

Enabling leadership using dispositions in Standard 1

Elaborations and scenarios to guide your development of:

**Focus Area: Perseverance and resilience
within the Australian Professional
Standards for Middle Leaders**



Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands, sea countries, and waterways from across Australia. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and living cultures; and to Elders past and present.

AITSL acknowledges Emeritus Professor Viviane Robinson for her significant contribution to the development of *Leading through Standard 1: Elaborations and scenarios that define practice*. Emeritus Professor Robinson was a member of the Australian Professional Standard for Middle Leaders Expert Panel, which supported the development of the Middle Leader Standards. This work draws on seminal international research in educational leadership.

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Please cite this publication as: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2026, *Leading through Standards 1: Elaborations and scenarios that define practice*, AITSL, Melbourne.

ISBN: 978-1-925192-98-8

First published 2026

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AITSL was formed to provide national leadership for the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership with funding provided by the Australian Government.

Focus Area: Perseverance and Resilience

Definition in the *Australian Professional Standards for Middle Leaders*

The ability to persist until a problem is solved despite failures and setbacks. The ability to sustain their energy under pressure and adapt well to change.

Elaboration of the definition

Perseverance, or what some authors call grit (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014), is the “voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties or discouragement” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 229). The disposition to persevere helps us overcome a natural tendency to quit when the going gets tough. It is manifest in the voluntary and lengthy pursuit of a difficult goal, despite failures and setbacks. In the context of school improvement, perseverance is required for sustained pursuit of the improvement goal.

Educational leaders who persevere have an expectation of eventual success built on the knowledge, skills, and confidence they have acquired through success in their previous leadership of improvement.

Persistence in the face of failure and setbacks is difficult because failure can threaten self-esteem and confidence. Perseverance with a task is more likely if leaders have relevant knowledge and skills. With success comes a greater sense of self-efficacy and greater willingness to tackle future challenges.

Perseverance and resilience are related concepts, but unlike resilience, perseverance includes the idea that people pursue the same difficult tasks and goals over time. Resilience is a more general term that does not imply stability of goals and interests (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014).

Why is perseverance and resilience important in education?

Many of the student outcome problems faced by educational leaders are longstanding and have remained intractable, despite the best efforts of their predecessors. Given previous failures to resolve such problems, it is reasonable to assume they are complex, and that improvement will require leaders' sustained and focused effort. That is why leading improvement requires perseverance.

Australian school leaders are required to set and pursue long term (3-5 years) strategic goals and to write annual implementation or improvement plans that will progress those goals. Strategic goals and annual goals are based on students' needs and, by implication, indicate areas where business as usual has not yet produced what is desired. Success in achieving these improvement goals requires perseverance, so that a coherent and effective approach can be designed and learned by all relevant staff.

Perseverance may be predictive of the effectiveness and retention of novice teachers (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). This link is explained by the challenging nature of teachers' work – those with grit are more likely to stick at it, learn how to succeed in the job and develop the confidence to take on more difficult challenges.

What is it not?

Perseverance as a desirable trait of character must be distinguished from the related vices of stubborn or dogged persistence. While improvement efforts may fail because leaders give up on a potentially fruitful strategy too early, they may also fail because leaders persist with a flawed strategy. Sometimes this happens when leaders become wedded to a particular programme, funding source, or extra staffing entitlement. In such cases perseverance is not virtuous but may be indicative of such vices as stubbornness or closed-mindedness. Leaders' perseverance should be directed towards the improvement goal itself rather than towards the maintenance of a particular strategy for achieving the goal. In short, leaders "must make a correct appraisal of whether persistence in the face of failure will produce eventual success or simply more failure" (Peterson & Seligman, p. 240).

Motivations

Perseverance as a desirable leadership trait is internally rather than externally motivated. The leader is determined to reach the improvement goal because he or she believes that is the right thing to do for their students, not because of external accountability requirements. They have a strong desire to master the task because success on such tasks is central to their leadership identity, and they have a strong sense of professional responsibility for the outcome.

