How do we prepare and evaluate principals?

Challenges and Successes

A CREATE White Paper (October 2015 Annual Meeting)

The Consortium for Research on Educational Assessment and Teaching Effectiveness (CREATE) provides a current international perspective on issues pertaining to teaching and assessment. Authored by members of the CREATE Board of Directors who provide a range of experiences and expertise, this paper is designed to facilitate reflection and encourage dialogue in considering how we develop and support the important role of principals in our schools.

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School-level leadership has received increasing attention as researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers across the globe have come to realize the direct impact that school leaders have on teaching and learning (Hallinger & Huber, 2012). Since its inception in 1995, CREATE has been on the forefront of contributing to the discussion of school leadership, in particular focusing on the development of standards and educator evaluation. For this paper, we provide an overview of the current context of the principalship in four different countries highlighting common elements as well as points of departure in Australia, Canada, China, and the United States. Specifically we focus on principal preparation, the development of standards for principals, and evaluation trends.

The Australian Context

“The quality of training principals receive before they assume their positions, and the continuing professional development they get once they are hired and throughout their careers, has a lot to do with whether school leaders can meet the increasingly tough expectations of these jobs” (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007, p.1).

The Australian context for principal preparation and evaluation is emerging in similar ways to the U.S. While formal principal certification is managed by each state, the move toward national standards
and national processes has evolved in a promising direction. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is the country’s leader and authorized manager of the standards process.

If Australia were a U.S state, it would rank third behind California and Texas (and just in front of Florida) in population, number of schools and numbers of principals. There are about 9,400 schools across primary, secondary, combined and special schools in the country enrolling 3.7 million students; with about 70% government schools, 18% Catholic and 11 % Independents. (Australian Bureaus of Statistics, 2014). In Australia, Catholic and Independent schools receive direct government financial support per student.

The Australian Professional Standard for Principals

“All principal preparation programs need to be totally aligned to the “Standard “so that new and aspiring principals are reflecting on practice and moving towards leadership.” (AITSL, 2015)

The Australian Professional Standard for Principals (the ‘Standard’) was developed in 2011 by AITSL. The Standard document sets forth what principals are obliged to take on as their charge. The Standard is organized into three Leadership Requirements and five domains of Professional Practice. Since their first release a section on Leadership Profiles was added that further details the Requirements and Practices (AITSL, 2014). “Principals and aspiring principals can use the Profiles to help them grow and develop as school leaders. The most effective leaders see learning as central to their professional lives” (p. 3). The Standard’s Leadership Requirements are Vision and values; Knowledge and understanding; and Personal qualities and social and interpersonal skills. The Standard’s five Professional Practices are: Leading teaching and learning; Developing self and others; Leading improvement, innovation and change; Leading the management of the school; and Engaging and working with the community (p. 2).

As a way to operationalize the standards, a Profiles process was added to the original standards document. These include the following domains: Operational; Relational; Strategic; and Systemic. As a way to evaluate these Profiles, the following categories of how principals can use these Profiles has emerged and can be the basis for evaluation: Self-reflection; Professional growth; Professional learning
programs; Selection and recruitment; Talent development and succession; and Performance review (p. 24-27).

The Standard has deliberately not been developed as a summative evaluation tool. Rather the Standard is evolving as a tool to: Provide a framework for professional learning; Provide a basis for attracting, preparing, developing and supporting principals for leading 21stcentury schools; Guiding self-reflection, self-assessment and development; and Being a guide to inform the management of self and others (AITSL, 2011).

Because of the emerging nature of the development of the Standard, it is too early to determine whether the Standard will be linked to the already available value-added measures available related to student performance and combined into a more U.S.-like evaluative tool used to rate and rank principals. At this point, the purity of the standards and the process is an optimistic lighthouse in the other quagmire of high stakes assessments around the United Kingdom and the United States.

