

# **Addressing Skills, Knowledge and Self-Efficacy in the Online Development of School Leaders**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Self-efficacy in school leaders is critical: Without a strong sense of purpose and focus, school leaders will fail at performing the difficult task that it takes to ensure student success and school performance. Competence without confidence may lead to school leaders who are hesitant, full of self-doubt, and inconsistent with their decisions. For school leaders, self-efficacy is critical to the success of the 21st Century school leader and the potential for effective facilitation of the development of such by online educational leadership programs. This study and review will explore the early steps associated with knowledge, skill and efficacy development in the leader, the perceptions of such by current educational leadership candidates, and the potential implications and next steps for further research and discussion.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The impact of self-efficacy in school leaders is one that holds the potential for significant variances in leadership effectiveness. Competence without confidence may lead to school leaders who are hesitant, full of self-doubt, and inconsistent with their decisions. At the opposite end of the continuum, school leaders who possess high efficacy without the competency to back it up (no doubt, we have all met these leaders) may find themselves scratching their heads in bewilderment as they confidently lead failing schools, disgruntled teachers, and frustrated students.

At its core, this study seeks to explore the degree to which leader self-efficacy is critical to the success of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century school leader and the potential for effective facilitation of the development of such by online educational leadership programs. This study and review will explore the early steps associated with knowledge, skill and efficacy development in the leader, the perceptions of such by current educational leadership candidates, and the potential implications and next steps for further research and discussion.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Self-Efficacy Defined**

Recognized as the foremost scholar in regard to self-efficacy, Albert Bandura (1994) studied and wrote extensively on this very topic and the impact of self-efficacy on self and others. Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura, includes “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events

that affect their lives” (1994, p. 1). These beliefs can determine and alter one’s feelings, motivation, thinking and behavior. By nature of default, all educators must have some sense, even if minimal, of self-efficacy. To stand in front of a classroom of students, or to conduct a parent conference, to present a professional sharing, or to lead a faculty meeting – all are tasks that require a certain level of self-belief. In their longitudinal studies on leadership development, Avolio and Hannah (2008) identified efficacy as a key contributing factor to developmental readiness. The thinking processes, emotional restraint and control, motivation to act, and ability to exercise potential influence over others are all actions and decisions inherent in these everyday educator events.

### **School Leadership Preparation: The Trifecta of Knowledge, Skills and Efficacy**

Leading a school requires many actions at various times – and often many actions at the same time. Cultivating the right balance of knowledge and skills necessary to carry out these actions simultaneously and successfully would be prominent among the goals of any educational leadership preparation program. Careful consideration to these goals, especially in light of program design for online educational leadership programs, is one in which a person must not only take into account the unique characteristics of online learners, but also the developmental progression inherent in leader preparation (Kerr et al., 2006).

The knowledge and skills base of the future school leader is one that is built around the assumption of a potential role as a leader of a learning environment (The Wallace Foundation, 2013), but what exactly does the fulfillment of this role require, and how best may a candidate be prepared to accept and execute this role successfully? In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration published the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, which acts as the guiding template for the knowledge and skills development of future and current school leaders. These standards were first housed under ISLLC and were originally developed in the mid-1990s. The more current standards build upon that early foundation, but also hold stark contrast due to a heavy emphasis on the learner and on student learning.

In addition, many leadership performance trends now feature expectations involving empowerment, engagement, and capacity-building of others. Enacting shared mission, cultivating caring communities, developing professional capacities, fostering professional communities, and engaging families – to cite a few actions – require knowledge and skills beyond the scope of an individual leader. There is an additional dynamic, one that is embedded in the leader’s self-belief system, that holds the potential to stifle or strengthen professional knowledge or skills.

