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The Five Essential Practices of School Leadership

A Framework for Assessing Practice



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Acknowledgments

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Why We Wrote This Framework

A great school principal in every school is essential to improving school practices, teaching, and learning. Becoming a great school principal typically occurs over time, with input from supervisors, 1 coaches, mentors, and other educators. Current efforts to improve the principal pipeline recognize the importance of talent management to systematically develop current and future school principals. Managing educator talent requires coherence among systems that wrap around and support educators, which involves coordination between school districts, departments of education, principal preparation programs, and other entities. AIR's Educator Talent Management Framework recognizes six, connected state- and district-level processes for managing educator talent, including:



- Preparation of school-level leaders by universities, colleges, and other programs
- Recruitment and hiring of principals and other leaders by school districts
- Induction and mentoring of leaders by coaches and other staff
- Evaluation and professional learning, which are interconnected and mutually informed
- Compensation and incentives for performance, which may be formal or informal
- Educator environment, which makes the teaching and learning environment safe and supportive

A framework for school leadership is the backbone of any talent management system because it clarifies what principals and other school-level leaders do and how well they do it in observable and measurable terms. Frameworks support the design of principal evaluation systems, principal professional development, and principal preparation. When a well-written framework is used, principals can better understand their strengths, challenges, and how to improve because frameworks allow principal supervisors and coaches to collect just the right evidence and give targeted feedback to principals. Other district-level staff can use principal frameworks to inform professional development design, induction and mentoring, preparation programs, hiring processes, and other aspects of the talent management system.

The Five Essential Practices of School Leadership framework provides a starting point for important conversations about principal performance expectations and talent management systems design. The framework is built from a strong research base and reflects educator perspectives on leading schools. We know context matters for school leadership, and we encourage state and district educators to adopt or adapt the framework to fit state-, district-, and school-level contexts for use.

¹ In this document, *supervisor* refers to any individual who oversees the evaluation of principals. We use this term because a supervisor may be a superintendent, assistant superintendent, human resources director, or other district-level administrator.

The framework aligns with an AIR-developed suite of measures, which can be used for principal performance evaluation and coaching. Using multiple measures, principal supervisors, coaches, and principals can get a holistic picture of performance, which is essential for growth and development.

Design Drivers

The Five Essential Practices of School Leadership framework reflects a set of design principles driven by and informed by our work with educators, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. These design principles help to ensure that the framework is a useful tool for providing principals feedback and is applicable across diverse school contexts.

- Design Driver 1. Focus on what matters most. Principals are often responsible for a multitude of school leadership tasks, from performing playground duty to coaching teachers. No evaluation system can, or should, account for every principal's work responsibility. In designing the Five Essential Practices framework, we prioritized instructional leadership, school management, and effective leadership practices, as identified by the latest research and national standards for professional practice. We also aligned the framework with national standards and can work with states and districts to align the framework with local standards.
- Design Driver 2. Created by and for principals. The National Association of Elementary School
 Principals and National Association of Secondary School Principals (2013) research indicates that
 school-level leaders are not frequently engaged in designing their own performance evaluation
 systems. The Five Essential Practices framework has been developed with extensive input from
 elementary, middle, and high school principals during a period of two years and has been vetted
 with content experts in the field to ensure that the framework indicators and elements
 represent relevant practice and attainable, appropriate performance levels.
- **Design Driver 3. Useful for improving practice.** The Five Essential Practices framework provides feedback on practice for all principals, regardless of experience level or career trajectory. Coaches, principal supervisors, and other educators can use the framework to give much needed focus to their support of principal progress.
- **Design Driver 4. Clearly defined performance levels.** Strong evaluation systems distinguish among levels of performance. We created a four-level framework to differentiate practice and a *below basic* level to represent the absence of the most basic leadership actions.

Framework Overview and Standards Alignment

The Five Essential Practices are:

- 1. **Build shared purpose.** The leader develops a compelling, shared organizational vision and ensures the vision is "lived" in the daily work of educators.
- 2. **Focus on learning.** The leader engages in instructional leadership to develop and maintain student access to appropriate, ambitious, and strong instructional programs focused on academic excellence and social and emotional development.
- 3. **Manage organizational resources.** The leader acts strategically and systematically to create teaching and learning conditions that are safe and supportive by aligning financial resources, human capital, data, and other resources.
- 4. **Collaborate with community.** The leader ensures that parents and community organizations are engaged with the school.
- 5. **Lead with integrity.** The leader models professionalism by acting with integrity and making his or her learning visible.

