ISLLC 2015: Model Policy Standards for Educational Leaders

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Introduction

A historic shift is happening in the field of educational leadership. Policy makers, parents and other constituents of public schools are increasingly holding education leaders accountable for the academic success and personal well-being of every student. No longer is it enough to develop and implement policies, manage finances, maintain a spotless building and keep the busses running on time. Education leaders must also provide conclusive evidence that the children in their care are being better prepared for college, careers and life.

School principals and district superintendents are not the only ones feeling the pressure of increased expectations. Today, education leadership is a collaborative effort distributed among a number of professionals in schools and districts. School-level leaders include administrators, teacher leaders and department chairs. District leaders hold positions such as superintendents, curriculum supervisors, talent management specialists, assessment directors, principal supervisors and professional learning providers. Their titles may vary, but they are all charged with the same fundamental challenge: Transform public schools to increase student learning and achievement.

Realizing better outcomes for students is hard work. Clear and consistent standards can guide that herculean effort. The refreshed ISLLC 2015 standards clarify the most important work and responsibilities of learning-focused leaders operating in today's education context. Grounded in both research and effective practice, these standards provide a framework for state departments of education and districts alike to understand how to best prepare, support and evaluate education leaders in their efforts to help every child reach his or her fullest potential. By adopting or adapting these standards, states and districts can establish policies and practices that will guide the career trajectories of leaders throughout the public education system. The standards can also inform how schools and districts recruit and cultivate leaders who can build teams that share and distribute the responsibilities required for high levels of student learning and achievement to occur.

In *Learning from Leadership*, a landmark 2010 report by The Wallace Foundation that links effective school leadership to student achievement, authors Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla Wahlstrom and Stephen Anderson accurately describe the work of transformational education leaders today:

> Leadership is all about organizational improvement; more specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question, and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions. Our general definition of leadership highlights these points: It is about direction and influence. Stability is the goal of what is often called management. Improvement is the goal of leadership.

A transformed public education system requires a new vision of leadership, one that goes beyond management and asks leaders to maintain a laser-like focus on student learning as they pursue a course of continuous improvement in their day-to-day work. ISLLC 2015 outlines such a vision of leadership. These standards can ensure that education leaders are equipped with the vital knowledge, skills, and dispositions to transform our schools into places that empower students to take ownership of their learning, emphasize the learning of content and the application of knowledge to real-world problems, and value the differences each student brings to the classroom. Our public education system--and the millions of children it serves--are counting on them to take on this significant challenge.

Policy Standards: Defining the Core Practices of Transformational Leaders
Our understanding of effective educational leadership has grown significantly since the first ISLLC standards were released in 1996. ISLLC 2015 has been recast to better incorporate the expanding body of research and best practices from the field. The standards are designed as a broad set of national guidelines that states may adopt, adapt or use as a model for developing their own standards. While research on the use and impact of the ISLLC standards is not as robust as we would like, it is fair to say that they have blanketed the profession of education leadership. In particular, they currently provide the policy scaffolding for school leadership in 45 states and the District of Columbia.

Standards ensure that everyone involved in the development of effective leadership practice--state policy makers, preparation programs, professional associations, professional learning providers, and individual practitioners--shares a clear understanding of what's expected of education leaders. The standards can then serve as the foundation for an aligned system that prepares, licenses, develops, supports and evaluates them effectively.

Indeed, state departments of education are already deeply engaged in policy work surrounding the preparation, support and evaluation of education leaders. For example, the majority of states now have processes in place to guide school leaders in annual cycles of student assessment, analyzing organizational effectiveness and improvement planning. One key objective of ISLLC 2015 is to challenge states, accrediting bodies, preparation programs, districts and individual practitioners to heed the standards' framework in answering several essential questions about education leadership:

- What knowledge, skills, dispositions and experiences do aspiring education leaders need to lead effective student- and results-focused schools?
- How does a district or school evaluate the knowledge, skills and dispositions of leaders to improve student learning and achievement?

- How does a state or district develop, implement, and evaluate coaching and mentoring of leaders?
- How does a state or district develop, support and assess continued professional learning and growth of education leaders?
- How does a state, district or school evaluate the knowledge, skills and dispositions of leaders in meeting expectations?
- How do individual leaders develop their professional knowledge, skills and dispositions?
- How do education leaders recruit, grow, and support leadership teams and teacher leaders to share the important work that needs to occur in schools and districts to enhance student learning and achievement?

