indirect. That is, it is mediated by school operations and classroom activities. Or more to the point, leaders influence the factors that, in turn, influence the outcomes (e.g., student graduation).

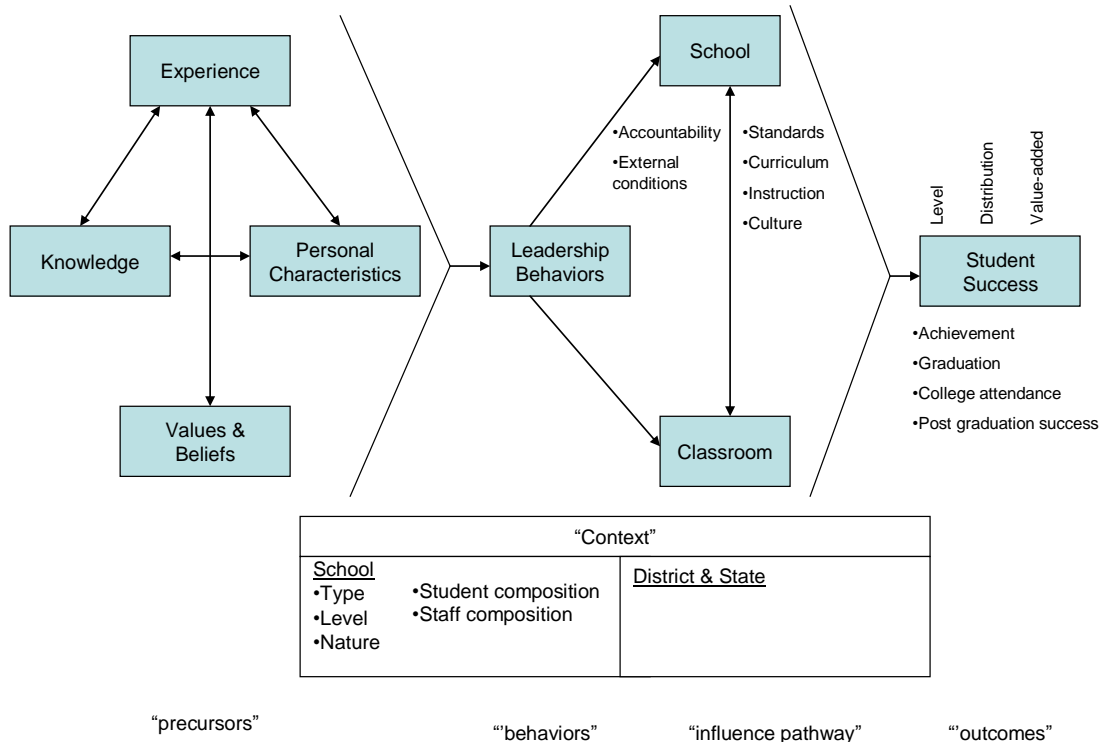


Figure 1. Learning Centered Leadership Framework

We conceptualize leader behaviors as impacting factors both at the school level (e.g., the structure and agenda of a leadership team) and the classroom level (e.g., grouping practices). Not surprisingly, we underscore the key variables that were harvested from the literature review (see below). We also describe the impact of leader behaviors in terms of a number of valued outcomes at three periods of time: indicators of in-school achievement (e.g., grades on common final exams), measures of performance at exit from school (e.g., graduation), and more distal indices of accomplishment (e.g., college graduation). The model also posits that outcomes be

viewed using “a tripartite perspective—high overall levels of student achievement (quality), growth or gain (value added), and consistency of achievement across all subpopulations of the student body (equality)” (Murphy, Hallinger, & Peterson, 1986, p. 154). Finally, the model acknowledges that context plays a significant role in the exercise of learning-centered leadership (e.g., a district’s decision to employ school managers at sites to free up time for formal leaders to devote more time to instructional issues).

## **RESEARCH ON LEARNING-CENTERED LEADERSHIP**

In this section we examine research findings on learning-centered leadership. We organize those findings under six core components and six key processes.

### **Core Components**

The core components represent the focus of effective learning-centered instructional school leadership as grounded in the literature. We chose those leadership behaviors that are linked in the research literature to teachers’ opportunities to improve their instruction and student learning, and that are aligned with the ISLLC standards. As noted previously, we do not include in our assessment other aspects of leadership such as values and knowledge, which, while important, are not indicated as part of learning-centered leadership behaviors (Murphy et al., 2006).

#### *High Standards for Student Learning*

The first core component in our leadership assessment conceptual framework is the extent to which leadership ensures *there are individual, team, and school goals for rigorous student academic and social learning*. There is considerable evidence that a key function of effective school leadership concerns shaping the purpose of the school and articulating the

school's mission (Bamburg & Andrews, 1990; Hallinger and Heck, 2002; Murphy et al., 2006). Traditionally, this aspect of leadership focused primarily on the principal's role in ensuring that the school has clear, measurable goals for student learning and academic progress. Setting clear goals for student achievement is central to effective leadership, as it guides the daily practices and decisions of all stakeholders. This may seem obvious today, but as the effective schools research was emerging in the 1970s, many schools had ill-defined goals that were often non-academic (Brookover et al., 1979).