The framework is **standards based** because it aligns with Interstate School Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008), which are principal professional standards adopted by a majority of states and territories. Table 1 displays the alignment between the Five Essential Practices framework and ISLLC. Note that the sixth ISLLC standard is represented in all of the Five Essential Practices at the *distinguished* level of performance.

Table 1. Alignment Between the ISLLC National Principal Standards and the Five Essential Practices of School Leadership Framework

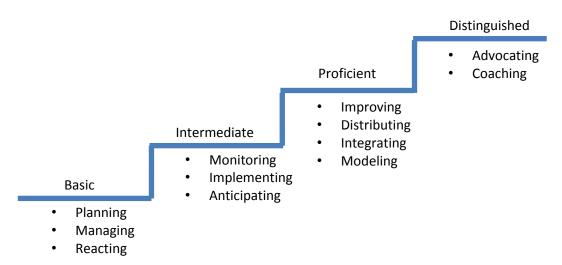
	Five Essential Practices of School Leadership				
ISLLC Standards	Build shared	Focus on	Manage	Collaborate	Lead with
	purpose.	learning.	organizational	with	integrity.
			systems.	community.	
Setting a shared vision for learning					
Developing a school culture and					
instructional programs					
Ensuring effective management of the					
organization					
Collaborating with faculty and					
community					
Acting with integrity and fairness and in					
an ethical manner					
Understanding, responding to, and					
influencing cultural contexts					

The framework's content is organized into principal "practices, elements, and indicators" across four performance levels. The following text provides definitions of these terms.

Practices, Elements, and Indicators. The five essential practices and indicators focus on principal actions, rather than on principal beliefs or knowledge, in order to be observable and measurable. The framework document is organized to facilitate practice assessment and feedback. Each of the five essential practices includes more fine-grained descriptors called *indicators* and *elements*. A practice is described by one or more *indicators*, which are the important components of the practice. Each indicator is further described by one or more *elements*, which are the important components of the indicator. AIR-developed measures, which are aligned to the framework, provide information about how well a principal scores at the indicator level. Indicator scores are added together to obtain a total score on each of the five essential practices.

Levels of Performance. The framework describes principal practice along a continuum of four distinct performance levels: *basic, intermediate, proficient,* and *distinguished*. When rating principals, evaluators also have the option of choosing *below basic* or *not observed*. **A principal cannot be considered** *distinguished* in a given indicator unless he or she meets all criteria for being proficient, intermediate, and basic. Figure 1 provides a general overview of the behaviors, practices, and skills that characterize each performance level. The actual performance level descriptions in the framework are tailored specifically for each leadership practice and quality indicator.

Figure 1. Overview of the Behaviors, Practices, and Skills That Characterize Each Performance Level



Below basic means principals do not demonstrate one or more of the practices at the basic level.

The Five Essential Practices of School Leadership Framework

Leadership Practice 1: Build Shared Purpose

	Indicator 1.1: Implement a Vision, Mission, and Goals Aligned to School Improvement Plans				
Element	Basic The principal performing at the basic level	Intermediate The principal performing at the intermediate level also	Proficient The principal performing at the proficient level also	Distinguished The principal performing at the distinguished level also	
A.	 Has created school improvement plan and other documents that display the alignment between the school vision, mission, and annual objectives with district goals and initiatives. Ensures others reference the vision, mission, and goals when making organizational decisions. Shows evidence of enacting the school objectives by engaging with other staff. 	 Gathers input from a diverse set of stakeholders when creating or implementing the school vision, mission, and goals. Monitors school progress toward attaining the mission and goals, particularly with respect to the educational attainment of students who struggle. 	Develops procedures for schoolwide reflection and collective action to improve the school to meet the vision and mission.	 Coaches teacher leaders, assistant principals, or other principals on developing, enacting, and monitoring a mission, vision, and school improvement plan. Engages in district-level discussions about policy direction and learning objectives. 	

