

# New Jersey School Principals' Perceptions on the Application and Importance of the ISLLC 2008 Standards' "Functions": A Preferred Hierarchy

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## Introduction

Being an effective building principal requires varied skills, knowledge and disposition (Ellett, 1999; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Murphy, 2002; Murphy & Shipman, 1999). A principal's leadership practice can influence and impact school climate, teacher morale and student efficacy (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). In brief, school principals play a critical role in the lives of all those associated with the educational community that they oversee (Hallinger & Heck, 1996).

Until recently, the traditional role of a principal was primarily that of a building manager, whose primary responsibilities included the allocation of funds, curriculum implementation and the evaluation of teachers and operating staff (Willis, 1980; Martin & Willow, 1981). However, with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB PL 107-110, 2002) the responsibilities of a principal have become much more demanding and complex. Countless local, state and federal mandates and the ubiquitous pressure for improved test scores has certainly made the job much more challenging and some even say untenable (Tomlinson, 2013).

As policy makers continue to focus on systemic change focused on increased student academic achievement, a set of common national standards, tenure reform and more rigorous teacher and principal evaluation protocols to propel a new paradigm of public education accountability, the role of the principal has evolved into that of a comprehensive leader centered on classroom instruction and student academic achievement. Creating and maintaining an effective school environment to accomplish and achieve these growing policy mandates requires that a school leader be equipped with a myriad of skills and knowledge never before anticipated or expected.

## Theoretical Perspective

In 1996 the Council of Chief State School Officers proposed and adopted via the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), six overarching leadership standards for both building and district level administrators, which were then revised in 2008 (CCSSO, 2008). These standards have influenced the licensing and certification process in a majority of states' administrative codes since their inception (Derrington & Sharratt, 2008).

Consequently most, if not all university principal preparation programs in the U.S. focus their curriculum on these six standards (Davis & Hensley, 1999; Waters & Kingston, 2005, Crow, 2006) even though there is a lack of experiential evidence to support this practice (English, 2005; English, 2006; Lindle, Stalion & Young, 2004).

Although much has been posited in the field of school leadership about the skills and knowledge base best needed to accomplish many of these new policy mandates (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; NAESP, 2001), not much has been written about the operationalization of the ISLLC Standards "functions," specifically from the perspective of a principal currently working in the field. However, this perspective is an important one and one that has the potential to not only inform the field of public school education and policy in general but also one that could provide valuable and insightful knowledge to universities and colleges regarding how to best prepare principal candidates.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the ISLLC Standards' "functions" from the perspective of New Jersey school building principals to determine what they consider to be the most important skills and knowledge a principal must possess in order promote school efficacy. This study builds on the authors' previous work where a national sample of superintendents were asked to rank order the ISLLC 2008 Standards' "functions" in order of importance within the context of principal evaluation (Babo & Ramaswami, 2011). Results from that study revealed the highest ranked "function" as, "Be an advocate for children" (Standard VI) followed by "model principles of ethical behavior" (Standard V). The lowest ranking functions were mainly from Standard IV - Community and Standard VI - Larger Context.

Consequently, the primary research question addressed in this study was: What do current practicing New Jersey (NJ) School Building Principals perceive to be the most and least important ISLLC 2008 Standard "functions" that a principal must possess and demonstrate in order to be a successful building leader?

## Methodology

### The Survey and Data Collection

A solicitation letter with a link to an online survey instrument developed through Qualtrics, a commercial online comprehensive data collection tool, was emailed to all the NJ school principals. The list of current NJ school principals was acquired from a database posted on the New Jersey Department of Education's (NJDOE) website. Survey questions were based on The Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 (CCSSO, 2008). The survey consisted of 66 questions that represented the ISLLC 2008 Standards' "functions." The 66 items were ranked by the principals as "Essential," "Important," "Somewhat Important," and "Insignificant." Construct validity for the survey was acquired through expert review and reliability of the 66 survey items yielded a Cronbach Alpha of .96.