External accountability for success is not necessarily incompatible with strong internal motivation. When there are such accountabilities, leaders frame them as aligned to and supportive of the values and moral purposes to which they are already internally committed (Mintrop, 2012). In this way, their perseverance remains voluntary and internally driven.

Scenarios illustrating increasing levels of perseverance and resilience

Scenario: Persevere and learn more

Since her recent appointment as literacy coach at Western School, Tamara had been worried about the lack of growth in reading comprehension between Years 3 and 5. The transition between learning to read and reading to learn seemed to be challenging for the students and their teachers.

Proficient

Six months ago, Tamara had gained agreement from the senior leadership team to make improving comprehension at Years 3-5 a priority for her work. Everyone had been confident that results would improve if they adopted a widely used programme for teaching comprehension skills. Unfortunately, the latest assessments had shown little improvement. After sharing the data with the Years 3-5 teachers, and disclosing her own disappointment, she invited discussion of why everyone's hard work had not resulted in more improvement. Unfortunately, her invitation prompted teachers to resurface their earlier explanations about how the students' language backgrounds, challenging behaviour and lack of motivation made it difficult to make progress.

Tamara contemplated what to do. She could give up and move to something easier, or she could persist. She decided on the latter, but knew she needed to find out quickly why the new programme was not working, so she could make the necessary adjustments. Was it that the comprehension programme was not effective, or was it the way it was being implemented in the school?

Accomplished

Tamara explained to the Years 3-5 teachers that she wanted them to help her answer the question about why they had not seen improvement. Was it the programme or was it the way it was being implemented? Over the next 3 weeks, she used her usual coaching and lesson observation time to check teachers' practice against the indicators of good practice that had been the focus of their

professional learning. She was able to report to the teachers that they were implementing the comprehension programme with fidelity, with only a few small exceptions. It seemed even more puzzling therefore that the results were not improving. Perhaps the programme was not as good as they had assumed. She told them she did not want to persevere with a flawed programme, but she was still committed to the goal of improving comprehension. After all, comprehension was key to success in all learning areas. But what was the key to success in comprehension?

Expert

Tamara decided she needed to look more deeply at the evidence base of the comprehension programme she had adopted. What assumptions did it make about how students learned to comprehend? How valid were those assumptions? And what research evidence was there to show that it worked? Over the holiday break, Tamara deepened her knowledge of comprehension by listening to podcasts, reading blogs and studying on-line summaries and syntheses about teaching and learning reading comprehension.

She was somewhat shocked to learn that the impact of the programme they were using on students' reading comprehension had never been rigorously evaluated. While she found case studies of schools that had used the programme and lots of endorsements of its effectiveness, she couldn't find any hard data.

The major conclusion Tamara drew from her reading about comprehension was that it was deeply entwined with vocabulary and background knowledge. If students could not bring relevant background knowledge to the text they were reading, then teaching decontextualised skills such as summarising and making inferences would not help.

Far better than teaching content-free comprehension skills was teaching the vocabulary and background knowledge required to comprehend the topics students were encountering. In short Tamara had to change tack by ensuring that teaching relevant background knowledge and vocabulary was embedded in every unit of work. She felt more confident now about how to change the strategy and more optimistic that it would bring the improvement everyone sought. She wanted to continue with comprehension as the priority and began to prepare the case she would need to make to the Years 5 and 6 teachers and to the senior leadership team.

Discussion Starters

1. Think of improvement efforts you have led. Did you and your team persevere until you reached the goal, or did you give up, switch to a different goal and get distracted?
2. What encourages you to persevere in your professional role with something that is difficult, and what leads you to give up, or give it away?
3. Think about a moment of 'failure' in your career. How resilient were you in recovering from that failure?

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Core Reading

- Edmondson, A. C. (2011). Strategies for learning from failure. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(4), 49-55.

The logo for the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) features the lowercase letters 'aitsl' in a sans-serif font. The letters are filled with a vertical gradient that transitions from a light green at the top to a darker teal at the bottom.

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Limited

The bottom of the page is decorated with two overlapping triangular shapes. A teal triangle points upwards from the bottom left corner, and a lime green triangle points downwards from the top right corner. They meet at a diagonal line that divides the bottom section of the page.

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AITSL is funded by the Australian Government