Leadership Practice 2: Focus on Learning

	Indicator 2.1: Improve the Instructional Program			
Element	Basic The principal performing at the <i>basic</i> level	Intermediate The principal performing at the intermediate level also	Proficient The principal performing at the proficient level also	Distinguished The principal performing at the distinguished level also
A.	 Develops a common language for discussing instructional practice with teachers that reflects the district instructional framework. Ensures that teachers develop instructional plans that reflect ambitious standards for teaching. Ensures specialized instructional support personnel and other staff coordinate services, particularly for struggling students. 	 Connects teachers with resources on research-based instructional practices. Monitors teaching to ensure instructional priorities are being met, including implementation of ambitious teaching standards. Monitors individualized and other learning programs to ensure they are implemented as planned. 	 Ensures teachers and staff adjust curriculum and instructional program to address student-performance trend data, as well as teacher performance on instructional framework. Connects teachers with professional learning experiences to address student-performance trend data, as well as teacher performance on instructional framework. 	 Works on district policy and procedures to ensure all students to have equal access to effective curricula and instruction, OR Coaches teacher leaders, assistant principals, or other principals to support instructional effectiveness among teachers.
В.	 Collects and properly manages student learning data (e.g., formative and summative assessment, student work, teacher judgment). 	 Monitors curriculum, instruction, and support services programs by using student and other data, particularly for student subpopulations (e.g., minority students, English language learners, gender, or students with disabilities). Supports teachers in analyzing student learning data, modifying instruction, and providing access to support services for struggling students. 	 Assesses how well teachers are using data and adjusts processes to improve teacher use of data. Models the use of data when making organizational decisions about instructional programs. 	 Coaches teacher leaders, assistant principals, or other principals on effective data analysis, including disaggregating data by student subpopulations, OR Advocates at the district level for appropriate use and analysis of student data (e.g., formative assessments, summative assessments, and data on student behavior).

	Indicator 2.1: Improve the Instructional Program				
Element	Basic The principal performing at the <i>basic</i> level	Intermediate The principal performing at the intermediate level also	Proficient The principal performing at the proficient level also	Distinguished The principal performing at the distinguished level also	
C.	Highlights for teachers/staff the importance of students learning about different cultures and interacting with students of different races, ethnicities, backgrounds, experiences, and preferences for learning.	Ensures that there are opportunities for students to learn about different cultures and interact with students of different races, ethnicities, backgrounds, and experiences through curriculum, instruction, and student scheduling.	Establishes processes to raise, discuss, and address issues related to staff and students' race, ethnicity, cultures, and other sources of difference that may produce discrimination, ineffective educational practice, or interpersonal conflict.	 Coaches assistant principals, teachers, teacher-leaders and others on establishing organizational conditions that may produce discrimination, ineffective educational practices and interpersonal conflict, OR Advocates at the district and/or state level for programs, procedures and policies that address issues related to students' race, ethnicity, cultures, and other sources of difference that may produce discrimination, ineffective practice, or interpersonal conflict. 	

	Indicator 2.2: Support Teachers' Development of a Positive Classroom Climate				
Element	Basic The principal performing at the <i>basic</i> level	Intermediate The principal performing at the intermediate level also	Proficient The principal performing at the proficient level also	Distinguished The principal performing at the distinguished level also	
A.	 Clearly describes schoolwide teacher expectations for a positive classroom climate that promotes the social, emotional, and academic skills of students. 	 Monitors teacher progress in developing a positive classroom climate and student social, emotional, and academic skills. Monitors school climate, as experienced by teachers and students. Connects teachers with relevant research-based strategies on creating positive learning environments and/or selects programs that focus on social and emotional learning or positive behavioral interventions. 	 Collaborates with teachers to revise programs or practices for improving school and classroom climate to support students' academic, social, and emotional development. Provides staff access to professional learning opportunities and resources promoting positive school and classroom climate and social and emotional learning. 	 Coaches assistant principals and other principals to create collaborative teacher working conditions and high quality professional development, OR Advocates at the district level for all students to regularly experience a positive classroom climate that promotes students' social and emotional learning. 	

