

Forum on School Leadership Standards

School leaders from around Australia met in Canberra on 15 November 2005 at a Forum convened by the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership* to discuss the development of professional standards for school leadership.

Those attending the Forum were drawn from the four major principals' associations and other professional associations representing school leaders.

The framing question for the day was should the profession have a role in developing school leadership standards. Posing this question begs a number of further questions: how is "the profession" defined? what is meant by "school leaders"? what purpose would standards serve? how would a national system of standards add value to the work of principals? what approaches should be used in developing standards? where do we go from here? Few of these questions were resolved by the end of the day, although many views were exchanged and there was much robust debate.

The background to the day was a briefing and consultation process conducted in August/September 2005 in all states and territories by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) on a preliminary issues paper on school leadership standards. This process, part of a commissioned project ACER is undertaking for the Institute, generated uncertainty and concern about the Institute's intentions in relation to standards for school leaders. The Forum provided reassurance that no firm directions for moving forward have been set and no decisions have been taken about the development of a national system of standards.

The Institute, set up as an umbrella for the many professional bodies in teaching to give the profession a strong national voice in policy-making and practice, has a publicly stated objective to support and advance the quality of school leadership in Australia by establishing a national system of standards for school leadership. While this end point is clear, there is no predetermined approach to reaching it, except insofar as the profession is to be engaged in shaping its own system of standards and this will need to build on what already exists.

There was clear consensus at the Forum around two issues: principals and the profession should own and control the processes for developing school leadership standards; and there is a need to identify where professional standards for principals would fit in with the plethora of existing school leadership standards and frameworks. Other main conclusions from the day's debates were that adequate time needs to be devoted to continuing consultation within the profession, and that certification against standards is something for consideration much later in the process, if at all.

In exchanges and conversations during the day, many issues of concern were aired. The open and lively discussions around some of the key questions set out below provide an interesting platform for a further round of conversations, within professional associations and within the profession more widely.

* From 5 December, the Institute will be known as Teaching Australia – the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership.

Questions still looking for answers:

1. How is “the profession” defined?

The inclusive approach to defining “the profession” is to regard teaching as a profession, like other great professions, embracing different roles and responsibilities within the broad concept of “the profession”. In this conception, principals have a particular and critical leadership role within it.

Other concepts of the profession are more fragmented, seeing school leaders, subject specialists and other roles within teaching as professions in their own right.

A strong and unified profession is likely to have more strength and standing in influencing directions, in the best interests of young Australians. The Institute has been set up as the national body for the teaching profession, and under its constitution is to take an inclusive approach.

2. What is meant by “school leaders”?

There are many leadership roles in schools, exercised by teachers as well as principals. While the focus of the Institute’s work on school leadership standards is specifically on standards for principals and aspiring principals, for those who **lead schools**, this is not to suggest that other leadership roles are less important. The standards work being undertaken by the Institute in relation to advanced teaching standards encompasses other members of the profession who **lead in schools**.

3. What are “professional standards”?

A system of professional standards is one that is owned and operated by the profession. Such a system would complement and serve different purposes to standards developed and implemented by employing authorities.

The present conversation within the profession about standards is not happening in a vacuum – employers and registration bodies and unions as well as professional associations are all engaged in the standards movement. Different players are at different stages of engagement and have different understandings of and perspectives on standards.

4. What purposes would professional standards for school leaders serve?

Being clear about the purposes and value of a system of standards is an important first step in introducing any discussion about standards and in designing any system. A first question to address is why the profession might be interested in this.

The purposes served by professional standards may be quite different from employer standards, for example. The latter are more likely to be directed at assessing competence and performance. A system of professional standards can articulate what is valued about school leadership, describe the essential features of what school leaders know and do, reflect the scope and complexity of a principal’s work and increase public understanding of it. Professional standards can be aspirational and inspirational, clarifying expectations of principals as professionals, wherever they work, and challenging them in their practice. They can provide a sound framework for self reflection and professional learning.

5. What value would a national system have?

A national system of professional standards can serve to promote the professional status of school leadership irrespective of sector or jurisdiction or geography. A national system could send a strong unified message about the profession to the community, raising the standing of the profession and encouraging aspirant principals. A national system could enable the profession to act together to build effective preparation and professional learning programs for school leaders.

6. What makes “good” standards?

In the first instance, school leadership standards need to reflect the centrality of student learning, development and welfare. Other touchstones for assessing the quality of standards might be whether they are open and non-prescriptive about ways of meeting them, whether they encourage creative and innovative leadership, whether they are framed in ways that encourage ongoing professional learning and whether they are general enough to apply in varied contexts but not so general as to be meaningless.

7. What should school leadership standards cover?

School leadership standards would cover what principals know and do, increasing understanding of the role of school leaders in terms of their students, student learning, professional relationships, and leadership practices. “Standards, by definition, are statements about what is valued.” Standards can also include professional commitments in terms of values, moral purposes and ethics.

8. How should standards be developed?

A clear conception of the professional practice of school leadership, existing standards and frameworks in Australia and overseas, research evidence and the purpose of the standards provide the building blocks for the development of new standards. Learnings from other professions can also be helpful. Development should be done from within the profession and involve extensive consultation and validation from professionals in a wide variety of contexts.

9. Where are we now in the development of school leadership standards?

For the profession, this is the beginning of a process of exploration - thinking through the concept of professional standards, considering the issues, raising questions and concerns and increasing involvement. Communicating with colleagues and reviewing the evidence and experience of standards in different contexts is a first step in a process which may extend over several years.

10. What are the next steps?

The Institute will initiate further consultations with the profession when the Australian Council for Educational Research provides its advice on options for a national system of school leadership standards. This advice is due by early January 2006 and will be presented to the Institute’s Board. The Institute will facilitate discussions among associations and assist communication within the profession early in 2006 on the way forward, in an inclusive, open and transparent approach.