Developing the Policy Standards

Ultimately, the quality of a set of standards depends upon the input on which it is based. The standards flow from an 18-month revision process that took a comprehensive look at the new education leadership landscape. The work included a rigorous review of empirical research about effective leadership and leadership in high-performing schools and systems. The bibliography lists a small but important sample of the extensive research base used to ground the standards. The full research base has been compiled into an online database at [INSERT URL HERE].

In addition to reviewing the research, the process also sought input from practitioners in the field. Focus groups and surveys captured the ideas and opinions of more than 1,000 practitioners at schools, districts and preparation programs around the country who shared insights about the role of the principal, superintendent and other education leaders. Their opinions helped to identify gaps between the real, day-to-day work of education leaders and the 2008 standards and functions.

The research review and practitioner feedback also identified key practices of transformational leaders, which informed the 2015 standards. These key practices are:

- Promoting a strong, shared student-centered vision and being a moral compass in providing direction
- Using data to guide their work, while attending to equity issues and the individual needs of every student
- Building individual leader and teacher capacity and developing the collective capacity of the staff to improve teaching, learning and leadership in the school
- Fostering a collaborative work environment and developing productive relationships with staff, particularly in regards to implementing local, state and national reforms
- Promoting on-going improvement, while looking to the future direction of education and the school

Finally, the standards were informed by core education values such as equity and ethical conduct that are essential to leadership practice but do not lend themselves as easily to empirical research.

Using the Standards
ISLLC 2015 will come to life as they guide the development and implementation of policies and practices at the state and local level that ensure education leaders have the specific skills, knowledge and dispositions to reach their fullest potential. To make this work most effective, states and districts should first bring all affected stakeholders to the table to discuss the standards and assess how best to adopt or adapt them given their local context. Seeking input from all of the stakeholders builds buy-in. It helps ensure that they understand the qualities desired in education leaders and that they will support the policies and practices established as a result.

State policy makers can use the standards to strengthen all aspects of an aligned system, from preparation and licensure through ongoing professional learning and evaluation. ISLLC 2015 will help shape the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, formerly the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards, which will guide the preparation of aspiring education leaders. In addition, NELP 2015 will inform the process through which preparation programs seek accreditation from the Council for the Accreditation for Educator Preparation. States can also use the standards to inform licensure requirements and the development of state licensing assessments. The ISLLC 2015 standards will also serve as the foundation for the Principal Supervisor standards that will be released later in 2015.

At the local level, districts and school boards can use the new standards to assess whether a leadership candidate has the right blend of knowledge, skills and dispositions to work effectively with teachers and increase student learning. Once such professionals are on the job, the standards can be used to guide early-career mentoring and coaching to hone their developing leadership capabilities.

The standards apply not just to new hires, however, but to all leaders as they progress in their careers. Current school and district education leaders can employ them as a compass to assess and improve their own practice and clarify professional learning goals. In turn, those designing professional learning can use the standards to ensure that professional learning opportunities meet the needs of leaders and facilitate their growth. The standards can also help states and districts articulate valued leadership behaviors and evaluate school leaders accordingly.

It's important to note that the standards describe the responsibilities of all school and district leaders, including principals, superintendents, and teacher leaders. They also apply to every phase of leadership, from preparation of aspiring administrators to professional learning for seasoned leaders. As such, they are general guidelines for the

profession. The duties and actions of leaders in specific roles, such as a school principal, must be further articulated.

ISLLC 2015 Standards: A Transformational Vision of Education Leadership

The primary goal of schools and districts is to ensure student learning and achievement and to better prepare students for college, careers and productive lives as contributing members of society. Studies show that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on student learning, according to an extensive review of the research by Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris and David Hopkins. Recognizing the integral role that education leaders play in student outcomes, the standards emphasize the core leadership responsibilities that are most critical to improving the academic success and personal well-being of children. Theory, effective practice and research suggest transformational leaders:

1. Build a shared vision of student success and well-being.

2. Champion and support instruction and assessment that maximizes student learning and achievement.

3. Manage and develop staff members' professional skills and practices in order to drive student learning and achievement.

4. Cultivate a caring and inclusive school community dedicated to student learning, academic success and the personal well-being of every student.

5. Coordinate resources, time, structures and roles effectively to build the instructional capacity of teachers and other staff.