Leadership Practice 3: Manage Organizational Systems

	Indicator 3.1: Manage the Organizational Structure				
Flomont	Basic The principal performing at the basic level	Intermediate The principal performing at the intermediate level also	Proficient The principal performing at the proficient level also	Distinguished The principal performing at the distinguished level also	
A	 Complies with pertinent laws and policies regarding school safety by creating a detailed safety plan, which addresses potential physical and emotional threats. Allocates responsibility to appropriate staff to lead school safety, discipline, equity, and learning environment efforts. 	 Implements a plan to ensure that students and staff are safe. Modfies school safety, student discipline, student program participation, student matriculation plans, and procedures in response to data. Communicates expectations for social interactions and school safety to staff and students. 	 Raises questions with the school leadership team and staff about how well the school addresses student safety, access to learning, and social equity through curriculum and instruction. Engages faculty, staff, students, and parents in identifying concerns or threats to school safety, student access to services, and equity issues and acts on information. Ensures that disciplinary policies and actions remove students from learning opportunities only as a last resort. Models communications and social interactions with staff and students during school walkthroughs. 	 Advocates for and contributes to greater organizational efficiency throughout the district by sharing effective practices, procedures, or policies with other school leaders. 	

	Indicator 3.1: Manage the Organizational Structure				
Element	Basic The principal performing at the basic level	Intermediate The principal performing at the intermediate level also	Proficient The principal performing at the proficient level also	Distinguished The principal performing at the distinguished level also	
В.	 Directs the school leadership team by setting agendas, convening meetings, and allocating tasks to appropriate formal and informal leaders. 	 Coordinates communications from the school leadership team to staff about schoolwide initiatives. Implements a strategy for managing educator talent by coordinating human resources supports for transparency and accountability. 	 Collaborates with staff to create school schedules that allocate the maximum amount of time to instruction. Evaluates the talent management system to identify areas for improvement. 	Leads or contributes to districtwide efforts to promote distributed leadership models and better career opportunities for teacher leaders through coaching programs or other means.	
C.	 Ensures that staff set attainable, measurable, academic learning and student behavior (e.g., social and emotional skills) goals for students. 	 Assesses the school's progress on student academic learning and student behavior goals (e.g., social and emotional skills) by using disaggregated data from multiple sources. 	■ Ensures that each student's learning plan aligns with the academic learning and student behavior goals (e.g., social and emotional skills) established for the school.	 Coaches teachers, assistant principals, or other principals in developing, monitoring, and adjusting the school's academic and behavior goals for students. 	

	Indicator 3.2: Lead and Develop Personnel				
Element	Basic The principal performing at the <i>basic</i> level	Intermediate The principal performing at the intermediate level also	Proficient The principal performing at the proficient level also	Distinguished The principal performing at the distinguished level also	
A.	 Ensures teachers and other staff successfully complete professional development plans in a timely manner. Leads and facilitates reflective conversations with teachers about professional growth and career paths. 	 Supports induction and mentoring process for new teachers. Connects teachers with the resources and supports necessary to achieve their professional development goals. 	Creates structured opportunities for teachers and other staff to lead learning for colleagues in the school.	 Leads or contributes to districtwide efforts at designing professional development delivery systems., OR Coaches teacher leaders, assistant principals, or other principals in best practices for developing professional growth plans with staff. 	
В.	 Formally and informally evaluates teachers and other staff according to district policies. Implements all evaluation procedures with fidelity. 	 When providing feedback to teachers, uses questioning techniques that require higher order thinking and critical self- reflection on practice. 	 Ensures all performance feedback is grounded in evidence and encourages expression of teacher perspectives as part of the feedback process. 	 Contributes to the district's ongoing efforts to improve the effectiveness and fairness of performance evaluation systems. 	
C.	 Supports teacher teams with consistent meeting time, leaders, and material resources. Uses schoolwide communications (e.g., newsletter, e-mail) and leadership meetings to keep staff informed about policies, procedures, awards, and other news. 	 Builds interpersonal trust among students, staff, and administration. Works with other school and district leaders to engage teachers in professional learning community activities. 	 Actively raises questions about professional activities and behaviors in order to disrupt stereotypes or biases that can affect schoolwide programs and services. Establishes and maintains professional traditions and practices in the school that engage all staff in celebrating accomplishments. 	Contributes to the districtwide evaluation of and modification to the professional cultures of the classroom, school, and community in order to maximize their impacts on student learning.	

