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PERSPECTIVE

# ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOL LEADERS:

## NEW DIRECTIONS AND NEW PROCESSES



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This Wallace “Perspective” is part of an occasional series that provides ideas and recommendations in the areas that The Wallace Foundation is engaged with: strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement; enhancing out-of-school time learning opportunities; and building appreciation and demand for the arts. This paper reflects the collective thinking of staff engaged with the education leadership initiative. We especially recognize the substantial contributions of Bradley S. Portin of the University of Washington’s College of Education in the formulation and drafting of this report.

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## ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOL LEADERS: NEW DIRECTIONS AND NEW PROCESSES

*Since 2000, The Wallace Foundation has supported a range of efforts to strengthen leadership so that teaching and learning are improved in every school, especially those most in need. Well-designed assessment processes could be a powerful and constructive way to identify leaders' strengths and weaknesses and encourage them to focus on the actions likeliest to bring about better teaching and learning. While assessing school leaders isn't a new idea, research concludes that most assessments in use today are not as focused on learning as they should be, nor are they effective in gathering reliable facts about how leaders' behaviors are or are not promoting the learning agendas of schools and entire districts. In this Wallace Perspective, we discuss the elements of a possible new direction in leader assessment – what should be assessed, and how. We then highlight several newly-developed instruments: one designed to assess instructional leadership, and two others for more targeted purposes. Finally, we discuss the potential, the challenges and the unknowns of using assessment as a key means of promoting not only better leader performance but also systemwide improvements that benefit children.*

### I. ASSESSING WHAT MATTERS MOST

Effective leadership is vital to the success of a school. Research and practice confirm that there is slim chance of creating and sustaining high-quality learning environments without a skilled and committed leader to help shape teaching and learning. That's especially true in the most challenging schools.

As pressure has increased to have all children in every school succeed as learners, there is broad acceptance that education leaders need to be more than building managers. The challenges presented by “achievement gap” data and the federal No Child Left Behind law have refocused the primary work of principals on leading the essential teaching and learning activities in their schools. This shift from building managers to learning leaders first and foremost is well documented, and is further backed by research indicating that leadership is second only to teaching among school-based factors in influencing learning.<sup>i</sup>

While we know a great deal about what it takes to lead the learning work of a school, education has been slower than many other fields in developing and widely adopting well-crafted, reliable ways to assess the performance of its leaders. In the military, there is a long tradition of rigorous, uniform assessment to help produce and support leaders who can assume tough tasks and achieve at high levels. Many top firms use “360-degree” assessments to gather input about employees' performance not only from their supervisors, but from co-workers and the employees themselves. And in many fields, assessments are used not only to make important career decisions about salaries or promotions, but to pinpoint areas for individual improvement, shape training and continuing development, and create a culture of learning and continuous improvement throughout those organizations.

Research as well as experience in these and other fields suggest that high-quality assessments exhibit a number of traits:

- They measure what they are designed to measure;
- They are consistently applied and tested for fairness;
- They are seen as an ongoing process for professional growth, not just a “tool” or an isolated event;
- They are based on the best available evidence, often from multiple sources;
- They reinforce the organization’s core goals;
- They provide actionable feedback on what matters most; and
- They help build a culture of continuous improvement.

In the education arena, the recent widespread adoption of learning-based leadership standards has been an important step in the right direction. More than 40 states have adopted the “ISLLC” (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) standards, or some version of them, as a uniform foundation for principal assessment. Many have adopted the revised 2008 ISLLC standards that are grounded in behaviors linked to improving student achievement and that are intended to encourage principals to carry out needed changes in their schools.

Standards are meaningful only when brought to life, however, and in the area of leadership assessment in public education, there has been a paucity of instruments and processes that effectively apply the new standards. Some states – notably Kentucky, Iowa and Delaware – have begun using the ISLLC standards as the basis for assessing leaders, improving their performance, and redesigning the training programs that prepare them for their jobs. (See text box on Delaware, p. 11). But a recent review of existing assessment instruments in use in 44 districts and states for which there is sufficient documentation found that nearly half fail to give leaders clear feedback on what they could be doing more or better to improve teaching and learning, linked to a developmental growth plan.<sup>ii</sup> In addition, there are often inconsistent connections between evaluation processes and the professional development and mentoring necessary to help leaders improve once weaknesses are identified. As recently as 2000, annual performance assessments of principals were often not required. And when required, they often varied from school to school. Even if they were consistent in a district, they were not based on standards that reflected current understandings of the work of the principal as a leader of learning, first and foremost.