The 66 survey items represented and attempted to measure the discrete level of importance of all 31 of ISLLC 2008 Standards' "functions" as perceived by survey respondents. Standard I, with 5 "functions," translated into 10 items; Standard II, that has 9 "functions," constituted 16 items; Standard III, with 5 "functions," resulted in 12 items; Standard IV, encompassing 4 "functions," resulted in 9 items; Standard V, consisting of 5 "functions," resulted in 13 items; and Standard VI, comprised of 3 "functions," composed 6 items. The survey also collected demographic data on each of the participants and their schools (e.g., gender, administrative experience, DFG, AYP status etc.). Solicitation emails were sent to 2,500 NJ principals with 200 emails returned as non-deliverable. Only 423 principals participated in the study for a return rate of 18.4%. However, this number was not consistent across all survey items as some participants did not answer some questions. Although the response rate is a limitation to the external validity of this study we feel the results do contribute to the overall discussion concerning principal preparation.

## Results

### Demographics

The sample consisted of an equal distribution of males and females. With regard to administrative experience, 25% had over 16 years of experience, and 63% had experience between 6 and 15 years. While 43% of the principals had Masters + 30 credits, 27% had earned Ed.D. or Ph.D. Additionally, 37% of these principals were in urban schools while 54% and 9% were in suburban and rural schools, respectively.

The grade configurations of these principals' schools revealed that close to half (47%) were from elementary schools with various K-8 configurations, while 20% were in schools with 7th -12th grade configurations. Twenty eight percent of these principals were from what NJ classifies as the "poorest" school districts, with 14% coming from the most affluent school districts. Fifty-eight percent came from what would be classified as average income districts.

### Findings

In order to investigate the rankings of the 66 items that represented the ISLLC 2008 Standards' "functions," a Friedman's test for related samples was used (Huizingh, 2007). This yielded a significant result ( $\chi^2(65, N = 156) = 2225.156, p < .001$ ), which indicated that a preferred hierarchy does exist among these "functions" as perceived by a sample of NJ principals.

**Tables 1 & 2** present the 15 top ranked and 15 lowest ranked items as determined by the Friedman's test. **Table 1** displays the top 15 ranked items with their means and mean rankings and are listed from highest-lowest. The mean rankings ranged from 38.74 to 45.49. **Table 2** displays the 15 lowest ranked items, listing the lowest

Function	Standard	Mean	Mean Rank
Promote and protect the welfare and safety of students.	III	45.49	3.95
Be an advocate for children.	VI	43.26	3.87
Collaboratively implement a shared vision and/or mission.	I	43.12	3.87
Model principles of ethical behavior.	V	42.99	3.87
Promote and protect the welfare and safety of staff.	III	42.86	3.86
Nurture and sustain a culture of high expectations.	II	41.88	3.83
Implement a plan to achieve the school's goals.	I	41.6	3.82
Nurture and sustain a culture of learning.	II	41.36	3.81
Collaboratively develop a shared vision and/or mission.	I	41.04	3.8
Create a plan to achieve the school's goals.	I	40.59	3.78
Nurture and sustain a culture of trust.	II	40.41	3.78
Maximize time spent on quality instruction.	II	40.21	3.78
Nurture and sustain a culture of collaboration.	II	39.9	3.77
Ensure teacher time is focused to support student learning.	III	38.88	3.73
Create a motivating learning environment for students.	II	38.74	3.72

*Results from Friedman's Test: NJ Principal' perceptions of the 15 Highest Ranked "functions" for all ISLLC 2008 Standards*

ranked to the highest ranked items. These mean rankings ranged from 17.32 to 26.71.

As seen in **Table 1**, the highest ranked item was "promote and protect the welfare and safety of the students" (Standard III), followed by "be an advocate for children" (Standard VI) and "collaboratively implement a shared vision and/or mission" (Standard I). Of the remaining 12 items, 6 were from Standard II - Instruction; 3 from Standard I; 2 from Standard III and 1 from Standard V. Six of the 15 highest ranked items were from Standard II - Instruction. The ability to advocate, nurture and sustain a school culture of instruction that promotes student learning and trust is considered to be essential by NJ principals, which is congruent with the thoughts opined by Quinn (2002). The second highest number of items (4) was from Standard I and the items related to creating and implementing a school's vision/mission. New Jersey principals also envision the safety of students and staff as important. These results are compatible with the model posited by Hallinger as defined and cited in Leithwood et al (2004) where mission/vision, providing for a positive learning environment and focus on student learning are considered pivotal to the role of an "instructional leader." Interestingly, no "function" from Standard IV (*Community*) made the top fifteen.