In our framework, however, we do not assess the mere presence of goals for student learning, but specifically emphasize the quality of the school goals, namely, the extent to which there are high standards and rigorous learning goals. The research literature has supported the notion that high expectations for all, including clear and public standards, are key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students, and for raising the overall academic achievement of all students. Early research on effective schools in lower socioeconomic communities found that these schools held high expectations for their students (Brookover & Lezotte, 1977; Purkey & Smith, 1983). More recently, Betts and Grogger (2003) found that on average, higher grading standards are associated with higher 12th-grade test scores. High standards for student performance focus on outputs rather than processes or inputs (Porter, 1994). In our framework, high standards mean those that “are intended to be absolute rather than normative. Second, they are expected to be set at high, ‘world-class’ levels...Finally they are expected to apply to all, or essentially all, students rather than a selected subset such as college bound students seeking advanced placement” (Linn, 2000, p. 10).

### *Rigorous Curriculum*

Rigorous curriculum refers to the content of instruction (as opposed to the pedagogy of instruction, which is dealt with in the following section). *Rigorous curriculum is defined as ambitious academic content provided to all students in core academic subjects.*

Having a rigorous curriculum provided by teachers and experienced by students is at the core of standards-based reform, including standards-based reform as articulated in the *No Child Left Behind* legislation. States must have challenging academic content standards that describe what students are to know and be able to do. School leaders, as has already been argued, play a crucial role in setting high standards for student performance in their school. These high standards, however, must be translated into ambitious academic content represented in the curriculum students experience. Murphy and colleagues (2006) argued, in their recent piece on learning-centered leadership, that school leaders in productive schools are knowledgeable about and deeply involved in the school's curricular program (Carter & Maestas, 1982; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Russell, et al, 1985). These leaders work with colleagues to ensure that the school is defined by a rigorous curriculum program in general and that each student's program, in particular, is of high quality (Newmann, 1997; Ogden & Germinario, 1995). Learning-centered leaders ensure that each student has an adequate opportunity to learn rigorous content in all academic subjects (Murphy & Hallinger, 1985).

A number of empirical studies demonstrate that teaching focused on ambitious academic content covered in content standards and student assessments leads to increases in student performance (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1986; Knapp, Shields, & Turnbull, 1992; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Turnbull et al., 1999; Wong et al., 1996). The content is defined not only by the topics that might or might not be taught (e.g., linear equations in mathematics), but also the cognitive demands that might or might not be taught (e.g.

memorize, understand the concept, solve problems, conjecture and generalize) for each topic. Research shows a strong positive link between student achievement gains and content covered, as defined at the intersection of specific topics with specific cognitive demands (Gamoran et al., 1997). Other research shows that much of the problem with low-achieving students can be addressed by providing them with better content (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; McKnight et al., 1987; Peterson, 1988; Porter et al., 1988; Romberg, 1988).

Effective leaders understand the importance of a rigorous curriculum offered by teachers and experienced by students, and the effects of a rigorous curriculum on gains in student achievement. They are attentive to establishing adequate opportunities for all students to experience a rigorous curriculum in each core academic subject regardless of a student's race, sex, SES background, first language, or disability. Effective instructional leaders work with their teachers to insure that the content of instruction is rigorous and aligned to the school's high standards for student performance.

### *Quality Instruction*

A rigorous curriculum (i.e., ambitious academic content) is insufficient to insure substantial gains in student learning; quality instruction (i.e., effective pedagogy) is also required.

*Quality instruction is defined as effective instructional practices that maximize student academic and social learning.* Teachers must deliver a rigorous curriculum in ways that actively engage students, are clear, and recognize naive conceptions that students bring to the classroom about the academic content to be learned. Effective teachers are clear about their instructional goals, communicate to their students what is expected of them and why, make expert use of existing instructional materials, are knowledgeable about their students, adapt instruction to their students' needs, and anticipate misconceptions in students' existing knowledge. Particularly at

the elementary grades, effective teachers provide the metacognitive strategies students need to comprehend the material. They monitor students' understandings by offering regular appropriate feedback, and they accept appropriate responsibility for student outcomes (Porter & Brophy, 1988). Newmann and Wehlage (1995) defined authentic pedagogy as teaching that requires students to think, to develop in-depth understanding, and to apply academic learning to important realistic problems.

Quality instruction (effective pedagogy) reflects research findings over the course of the past few decades about how people learn (National Research Council, 1999). That work makes clear that teachers' pedagogical practices must draw out and work with the pre-existing understandings that students bring with them to the classroom. Quality instruction provides students with many examples in which the same concept is at work and uses ongoing assessments designed to make students' thinking visible to both the teachers and the students.