Why is assessment so challenging in the education arena? It should be said, first of all, that there is no evidence that education leaders are more resistant than those in other fields to the notion of assessment. The likelier explanation lies in the distinctive history, decentralized structure and widely-varying local politics of public education, along with the aforementioned changes in the field’s understanding of what leaders should be prioritizing in their schools. Unquestionably, the local control and varying contexts that characterize public education have made it harder and more contentious to arrive at field-wide agreement on what appropriate assessment should emphasize most, whose input should be sought, etc.

While acknowledging those challenges, the scarcity of well-conceived assessment processes for education leaders nonetheless raises this question: How can we expect school leaders to improve their performance throughout their careers and meet the mounting challenges of their

jobs if we aren't gathering, and acting on, the right information about the effectiveness of their behaviors and actions as leaders of learning? If we now require principals to be not only leaders of buildings, but leaders of learning, we know we can't assess them only as building managers, as important as those tasks undoubtedly are. We also have to find ways to assess whether their behaviors as leaders of learning are effective.

Against the diverse backdrop of public education, this paper does not offer a single “right” process or tool for all states and districts to adopt in assessing school leaders. Instead, we suggest for consideration and discussion a set of basic goals and criteria that research and emerging experience suggest could help promote a new, more effective direction in assessment. We then describe a newly-developed leader assessment product, the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED),<sup>iii</sup> that seeks to apply those criteria, as well as more targeted tools that focus on two specific aspects of leadership: mentoring and time management. All of these new assessments were developed with funding from Wallace as part of our decade-long initiative to promote and sustain improved education leadership.

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*How can we expect school leaders to improve if we aren't gathering, and acting on, the right information about their effectiveness as leaders of learning?*

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We conclude by summarizing the potential benefits of a new direction in assessment both for leaders and those they affect, and we raise a number of questions that remain to be answered if such a new direction is to be effectively pursued.

## II. LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT: THE MISSING COMPONENTS

Assessing leaders is not a new practice within schools and districts. In general, however, leadership assessment follows locally determined, contract-driven review processes largely for personnel purposes.<sup>iv</sup> Typically, principals establish some set of goals through a form and process defined by their district. They then meet annually with a supervisor who determines whether or not their work has been satisfactory. Assessments are often weakly tied to leadership standards and opportunities for professional growth. And they may or may not focus primarily on the instructional aspects of a leader's performance.

The extent to which current assessment practices relate to what principals do, how and whether they relate to accepted leadership standards, and what the supervisor has as useful data besides just test scores to assess principals' performance, varies widely. The aforementioned examination of leader assessment instruments in use in 44 prominent urban systems found that fewer than half of the instruments (18) use state standards, and only 25 percent use ISLLC standards.<sup>v</sup> Leadership assessments also vary greatly with respect to how much they focus on the managerial work of schools or on learning outcomes. For example, in the critical content domain of “school and instruction” (versus “management,” “external environment,” and “personal characteristics”) “coverage ranges from 23% to 85% of the instrument.”<sup>vi</sup>

There is worrying variation in assessment processes as well, and very few have been tested for validity and reliability – essentials for achieving basic fairness. The researchers who examined instruments in use in urban districts noted that: “...assessments for principals are conducted very differently by school districts, with no clear norms or performance standards. There is little constancy in how the assessments are developed, which leadership standards are used, and if the measures are valid and reliable...few have a conceptual framework based on how leaders improve student learning, nor have they been validated for their intended uses.”<sup>vii</sup>

In short, researchers from Vanderbilt University have concluded: “there is little consensus in the field around what should be assessed;” and further, “...the content of leadership assessment is ‘a mile wide and an inch deep’; many aspects of leadership are assessed, but almost nothing is assessed in depth.”<sup>viii</sup> Too

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often, leader assessment is seen as a single high-stakes event – a form to be completed or an interview conducted – rather than an ongoing process connected to the goal

of professional development and continuous improvement. In their comprehensive review of principal evaluation, Ginsberg and Berry concluded that, “the policymaker seeking assistance in choosing a principal evaluation system is offered little sound guidance from these [existing] sources.”<sup>ix</sup>

### III. A NEW DIRECTION FOR ASSESSING SCHOOL LEADERS

How, then, might leaders get more valid and reliable information that could help them and others know how they are doing and where they might improve? From the research and work of The Wallace Foundation and its partners, the following attributes of quality leadership assessment emerge as central to setting a new direction for assessing school leaders. These attributes fall under two critical questions:

- *What should school leaders be assessed for?* and,
- *How should they be assessed so that the process enhances their effectiveness in improving learning?*

#### WHAT SCHOOL LEADERS SHOULD BE ASSESSED FOR

##### *1. A focus on “driver” behaviors that improve instruction and promote necessary school change, anchored in standards*

Any true picture of a “day in the life” of a principal includes a long list of managerial and leadership tasks. But a key prerequisite of leader assessment is a strong focus on instruction and the behaviors most likely to drive better learning. The most important change that has occurred in education leadership in decades is the priority placed on the work that leaders do to guide and support the improvement of teaching and learning. As the National Association of Elementary School Principals recently put it:

*“Principals can no longer simply be administrators and managers. They must be instructional leaders focused on improving student achievement. They must be the force that creates collaboration and cohesion around school learning goals and the commitment to achieve those goals.”<sup>x</sup>*

Along with greater emphasis on instruction, assessment should be focused more on actual behaviors and actions, rather than on knowledge or traits. As researchers have noted,<sup>xi</sup> existing measures have tended to emphasize selected inputs such as a leader’s personality traits or school climate issues, rather than what principals actually do and the impact of those actions on teaching and learning. Indeed, it is personal characteristics (for example, popularity, the volume of parent complaints, the quality of outside relationships<sup>xii</sup> ) that often place principals on or off the radar screen of their supervisors, more so than whether their actions are improving learning.

A key challenge for leader assessment, then, is to narrow the focus on the most potent behaviors that can promote better learning outcomes, rather than peripheral concerns of daily management that continually bombard school principals. The Wallace Foundation and its partner states and districts have used the term “driver behaviors” to identify those actions. The Council of Chief State School Officers makes a similar point: “A performance assessment system that is able to change behaviors and results must be focused on a narrow and prioritized set of observable behaviors – ‘driver behaviors’ – that if improved, will have the greatest likelihood of improving the quality of teaching and learning.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Having agreed-upon standards is a crucial step to defining and prioritizing these effective leadership behaviors – and it’s also essential that the standards codify what *should* be, not just what is. The work of our schools, particularly in our most challenging urban settings, requires innovation and reform of systems and practices that have often not served students well. Schools require leaders who can drive change based on a clear, shared vision of what graduates will need to succeed. To do so, a leader needs to understand how best to deploy his personnel resources – the time and the talents of the people he manages – to support teaching and learning.<sup>xiv</sup> Leaders also need to understand how their school relates to the district, garner the support of their community, and leverage the resources of the community to meet the diverse needs of their students. A powerful leadership assessment process can direct leaders’ attention to these challenges and provide a way to pinpoint where his or her actions are effective or in need of improvement.

## ***2. Shared authority and responsibility for improving learning***

There is growing recognition that it takes more than a single heroic leader to create and sustain schools that are true communities of learning. Principals retain key instructional leadership roles; however, their work also includes the distributed practice of teams and groups.

Assessing teams without blurring the importance and performance of individual leaders is a challenge for leadership assessment. However, a critical attribute of principal assessment should be to identify how effectively individual leaders develop the instructional capacity of others (such as teacher leaders, instructional coaches and content experts) and then create opportunities for sharing authority broadly within their schools to guide the learning agenda.

The Ohio Leadership Advisory Council’s Leadership Development Framework<sup>xv</sup> provides an example of how this might be done. The Framework establishes a coherent rationale and “essential skills and practices” in six process areas: data and decision-making; focused goal setting; instruction and learning; community engagement; resource management; and building governance. As the council puts it: “A fundamental assumption underlying Ohio’s work to create a coherent and cohesive leadership development system is that the purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role. This foundational principle...lends support for the creation of new leadership models that can be used to distribute key leadership functions, and align and focus work across the system to improve instructional practice and student performance.”<sup>xvi</sup>

## HOW LEADERS SHOULD BE ASSESSED

### *1. Reliable, tested instruments*

Regardless of how leadership assessment is used – for high-stakes career decisions such as promotions, or for charting an accurate course for professional development, or both – basic questions about fairness and reliability should be addressed. Specifically, assessment should be designed to reach the same or similar conclusions if two or more leaders are evaluated in particular conditions. And it should be valid – meaning, that it actually captures what it intends to. But research has found wide variation in the topics and attributes that are assessed, the approaches and methods used, and the formats and levels of specificity in existing assessments.<sup>xvii</sup>

What this means is that critically important questions about fairness, reliability and relevance to learning go largely unanswered:

- First and foremost, is what you are measuring clearly related to the desired learning outcomes of the school?
- How can you be sure that the assessment measure is related to the desired actions?
- Would others come to the same conclusions if they evaluated the same leader?
- Does the assessment have “reach” and applicability to a wide variety of schools and contexts?