The lowest ranked function in **Table 2** was "act to influence State and/or national decisions affecting student learning" (Standard VI). The next five lowest ranked items all came from Standard IV, ranks 2 - 6. These items represented promoting understanding, appreciation and use of community's intellectual, cultural and social resources along with building and sustaining relationships with community partners. This suggests that the NJ principals do not see skills related to fostering community relationships as essential for being effective. McKerrow, Crawford & Cornell (2006) reported similar findings, discovering a significant negative correlation between principal seniority and stakeholder collaboration.

There were four items from Standard III that were ranked low, three items from Standard II and an additional two from Standard VI. Notably, most of the items from across these standards were related to technological resources and leadership capacity and management. None of the "functions" from Standards I and V were considered unimportant by these principals. It is important to note that Standard III is the only one which had almost equal representation in both, the highest (3) and lowest (4) ranked items. This dichotomous nature of Standard III is similar to what the authors found in their national

**Table 2**

Function	Standard	Mean	Mean Rank
Act to influence State and/or national decisions affecting student learning.	VI	2.92	17.32
Promote understanding, appreciation, and use of the community's diverse intellectual resources.	IV	3.06	19.99
Promote understanding, appreciation, and use of the community's diverse cultural resources.	IV	3.1	20.78
Promote understanding, appreciation, and use of the community's diverse social resources.	IV	3.1	20.91
Sustain productive relationships with community partners.	IV	3.15	22.02
Build productive relationships with community partners.	IV	3.17	22.41
Anticipate emerging trends and initiatives in order to adapt leadership strategies.	VI	3.16	22.74
Obtain, allocate, align, and efficiently utilize technological resources.	III	3.25	24.92
Assess and analyze emerging trends and initiatives in order to adapt leadership strategies.	VI	3.27	25.17
Monitor the management and operational systems.	III	3.28	25.19
Promote the use of the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching.	II	3.29	25.9
Evaluate the management and operational systems.	III	3.29	26.03
Promote the use of the most effective and appropriate technologies to support learning.	II	3.29	26.15
Develop the capacity for distributed leadership.	III	3.31	26.36
Develop the leadership capacity of staff.	II	3.31	26.71

*Results from Friedman's Test: NJ Principal' perceptions of the 15 Lowest Ranked "functions" for all ISLLC 2008 Standards*

study of superintendents and their application of the ISLLC 2008 Standards' "functions" to principal evaluation (Babo & Ramaswami, 2011). These similar findings could very well be the artifact of the current educational environment where accountability and student achievement hold more importance than the effective management and operation of the school (Kaplan, Owings & Nunnery, 2005).

## Conclusions

These findings suggest that NJ principals perceive an "unambiguous hierarchy" with regard to their duties as principals. These results imply that current NJ principals perceive the role of the principal to be primarily focused on instruction, quite possibly a byproduct of the demands of increased state and federal accountability mandates. These findings echo the results from a previous but similar study by one author (Babo, 2009), where NJ school superintendents ranked the "functions" for Standard II, I and III at the top and the "functions" for Standards IV and VI at the bottom in establishing a hierarchy of importance as it relates to principal evaluation. The authors' previously cited study using a national sample of school superintendents also reported similar results (Babo & Ramaswami, 2011).

One cannot ignore the synchronization of the importance placed by both parties on instruction and student learning along with vision and mission when they consider effective leadership. This perspective is aligned with the findings of Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom (2004) and Cotton (2003), where both studies emphasize the importance of the principal as an instructional leader in order to facilitate student academic growth. Additionally, one would be remiss to ignore the implications of the low rankings for both ISLLC 2008 Standards IV and VI throughout previous studies and inclusive of this one.

Do the results reported here by a sample of current working NJ principals and the results from previous studies on the topic indicate a need to revisit these leadership standards and question their relative importance overall in the preparation of school leaders? Or do they call for a renewed vigor in the teaching of these standards in preparation programs across the U.S.?

The consistently low rankings of Standards IV and VI argue for preparation programs to critically evaluate the delivery of these standards and the importance placed on them. Research and practice tell us that principals need to work closely with the outside community and the larger social, cultural and political context in order to tap into resources that might benefit the overall performance and efficacy of the school.

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