

Australian Professional Standards for Middle Leaders

STANDARD 2: ENABLING KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

Focus Area: Using relevant knowledge

*Elaborations, scenarios and analysis to guide
your development*



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.

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Focus Area: Using relevant knowledge

Definition in the *Australian Professional Standards for Middle Leaders*

The ability to use and source knowledge to enhance the attainment of improvement goals.

Elaboration of the definition

This capability requires middle leaders to be knowledgeable *and* to use that knowledge to understand and resolve problems that prevent improvement in teaching and learning. The scope of the knowledge needed for excellence in middle leadership is broadly defined as that required to lead in the four domains of practice included in Standards 3-6.

- Standard 3: Enhancing understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
- Standard 4: Coordinating high-impact teaching and learning
- Standard 5: Leading improvement in teaching practice
- Standard 6: Managing effectively

For example, capability in Standards 4 and 5 requires leaders to have up to date evidence-based knowledge of how students learn and of how teachers promote that learning in diverse classroom contexts. The depth of knowledge required will vary depending on the responsibilities associated with a particular middle leadership role. In general, sufficient depth of knowledge is needed to know what good practice looks like and to provide educational arguments about why some pedagogical approaches are preferred over others.

As noted by Spillane and Seashore Louis, “without an understanding of the knowledge necessary for teachers to teach well, - content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, content specific pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge and knowledge of learners - school leaders will be unable to perform essential school improvement functions such as monitoring instruction and supporting teacher development” (2002, p. 97).

The goal is not that the middle leader knows everything, but that she knows enough to know what she does not know, and how to access the rest.

Expert capability in this standard requires understanding of underlying principles and rationales, because it is those features that allow flexible and rigorous knowledge use. Expertise is not developed by accessing bite-sized lists, bullet points, or tips, because those formats strip the material of the reasoning and argument that enables theoretical understanding and flexible application. In order to **use** knowledge in adaptive ways, leaders need to be able to apply it to their context while preserving the conditions required to make the ideas work in practice.

Why is it important that middle leaders are knowledgeable?

Demographic changes, combined with the increasing ambition of policy goals, means that the knowledge required of middle leaders is of greater scope and complexity than is often recognised.

Leaders with accomplished and expert capability on this standard are more likely to have a stronger sense of efficacy than those with lower capability, because their use of school data and of research evidence means they are more likely to understand and resolve classroom problems. They have deep knowledge, based in cognitive science, of how students learn, and use that knowledge to generate and test hypotheses about the causes of poor student outcomes (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Willingham, 2021). Such knowledge also enables leaders to discern between more and less valid claims about what constitutes “best practice” and to follow through on only those ideas that have been shown to have high impact on student learning and wellbeing.

Middle leaders with accomplished and expert capability use their educational knowledge to challenge beliefs about what is and is not possible. Their knowledge liberates them from the status quo by enabling them to envisage better practices and achieve better student outcomes. They can debate their point of view with those who hold diverse or even contrary views, and treat such debates as important informal professional learning opportunities.

Middle leaders who cannot give educational as opposed to compliance reasons for a preferred course of action, will be less confident and less influential than those who can use their knowledge to communicate educational rationales. Compliance reasons make reference to policy, regulations, and authority figures e.g. “The boss expects to see the intended learning outcomes on the board”. Educational reasons justify a course of action with reference to teaching and learning, often with reference to research or context-specific evidence. An educational justification for the use of intended learning outcomes is that they enable students to understand and focus on the purpose of the learning activity. They know why they are doing something rather than just what they are supposed to be doing.

Given the impact and importance of the decisions made by middle leaders, it is critical that they model evidence-based decision-making and commitment to continuous professional learning. It is equally important that systems support middle leaders in their professional learning by making high-quality, evidence-based resources readily available.

Scenarios illustrating increasing capability in Standard 2

Scenario: Developing an instructional framework

Last year, the senior leadership team at Norcross Catholic College achieved its strategic goal of developing a whole school framework for quality teaching. Senior leaders based the framework on the instructional principles set out by Barack Rosenshine (2012) because they had already been widely discussed in the diocese and had a sound theoretical and evidence base. Senior leaders recognised, however, that the framework would need to be elaborated and adapted by each subject department. That is the job that Robert, the new head of English, has made a priority for the year.