We are suggesting, in other words, that the benefits of having assessments with proven, tested validity and reliability include:

- Relevance to the most important challenges facing our schools;
- Use of the same assessment topics and observations for all principals who are assessed;
- Use of the same assessment topics and observations over different years when principals are assessed; and
- Comparisons with assessment results for large numbers of principals who have participated in the same assessment.

### *2. Adaptable to different purposes and contexts*

The role of assessment is to provide fair, reliable information for making important decisions affecting individual leaders and the organizations they are part of. Ideally, the assessment process yields information about a leader’s strengths and weaknesses that is useful and adaptable to multiple purposes and different contexts.



Assessments are commonly used for “summative” purposes such as selection, placement, retention and termination (personnel management functions). They also have a key role to play in “formative” purposes to identify where a leader needs to grow and learn (professional learning functions); or as a way to measure how a larger school or system is progressing on strategic plans (organizational improvement functions).<sup>xviii</sup>

There are inherent tradeoffs and tensions among these purposes. It’s generally easier to have a candid conversation about a principal’s strengths and weaknesses when the purpose is mainly to identify organizational or professional development needs than when a raise, a promotion or possible termination are at stake. Portin and colleagues write:

“...the impulse to render a judgment about leaders’ performance, without regard for the improvement of that performance, may compete with the desire to assemble evidence that helps leaders improve their effectiveness. The former, summative assessment is especially useful for decisions that have little to do with the leaders’ improvement trajectory over time (e.g., whether or not to certify administrators, renew their contracts, or reassign them from a current position). The latter, formative assessment is obviously more useful for focusing the leaders’ efforts on particular skills or areas of knowledge that they will be seeking to develop. The two contrasting purposes for assessment data imply different approaches to assessment that yield varied data: It is as difficult to fire someone with data suggesting possibilities for future growth as it is to change practice with school test scores alone.”<sup>xix</sup>

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Iowa’s standards for school leaders illustrate how one state is working to reconcile these tensions. The state’s established standards for school leaders say, on the one hand, that “a comprehensive principal performance review process must be intended to acknowledge strengths and improve performance...” while adding that such assessments should “... provide opportunities for personal and professional growth.”<sup>xx</sup> Iowa requires all superintendents to receive a 30-hour evaluator training course. While not a sure fix, it is a step toward ensuring that Iowa’s principal assessment system is used in a way that matches purpose and process.

Another feature of powerful assessment processes is their adaptability to different contexts while not losing a focus on the core elements of effective leadership for learning. For example, leading a large suburban high school presents different challenges from leading a small rural elementary school. One is not “easier” than the other, simply different. Depending on such contextual factors, principals and their supervisors may prioritize different leadership actions and behaviors, even if their student test scores are similar. An assessment does not tell the principal or her supervisor what actions to take. Used and interpreted well, however, it can point to the principal’s specific strengths and limitations and help prioritize different areas of leadership performance depending on the particular context and needs of her school.

Finally, assessments should be flexible enough to take different career stages into account. A novice leader has different needs from a seasoned leader, and each requires different feedback to further his or her skills. Such adaptations to different career stages don't suggest that the central work is different – but the content, timeliness, and attendant support provided should match the different needs of new and more veteran school leaders.

#### IV. NEW TOOLS FOR A NEW DIRECTION

So far, we have suggested that new principal assessment processes could powerfully catalyze and support learning-centered leadership in schools if they (1) focus squarely on the most important “driver” behaviors that improve instruction, (2) are anchored in accepted leader standards, (3) promote necessary school change rather than reinforce the status quo, (4) feature reliable and tested instruments, (5) are flexible enough to take different purposes and

contexts into account, and (6) lead to appropriate professional development that addresses any weaknesses or concerns identified by the assessment process.

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In this section, we describe a newly-published assessment process, the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED), which is among the first designed to apply all of those attributes to the assessment of school leaders. Unlike

other existing assessments, VAL-ED rests on a robust research base and underwent a three-year, multi-stage development, validation and field-testing process in a variety of schools and contexts to ensure its reliability and fairness in identifying where principals can improve, and areas for professional development.<sup>xxi</sup> The Wallace Foundation provided funding to develop VAL-ED, and a number of Wallace-supported state and district sites participated in the field tests, including: Atlanta; Louisiana; Springfield, MA; Boston; Springfield, IL; St. Louis; Louisville, and Eugene, OR.