While touching aspects of everyone’s lives, self-efficacy in the leader can produce the foundation for the learned skills and knowledge to be showcased, and, in some cases, to be self-regulated and self-corrected (Pajares, 2009). While scant research exists on the self-efficacy of developing school leaders, it may be reasonably assumed that the efficacious school leader may have advantages in carrying out the critical tasks inherent in school administration. This conclusion may lead designers of educational leadership programs to examine how to go about cultivating not only competent leaders, but leaders with high self-efficacy as well.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **The KSE Leadership Survey**

In January of 2017, the graduate program in educational leadership for a southeastern university was examined in order to determine not only the perceived proficiency in leadership knowledge and skills at the beginning of a graduate program, but also the perceived level of leader self-efficacy. While post-program survey data had been traditionally collected from exiting candidates, and this, along with individual course feedback, was generally used to determine candidate growth and perceptions, the interdependence and progression in terms of knowledge, skills and efficacy combined was a topic to be explored more intently. To this purpose, the KSE (Knowledge, Skills, Efficacy) Leadership Survey was developed and administered for the first two incoming cohorts of the 2017 calendar year and established as a foundation for further research and data collection regarding these topics.

This educational leadership program specifically correlates with the North Carolina School Executive Performance Standards; therefore, the KSE Leadership Survey tool used to measure the perceived knowledge, skills and efficacy of these future leaders was designed specifically to also align to these standards. Specific questions focused not only on the development of skills and knowledge in various leadership areas – but also on the beginning leaders’ self-efficacy in relation to the execution of high levels of performance in these areas. The North Carolina School Executive Performance Standards (NCDPI, 2010) include standards that describe the elements and descriptors indicative of effective principal performance in each of the following eight leadership areas: 1) Strategic Leadership; 2) Instructional Leadership; 3) Cultural Leadership; 4) Human Resource Leadership; 5) Managerial Leadership; 6) External Development Leadership; 7) Micro-political Leadership; and 8) Academic Achievement Leadership.

The KSE Leadership Survey provided a brief performance-based description of each of these standards, then required each participant to rate their own perceived knowledge, skills, and efficacy in each standard as compared to the level needed for a school administrator to meet this performance standard with success. The survey consisted of 24 questions – three questions associated with each of the eight standards (knowledge, skills, efficacy) – and participants rated their perceptions on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the minimal level of knowledge, skills or efficacy and 10 being the maximum level possible for a school administrator in any of the areas.

### **Current Survey Distribution and Planned Future Distribution**

While the first two administrations of the KSE Leadership Survey, the data from which this study is based, were administered in early 2017 and measured beginning-of-program perceptions exclusively, plans have already been established for future administrations and purposes. Distribution is scheduled to occur four times during the candidates’ progression through the educational leadership program: 1) at the beginning of the program; 2) at the beginning of the internship; 3) at the conclusion of the program; and 4) one year beyond completion of the program. Candidates who are in the appropriate program milestone will be sent an information email along with a survey link. All surveys were and will remain anonymous and have been and will continue to be identified only through cohort groupings.

For the purpose of this particular study, the KSE Leadership Survey was distributed to new, beginning-of-program candidates entering the educational leadership program in either spring or summer of 2017. Participation was voluntary, and candidates were advised in advance of future planned distributions as well as assured of anonymity. Candidates received a group email (by cohort) with a link by which to access the survey, along with a group (cohort) access code for tracking purposes. In the following data analysis section, the responses from these first two “Survey 1” cohorts are shared, with trends and implications discussed. Acting as the first step of multiple survey steps for these first two 2017 cohorts as well as multiple survey steps for future program cohorts, this early data provides a foundational baseline (mean ratings and response counts) for preliminary conclusions and recommendations.

### DATA ANALYSIS

The following data resulted from Survey 1 responses from incoming educational leadership program candidates during January – June of 2017. Candidates were asked to complete the survey during their first two weeks of the 22-month Master of Arts in Educational Leadership program, thus capturing a “beginning-of-program” perception base. Cohort participation rates are provided in Table 1.

Survey participants were asked to rate their own perceptions, at this beginning-of-program baseline point, in terms of the eight North Carolina School Executive Standards – and to differentiate these perceptions in terms of perceived knowledge, skills and efficacy in each standard. Table 2 presents an analysis of these responses, by standard and by cohort, as well as in terms of culminating data for Survey 1 responses. Included in Table 2 are mean scores of responses (on a scale of 1 to 10) as well as response counts for the 1-5 range and the 6-10 range for each question.