Effective instructional leaders understand the properties of quality instruction (effective pedagogy) and find ways to ensure that quality instruction is experienced by all students in their school. They spend time on the instructional program, often through providing feedback to teachers (Clark, Lotto, & McCarthy, 1980) and supporting teachers to improve their instruction (Conley, 1991; Leithwood & Janzi, 1990).

#### *Culture of Learning and Professional Behavior*

Another core component in our assessment framework is leadership that *ensures there are integrated communities of professional practice in the service of student academic and social learning. There is a healthy school environment in which student learning is the central focus.*

Research has demonstrated that schools organized as communities, rather than bureaucracies, are more likely to exhibit academic success (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995;

Louis & Miles, 1990). Further research supports the notion that effective professional communities are deeply rooted in the academic and social learning goals of the schools (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989). In other words, the communities are not for the mere purpose of creating pleasant work environments. In fact, Phillips (1997) found that in schools where teachers are more concerned with affective relations than academic learning, test scores tend to be lower. She cautioned that school community must place academic learning at its center. Often termed teacher professional communities, these collaborative cultures are defined by elements such as shared goals and values, focus on student learning, shared work, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996).

Another strand of the literature that supports the importance of this core component is the research on school climate. The early research on effective schools indicated that a safe and orderly environment is associated with academic success (Clark, Lotto, and McCarthy, 1980; Rutter et al., 1979). More recently, Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides (1990) found that “the principal’s role in establishing a strong school climate....strongly predicted school achievement” (p. 117). However, a healthy school environment encompasses more than a “safe and orderly climate.” Research and program development by Crone and Horner (2003) and Charney and Wood (1981) have focused on school-wide prosocial programs and their effects on both social behavior and academic outcomes. This work with school-wide positive behavior support and school-wide social curriculum collectively indicates that schools that are supportive, responsive environments for students have better attendance, fewer office referrals, more academic engagement from students, and greater gain in achievement test results in comparison to schools without such programs (Charney, 1982; Elliott, 1993, 1997; Gresham, Sugai, Horner, Quinn, &

McInerney, 1998). Thus, healthy schools are also supportive of students' social and academic needs.

School leadership plays a central role in the extent to which a school exhibits a culture of learning and professional behavior and whether there are integrated professional communities. Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) found that schools with supportive principals tended to have higher levels of professional community. Similarly, Bryk, Camburn, and Louis's (1999) research in the Chicago public schools indicated that principal leadership is an important facilitating factor in determining the level of professional community. Leaders play a central role in promoting a climate of respect and support for students and teachers (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988).

#### *Connections to External Communities*

Leading a school with high expectations and academic achievement for all students requires robust connections to the external community. These connections include *linkages to family and/or other people and institutions in the community that advance academic and social learning*. There is a substantial research base that has reported positive relationships between family involvement and social and academic benefits for students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). A study of standards-based reform practices, for instance, found that teacher outreach to parents of low-performing students, such as meetings, sending materials home, and communicating with parents when their child was having problems, was related to improved student achievement (Westat and Policy Studies Associates, 2001). Similarly, schools with well-defined parent partnership programs show achievement gains over schools with less robust partnerships (Shaver & Wells, 1998). Community-wide involvement, such as school-linked social services, parent education programs, and community organizing initiatives, aim to change the underlying conditions associated with low student achievement (Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001).

Learning-centered leaders play a key role in both establishing and supporting parental involvement and community partnerships. These leaders model the importance of collaborating with parents and others in the extended school community (Corcoran & Wilson, 1985; Goldring & Sullivan, 1996; Russell et al., 1985). External collaboration is part of the strategic vision of the school; this collaboration is closely linked to the academic and social learning goals of the school. Learning-centered leaders focus collaboration and engagement with the external community on learning goals; they do not engage the external community for public relations as an end in itself. Learning-centered leaders “model community collaboration for staff, establish norms about the importance of parent connections, and provide opportunities for staff to develop the collaborative skills needed to work effectively with parents” (Murphy et al., 2006, p. 34).

The relationship between schools and communities is not just one way, from the school outward to the community. Effective leadership also ensures that expectations, information, and interests from the community are part of the school’s goals, culture, and decisions (Murphy et al., 2006; Rowe, 1995). To achieve these school-community partnerships, school leaders develop working relationships with religious, business, and political leaders in the school community (Goldring & Hausman, 2001). Leaders “invest time, energy and resources in community and family work because they know that they and their schools cannot be successful without them....They choose their involvement strategically with an eye toward building supports for children and schools” (Lawson, 1999, p. 12).