#### THE VANDERBILT ASSESSMENT OF LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION (VAL-ED)

To create an assessment process that focused squarely on behaviors associated with learning-centered leadership, VAL-ED's developers identified instructionally-focused practices anchored in the ISLLC standards. As the text box on the following page illustrates, VAL-ED's criteria for assessing leader performance consist of six “Core Components of School Performance” – the “what” of effective leadership – and six “Key Processes of Leadership” – the “how.”

Few existing leader assessments take into account or deliberately reinforce the ability of principals to share authority and responsibility for driving better learning with others in

their school. VAL-ED seeks to do so in two specific ways. First, it is designed to evaluate a principal's performance in promoting a particular desired result in his or her school – whether through his or her direct action or by effectively distributing authority to “designees” that could be another individual or a team. Second, the idea of distributed authority is reinforced by the opening phrase of each item in the assessment instrument: “How effective is the principal at ensuring that the school...etc.”

The VAL-ED tool was also designed to be adaptable to different purposes:

- To help pinpoint areas for improvement and professional development, it provides “norm-referenced” scores (on a scale of 1-5) that enable an evaluator to compare a leader's performance to an appropriate group of other principals – for example, comparing beginning leaders with each other – or, against the entire pool of principals who have been assessed by VAL-ED.
- It also provides “criterion-referenced” scores that show how a leader is performing against a particular standard. For example, a principal might be found to be “outstanding” in exhibiting a specific leadership “driver” behavior – that is, so consistently that he or she is almost certain to improve student learning. Such ratings are more suited to “summative” purposes such as job promotions or retention decisions that differ at various career stages.

Finally, VAL-ED is designed as a “360-degree” assessment, including observations of the principal, his or her supervisor, and the teachers in the school. Feedback on the leader's performance is gathered on the core components and key processes of leadership measured by VAL-ED, and respondents are asked to draw upon multiple forms of evidence from direct observation, documents and artifacts, and reports from others. From these assessments, leaders receive feedback on their degree of success from “below basic” to “distinguished” and receive an outline of growth areas to improve their leadership practice.<sup>xxii</sup>

While the idea of including multiple perspectives about a leader's performance is widely accepted in business and other fields, it appears to be more complicated and politically fraught in the education field. On the one hand, assessing school leaders from multiple vantage points and perspectives can help address a previously-cited weakness in many existing processes:

## DIMENSIONS MEASURED BY VAL-ED

### Core Components of School Performance

- High Standards for Student Learning
- Rigorous Curriculum (content)
- Quality Instruction (pedagogy)
- Culture of Learning & Professional Behavior
- Connections to External Communities
- Performance Accountability

### Key Processes of Leadership

- 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 and human resources necessary to promote academic and social learning.
- Advocating – promote 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.

For further information about VAL-ED, visit [www.vanderbilt.edu/lisi/valed/featured.html](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lisi/valed/featured.html) and [www.thinklinkassessment.com/corporate/valed.html](http://www.thinklinkassessment.com/corporate/valed.html)

## TARGETED TOOLS: FOR PRINCIPAL MENTORING, AND TIME MANAGEMENT

VAL-ED is designed to assess the overall performance of school leaders in promoting better teaching and learning. There are also advantages in more targeted tools that focus on particular aspects of school leadership. Two such Wallace-funded tools have been developed: one to improve the mentoring of new principals, and a second to help school leaders direct more of their time toward instructional tasks.

### **The Leadership Performance Planning Worksheet (LPPW)**

This tool was developed to structure the dialogue between new principals and their mentors around identifying and mastering leader behaviors that make up the core of effective instructional leadership, and to record progress. Drawing on the leadership development work of the NYC Leadership Academy<sup>xxiii</sup> and assessment instruments used by the states of Delaware and Kentucky, LPPW has been pilot tested with principals, mentors and coaches in over 960 schools in seven states. Early indications are that it is an effective tool for helping move mentoring away from an unfocused “buddy system” to a more systematic, learning-centered conversation aimed at identifying and addressing the greatest needs of new principals. (More information and sample pages from the worksheet are available at [www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Documents/LPPW%20Explanatory%20Text.pdf](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Documents/LPPW%20Explanatory%20Text.pdf).)