**Table 1.** KSE Leadership Survey: Survey 1 Participation Rate [Jan-June 2017]

Cohort [Survey 1]	Cohort Students	Number of Participants	Participation Rate
Spring-2017	18	10	55%
Summer - 2017	23	15	65%

**Table 2.** KSE Leadership Survey – Survey 1 Response Analysis [Jan. – June, 2017]

	Spr. 2017 Mean	Spr. 2017 <=5/>=6	Sum 2017 Mean	Sum 2017 <=5/>=6	BOP Mean	BOP <=5/>=6
<b>Standard 1: Strategic Leadership</b>						
Knowledge	4.60	7/3	3.93	12/3	4.20	19/6
Skills	4.60	6/4	4.07	10/4	4.29	16/8
Efficacy	4.90	6/4	4.50	9/5	4.65	15/9
<b>Standard 2: Instructional Leadership</b>						
Knowledge	5.20	5/5	4.85	8/6	5.00	13/11
Skills	5.10	6/4	5.00	8/6	5.04	14/10
Efficacy	5.10	4/6	4.93	6/8	5.00	10/14
<b>Standard 3: Cultural Leadership</b>						
Knowledge	5.50	4/6	4.57	9/5	4.96	13/11
Skills	5.00	6/4	4.78	9/5	4.88	15/9
Efficacy	5.40	5/5	5.00	8/6	5.16	13/11
<b>Standard 4: Human Resources Leadership</b>						
Knowledge	4.40	7/3	4.71	8/6	4.58	15/9
Skills	4.30	8/2	4.85	7/7	4.63	15/9
Efficacy	4.00	8/2	4.85	7/7	4.50	15/9
<b>Standard 5: Managerial Leadership</b>						
Knowledge	3.70	8/2	3.85	10/4	3.79	18/6
Skills	3.90	7/3	4.57	8/6	4.29	15/9
Efficacy	3.90	7/3	4.71	8/6	4.38	15/9
<b>Standard 6: External Development Leadership</b>						
Knowledge	4.70	7/3	4.00	11/3	4.29	18/6
Skills	4.50	7/3	3.92	12/2	4.16	19/5
Efficacy	4.40	7/3	4.28	9/5	4.33	16/8
<b>Standard 7: Micropolitical Leadership</b>						
Knowledge	4.50	7/3	4.14	12/2	4.29	19/5
Skills	4.20	8/2	4.14	11/3	4.17	19/5
Efficacy	4.30	8/2	4.00	12/2	4.13	20/4
<b>Standard 8: Academic Achievement Leadership</b>						
Knowledge	5.50	5/5	5.07	7/7	5.25	12/12
Skills	5.50	5/5	5.14	7/7	5.29	12/12
Efficacy	5.40	6/4	5.36	6/8	5.38	12/12

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The data presented through these first two iterations of Survey 1 are compelling

both in terms of levels of perceived accomplishment for beginning-of-program candidates as well as in terms of consistent contrasts between perceived knowledge, skills and efficacy in particular standards. Interesting findings and conclusions from analysis of all Survey 1 participant data (BOP) includes the following:

**Contrasting Knowledge, Skills and Efficacy.** The data indicates that students perceive their current knowledge, skills and efficacy in each area to be of similar strength – with only standards being significantly higher or lower and not necessarily indicators. It is also interesting to note that in the areas of Strategic Leadership, Cultural Leadership, Managerial Leadership, External Development Leadership, and Academic Achievement Leadership, candidates rated efficacy with higher mean scores than knowledge or skills.

**Perceived Areas of Strength.** Students in the beginning of an Educational Leadership program perceive their greatest possession of knowledge, skills and efficacy to be in the standards associated with Instructional Leadership (K=5.00; S=5.04; E=5.00) and Academic Achievement Leadership (K=5.25; S=5.29; E=5.38). At first glance this may appear to be an expected perception, based on the knowledge that these candidates are likely active classroom teachers or counselors themselves and thus engaged in instruction and the pursuit of academic achievement on a daily basis. However, the survey questions did not inquire as to the perceived levels of knowledge, skill and efficacy needed to carry out a teaching or counseling role with success. The actual survey questions asked the participant to consider the knowledge, skills or efficacy currently perceived as compared to what would be needed as a school administrator. A sample question from the survey (Question #6 – Instructional Leadership – Efficacy) is provided below in Figure 1 as illustration of this directive.