### *Systemic Performance Accountability*

Accountability for performance involves *individual and collective responsibility among leadership, faculty, and students for achieving the rigorous student academic and social learning goals*. Accountability stems from both external and internal accountability systems (Adams &

Kirst, 1999). External accountability refers to performance expectations that emerge from outside the school and the local community. Recent research reported a positive relationship between the strength of a state's accountability system and student achievement (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Hanushek & Raymond, 2004). Simultaneously, schools and districts have internal accountability systems with local expectations and individual responsibilities.

If external policies help to set some of the broader targets for schools, then internal goals comprise the practical steps that schools must take to reach those targets. Schools with higher levels of internal accountability are more successful within external accountability systems, and they are more skillful in areas such as curricular decision making, addressing instructional issues, and responding to various performance measures (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Elmore, 2005).

School leaders must integrate internal and external accountability systems by holding their staff accountable for implementing strategies that align teaching and learning with achievement goals and targets set by policy. As noted by Murphy and colleagues (2006), school leaders play an integral role in focusing their staff and students on the particular criteria for success embodied in performance standards and school goals. They do so through frequent reference to and use of these criteria in meetings, performance reviews, classroom observations, discussions of curriculum and instructional strategies, and other interactions with staff. Effective leaders enhance accountability by offering individualized support to staff, challenging teachers to think critically about their teaching, and promoting an atmosphere of collaboration in the school.

Assessment systems are central to systemic performance accountability, and in schools with learning-centered leaders, these systems are characterized by a variety of distinguishing elements. First, they are comprehensive. They address classroom and school-based activity. They feature the use of a wide variety of monitoring and data collection strategies, both formal and

informal. They insist on multiple and complementary indicators of student learning. For example, comprehensive designs often include teacher record-keeping systems, end-of-level or end-of-unit reports, student work products, criterion-referenced tests, and standardized measures of student performance. They also use information gleaned from direct observations in classrooms. Second, they disaggregate information on the important conditions and outcomes of schooling (e.g., program placement of students, test results) by relevant characteristics of students (e.g., gender, race, social class). Third, they are constructed in ways that foster the triangulation of data from multiple sources in order to arrive at judgments about the effectiveness of curricular and instructional programs and organizational operations. Lastly, as noted above, these systems implement tight alignment between local school-based and external assessments.

### **Key Processes**

Key leadership processes refer to the ways in which leadership, individually and collectively, influences organizations and their constituencies to move toward achieving the core components of High Standards of Student Performance, Rigorous Curriculum (content), Quality Instruction (pedagogy), Culture of Learning & Professional Behavior, Connections to External Communities, and Systemic Performance Accountability. As noted by Fullan (1982), “change is a process, not an event” (p. 41).

There is agreement regarding many of the key processes of leadership. Adair (1983) suggests that leadership involves juggling three key overlapping domains in an organization: group maintenance needs, task needs, and individual needs. He goes on to suggest elements (or “processes,” in our words) in each of these leadership domains, including defining the task, planning, briefing (communicating), controlling, evaluating, motivating, organizing, and setting an example. Clark, Lott, and Astuto (1984) highlight the importance of planning, implementing,

and evaluating in the change and school improvement process. Others have compiled similar lists of leadership processes.

Our conceptual framework features six key processes, based upon the prevailing views of effective leadership and the research on school improvement: planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating, and monitoring. Following a systems view of organizations, we acknowledge that the processes are interconnected and recursive, and are highly reactive to one another. For example, to monitor teaching for high-quality instruction, leaders first need to plan for the collection of key data; they need to communicate both the need for the data and the results. Leaders need to implement changes based on the information gleaned from the monitoring, and they need to support teachers to help them improve their instruction. In this section, we review the key processes and provide examples of how each process is enacted in relationship to a few of the core components.

### *Planning*

Planning is an essential process of leadership. *We define planning as articulating shared direction and coherent policies, practices, and procedures for realizing high standards of student performance.* Planning helps leadership focus resources, tasks, and people. Change studies document the importance of planning (Clark et al., 1984). Learning-centered leaders do not see planning as a ritual or as overly bureaucratic. They engage in planning as a mechanism to realize the core components of the school. Effective principals are highly skilled planners and in fact, they are proactive in their planning work (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). Planning is needed in each of the core components; it is an engine of school improvement that builds common purpose and a shared culture. For example, to ensure high-quality instruction, one of the core components in our framework, learning-centered leaders devote considerable time and undertake

careful planning to guarantee that the school employs excellent, highly qualified teachers, as well as faculty whose values and instructional frameworks are consistent with the mission and the culture of the school (Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Teddlie, Stringfield, Wimpleberg, & Kirby, 1989).

Another example of the importance of planning for high-quality instruction involves professional development. In order to continue providing high-quality instruction, teachers must participate in ongoing professional development. Effective leaders assume an active role in planning staff learning activities along with the overall professional development system of the school (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Clark, Lotto, & McCarthy, 1980). Contrast this planned approach to the more typical scenario where teachers simply choose workshops from a menu of options offered through the district or the state.