6. Engage families and the outside community to promote and support student success.

7. Administer and manage operations efficiently and effectively.

Carrying out the actions associated with these seven key indicators of transformational leadership is likely to exceed the knowledge, capabilities and time of a single heroic leader. Instead, it will require tapping the expertise of an entire team, including individuals both within and beyond a school or district, and building their capacity to take on new responsibilities.

When compared to the 2008 standards, the new standards give more prominence to certain leadership domains, such as a school's instructional program, culture and talent management. In addition, ISLLC 2015 reflects a clear logic of improvement-focused educational leadership. The standards don't stand in isolation but are interdependent and integrated. For example, a shared vision drives the development of instruction, which in turn sets direction for continuing education for staff and helps create a collaborative work

environment centered on student needs. Figure 2 demonstrates the integrated nature of the seven standards.

Figure 2 The Integrated Nature of the Seven ISLLC 2015 Standards

Figure 2: Educational Leadership Standards Conceptual Map

Foundations of Transformational Leadership

"Every school leader should regularly ask the question: "What impact do I have on my school's success through my knowledge, skills, and dispositions -- not simply through the programs I've helped initiate?" Too often, principals share best practices with colleagues in terms of programs and approaches to leading, but never get around to reflecting on and discussing the personal ingredients for their success, or their strengths or weaknesses -- which more often than not are the very things that enabled a best practice to be successfully adopted." (NASSP, 2015).

Education leaders need specific knowledge, skills and dispositions to transform schools and improve outcomes for the students in their care. States must build and strengthen all three so that education leaders can reach the standards set for them. In preparing, supporting and evaluating leaders, states and districts must establish policies and programs that equip leaders with the knowledge they need to critically examine schools and districts as complex systems and carry out the improvements that are expected of them. States must also help leaders sharpen their skills to assess existing operations,

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design new approaches, implement them and evaluate the outcome to make further improvements.
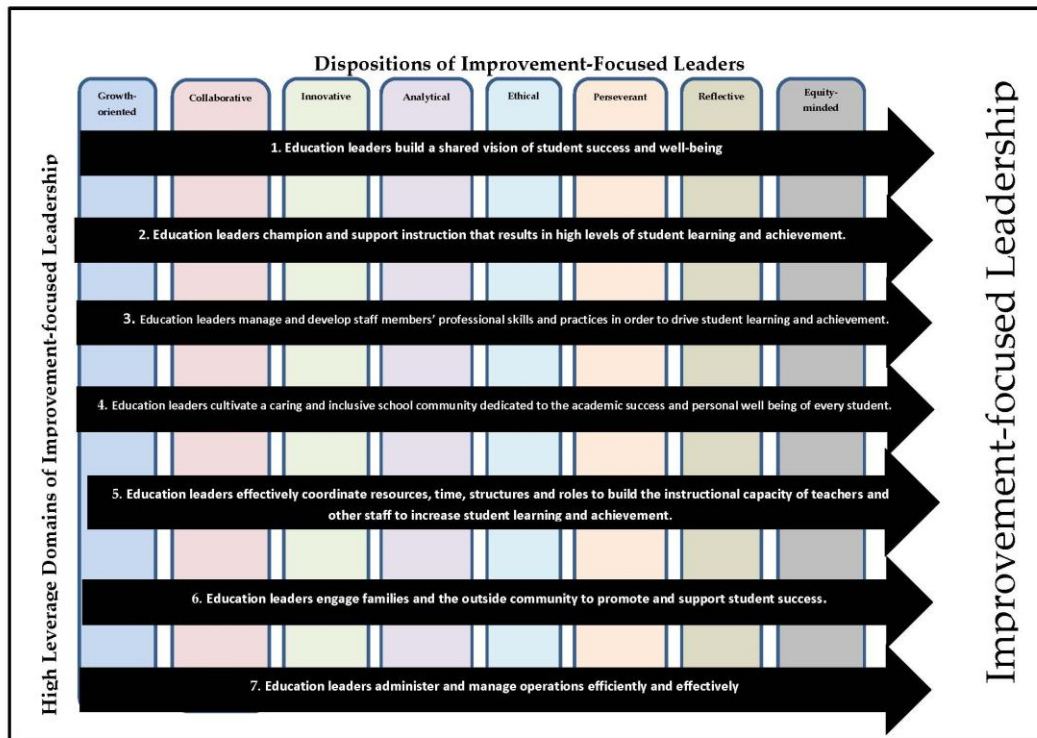
Lastly, states must nurture a mindset in education leaders that motivates them to question established ways of working and pursue new paths forward when existing practices do not lead to desired results. States must establish expectations and policies that help leaders develop and strengthen eight key dispositions that are essential to their success:

Dispositions of Transformational Education Leaders

1. **Growth-oriented:** Transformational education leaders believe that students, education professionals, educational organizations and the community can continuously grow and improve to realize a shared vision for student success through dedication and hard work.