The Canadian Context

As with public education in Canada, there is no single national Canadian context for principal preparation and evaluation. Rather, each province has its own set of requirements, regulations, and standards for school administrators. Common across provinces is the requirement that all school administrators have a valid teaching certificate for the province in which they work. Beyond this requirement, the qualifications for becoming a school administrator are not consistent. Some provinces require school administrators to have a graduate degree, while others require future administrators to complete an educational leadership program, often at the local level. For example, it is common in Alberta for local school boards to have their own leadership programs. “These leadership programs are designed to develop leaders within the school authority,” allowing the hiring of current staff, who already have local context and experience, into administrative positions (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2009). Ontario has a relatively specific set of requirements for eligibility to be a school principal: five years of teaching experience, certification in three divisions (primary, junior, intermediate, senior), two Specialist
or Honour Specialist additional qualifications or a master's degree, and the completion the Principal's Qualification Program. The Principal's Qualification Program is offered by Ontario universities, teachers' federations, and principals' associations.

Adding to the variation, school administrators in some provinces (e.g., Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba) are part of the provincial teachers’ federation (union). In Manitoba, the Council of School Leaders has a partnership with the Manitoba Teachers’ Society. In other provinces, principals are part of a separate body, and this body typically provides a support rather than regulatory role (e.g., British Columbia Principals’ and Vice Principals’ Association (BCPVPA), Ontario Principals’ Council (OPC)). Lastly, there is a Canadian Association of Principals (CAP) whose role is to provide a national unified voice for school administrators across the country. The CAP has no actual authority.

Given the variability in educational governance across provinces, there does not exist a single national set of regulations or professional standards for school administrators. As one example, school administrators in Ontario are regulated by the Ontario College of Teachers, a self-regulatory body that certifies, governs and regulates teachers and administrators. The regulatory aspect of the OCT is focused on issues of misconduct rather than ongoing professional practice. Similar external regulatory bodies for principals do not exist in other provinces. As a result, there are no centralized procedures in place to monitor and evaluate school principals in terms of their work performance.

This lack of formal, external monitoring and evaluation of school administrators is consistent with the overall approach to public education throughout Canada. Canadian provinces have not implemented high-stakes external accountability or value added models of teacher or school evaluation. Rather, models of education accountability throughout the country are focused on professional self-accountability or self-developed school and board improvement plans. The foundation for this “Canadian” approach is the belief that Canadian educators are well-trained, dedicated professionals who will act in a professional manner. Educators do not need a “threat” of evaluation but rather an opportunity to develop their skills over time. This same philosophy is found with respect to school administrators. As a result, professional expectations for school administrators are most commonly articulated in job
descriptions developed by local school boards as noted by the province of Alberta, “provincial legislation does not specify the competencies required of a school principal.” There have been efforts to develop Standards of Practice for school leaders within provincial ministries or supporting associations (e.g., BCPVPA). Where present, these Standards are not considered regulatory but rather are considered to represent expectations for ongoing professional learning and leadership development. As one example, the BCPVPA developed The Leadership Standards (2013). As noted by the BCPVPA, document is a useful tool for personal growth plans as principals and vice-principals assess their current strengths and areas for development (p. 2). The Standards are explicitly described as not being for the purposes of evaluation of school administrators, given they are generic, context dependent and aspirational (p. 4).

The four leadership domains and the accompanying nine standards developed by the BCPVPA (p. 9) are as follows:

**Moral Stewardship**

**Standard 1: Values, Vision, and Mission:** Principals and vice-principals guide the development and implementation of shared values, vision, mission, and goals to support learning and achievement for all students.

**Standard 2: Ethical Decision Making:** Principals and vice-principals articulate the process of decision making using an ethical framework based on the moral purpose and direction of the school.

**Instructional Leadership**

**Standard 3: Supervision for Learning:** Principals and vice-principals engage in effective supervision that focuses on instructional and assessment practices that maximize student development, engagement, and learning.

**Standard 4: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment:** Principals and vice-principals are knowledgeable and provide guidance regarding curricula, instructional and assessment practices, and their impact on student development, engagement, and learning.

**Relational Leadership**

**Standard 5: Intrapersonal Capacity:** Principals and vice-principals demonstrate self-knowledge and personal qualities that support positive relationships and build cultures of integrity.