Planning is key to other core components as well, for example, effective leaders place a high priority on curriculum planning (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). They also actively plan for the collection of data needed to both implement systemic accountability in the school and to monitor the curriculum and instructional quality. Further, effective leaders create systematic plans to engage the larger school community (Goldring & Hausman, 2001).

### *Implementing*

After planning, *leaders implement; they put into practice the activities necessary to realize high standards for student performance*. In a comprehensive review of the research on implementation of curriculum and instruction, Fullan and Pomfret (1977) concluded that “implementation is not simply an extension of planning...it is a phenomenon in its own right” (p. 336). Effective leaders take the initiative to implement and are proactive in pursuing their school goals (Manasse, 1985).

Learning-centered leaders are directly involved in implementing policies and practices that further the core components in their schools. For example, effective leaders implement joint planning time for teachers and other structures as mechanisms to develop a culture of learning and professional behavior (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampton, 1998). Similarly, they implement programs that build productive parent and community relations as a way to achieve connections to external communities (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

School leadership engages with school staff to implement rigorous curriculum that is aligned with high standards for student performance. They implement high-quality instructional programs (Austin, 1978; Weber, 1971; Wellisch et al., 1978) and, as noted by Murphy and colleagues (2006), they are personally involved with school faculty to implement assessment systems at the classroom and school levels for systemic accountability (Clark & McCarthy, 1983; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Weber, 1971).

### *Supporting*

*Leaders create enabling conditions; they secure and use the financial, political, technological, and human resources necessary to promote academic and social learning.*

Supporting is a key process that ensures the resources necessary to achieve the core components are available and used well. This notion is closely related to the transformational leadership behaviors associated with helping people be successful (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

The literature is clear that learning-centered leaders devote considerable time to supporting teachers in their efforts to strengthen the quality of instruction (Conley, 1991; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). This support takes varied forms, as noted by Murphy and colleagues (2006). For example, from a financial and technological perspective, leaders make sure that

teachers have all the necessary materials and resources required to be highly effective instructors. In terms of social and human capital, leaders provide access to new sources of knowledge and make certain that teachers have high-quality opportunities to expand, enhance, and refine their instructional skills (Cawelti, 1997; Newmann, 1997; Wilson & Corcoran, 1988). Leaders demonstrate personal interest in staff and make themselves available to them (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Leaders also provide support for high-quality instruction by ensuring that teachers have guidance as they work to integrate skills learned during professional development into their instructional behaviors (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978).

Support is also a key process in ensuring a culture of learning and professional behavior. Murphy and colleagues (2006) note that leaders support integrated communities of practice by providing the infrastructure, such as time and space, that nurtures informal learning throughout the school (Little, 1982; Newmann, 1997; Venezky & Winfield, 1979). Shared decision making and other participatory mechanisms and structures provide a framework of support for cultures of learning and professional behavior (Lezotte, Hathaway, Miller, Passalacqua, & Brookover, 1980; Little, 1982; Rutherford, 1985). Leaders realize that communities of professional practice require resources as well, and they take advantage of their unique position in garnering and allocating resources to bring communities of professional practice to life (Little, 1982; Rutter et al., 1979).

### *Advocating*

*Leaders promote the diverse needs of students within and beyond the school.* Advocating for the best interests and needs of all children is a key process of learning-centered leadership. Learning-centered leaders advocate for a rigorous curriculum for all students. They ensure that policies in the school do not prevent or create barriers for certain students to participate in classes

that are deemed gateways to further learning, such as algebra. They ensure that special needs students receive content-rich instruction. Similarly, effective leadership ensures that all students are exposed to high-quality instruction; they manage the parental pressures that often create favoritism in placing students in particular classes. Both the instruction and content of the school's educational programs honor diversity (e.g., the use of culturally rich educational materials) (Ogden & Germinario, 1995; Roueche & Baker, 1986). Through advocacy, learning-centered leadership works with teachers and other professional staff to ensure that the school's culture both models and supports respect for diversity. Learning-centered leaders make their advocacy public. Further, advocacy is central to the systematic accountability processes in the school, as teachers are held accountable for the academic and social learning of the diverse student body.

Learning-centered leaders advocate on behalf of all children in their relationships with the external community. As Murphy and his colleagues (2006) note, "learning-centered leaders proactively respond to external policy initiatives (e.g., speak at public forums, address civic organizations) to ensure that public policy advantages the students in their schools—and their families." Effective leaders model their advocacy by developing civic capacity with key institutions and organizations in the school's community (Goldring & Hausman, 2001). They guide service providers, youth development specialists, and private organizations to create opportunities to serve children with multiple and varying needs (Butty, LaPoint, Thomas, & Thompson, 2001). Learning-centered leadership advocates on behalf of parents and their students to the political community and the educational bureaucracy.

*Communicating*

*Leaders develop, utilize, and maintain systems of exchange among members of the school and with its external communities.* In studying school change, Loucks and colleagues (1982) found that “principals played major communication roles, both with and among school staff, and with others in the district and in the community” (p. 42).