### **TimeTrack**

Management duties can easily crowd out the time principals spend on instructional improvement. Studies show that principals typically spend two-thirds or more of their time on tasks far-removed from the classroom. In 2002, the Jefferson County (KY) Public Schools began a multi-faceted effort to help principals accurately gauge and reorient how they spend their time, with Wallace support.<sup>xxiv</sup> A key element of that process is called TimeTrack Analysis Data Collection. Data collectors shadow principals for five days and record how much time they spend on instructional, management or personal tasks. Principals can then use the data to create goals for increasing the time they spend on instructional leadership. The tool provides baseline and follow-up data one year later. (The most recent versions of the TimeTrack tool and user’s guide can be downloaded for free at [www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Documents/TimeTrack\\_Release\\_V2.zip](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Documents/TimeTrack_Release_V2.zip).)

that they are the product of isolated interaction between principals and supervisors who may have limited day-to-day knowledge of a principal’s work and accomplishments. Teachers, for example, may add considerable depth and insight about a principal’s actions and interactions that a principal’s supervisor might know little or nothing about.

At the same time, 360 assessments are not without pitfalls. During its pilot stage, VAL-ED’s developers noted uneasiness among teachers about the anonymity of their feedback. Principals, for their part, worried that such assessments might devolve into mere measures of their popularity among teachers and others in their school, rather than an assessment of how well

the leader made tough or unpopular choices that prioritize the learning of all students. As researchers have noted, there is a risk that 360 assessments can include “perceptions of people who may not know what the principal is attempting to accomplish or who view the leaders’ actions only in terms of their own interests.”<sup>xxv</sup>

## V. IMPLEMENTING A NEW DIRECTION

This paper has argued that leader assessment is an important but largely under-developed part of the web of policies, practices and incentives needed to support our nation’s principals. When used to enhance performance as well as ensure accountability, assessment can be a driving factor in helping leaders’ develop the behaviors and skills that will improve learning for all students.

It’s significant that new directions and new processes for assessing leaders – including VAL-ED as well as efforts by states like Delaware, Kentucky and Iowa – are in the early stages of development, testing and implementation. What’s clear from these early efforts is that there is no single “right” formula for the education field to follow. Nor will better assessment automatically result in new and improved leadership. Assessment is one element of a broad systems challenge that requires state and district policies that promote better training and overall support for leaders and a clear focus by all, with learning as the ultimate goal. The new direction for assessment described in this paper can provide critical information that lends support to that objective. But in order for progress to occur, there needs to be a broader leadership context that matches expectations with resources, professional development and coaching, and aligned commitment to the learning agenda in each school.

Much remains to be learned in order to effectively implement this new direction in leader assessment. For one thing, the work of leading schools can no longer be seen as a solo act. We need to learn more about how leadership assessment can be used to provide measures of how well effective teams lead in the school. The varied contexts of leadership – urban, rural, suburban, elementary, secondary – present another challenge for thinking about better assessment. The field needs to learn more about what is gained or lost when assessment tools are applied in those different contexts and how leadership assessment processes can account for the important contextual differences stemming from local need.

## BUILDING AN ALIGNED LEADER ASSESSMENT SYSTEM IN DELAWARE

Delaware is one of a handful of states that have sought to create an aligned system of leadership assessment. The Delaware Performance Appraisal System, or DPAS-II,<sup>xxvi</sup> connects statewide leadership standards with state and district practices for the purposes of “professional development, continuous improvement, and quality assurance.” In establishing DPAS-II, Delaware provides the tools and policy provisions to ensure that clear expectations for leader practice are uniformly applied, that processes and tools are adapted to a leader’s stage of development, and that accountability for performance measures are backed up with developmental supports.

DPAS-II assesses leaders on five components, each aligned with the ISLLC standards: 1) vision and goals; 2) culture and learning; 3) management; 4) professional responsibilities; and, 5) student improvement. Leaders are assessed on the specific actions and behaviors they undertake to realize and improve each of those components: how effectively, for example, they use data to plan, implement, assess and promote their progress.

A recent evaluation summary noted both strengths and weaknesses in DPAS-II including problems with documentation and concerns about whether the process provides an accurate picture of a school’s progress. Overall, however, the work that Delaware is doing shows the potential of a coordinated, statewide system of leadership assessment.

## THE BENEFITS

This paper has argued that a new direction for leadership assessment has much more to offer than simply adding accountability measures and personnel evaluation strategies. Leading the learning work of schools for the future requires whole new sets of skills and attributes that imply continuous learning. A continuously learning organization, while not a new idea, is one that has increasing importance if our schools are to serve all students well to a high standard. In the end, it is about the core outcomes for schools – for learning, learning improvement, and educational opportunity. Everyone, from the preschool student through the teacher to the principal (and on to the district) is a learner – and learning requires feedback to know what you are doing well and where new growth is necessary.

