

A Framework
for the Assessment of

Learning-Centered Leadership

Andrew C. Porter
Ellen Goldring
Joseph Murphy
Stephen N. Elliott
Xiu Cravens

Vanderbilt University

Prepared for the Wallace
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With Wallace Foundation funding, in the summer of 2005 we began a three-year project to develop a set of instruments to assess the effectiveness of educational leadership (both individual and team). The purpose of this report is to present a model of education leadership assessment and our conception of leadership behaviors. The model and conception of leadership behavior will drive development of our assessment instrumentation. As will become clear, our focus is on the assessment of leadership behaviors; our leadership assessment system model shows how our focus on leadership behaviors fits within a larger context of leadership assessment, school performance, and student success.

We are in the early stages of our work. In Phase I, we draw on the research literature about school leadership to develop our conception of education leadership and our model. The conception then drives our development of assessment instrumentation. The next phase of our work involves field testing of the assessment, which is followed in Phase III with initiatives to disseminate the instrument, its uses, and its psychometric properties for those uses.

Leadership Assessment as a Critical Element in School Improvement

Leadership is an essential element of successful schools. The identification and development of effective leadership, however, has been significantly hampered by the paucity of technically sound tools for assessing and monitoring leadership performance. Our three-year project aims to develop and establish validity evidence for a standards-based leadership assessment system (our working title for the assessment system is VAL-Ed—Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education). VAL-Ed is conceptualized as a multi-component assessment system for measuring critical leadership behaviors of individual educators or teams of educators especially in urban settings for the purposes of diagnostic analysis, performance feedback, progress monitoring, and personnel decisions. The core of VAL-Ed is an inventory of leadership behaviors and a measure of value-added to student achievement. The results of VAL-Ed are likely to be a pair of profiles of key leadership behaviors interpretable from both norm-referenced and standards-referenced perspectives. Functionally, VAL-Ed is to yield valid performance information that can facilitate both formative and summative evaluation of the behaviors of leaders and leadership teams. We hypothesize that the process of responding to the assessment will be educative in its own right and may serve as a launch pad for professional development. Our goal is an assessment system that has the following properties: a) works well in a variety of settings and circumstances, b) is construct valid, c) is reliable, d) is feasible for widespread use, e) provides accurate and useful reporting of results, f) is unbiased, g) yields diagnostic profiles for formative purposes, h) can be used to measure progress over time in the development of leadership, and i) predicts important outcomes.

Developing educational leadership for school improvement is difficult work. As is the case with school improvement in general, success in changing educational leadership has been most noticeable when systematic plans have been crafted that target the leverage points for change. The most important leverage points for improvement in educational leadership are as follows: (1) standards, (2) licensure, (3) program accreditation, (4) professional development, and (5) leader evaluation and resultant consequences. To date, considerable work has unfolded over the first four of these leverage points for redefining school leadership. The widespread development and adoption of national Standards for School Leaders (ISLLC) by 40-plus states and all the major

professional associations in school administration, the complete overhaul of program accreditation (the NCATE process) based on those standards, the development of a standards-based national licensure examination by the ISLLC project (the ETS School Leaders Licensure Assessment), and new models for professional development linked to standards are examples of major initiatives.

Unfortunately, only minimal traction has been gained on the fifth critical leverage point, leadership assessment. As the Wallace Leadership Effectiveness Knowledge Exploration Committee charitably concluded, “Leadership effectiveness performance assessment is currently a nascent field” (p. 11). As long as leadership assessment continues to focus on the key values of the profession in the 20th century—maintaining stable operations and avoiding conflict—and is scaffolded on politics, management, governance, and organizational structure, our ability to develop a profession with leadership for learning at its core will be severely compromised. In short, we argue that leadership assessment is a significant “condition of leadership” impacting leaders’ behavior.