2. **Collaborative:** Transformational education leaders share the responsibility and the work for realizing a shared vision of student success.

3. **Innovative:** Transformational education leaders break from established ways of doing things to pursue fundamentally new and more effective approaches when needed.

4. **Analytical:** Transformational education leaders gather evidence and engage in rigorous data analysis to develop, manage, refine and evaluate new and more effective approaches.

5. **Ethical:** Transformational education leaders explicitly and consciously follow laws, policies, and principles of right and wrong in everything they do.

6. **Perseverant:** Transformational education leaders are courageous and persevere in doing what is best for students even when challenged by fear, risk and doubt.

7. **Reflective:** Transformational education leaders re-examine their practices and dispositions habitually in order to develop the "wisdom of practice" needed to succeed in pursuing new and more effective approaches.

8. **Equity-minded:** Transformational education leaders ensure that all students are treated fairly, equitably, and have access to excellent teachers and necessary resources.

Figure 3 demonstrates how these dispositions are essential to the work of educational leadership as they extend across each of the seven ISLLC 2015 standards.

Figure 3. Dispositions of Leaders across the ISLLC Standards

Dispositions of Improvement-Focused Leaders

| Growth-oriented | Collaborative | Innovative | Analytical | Ethical | Perseverant | Reflective | Equity-minded |

High Leverage Domains of Improvement-focused Leadership

1. Education leaders build a shared vision of student success and well-being

2. Education leaders champion and support instruction that results in high levels of student learning and achievement.

3. Education leaders manage and develop staff members' professional skills and practices in order to drive student learning and achievement.

4. Education leaders cultivate a caring and inclusive school community dedicated to the academic success and personal well being of every student.

5. Education leaders effectively coordinate resources, time, structures and roles to build the instructional capacity of teachers and other staff to increase student learning and achievement.

6. Education leaders engage families and the outside community to promote and support student success.

7. Education leaders administer and manage operations efficiently and effectively

Improvement-focused Leadership

A Focus on Continuous Improvement

The standards lay out the core responsibilities of effective leaders in order to drive student learning and achievement. To carry out these responsibilities, leaders must approach their day-to-day work in terms of continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is achieved by employing a strategic cycle of actions. First, leaders must *study* and analyze data and evidence to understand a situation and identify its strengths and weaknesses. Then, they must *develop* the rationale and associated plan for addressing the weaknesses and building on strengths. They *enact* the plan next, followed by *evaluating* the outcome. The cycle then repeats itself, allowing problems that were once invisible to emerge and be addressed. Through such an iterative process, approaches get revised, refined and yield progressively better results. Figure 4 illustrates the cycle of actions.

Figure 4. Elements of Improvement-Focused Leadership Practice

Elements of Improvement-Focused Leadership Practice
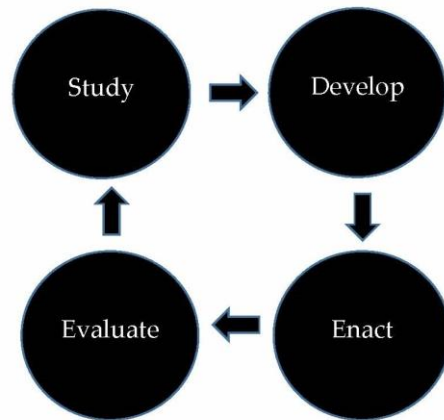
To see how such a focused learning and improvement cycle plays out in real life, consider a principal and his instructional leadership team examining year-end achievement data for English language learners at their diverse urban high school. The data reveal an achievement gap between ELL students and the mainstream student population. This discovery prompts the leadership team to review the course-taking patterns of ELL students, which indicate that few take advanced courses in English, mathematics, and science because they lack the prerequisite language skills and course content. Based on this insight, the leadership team designs and implements a new accelerated preparatory program for ELL students to get them ready for advanced courses. The team also arranges extra support for ELL students once they're enrolled in these classes. Following implementation, the team evaluates its efforts annually and refines as necessary to continuously improve student outcomes.