**Figure 1.** Sample Question and Directive of KSE Survey

\*Questions 4-6 pertain to Standard 2: Instructional Leadership (see expectations for Instructional Leadership in grey below)

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**SELF-EFFICACY:**

My current level of self-efficacy (belief and confidence) as compared to the self-efficacy needed to meet this expectation in an exemplary manner:

As a school administrator, you will be expected to lead discussions about standards for curriculum, instruction and assessment based on research and best practices in order to establish and achieve high expectations for students, including the monitoring of the alignment of these in your school. You will be expected to create processes and schedules which protect teachers from disruption of instructional or preparation time.

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**Academic Achievement Leadership.** The highest mean responses of the survey occurred in Standard 8: Academic Achievement Leadership. In the state of North Carolina, this is the one standard that is not related to the ratings of an evaluator. The rating in this

standard is, instead, determined exclusively by school standardized testing results. It is noteworthy that incoming candidates in this educational leadership program rated this standard as the highest in perceived knowledge (m=5.25), skills (m=5.29), and efficacy (m=5.38) – with all three indicators rated with a mean above 5. This data translates into beginning-of-program students who perceive that they have above the response range midpoint in terms of the levels needed in knowledge, skills and efficacy to be successful in this standard as a school administrator. Also of interest is that the mean rating for efficacy in this standard was the highest recorded mean rating of the entire data set. Assumptions as to why candidates would perceive higher levels of strength in this area may be linked to success as a classroom teacher or strong comfort levels in terms of know-how – both of which are related to, but not entirely indicative of, the knowledge, skills and efficacy needed for the school administrator to be successful in leading a school towards Academic Achievement. The challenge related to this data is that many teachers across the state of North Carolina, the Southeast region, and the nation as a whole, teach in schools and in classrooms which, unfortunately, do not record high levels of student academic achievement. Yet, these future leaders, as incoming cohorts in an educational leadership program, perceive this very area to be the one in which they hold the strongest current levels of preparedness and confidence.

**Instructional Leadership.** The second-highest mean responses of the survey occurred in Standard 2: Instructional Leadership. Each of these three ratings was at or above the midway point range, with knowledge rated with a mean score of 5.00, skills rated with a mean score of 5.04, and efficacy rated with a mean score of 5.00. With many of the same points and questions related to the Standard 8 ratings discussed above, it is clear that these incoming candidates perceive that, compared to other standards, Instructional Leadership is a strength. Again, instructional leadership at the classroom level is quite different than that of a true instructional school leader, yet the candidates represented in this survey considered themselves at least halfway accomplished in terms of all the knowledge, skills and efficacy needed to be successful in instructionally leading a school as a school principal or administrator.

**Area with the Most Opportunity for Growth.** In terms of the lowest scored standards or indicators, the candidates rated Managerial Leadership (Knowledge) with a mean score of 3.79. Managerial leadership includes the ability to manage the fiscal and procedural actions of a school, actions that are often beyond the normal comfort level or daily roles of classroom teachers or counselors. One interesting note related to Managerial Leadership would be the mean score for efficacy in this area: 4.38. This would appear to suggest that while candidates may not perceive that they possess managerial knowledge, they are inclined to be more efficacious that they are currently ready to be successful as a managerial leader.

**Instructional Leadership and High Individual Confidence.** While previous conclusions relied on the mean ratings from the survey, this particular point is based on the below/above counts taken from the individual responses. These are noted in Table 2 as  $\leq 5$  and  $\geq 6$ . These columns note how many students actually chose a response that was 5 or lower and how many chose a response that was 6 or higher. The interesting thing about this data is that in every standard and indicator for BOP, there were more candidates who chose a response of 5 or lower (midway to the knowledge, skills or efficacy needed to be successful as a school administrator or lower) than there were who chose a response of 6

or higher (above the midway point in relation to what is needed to be a successful school administrator) – every standard and indicator, that is, *except* for one. In the area of Instructional Leadership – Efficacy, the majority of candidates (14) chose 6 or higher as their individual rating, in contrast to 10 candidates who chose 5 or lower. This is the only point in the survey in which this phenomenon occurs, and it may indicate an inflated confidence on the part of candidates in terms of instruction and the role that school administrators play in strong instructional leadership.