Continuous improvement, then, is the ultimate benefit of better assessment systems – and those who stand to gain within education include but go beyond the leaders themselves:

- ***Improving organizations – schools and districts***  
School leaders' relationships with their districts are changing. Historically, the lines of communication were largely for reporting and oversight purposes. In the same way that the work of school leaders has become more finely focused on learning, the work of districts/leaders is more oriented toward supporting the learning work of schools.<sup>xxvii</sup> Yet as researchers at the University of Washington assert, the “fine detail” of learning-focused leadership still needs to be described in ways that inform practice. What are the activities and conditions that shape and support this kind of public school leadership? The researchers suggest that:

*“...first, some of these activities are embedded in the exercise of leadership itself, a second layer seeks to guide or support leadership practice, while a third layer sets broader policies not targeted to leadership per se, yet which can powerfully affect leadership practice. Separately and together, these activities create conditions that shape and support what leaders do, think to do, and are able to do, in relation to learning improvement.”<sup>xxviii</sup>*

Sound, reliable assessment processes can be used for preparation purposes. For example, in the Springfield (MA) Public Schools, an assessment system has been used for both selection and placement purposes in professional development, and as a means for gathering data on the district's efforts to establish a “culture of achievement.” In this case, the assessment system serves as a driver to align learning communities, accountability and new expectations for schools. Assessment can also be a means of determining the exact support and intervention a leader may need in order to effectively lead her school forward.

- ***Enhancing leaders' confidence by pinpointing real accomplishment***  
A strong leadership assessment system can build confidence by highlighting genuine successes in lifting learning. Indeed, one of the most important benefits of a good assessment process is the information that it can provide supervisors to get underneath test scores to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of principals in their efforts to

lift student achievement. Without such assessment data, supervisors may, for example, penalize principals assigned to schools with a history of low test scores that they have not yet fully turned around, even though their actions have led to significant improvements. Since a principal's day-to-day work touches on many issues, good assessments that center on learning can be particularly valuable in alerting school leaders and their supervisors about which topics have already demonstrated progress and which need more emphasis.

- *Contributing to the field of educational leadership*

Finally, the field of education leadership is both turbulent and fertile ground for incorporating new agreements about assessment. New processes and strategies have at least three areas of contribution to the field:

- They could help create a common understanding for focusing on what matters most in leadership action that can influence student learning.
- New and extensively used processes could help build new coherence between policy and practice at all levels of the system: from the state to the district to each school. This has been seen in locations such as Delaware that are aligning preparation and performance standards for school leaders statewide – from licensure policy, through preparation, to the accountability measures and assessment processes used statewide.
- The preparation of education leaders has long been criticized for clinging to past models of principals as building managers rather than learning leaders.<sup>xxix</sup> Powerful assessment processes, aligned with widely accepted standards that drive practice toward the learning work of schools, could contribute to reorienting that focus.