**Standard 6: Interpersonal Capacity:** Principals and vice-principals build and support positive, effective working relationships within the school and community for all.
Standard 7: Cultural Leadership: Principals and vice-principals develop and sustain a culture and climate that supports student and adult learning.

Organizational Leadership

Standard 8: Management and Administration: Principals and vice-principals strategically plan and manage to strengthen the school’s capacity to support student development, engagement, and learning.

Standard 9: Community Building: Principals and vice-principals build positive and effective interdependencies among schools, families and the community.

As a second example, the Alberta Department of Education, working with school administrators and researchers developed the Principal Quality Practice Guideline (2009). The Guideline consists of 7 leadership dimensions. Similar to the Standards developed by the BCPVPA, these dimensions focus on leadership, school management, community relations, vision, and fostering effective relationships. This Guideline is intended to be a “first step in a process to develop a framework for quality school leadership in Alberta.”

The Standards and Guidelines above further highlight the overall manner in which public education in Canada addresses issues of accountability. Certainly, there are external bodies, measures, and tools used to monitor the effectiveness of education throughout Canada. Yet these external bodies, measures, and tools can be considered to serve more as resources for overall system improvement and individual professional learning and development.

The Chinese Perspective

The evolution of the state of the principalship in China reflects the history of educational reform. In 2001, the China Ministry of Education launched a bold new reform effort aimed at changing curriculum, instruction, and assessment in China’s schools. The nationwide changes in China can be characterized in the following ways:
• moving away from the transmission of discrete, discipline specific knowledge to fostering positive dispositions and a more relevant, engaging, comprehensive, and integrated learning experience,
• de-emphasizing repetitive, mechanistic learning and emphasizing increased student participation and developing capacities in communication and teamwork,
• reducing the focus on screening and selection functions of assessments to increasing the use of assessment information in formative and constructive ways, and,
• decentralizing curriculum, instruction and assessment by allowing for adaptation of curriculum and learning experiences based on local needs (Grant, et al., 2014).

This new reform has necessitated a change in the roles and responsibilities of principals.

Since China has the largest population of any country in the world, it stands to reason that China has the greatest number of schools and principals of any country. It is estimated that there are more than 310,000 primary and secondary schools in China resulting in an estimated 620,000 principals and vice principals (Hu, 2013). School level administrators are employed by the national government and the government maintains tight control as school leaders are considered civil-service government officials (Liu, et al., in press).

As in the United States and other countries, the role of the principal in China has evolved from a focus on management to a focus on leadership. In 2013, the Ministry of Education developed new standards for principals (MOE, 2013). The process involved reviewing standards from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan as well as conducting empirical investigations in multiple provinces and municipalities to then developing frameworks for consideration. A single framework emerged from the process. The principles upon which the standards were developed include: morality first, talents cultivation, leadership in development, emphasis on culture and improvement, and life-long learning. The specific standards to emerge included:
1. Setting a school development plan
2. Creating a nurturing school culture
3. Engaging in curriculum and instructional leadership
4. Facilitating teacher professional development
5. Optimizing internal organizational management
6. Adjusting to external contexts

This set of standards, along with changes in preparation and evaluation, continued a move toward professionalizing the principalship (Yan & Ehrich, 2009).

More formal training for the principalship in China is a recent phenomenon. Prior to the 1990s talented and expert teachers received on the job training, similar to an apprentice-style approach. Over the past twenty years, the training became more formalized linking training to universities. Principal training centers were established and are coordinated and guided at the local, provincial, and county levels (Yan & Ehrich, 2009). Mirroring the education reform efforts in China principal training focuses governance, curriculum, leadership, and management. This change is reflected in the 2013 professional standards developed by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

Prior to 1980, principal evaluation focused mainly on political loyalty. As government and education reforms emerged from the 1980s to today so did the evaluation of principals. The Chinese government began to focus on professional quality as a critical element in principal and school effectiveness. Beginning with a series of influential documents, the government sought to clearly define qualifications and job requirements (SEC, 1989; SEC, 1990). Many scholars (e.g., Jiang, 2013) have called for the use of the MOE 2013 as a basis for the development of a new evaluation system for principals. Still today, however, the focus on student test scores is a key component in evaluation. It is based on a cultural tradition of schools’, with teachers’ and principals’ reputations being linked directly to the academic achievement of students as measured by national examinations (Zeng, 2005). Similar to the limited number of empirical studies on teacher effectiveness and teacher evaluation in China, research on
the development, implementation, and outcomes of principal evaluation in China is in its infancy (Chu & Cravens, 2012; Liu & Meng, 2008).