A Leadership Assessment System Model

Our model of a leadership assessment system (see Figure 1) attempts to capture in broad strokes how education leadership has and might be assessed. We show most, if not all, of the major constructs that might be the focus of leadership assessment and position our focus on leadership behaviors in that larger context. We do not attempt to diagram a full explanation for how school leadership leads to instructional improvement and subsequent student success (for such a model, see our literature review of school leadership). The model shows leadership knowledge and skills, personal characteristics, and values and beliefs as precursors of the actual leadership behaviors exhibited by individuals or teams in performing their leadership responsibilities. These leadership behaviors then lead to school performance on core components such as providing a rigorous curriculum and high-quality instruction. These school performances, in turn, lead to student success. Here our thinking is to focus on value-added, for example, improvements in student achievement, student attendance, student graduation rates, and college enrollment. Thus, in assessing a leader or leadership team, one might focus on knowledge and skills, personal characteristics, and beliefs, but that is not our focus. In contrast, our assessment of education leadership focuses on leadership behaviors defined by the intersection of six core components of school performance and six key processes which together make up our conception of principal and team school leadership (described below).

Our assessment model does not envision direct effects of leadership behaviors on student success. Rather, the leadership behaviors lead to changes in school performance, which in turn lead to student success. Thus, in assessing the quality of education leadership one might focus on behaviors as we propose to do, but we also propose to give weight to how successful the school is in terms of its core components (e.g., does it have a rigorous curriculum?). We will also give weight to student success in the assessment of the quality of education leadership (e.g., does the school have a relatively large value-added to student achievement?).

Our model posits that there are aspects of the context within which leadership and schooling takes place that might bear on leadership evaluation. For example, everything else being equal,

the evaluation of leadership quality might appropriately take into account the amount of experience of the leadership. For example, are we assessing a first-year principal or a seasoned principal, a newly established leadership team or a seasoned team? One might expect and demand higher quality leadership from an experienced leader or leadership team. Similarly, length of time in the school might appropriately be taken into account. A new leader or leadership team to a school may not have yet been able to establish patterns of behavior in their early work that they will establish over the longer haul. Even more likely, the effects of leadership may not be seen immediately in school performance or student success. Rather, good leadership should lead to increasing quality of school performance over time, and only after improved school performance has been in place can one expect to see that improved school performance reflected in improved student success.

Student body composition, staff composition, level of schooling, and geographic setting of the school can all have bearing on the challenges to providing high-quality education leadership. Taking these contextual features into account in evaluating leadership, however, has its dangers. On the one hand, evaluation of education leadership should undoubtedly take into account the challenges presented to providing high-quality leadership, high-quality school performance, and high-quality student success. For example, in the early days of taking over a troubled school, even the most effective educational leadership can not be expected to be immediately apparent or have immediate effects on school performance and student success. At the same time, these contextual factors should not be used as an excuse for poor quality leadership.

Our intention is to focus our assessments of education leadership on leader behaviors. We do, however, expect our assessments of education leadership to give some weight to school performance and student success, and we do expect our assessments of education leaders to take into account additional contextual factors such as their experience and length of time in the current school as well as the challenges to high-quality leadership presented by the school. Here, our assessment will likely employ rubrics for scoring a body of evidence (e.g., work samples, student test scores, and other outcomes measures such as graduation rates). The shaded portions of our assessment model reflect these complexities.

Conception of Leadership Behaviors

Based on our reading of the literature and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, our conception of leadership behavior is two dimensional; the behaviors we propose assessing and the corresponding instrument development will be defined by the intersection of the two dimensions.

Core Components of School Performance

The first dimension consists of core components of school performance and has the following elements:

High Standards for Student Performance—There are individual, team, and school goals for rigorous student academic and social learning.

Rigorous Curriculum (content)—There is ambitious academic content provided to all students in core academic subjects.

Quality Instruction (pedagogy)—There are effective instructional practices that maximize student academic and social learning.