Assessment alone is not a silver bullet for all of the challenges facing public education. But it is one important tool we can use in tackling, as Michael Knapp puts it, “the enduring challenge ... of finding coherent, sustainable ways to join forces across jurisdictional or positional boundaries, and across levels in the system, in the service of learning-focused leadership and leadership support.”<sup>xxx</sup> If assessment can become an important means of illuminating and changing the performance of school leaders, especially in our lowest achieving schools, we may finally begin to make a serious dent in the unacceptable achievement gap that confronts this country.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K., *How Leadership Influences Student Learning: Review of Research*, University of Minnesota, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 2004, p. 7., available for free at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)
- <sup>ii</sup> Goldring, E., Cravens, X, Murphy, J., Elliott, S., Carson, B., & Porter, A., *The Evaluation of Principals: What and How Do States and Districts Assess Leadership*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, March 2008, p. 20.
- <sup>iii</sup> The Wallace Foundation judged that the lack of well-grounded assessment systems was a significant problem for the field of education leadership, and through a competitive process selected a team of researchers to develop what became the VAL-ED assessment. The responsibility for the development and testing of Val-Ed is solely the authors’.
- <sup>iv</sup> Portin, B., Feldman, S., & Knapp, M., *Purposes, Uses, and Practices of Leadership Assessment in Education*. State of the Field monograph published by the University of Washington Center for Teaching and Policy and The Wallace Foundation, 2006.
- <sup>v</sup> Goldring, p. 22.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29
- <sup>viii</sup> Goldring, E., Porter, A., Murphy, J., Elliott, S. N., & Cravens, X., *Assessing Learning-Centered Leadership: Connections to Research, Professional Standards, and Current Practices*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, Learning Sciences Institute, 2007. Available for free at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)
- <sup>ix</sup> Ginsberg, R., & Berry, B., *The Folklore of Principal Evaluation*. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 1990, 3, 205-230, p. 212.
- <sup>x</sup> National Association of Elementary School Principals, *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do (Executive Summary)*. Alexandria, VA, 2008, p. 2.
- <sup>xi</sup> Goldring, E., Porter, A., Murphy, J., Elliott, S. N., & Cravens, X., *Assessing Learning-Centered Leadership: Connections to Research, Professional Standards, and Current Practices*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, Learning Sciences Institute., 2007, available for free at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)
- <sup>xii</sup> Portin, p. 25
- <sup>xiii</sup> Council of Chief State School Officers. *Leadership Issue Group on Assessing Leadership Effectiveness: Interesting Practices and Lessons Learned*, 2007 Washington, D.C.: p. 2
- <sup>xiv</sup> See, for example: Plecki, M., Alejano, C., Knapp, M, & Lochmiller, C., *Allocating Resources and Creating Incentives to Improve Teaching and Learning*, 2006 State of the Field monograph published by the University of Washington Center for Teaching and Policy and The Wallace Foundation.
- <sup>xv</sup> See <http://www.ohioleadership.org/documents/Framework%20Final.pdf>



- <sup>xvi</sup> Ohio Leadership Advisory Council. (2008, January). Leadership Development Framework, Columbus, OH: Ohio Department of Education. p. 3.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Murphy, J., Goldring, E., Cravens, X, Elliott, S., & Porter, A., *The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education: Measuring Learning-Centered Leadership*. East China Normal University Journal/August 2007, p. 22.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Portin, pp. 4-17.
- <sup>xix</sup> Portin, p. 40.
- <sup>xx</sup> A full description of Iowa’s Principal Leadership Performance Review Process can be found at: <http://www.sai-iowa.org/principaleval/>.
- <sup>xxi</sup> <http://www.thinklinkassessment.com/corporate/valed.html>. Among the validation steps that VAL-ED has undergone, the assessment was reviewed by education leaders and researchers to ensure that all items were aligned to the ISLLC standards. The authors conducted a nine-school pilot test in a single urban school district to further test and refine the instrument and gather user feedback. Following that, teachers, principals and supervisors were interviewed about the usefulness of an online prototype, and a review committee consisting of urban district leaders screened the assessment questions for bias. In the spring of 2008, VAL-ED was field-tested nationally in more than 300 schools in 60 districts.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Porter, A., Murphy, J., Goldring, E., & Elliott, S., *Assessing Learning-Centered Leadership*, 2008. Powerpoint available at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lsl/valed/featured.html>.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> NYC Leadership Academy, “Leadership Performance Planning Worksheet,” created in cooperation with the Center for Performance Assessment.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> The project also includes the introduction of a new school-level position called SAM, or School Administration Manager, who is supposed to assume non-instructional tasks so that the principal is freer to concentrate more time on classrooms and learning.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Portin, p. 29.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> DPAS II Guide for Administrators. Delaware Department of Education, Dover, DE.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Plecki, M., McCleery, J., Knapp, M. S., *Redefining and Improving School District Governance*, State of the Field monograph published by the University of Washington Center for Teaching and Policy and The Wallace Foundation, 2006.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Knapp, M. S., Copland, M. A., Plecki, M. L., & Portin, B. S., *Leading, Learning, and Leadership Support*. State of the Field monograph published by the University of Washington Center for Teaching and Policy and The Wallace Foundation, 2006, pp. 2-3.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., Orr. M. T., & Cohen, C., *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Knapp, p. 7



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To learn more about assessing school leaders and related topics, the following can be downloaded for free from The Wallace Foundation's website at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org):

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*Assessing Learning-Centered Leadership: Connections to Research, Professional Standards, and Current Practices*, Learning Sciences Institute, Vanderbilt University, 2007

*Learning-Centered Leadership: A Conceptual Foundation*, Vanderbilt University, 2007

*A Framework for the Assessment of Learning-Centered Leadership*, Vanderbilt University, 2007

*Leading, Learning, and Leadership Support: Overview*, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, 2006

*Purposes, Uses, and Practices of Leadership Assessment in Education*, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, 2006

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