This type of focused learning and improvement cycle is embedded in the 2015 standards. In addition to describing the role and responsibilities of an effective education leader, each standard includes a series of "actions" that a leader committed to transformational change must take. The actions follow a rough sequence, corresponding to the four stages of the improvement cycle--study, develop, enact and evaluate.

ISLLC 2015 Standards

ISLLC 2015 Standards

Standard 1. Education leaders build a shared vision of student academic success and well-being.

Education leaders build consensus among all stakeholders of what students should know and do as a consequence of their participation in schools, as well as what it means for students to become well-adjusted, contributing members of society. Building such a vision can require reconciling possibly competing perspectives among diverse members of the school community.

Actions

- Foster an open, tolerant and trusting culture that values the viewpoints of all members of the school community.

- Encourage an open dialogue that examines existing and new expectations for students' educational experiences and outcomes, gaps in existing expectations, and opportunities for improvement.

- Collaboratively develop, promote, implement, and steward a shared vision and mission for quality teaching and learning.

- Translate the vision of students' experiences into measurable goals and outcomes.

- Ensure that the student-focused vision guides all school and system-wide continuous improvement efforts.

- Monitor and evaluate progress toward goals and revise plans as needed.

- Act in ways that consistently reflect the vision, mission and values of the school/district.

Standard 2. Education leaders champion and support instruction and assessment that maximizes student learning and achievement.

Education leaders promote the use of rigorous curricula, which set high expectations for students and are aligned to academic standards. They seek to maximize student learning through authentic and differentiated pedagogy, systems of support and effective assessment strategies that inform instruction. They develop and coordinate these systems in ways that create opportunities to personalize the academic program to meet individual student needs.

Actions

- Engage educators and other constituents in critically examining the effectiveness of existing approaches to instruction, curriculum, assessments and evidence of student learning and achievement.

- Collaborate with educators and other constituents to determine whether existing approaches align with the new shared vision and goals for all students' educational experiences and outcomes.

- Identify evidence-based instructional strategies to strengthen existing methods or to implement new ones.

- Enact effective programs by giving clear guidance to staff, providing ongoing support for their professional practice, and offering a full range of integrated services and interventions to meet the diverse cultural and learning needs of all students.

- Employ technology in the service of teaching and learning.

- Emphasize assessment systems congruent with understandings of child development and technical standards of measurement.

- Use assessment data in ways that are appropriate to their intended use and within their technical limitations.

- Enlist families and the community in supporting student success within instructional programs.

- Monitor and evaluate the impact of instructional programs on student learning and achievement and make adjustments as necessary.

Standard 3. Education leaders manage and develop staff members' professional skills and practices in order to drive student learning and achievement.

Education leaders support the professional learning of effective, caring teachers and leaders who are able to work with students productively in the classroom and who can collaboratively lead a school or district. Building an effective staff takes careful personnel recruitment, selection, assignment of responsibilities, support, evaluation and retention. Developing the professional skills of educators involves such activities as coaching, creating supportive conditions and fostering a learning community.

Actions

- Manage talent through effective personnel recruitment, selection, assignment of responsibilities, support, and retention.

- Engage staff members in identifying the types of professional knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to meet students' learning needs and to effectively implement instructional programs.

- Evaluate existing professional knowledge, skills and dispositions with staff members to determine areas of improvement.

- Employ valid systems of supervision and evaluation that are anchored in research and provide accurate, reliable information.

- Protect teaching and learning from disruptive forces.

- Provide high-quality, actionable, and salient feedback to all staff members, and facilitate collegial exchanges of feedback.

- Work with staff to design and implement high-quality professional learning that is based on best practices of adult learning and development, coordinates with instructional programs, and addresses the needs of all students and staff members.

- Develop and implement a personal professional growth plan for continuous improvement.

- Support individual staff members in developing and implementing their professional growth plans.

Standard 4. Education leaders cultivate a caring and inclusive school community dedicated to student learning, academic success and personal well-being of every student.

Education leaders create healthy, safe, and supportive school environments in which students are known, accepted, valued and empowered to reach their fullest potential. Leaders do so by fostering a culture defined by high expectations, trust and a collective sense of responsibility for the academic, social and emotional needs of all students.

Actions

- Engage students and staff to examine existing relationships with and among students.

- Solicit input from all stakeholders on how to strengthen relationships with and among students and create a climate of care, trust and high academic expectations.

- Model desired behaviors, values and beliefs in their own day-to-day work.