	Indicator 3.3: Manage Resources				
Element	Basic The principal performing at the basic level	Intermediate The principal performing at the intermediate level also	Proficient The principal performing at the proficient level also	Distinguished The principal performing at the distinguished level also	
A.	 Allocates available fiscal, personnel, and material resources in an effective, legal, and equitable manner that supports the school's vision, mission, and goals. 	 Monitors the school budget and ensures that the school operates within established budgetary guidelines. 	 Evaluates the effective, legal, and equitable use of fiscal, personnel, space, and material resources. Collects and analyzes data from a variety of sources—including feedback from stakeholders—in evaluating resource allocations. Modifies school processes to increase efficiency while achieving the school mission. 	 Contributes to district or statewide efforts to improve the effective and efficient use of resources. Pursues grant and other funds for new resources to improve student achievement. Coaches teacher leaders, assistant principals, or other principals in effective strategies and systems for managing school resources effectively and equitably. 	
В.	 Strategically allocates planning and instructional time for instructional staff. Creates a teaching schedule that is effective and efficient for quality teaching and learning. 	 Evaluates how instructional time is used by teachers; advocates for more effective use of time, as necessary. Protects collaborative teacher planning time (e.g., data teams). 	 Works with teacher leaders to support improved use of instructional time. Encourages collaborative planning time be used for substantive conversation about instruction and student learning. 	Coaches teacher leaders, assistant principals, or other principals to improve instruction and the use of instructional time.	

Leadership Practice 4: Collaborate With Community

	Indicator 4.1: Collaborate With Families and Stakeholders, and Respond to Diverse Community Needs			
Element	Basic The principal performing at the basic level	Intermediate The principal performing at the intermediate level also	Proficient The principal performing at the proficient level also	Distinguished The principal performing at the distinguished level also
Α.	 Identifies opportunities to collaborate and address community needs within the school. 	 Supports educators to help families understand how to support a child's specific social, emotional, and academic learning needs. Responds to family and community needs in a timely and reasonable manner. 	 Based on evidence, adjusts programs or processes supporting collaboration among educators, parents, and community members. 	 Advocates for and contributes to efforts at the district or state level to effectively collaborate with families and community, OR Coaches teacher leaders, assistant principals, or other principals or administrators in effective strategies for responding to family and community needs.
В.	Ensures that partnerships with families and community organizations provide supports to students.	 Uses a variety of data sources to monitor and assess the impact of community resources in promoting student learning, solving school problems, and achieving school goals. Grows mutually beneficial partnerships with businesses and community-based organizations to share school and community resources, such as buildings and playing fields. 	 Collaborates with teachers and support staff to expand the use of community resources to accomplish the school mission. Evaluates school staff collaboration with health, social, and other service organizations to ensure they successfully connect families and students with important services. 	 Contributes to district efforts at building relationships with community leaders to analyze data on economic, social, and other issues that impact district and school planning, programs, and structures, OR Advocates for the development and better use of community assets in enhancing districtwide efforts to implement effective, relevant school programs.

Leadership Practice 5: Lead With Integrity

Principals lead with integrity and model responsibility through pursuit of professional learning.

	Indicator 5.1: Demonstrate Personal and Professional Responsibility				
	Basic	Intermediate	Proficient	Distinguished	
Element	The principal performing at the basic level	The principal performing at the intermediate level also	The principal performing at the proficient level also	The principal performing at the distinguished level also	
Α.	 Adheres to district and state ethical and legal principles. Demonstrates respect for others, honors confidentiality, and engages in honest interactions that reflect ethical and legal principles. 	 Gathers others' input on the ethics and integrity of personal leadership practices. 	 Models collective responsibility by demonstrating personal accountability for mistakes and professional learning. 	 Coaches assistant principals, other principals, or leaders on acting with ethics and integrity. 	
В.	 Completes the professional growth plan in a timely manner. Sets and meets professional goals that are aligned to district and school needs. 	 Pursues professional development and training to support and lead key programs and efforts in the school. 	 Models self-reflection by evaluating one's practice and adjusting it accordingly. Collaborates with colleagues within the school and beyond it to continuously improve leadership skills. Applies learning gained from the professional growth plan to change personal practices. 	 Contributes to district efforts to improve principal professional development. Coaches other school leaders in growing as a professional to better meet school, teacher, and student needs. 	

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