The evolution of the principal standards, training, and move toward the development of new evaluation in China has resulted in the professionalization of the principalship. The development of guidelines for the curriculum in training elementary and secondary school principals and guidelines for the implementation of the training as well as a move toward formal training has been influential (SEC, 1989; SEC, 1990). Policies have been developed and implemented, over one million school principals have participated in training, and universities have become highly involved in the development and implementation of training (Yan & Ehrich, 2009). Given the current state in China, the time is ripe for evaluation and research on the development, implementation, and outcomes of the principalship.

In just twenty-five years, China has elevated the professional standing of principals. This is no small feat. However, ongoing, important questions remain. These include:

- How can the training of principals merge theory and practice, giving principals an opportunity to develop skills and competencies needed for successful leadership? This is a continued concern that mirrors the international conversation on the development and training of school-based administrators.

- Given that China is such a large country with a diverse population how can effective leaders be developed that can respond to and make needed changes based on the local context? This is particularly true considering the needs of children and schools in rural versus urban communities and ethnic minority students.

- Given the education reform efforts in China, how does the role and evaluation of the principal change to focus on the context, inputs, and processes of education and not just the outcome as measured by a single achievement score? Although the national reform agenda de-emphasizes the
use of one single indicator for student achievement the reality is that one indicator continues to have high-stakes consequences for students, teachers, schools, and principals.

**The United States Context**

The role of the school principal is crucial to realizing educational success for the nation’s schools. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), there are 231,500 elementary, middle, and high school principals in the United States. Across the country, about 4,000 new principals need to be hired annually (Superville, 2015). In most states, a Master’s degree is required and principals generally have five years of related experience. However, it can be argued that teaching experience and graduate school is but one component in preparing leaders to lead as managerial leaders, build and sustain school culture, serve as instructional leaders, and navigate ever-changing policy, innovation, and accountability trends. Today’s “learning leaders” must be equipped to foster a climate of learning and growth for both students and staff, and also be prepared to address the unexpected challenges that present themselves in day-to-day leadership. While teacher quality has been identified as most important in the area of school reform, principal leadership is next (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

The year 2015 is significant in that the increased expectations of principals and superintendents have led to updated standards, known as the ISLLC 2015 Standards. First released in 1996 and adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration in 2008, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders “provide the policy scaffolding for school leadership in 45 states and the District of Columbia (CCSSOa, 2015, p. 4; CCSSO, 2015b). The adopted 2008 standards represent “the broad, high-priority themes that education leaders must address in order to promote the success of every student” as follows:

1. Setting a widely shared vision for learning;
2. Developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;
3. Ensuring effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment;

4. Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources;

5. Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner; and

6. Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural contexts (CCSSO, 2008, p. 6).

In preparing and evaluating school leaders, states overwhelming use these cornerstone standards in preparing their leaders, though often with their own emphases. For example, the North Carolina Standards for School Executives identify the following eight standards: Strategic Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Cultural Leadership, Human Resource Leadership, Managerial Leadership, External Development Leadership, Micropolitical Leadership, and Academic Achievement Leadership (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2013, pp. 4-9). Clearly, we are asking much of our nation’s school leaders. This seemingly impossible expectation is even noted in the North Carolina standards as “overwhelming,” thus noting that it is “imperative that a school executive understands the importance of building an executive team that has complementary skills” (p. 3).