- Instill a sense of belonging among students by recognizing and reinforcing behaviors, values and beliefs that ensure that each student is an active member of and takes responsibility for the school.

- Provide adequate, relevant, and sustained academic and social supports that drive expectations, student learning and academic success.

- Provide students with academic and social experiences that are congruent with the cultures and languages of the community.

- Monitor changes in norms, values and beliefs among students, families, staff and constituents and make adjustments as appropriate.

Standard 5. Education leaders effectively coordinate resources, time, structures and roles to build the instructional capacity of teachers and other staff.

Education leaders strive to ensure that staff have the requisite organizational resources, time, structures and roles to increase student learning and achievement. They think creatively about class schedules, student and teacher assignments, the use of technology in the classroom, and the allocation of time and space for staff to exchange ideas and collaborate.

Actions

- Explore with staff how existing resources, roles and structures affect instruction, professional growth, and student learning and achievement.

- Innovate the allocation of resources and the design of roles and structures with staff to better support instruction, professional growth and student learning and achievement.

- Build support for roles and structures that results in teachers and other staff making effective use of them.

- Evaluate the effects of changes to resources, time, structures and roles on student learning and achievement and make adjustments as necessary.

Standard 6. Education leaders engage families and the outside community to promote and support student success.

Education leaders build and sustain productive relationships with families and other community partners in the government, non-profit and private sectors. They promote understanding, appreciation and use of the community's diverse cultural, social and intellectual resources. They communicate regularly and openly with families and community partners, and seek their input and support for continuous improvement efforts.

Actions

- Engage staff, families and community partners to assess existing relationships and the extent to which those relationships support continuous improvement efforts.

- Collaborate with external partners who can help make a positive impact on student outcomes.

- Create an environment that values the diverse cultures in the school and community and welcomes family engagement in the learning of students.

- Develop partnerships with families to support student learning and achievement outside of school.

- Facilitate two-way communication with families and other key external partners.

- Secure resources to establish external partnerships that support the school's ambitions and designs for improvement.

- Advocate for school/district needs to policy makers and the public.

- Regularly examine the contributions of external partners to continuous improvement efforts.

- Gauge the effectiveness of efforts to communicate and engage families and other constituents.

Standard 7. Education leaders administer and manage operations efficiently and effectively.

Education leaders are responsible for the effective, efficient, equitable and ethical management of schools and districts. Their responsibilities include garnering and allocating resources, monitoring and addressing internal and external regulatory requirements, developing organizational policies and practices, and other administrative duties that maintain the continued viability of the school or district.

Actions

- Involve staff in a thorough review of existing administrative functions, including talent management, school discipline and safety, finance and budgeting, information management and compliance monitoring, to assess issues of equity, effectiveness and efficiency.

- Determine with staff how well the management of the school and district supports the school and district's vision and values.

- Design management responsibilities, structures and systems that are equitable, culturally responsive and prioritize needs of all students.

- Understand, develop, implement, and advocate for effective policies that are in the best interest of all students.

- Be a responsible steward of public funds, and seek and secure other sources of revenue as needed.

- Coordinate administrative and management work with efforts to develop professional practices of educators and to build community.

- Evaluate the quality of administrative and managerial functions and their contributions to system-wide operations and make adjustments as necessary.

Appendix: Glossary of Terms

Actions: The functions or activities for which a person is responsible. Each standard includes a series of actions that an effective school leader must pursue to continuously improve and successfully achieve that particular standard.

Content Standards: Guidelines for states and districts about the specific knowledge and capabilities of a school leader in a particular role (e.g., principal, principal supervisor, superintendent, etc.). An example of content standards is the Model Principal Supervisor Standards under development by Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration.

Dispositions: Attributes or qualities that distinguish a person.

Improvement-focused educational leadership: A style of leadership that pursues continuous improvement in all aspects of education in order to increase student learning and achievement.

Policy Standards: High-level, broad guidelines that describe what any school leader needs to know and be able to do regardless of job title or tenure. Policy standards outline leadership knowledge, skills and dispositions, not specific job responsibilities.

Preparation Standards: Guidelines on the knowledge and skills that aspiring leaders must acquire in leader preparation programs. These standards can also guide accreditation of preparation programs.

Professional learning: The act of developing the knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions that practicing educators need to help students perform at higher levels.

Transformational leadership: A style of leadership that identifies a needed change, conveys a shared vision to guide that change, and supports and empowers others as they help carry out the change and build their own leadership capacity.

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