Proficient	
Scenario	Analysis
At the first meeting, Robert planned to check how his team understood the Rosenshine principles before discussing what elaborations might be needed if they were to provide clear guidance about good teaching practice in English. He was dismayed by the wide range of understandings and attitudes expressed by his teachers. Some were convinced their teaching already exemplified all the principles, and that no further detail was needed. Others were opposed to the type of pedagogy that the principles required. In their view, the emphasis on explicit teaching undervalued the independent project work that was the bedrock of creative expression in English. One or two teachers were supportive of developing the framework as requested by senior leaders. Robert soon realised that despite the professional learning and resources that the diocese had already provided, many of his teachers misunderstood the Rosenshine principles. While no expert himself, he believed that some teachers misunderstood such terms as explicit teaching and direct instruction and were confused about how independent work fitted into the framework. Without attributing blame, he disclosed his beliefs about the possible confusions, carefully explaining why he thought some of the discussion had misunderstood the principles. He then suggested that everyone revisit the original Rosenshine article and reflect on its implications for their own practice before the next meeting. Everyone agreed that there was no point elaborating the framework if there was confusion about the principles on which it was based.	<i>Robert knows enough about the instructional principles advocated by Rosenshine to recognise and describe the possible misunderstandings of some of his teachers. He also knows enough about productive team work to recognise that fully understanding a framework is a prerequisite for adapting it to the teaching of a particular subject. This knowledge gives him the confidence to provide his team with clear guidance about how to proceed.</i>

Accomplished	
Scenario	Analysis
Robert realised he would have to set aside quite a bit of time to prepare for the next departmental meeting. He needed to not only prepare a clear explanation of the Rosenshine principles but also respond to the specific objections and misunderstandings he had heard in the last meeting. He recognised that, having asked the team to reflect on their own practice, he needed to model such reflection by identifying what he currently did that was and was not consistent with the principles. One example was that he probably set independent practice before students had experienced success through sufficient guided practice. Another was that he was too often calling on a few students who volunteered rather than finding ways to check all students' responses. Robert checked at the start of the meeting that everyone had reviewed the Rosenshine article and had reflected on the match between their practice and the instructional principles. He then presented his summary of the article, paying particular attention to the misunderstandings he had detected in the previous meeting, and to deepening teachers' understanding of the principles. When teachers were ready, he offered to start the reflection process by modelling his evaluation of his own practice. Teachers found this helpful and then offered their own reflections. The team discussion of the matches and mismatches turned out to be a fruitful way of identifying how to elaborate the framework so that it provided a practical guide to quality teaching of English.	<i>Robert's deep knowledge of the principles underpinning the instructional framework enable him to teach his team how to reflect on their own practice. His teaching began with modelling his reflections on his own practice by giving examples of how his own teaching did and did not reflect the Rosenshine framework. The clarity of his modelling and his willingness to be vulnerable enabled others to follow his example.</i>

Expert	
Scenario	Analysis
While Robert was pleased with the progress the team had made, he was well aware that if he was more up to date with his professional reading, he could offer more guidance about how the team could resolve some of the concerns that they frequently discussed. He knew enough now to know, for example, that the research on retrieval practice would help teachers design better homework, that rich background knowledge and vocabulary were keys to better comprehension, that they all needed to teach writing in a more structured way and not assume that literacy was a primary school responsibility. He decided he needed to help the team establish some priority goals and then locate a few high-quality professional resources so that everyone could contribute to the quality teaching framework in an informed and evidence-based way. He would tell the team that he wanted a framework that was consistent with the Rosenshine principles, adapted to the teaching of English, and practical enough to guide unit planning. He needed to disclose his view that, rather than a paper exercise, this was a way of improving the consistency and effectiveness of teaching across the English department. Would they be willing to join him?	<i>As Robert deepened and broadened his own professional knowledge, he could see aspects of his own and his team's practice in a new light. His knowledge provided standards of good practice against which his team could collaboratively evaluate aspects of their teaching. As he and the team learned more, he believed that they would be more successful in improving student outcomes and their sense of agency would grow. Given how time poor his teachers were, he believed that it was largely his responsibility as leader to support their professional learning by identifying some key readings in the focus areas that the team agreed to study and discuss.</i>

Discussion Starters

1. What opportunity have you had to stay up to date with your professional reading? How important is it to you to keep up to date with topics that are relevant to your job?
2. In what aspects of your job do you think that your knowledge base is weaker and stronger? How do these differences in your knowledge base affect the way you do your job?

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Core Reading

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