Culture of Learning & Professional Behavior—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.

Connections to External Communities—There are linkages to people and institutions in the community that advance academic and social learning.

Systemic Performance Accountability—Leadership holds itself and others responsible for realizing high standards of performance for student academic and social learning. There is individual and collective responsibility among the professional staff and students.

Key Processes of Leadership

The second dimension defines the leadership behaviors that can lead to producing each core component of school performance. These key processes are

Planning—Articulate shared direction and coherent policies, practices, and procedures for realizing high standards of student performance.

Implementing—Engage people, ideas, and resources to put into practice the activities necessary to realize high standards for student performance.

Supporting—Create enabling conditions; secure and use the financial, political, technological, human, and social capital necessary to promote academic and social learning.

Advocating—Act on behalf of the diverse needs of students within and beyond the school.

Communicating—Develop, utilize, and maintain systems of exchange among members of the school and with its external communities.

Monitoring—Systematically collect and analyze data to make judgments that guide decisions and actions for continuous improvement.

The leadership behaviors we wish to assess are defined at the intersection of these two dimensions (see Figure 2). According to our conception, for example, we would assess the extent to which the school leadership plans for a rigorous curriculum (the intersection between planning and rigorous curriculum) or implements high-quality instruction (the intersection between implementing and high quality instruction).

We realize that the language we use to state each level of each dimension and their definitions is important. While we have spent considerable time and care deriving the two dimensions, the specific levels of each dimension, and the language to describe them, the specifics of our conception are likely to continue to evolve. As just one example, in the spring of 2006 we convened separately a panel of researchers and a panel of practitioners to review our conceptual framework; what is presented here reflects changes based on advice we received.

Conclusion

As we pursue our work to develop an assessment of education leadership and establish the assessment's psychometric properties, we have developed an assessment model and conception of leadership behaviors defined by the intersection of six core components and six key processes. The conception will drive our development of the assessment of leadership behaviors. Initial work will be the development of a behavior assessment instrument that can be completed by the school leader or school leadership team, teachers in the school, the supervisor of the leader/leadership team, and perhaps even others, including parents and community leaders (i.e., a 360 assessment). A sample of leadership behaviors from each of the cells in our two-dimensional conception will comprise the assessment instrument. The instrument will ask respondents to indicate the extent to which school leadership exhibits the appropriate behaviors. We envision the results of the assessment will be reported in terms of a profile on core components and a profile on key processes. Thus, leadership might be especially effective in behaviors leading to productive connections to external communities (a core component) or a bit weak on monitoring and evaluating in pursuit of the core components of school success.

Our goal is an assessment instrument measuring leadership behaviors that can be interpreted in both a norm-referenced and a standards-referenced way. With those goals in mind, we will be conducting a substantial field test of the assessment system that will provide initial norms as well as establish the psychometric properties of the assessment system. In addition, we will conduct a standards-setting study to establish performance standards. Our initial thinking is to use a holistic/body-of-work approach to set our proficiency standards, drawing on a panel of education leaders and resulting in classifications such as distinguished, proficient, and novice (the details of this performance setting are yet to be determined).

As our work moves forward, we will continue to vet our conception of education leadership and our instrument development with our expert panel of practicing education leaders and our expert panel of education leadership researchers. Prior to field testing the instrument, draft instruments will be pilot tested through two rounds of cognitive interviews and critiqued by a bias review committee and a feasibility review committee.

With this paper, we invite your feedback on our initial conception of education leadership.