Learning-centered leaders communicate unambiguously to all the stakeholders and constituencies both in and outside the school about the high standards of student performance. “Effective principals continually communicate their high expectations to students and staff” (Manasse, 1985, p. 447). These communications allow for clear, focused articulations of the goals of the school (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Venezky & Winfield, 1979).

Leaders communicate regularly and through multiple channels with families and community members, including businesses, social service agencies, and faith-based organizations (Edmonds & Frederiksen, 1978; Garibaldi, 1993). Through ongoing communication, schools and the community serve as resources for one another that inform, promote, and link key institutions in support of student academic and social learning.

Communication plays a key role in systemic performance accountability as well. As noted by Murphy and colleagues (2006), learning-centered leaders hold faculty and students accountable by communicating the results of accountability data (Eubanks & Levine, 1983). Effective leaders provide teachers and parents with assessment results on an ongoing basis (Levine & Stark, 1982; Venezky & Winfield, 1979). Information about student progress is communicated regularly to students and parents in an accessible form, at multiple times, across an array of forums, and in multiple formats (Eubanks & Levine, 1983; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1984; Wynne, 1980).

Communication is central to developing a culture of learning and professional behavior in the school. Integrated communities of practice cannot emerge nor can they function if there is not open and adequate communication amongst teachers, between teachers and leaders, and amongst teachers, leaders, and students. Bryk, Camburn, and Louis (1999) noted that strong professional communities emerge when the school engages in reflective dialogue, “engaging in extended conversations” (p. 754). Leadership must support and participate in these important conversations.

### *Monitoring*

*Monitoring refers to systematically collecting and analyzing data to make judgments that guide decisions and actions for continuous improvement.* A key transformational leadership behavior is monitoring school activity (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Early on, the effective schools literature identified monitoring school progress in terms of setting goals, assessing the curriculum, and evaluating instruction, as a key role of instructional leadership (Purkey & Smith, 1983).

In terms of our core components, learning-centered leaders monitor the school’s curriculum, assuring alignment between rigorous academic standards and curriculum coverage (Eubanks & Levine, 1983). They monitor students’ programs of study to ensure that all students have adequate opportunity to learn rigorous content in all academic subjects (Murphy & Hallinger, 1985).

Learning-centered leadership also undertakes an array of activities to monitor the quality of instruction, such as ongoing classroom observations. Heck (1992) found that ineffective elementary-school principals were less likely than principals in effective elementary schools to monitor classroom instruction through regular classroom visits. Effective leaders also actively

monitor the procedures put into place to improve quality instruction, such as the use of cooperative planning time by teachers or professional development. Leadership monitors the effectiveness of professional development by assessing the extent to which staff instructional practices are changing and improving, and ultimately impacting student learning and achievement (Eubanks & Levine, 1983).

Monitoring student achievement is central to maintaining systemic performance accountability. Murphy and colleagues (2006) have noted that learning-centered leaders are knowledgeable about assessment practices and are personally involved with faculty in monitoring assessment systems at the classroom and school levels (Clark & McCarthy, 1983; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Learning-centered principals help teachers use data to identify individual students who need remedial assistance, tailor instruction to individual students' needs, identify and correct gaps in the curriculum, improve or increase the involvement of parents in student learning, and assign or reassign students to classes or groups. Furthermore, effective leaders use data to help teachers identify areas where they need to strengthen content knowledge or teaching skills. In other words, monitoring is used to focus professional development. Heck (1992) found that effective principals use test results to monitor program improvement as a mechanism to focus on systematic accountability. Monitoring through data is also used to engage the external school community by analyzing strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for school improvement.

## **MEASURING LEARNING-CENTERED LEADERSHIP**

### **The State of Principal Leadership Assessment in the U.S.**

The importance of assessing the effectiveness of school principals has been realized by educational researchers for as long as leadership has been considered as a central variable in the equation that defines school success (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Synder & Ebmeier, 1992). It is also no exaggeration to say that the importance claim has been accompanied by criticism regarding (a) the lack of adequacy of assessment instruments and, (b) processes that fail to “tap important theoretical constructs of the role, and provide valid and reliable data that can be used by decision makers for established purposes” (Heck & Marcoulides, 1992, p.139; see also Reeves, 2005; Porter et al., 2006; Portin et al., 2006).

In fact, as early as 1990, in a comprehensive review of the literature related to principal evaluation, Ginsberg and Berry (1990) found a wide array of practices reported with little systematic research to support one approach over another. In 1992 and 1993, the weakness of research on school leadership evaluation was the topic of two full issues of the *Peabody Journal of Education*, in which Ginsburg and Thompson (1992) lamented “the state of research on principal evaluation” (p.67).