Student achievement often factors into principal evaluations (Superville, 2014) (as noted in the above North Carolina “Academic Achievement” standard) with variance between states perhaps comparable to student achievement expectations and results. Today’s principals are in a unique position, however, to leverage teacher leadership within their schools (Sterrett, 2015). Nevertheless, the inclusion of teachers in important areas related to the above leadership aspects requires time and trust. Both are often found in short supply in times of hurried transitions, so it is imperative for principals to be supported by their districts and school communities from the very beginning.
Fortunately, there are success stories and opportunities. The revised draft ISLLC standards, for example, note that the “herculean effort” requires standards that are grounded in “both research and effective practice” to develop, recruit, and retain school leaders (CCSSO, a., 2015, p. 3). Organizations such as the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) have developed principal professional development for early-career principals (Superville, 2015) in targeted areas such as early-childhood education. The US Department of Education has recently focused attention on schools and districts who meet “Green Ribbon” criteria of reducing environmental impact and costs; improving the health and wellness of schools, students, and staff; and also focusing on environmental education (including STEM, civic skills, and green career pathways) (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Kensler and Uline (2014) note that principals, along with other key educational leaders, serve an important role as “gatekeepers of change” (p. 20) in supporting sustainability in schools. Defining “excellence” beyond test scores alone may be reassuring to the principal who is focused on the collaborative effort of ensuring that all students and staff can succeed in our ever-changing world.

**Conclusions**

Of the four countries highlighted for principal preparation and evaluation, Australia, Canada and the United States are industrialized countries with developed educational systems. While having a long history, China is only now emerging as an industrial power. Along with this emergence, the country has made substantial changes to its educational system, beginning approximately 35 years ago. In terms of the professionalization of the principalship, China has moved to a more westernized approach. Principals are expected to help integrate learning experiences for students, develop student communication and teamwork, emphasize formative assessment and adapt curriculum based on local needs. The table below helps to summarize the similarities and differences among the four countries using selected principal training and evaluation indicators.

**Table: Principal Training and Evaluation in Four Countries**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators/Countries</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal Training</td>
<td>Primarily university</td>
<td>Decentralized by province, options vary</td>
<td>Principal training centers linked to universities</td>
<td>Universities with some district or private providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National or Regional Principal Standards</td>
<td>National principal standards</td>
<td>Decentralized by province</td>
<td>National principal standards</td>
<td>National principal standards and state standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National or Regional Principal Evaluation</td>
<td>National principal evaluation</td>
<td>Decentralized by province</td>
<td>National principal evaluation</td>
<td>Designated by states with some national guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Evaluation for Summative or Formative Purposes</td>
<td>Formative purposes</td>
<td>Formative purposes</td>
<td>Summative purposes, use of test scores</td>
<td>Summative purposes, use of test scores</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principals as Managers or Leaders</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
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</table>

Of importance, all the countries in our review consider the principal as a leader rather than a manager. Nevertheless, this notion of leadership is tempered by current or developing evaluation procedures. Canada and Australia use evaluation procedures that are formative in nature, enabling principals to largely self-direct subsequent learning about leadership. The U.S. and China use more summative evaluation procedures, requiring principals to demonstrate their leadership skills within a more formal structure of principal evaluation. Currently, Australia appears to be at crossroads with principal training and evaluation. Although there is some evidence of high stakes accountability (like value-added measures), the purity of the current standards and process remain formative in nature and support principal self-reflection, the management of self, and professional learning. Canada has the most decentralized and internalized approach of the four countries, where provinces create their own principal standards, approach training in a variety of ways and the evaluation of principals is formative in nature. The focus in Canada is on professional self-accountability for principals. The belief is that Canadian principals are well trained and will act in a professional manner. In contrast, China has the most highly centralized and controlled approach to principal training and evaluation, probably due to the fact that they completely retooled their educational system in 1980 and needed to make changes quickly. In the United States, the many roles and responsibilities of the principalship are emphasized with targeted professional
development provided to principals if needed. In addition, principal evaluation across the U.S. is primarily high stakes, with the inclusion of students’ test scores as part of the process.

The four countries highlighted in this white paper each have distinct principal training and evaluation processes influenced by their respective cultures, policies, research and past outcomes. Continued reflection in regards to this vital role is warranted particularly in seeking to realize “improved student learning, development, and achievement in PK-12 schools, institutes of higher education, and other educational settings” (CREATE, n.d.).

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