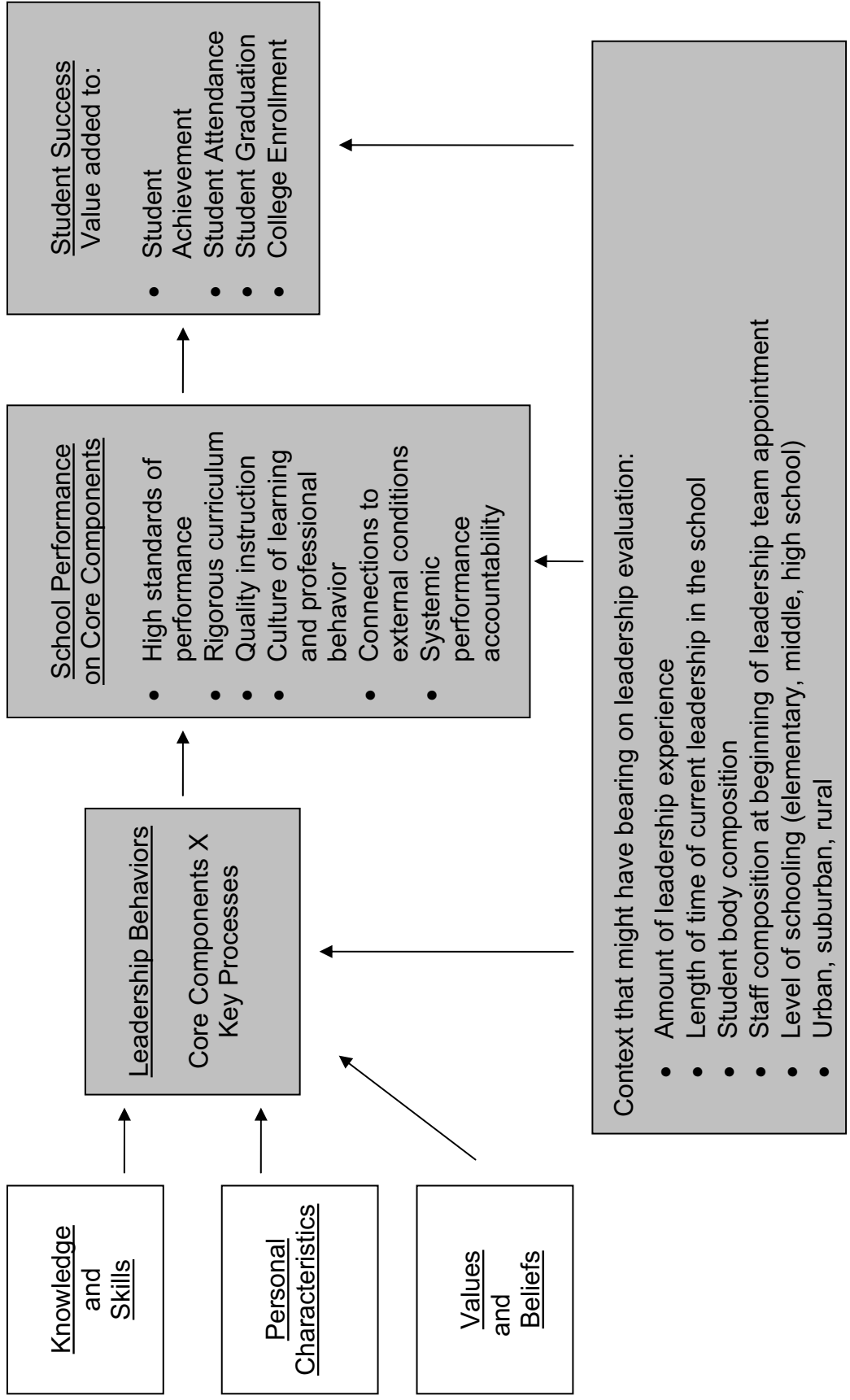


Figure 1. Model for Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education

Key Processes						
Core Components	Planning	Implementing	Supporting	Advocating	Communicating	Monitoring
High Standards for Student Performance						
Rigorous Curriculum (content)						
Quality Instruction (pedagogy)						
Culture of Learning & Professional Behavior						
Connections to External Communities						
Systemic Performance Accountability						

Figure 2. Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education: Core Components & Key Processes