## IMPACT AND APPLICATIONS

In light of these early findings, consideration as to capitalizing on these opportunities, in both implicit and explicit ways, may provide those who design and implement programs of educational leadership development the most fruitful window by which to encourage successful student experiences (Kirk, 2015) as well as build successful future school leaders. Current opportunities may include:

1. *Mastery experiences*: While several strategies may be used to build self-efficacy, mastery experiences provide the most significant source for efficacious growth (Kirk, 2015). A deliberate program design that includes opportunities for mastery experiences provides the candidate with concrete examples of success.... not just any success, but their own success (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). The design for the experience of mastery is one that should be considered when building program activities as well as the scope of internship activities.
2. *Vicarious experiences*: Opportunities to observe peers succeeding with tasks can strengthen a student's belief in their own abilities (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Kirk, 2015; Pajares, 2009). Based on this knowledge, optimizing opportunities for collaboration within the educational leadership online environment and internship learning environment is key. Instructors who encourage active discussion and then direct students, through positive feedback, to read their peer's discussion posts are providing vicarious experiences for all (Vilkas & McCabe, 2014; Ya Ni, 2013).
3. *Verbal persuasions*: An aspiring leader's self-efficacy may also be impacted by the verbal persuasions of others – the feedback or encouragement or even criticism that is received, internalized, and used to shape beliefs. In an online learning environment, social persuasion may tend to be an even greater challenge, as conversations occur over email and online and students and professors engage in learning while never meeting in person. Qualitative feedback that is viewed by students as constructive and credible can work to build efficacy even as students are growing in knowledge and skills (Cheawjindakarn et al., 2012; Kirk, 2015).
4. *Physiological reaction*: Stress can impact efficacy-building; thus, student stress is a topic of relevance in the discussion of efficacy growth in future leaders. In terms of online leadership programs, in which some students may struggle with feelings of disconnectedness, it can be difficult if not impossible for professors to pick-up on the usual signs of stress that can more readily be detected in the face-to-face

- classroom environment (Barr & Miller, 2013). As recommended by Vilkas and McCabe (2014), the key for any program is to be proactive. This is done by a focused effort on the part of all instructors and the director to keep directions, expectations, and assessments clear, free of surprises, and efficiently communicated.
5. *Pedagogical choices*: Programmatic pedagogical choices also offer a deliberate opportunity to foster the efficacy growth of the student and emerging leader (Barr & Miller, 2013; Jaschik, 2009). In earlier research, Fencil and Scheel (2005), considered student perceptions and responses in order to identify pedagogical approaches that led to higher self-efficacy and efficacy development, including setting individual goals for individual students and providing inquiry-based lab activities. In expanding slightly on the former point, Jeffrey McCafferty shed light on the importance of the individualized approach to online learning (2014) through his advice to use “technology to enable faculty members to better meet the unique needs of individual learners” (p. 21). This differentiation may extend beyond the course content and into the hands-on, experiential learning itself, which ideally takes place in the laboratory (the school) under the guidance of a master (a mentor administrator).
  6. *Internship parameters*: Many leadership development programs rely on the availability of internship experiences as a pathway for application and practice. The internship phase of learning may also prove helpful in guiding and building needed efficacy while redirecting or reframing misplaced or inappropriate confidence. Opportunities specifically focused on areas of instructional leadership may be warranted based on this early data.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Faced with the daunting and, at times, seemingly insurmountable challenges facing 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders, the self-efficacious, highly skilled and knowledgeable leaders will, no doubt, be the most highly sought-after candidates to lead our nation’s schools. With increasing numbers of schools in turnaround status, increasing numbers of districts labeled as failing, and persistently alarming rates of low achievement for minority and impoverished students – these are the leaders who are needed, and these are the future leaders for whom our educational leadership programs must be designed. As shared by Avolio and Hannah (2008), “leader developers will be well served by promoting that each developing leader understands that an able leader is largely made versus born and that he or she is the author of his or her own leadership journey” (p. 343).

The application of the KSE leadership survey will continue with future cohorts of incoming candidates, but will also continue in re-application for the two cohorts featured in this study – at various milestones of their program progression and career introduction. This milestone tracking will allow a real-time gauging of changes or lack of progress or alignment in cohort growth in knowledge, skills and efficacy.

With a growing database and, perhaps, future significant findings, educational

leadership programs may implement programmatic and internship improvements to intentionally address the balance of leadership efficacy with competency. Therefore, tomorrow's school leaders may truly become "authors of leadership journeys" that lead to school administration success.

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