In a recent comprehensive review of current principal leadership evaluation practices in the United States, the general content and the usage of actual instruments used by 63 urban districts in 42 states and the District of Columbia were analyzed for an in-depth look of how districts evaluate their school principals (Goldring & Cravens, 2007). Using the Learning-Centered Leadership Framework presented earlier (Porter et al., 2006), the study focuses on identifying the congruency between current evaluation practices and the research-based criteria for effective leadership associated with school performance. It was found that districts focus on a variety of performance areas when evaluating their principals, using different formats at various levels of specificity. Among the sampled instruments, items covering *Culture of*

*Learning and Professional Behavior* receive considerable attention, while items on *High Standards for Learning* and *Performance Accountability* also carry relatively big weights. However, items on *Rigorous Curriculum* and *Quality Instruction*, two very important areas for learning-centered instructional leadership are underemphasized. Many of the key leadership driver behaviors for student achievement discussed above such as monitoring instruction, maximizing time on task, and focusing on achievement gap do not receive widespread attention in the evaluation process. Goldring and Cravens also noted by the study that current evaluations are mostly intended for formative use with their main focus on principal professional growth and development. Furthermore, few instruments use evaluation criteria that are standards-based and evidence-based; virtually no districts or states reported information regarding reliability and validity; and few have explicit training for the assessors.

### **The VAL-ED™**

As a response to the need for valid and reliable leadership evaluation, and with Wallace Foundation funding, the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED™) was developed to assess the effectiveness of school principals. The focus of VAL-ED™ is on the behaviors examined above in our analysis of research on learning-focused leadership.

The development and validation of the VAL-ED™ has three phases. The first phase involves drawing on the research literature about school leadership to develop a framework of education leadership. That conception then drove the development of assessment instrumentation. The second phase involves field testing of the assessment, which is followed in the third phase with initiatives to disseminate the instrument, its uses and its psychometric properties for those uses.

The VAL-ED™ is a paper and on-line assessment which utilizes a multi-rater, evidence-based approach to measure the effectiveness of school leadership behaviors known to influence teacher performance and student learning. It is a “360 degree” assessment, where teachers, the principal, and the principal’s supervisor respond to a behavior inventory. The VAL-ED™ measures the *core components* and *key processes* outlined in the learning-centered leadership framework. As noted, the core components refer to characteristics of schools that support the learning of students and enhance the ability of teachers to teach. Key processes attend to *how* leaders create those core components. The instrument consists of 72 items that comprise six core component subscales and six process subscales. There are two parallel forms of the assessment to facilitate measuring growth over time. For each item, the respondent rates the effectiveness of a principal’s behavior on a five-point scale after having first indicated the sources of evidence on which the effectiveness is rated. The principal does not need to have performed the leadership behavior directly, but must have ensured that the behavior was done by others. The reference period is the current school year.

The VAL-ED™ is designed, developed and tested to be both reliable (i.e., provide accurate measurement) and valid (i.e., measure leadership behaviors that lead to improved student achievement). The instrument is constructed to have the following eight features: (a) work well in a variety of settings and circumstances, (b) be construct valid, (c) be reliable, (d) be unbiased, (e) provide accurate and useful reporting of results, (f) yield diagnostic profiles for formative purposes, (g) be used to measure progress over time in the development of leadership and (h) predict important outcomes.

To accomplish these goals, the development team is following a multi-stage development process that involves cognitive labs, pilot tests, and field tests. At each stage of the design and

development process, the properties of the instrument are being investigated through empirical study and expert review. The process is guided by design imperatives based on the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (American Educational Research Association, 1999) and best test development practices (Downing & Haladyna, 2006).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

The stakes of having effective school leaders are high in today's climate of system-wide accountability where American public schools are charged with the daunting tasks of improving student achievement and closing performance gaps among the subgroups of an increasingly diverse student population (Thomas et al., 2000; Portin et al., 2006; Catano & Stronge, 2006). Effective leadership assessment can be an integral part of a standards-based accountability system. When designed accurately, executed in a proactive manner, and properly implemented, it has the power to improve school performance and to identify leaders of the future (Lashway, 2003; Reeves, 2005).

First, leadership assessment can set the organizational goals and objectives for the school leader (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Second, leadership assessment provides both summative and formative feedback to the school leader. Given the critical role and mounting demands on school principals, identifying and developing effective school leaders is a top priority for school systems (Knapp, Copland & Talbert, 2003). Incumbent school principals also can benefit from assessment results as benchmarks for professional growth. Third, assessment can serve as a powerful communication tool both within the school district and in the school community. Leadership assessments with well articulated results can help all stakeholders understand the

common goals, accomplishments and challenges faced by the school, and its leader, which in turn creates an environment of collective accountability.

## **CONCLUSION**

Virtually every school district in the United States (N = 14,000 school districts and over 90,000 schools) requires some form of evaluation of its principals. Many states and districts have developed their own leadership assessment tools, but our analysis of the assessments with large urban school districts indicates that few have a conceptual framework based on how leaders improve student learning, nor have they been validated for their intended uses. Thus, there is a need for a valid and reliable principal leadership assessment tool such as the VAL-ED™. Undoubtedly, responding to the assessment system and reporting on the results will be an educative experience for leaders and leadership teams and will serve as an excellent starting point for subsequent professional development. Drawing on the best existing scholarship and practice as a starting point and extending that work significantly, the VAL-ED™ meets the challenge of sharpening the conception of school leadership with a learning-centered focus and operationalizing that conception through an assessment process that is equipped with desired psychometric properties. Both research community and educational practitioners will benefit from such on-going collaborative efforts to improve the way we evaluate and develop our school leaders.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Joseph F. Murphy**

Joseph Murphy has extensive experience in the field of educational leadership. He is a former administrator at the school, district, and state levels. He has published extensively on the topic of leadership in the leading journals in education as well as in the major practitioner outlets. He has also written and/or edited over a dozen books on the topic of leading school organizations, including the 2002 NSSE yearbook. Of particular interest here is that almost all of his work on school administration focuses on the instructional dimensions of school leadership, beginning with his (and Philip Hallinger's) seminal work on principal and superintendent instructional leadership in the 1980s through his most recent volume (and related research) on teacher leadership (*Connecting Teacher Leadership and School Development*, 2005). His work has had an important influence on the shape and texture of school leadership in the United States, perhaps most noticeably as the foundation for the ISLLC *Standards for School Leaders*—the framework for school leadership (1) in play in over 40 states, (2) at the heart of the NCATE accreditation process, (3) for the national examination for school leaders (SLLA) (4) as the architecture for professional development in numerous states, and (5) as the scaffolding for administrator evaluation in Delaware and school districts nationwide. Murphy has had considerable experience in developing processes and tools for leadership assessment. He led the teams that created the specifications (with ETS) for the national licensure examination (School Leader Licensure Assessment), and for the statewide administrator evaluation system in Delaware. A significant portion of Murphy's time has been spent working with colleagues in the practice and policy communities, directly as a school leader, as chair of ISLLC and president of the Ohio Principals Leadership Academy, and through his work as advisor to numerous endeavors designed to strengthen school leadership at the national and state level.

### **Ellen B. Goldring**

Ellen Goldring is the Alexander Heard Distinguished Service Professor and Professor of Education Policy and Leadership at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. She recently served as the coeditor of *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. She is also a member of the Task Force on Developing Research to Improve Educational Leadership, cosponsored by the American Education Research Association, The Laboratory of Student Success, and University Council for Educational Administration. Her work has been funded by the Spencer Foundation, The WT Grant Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Institute of Educational Sciences. Goldring has widespread experience in the field of educational leadership. Most recently, she has designed and implemented a principal leadership academy that is now in its fourth year of partnership with the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools.

### **Xiu C. Cravens**

Xiu Cravens is an assistant professor of the practice in education policy and comparative and international education at Peabody College. Her scholarly work involves qualitative and quantitative research in the areas of leadership development and accountability measures for educational reform. She is particularly interested in addressing the conceptual and methodological challenges of cross-cultural comparison and generalization in international education policy research. She has authored or coauthored research articles that appear in peer-

reviewed academic journals such as the *American Journal of Education*, *Elementary School Journal*, *Fudan Education Forum*, *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, and *Comparative Education Review*. She also serves as the China liaison for Vanderbilt University and the assistant dean for international affairs at Vanderbilt's Peabody College of Education and Human Development. In this role, she has lead the institutional efforts in working with universities and institutions worldwide, particularly in the Asia-Pacific Region, in research, faculty and student exchange, and professional development for school administrators.

**Stephen N. Elliott**

Stephen Elliott directs the Learning Sciences Institute at Arizona State University, which focuses on the generation and dissemination of research on the core human enterprises of learning and education broadly defined. Professor Elliott's research focuses on scale development and educational assessment practices. In particular, he has published articles on (a) the assessment of children's social skills and academic competence, (b) the use of testing accommodations and alternate assessment methods for evaluating the academic performance of students with disabilities for educational accountability, and (c) students' opportunities to learn the intended curriculum. Along with Vanderbilt colleagues, he also designed and validated the *Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED)* to evaluate the performance of principals and their influence on students' achievement.

**Andrew C. Porter**

Andy Porter is Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania and George and Diane Weiss Professor of Education. Trained as a statistician/psychometrician, he has been an active education researcher for more than 30 years and has led successful education research and development centers for 25 years. Porter currently chairs the assessment and accountability technical panels for the states of Ohio, Wisconsin and Missouri and serves on the technical panel for the State of Kentucky. His tools for measuring the content of instruction in K12 schools for the subjects of math, science, and English language arts are used in over 30 states. He is an elected member and vice president of the National Academy of Education, member of the National Assessment Governing Board, Lifetime National Associate of the National Academies, and past-President of the American Educational Research Association.