

Five Ideas for Reframing the Principalship

G. Thomas Bellamy

University of Washington, Bothell

Connie Fulmer

University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center

& Rodney Muth

University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center

Abstract: Schools, and especially principals, are challenged constantly to improve learning outcomes for students. We advance five ideas that should help principals address these challenges: (a) student learning “plus,” (b) school accomplishments, (c) organizational context and depth of repertoire, (d) social and political context, and (e) leadership as an annual cycle.

Introduction

The challenges facing schools and their principals are clear: (a) intense pressure to meet standards of learning on annual tests when schools now serve more students with traditional challenges of poverty, language status, or disabilities; (b) widespread funding disparities that limit equity in learning as public policies focus on learning gaps among student groups; and (c) school-choice models that advantage some family priorities while diverting attention from the academic achievement of all.

Whatever one might say about the reasonableness of these contrasting expectations, schools remain critical to perpetuating our democratic model of government as well as maintaining our prosperity in a global

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economy. Yet, the school-leadership profession has not moved quickly or effectively to respond to these evolving expectations of schools, leaving large numbers of individual principals unsuccessful in their efforts to address these challenges.

The gap between expectations and realities has helped popularize many alternatives to how the principalship is designed, how individuals are prepared for the role, who is considered for vacancies, and how new information is brought to practice. With tests of many of these alternatives underway in some states, it is not unreasonable to expect that the principalship as we know it is at risk unless significant and rapid improvements are made in professional preparation and individual practice.

Ideas abound about how the profession should respond to these challenges. Proposals range from re-grounding the field in core values like social justice and professional community (Murphy, 2002; Starratt, 2003), developing a better-organized or more inclusive knowledge base (Hoy, 1994; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993), developing a renewed focus on instructional leadership (Blase & Blase, 1998), supporting student learning through professional learning (DuFour, Eaker, & Burnett, 2002), implementing national standards for principal preparation programs (Van Meter & Murphy, 1997), and so on.

At the risk of adding to the confusion, we propose a different approach because a more comprehensive view is needed to address issues about knowledge, conceptions of practice, approaches to preparation, and strategies for developing the profession as a coherent whole. Our proposal rests on five foundational ideas that raise interrelated questions of “why,” “what,” and “how” in the work of the principalship. While each of the five ideas is grounded in familiar concepts, none has been central to scholarship, policy, and practice in school leadership. Taken together, the five ideas offer new ways to examine the critical challenges that principals and the profession face today.

Student Learning Plus

The purpose of schools and the result expected of principals is student learning—and more. Our “student learning plus” view means several things. First, as expectations for schools change, so do requirements for successful school leadership. From colonial times forward, public schools in America have faced many competing expectations, focusing variously on religious transmission, development of public morality, preparation for work, fostering civic engagement, and support for individual development (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990; Cremin, 1970; Tyack, 1974). Over time, these conflicting ideas about what kind

of learning is important have been complicated by many additional expectations: to provide reliable day care, universal health screening, as well as programs for alcohol and drug abuse, pregnancy prevention, and so forth. Now as earlier in our history, assimilation is a large and necessary goal. With such competing pressures, it is understandable why the goals of schools and their principals have focused on maintaining social legitimacy by conforming to social expectations (Meyer & Rowan, 1978).

Today, social legitimacy is no longer enough: Content standards and annual tests, assessment methods and accountability, and annual test results as public data used in the assessment of school and principal effectiveness all weigh heavily. The shift to results, supported by state and federal policies (Bracey, 2004), strong public support (Rose & Gallup, 2004), and visible professional advocacy (Schmoker, 1996) has raised the pressure on principals to the boiling point.

As the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 proceeds, another expectation is that *high reliability* is rapidly becoming a norm for schools. It is no longer sufficient for schools to operate efficiently and creatively to increase student learning; rather, they now are challenged to avoid failure entirely, to ensure that every child is supported to make adequate yearly progress.

Figure 1 illustrates “student learning plus,” showing that these expectations for school success form an increasingly complex set of requirements for school leaders. While measured student learning serves as an important outcome, additional expectations constrain how learning is achieved and how resources are deployed.

School Accomplishments

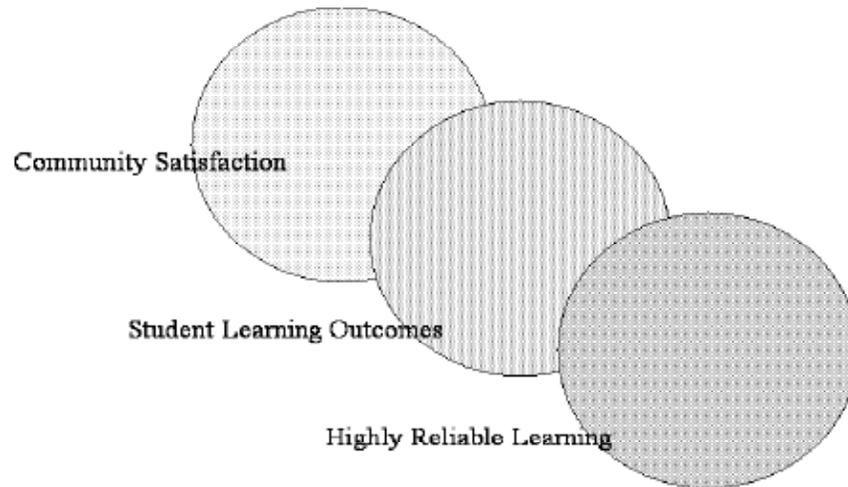
To promote student learning, principals have a school-wide responsibility for managing the processes and creating the conditions that support teaching and learning. We call these conditions a school’s *accomplishments* (Bellamy, Fulmer, Murphy, & Muth, 2003, 2007; Muth, Bellamy, Fulmer, & Murphy, 2006) to focus attention on what actually changes. Most other models or frameworks focus on programs, procedures, or strategies. Following is a brief summary of our accomplishment perspective.

To support student learning, principals address an endless array of daily problems: rapid-fire, simultaneous, and messy, leading often to fragmented and disjointed work. Behavioral issues, parent complaints, calls from the district, and urgent notes about classroom crises conspire to make each day turbulent.

To harness this rush of daily work to the core purpose of student learning, principals need logical and practical mid-range theories (Merton,

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Figure 1. School Goals as “Student Learning Plus.”



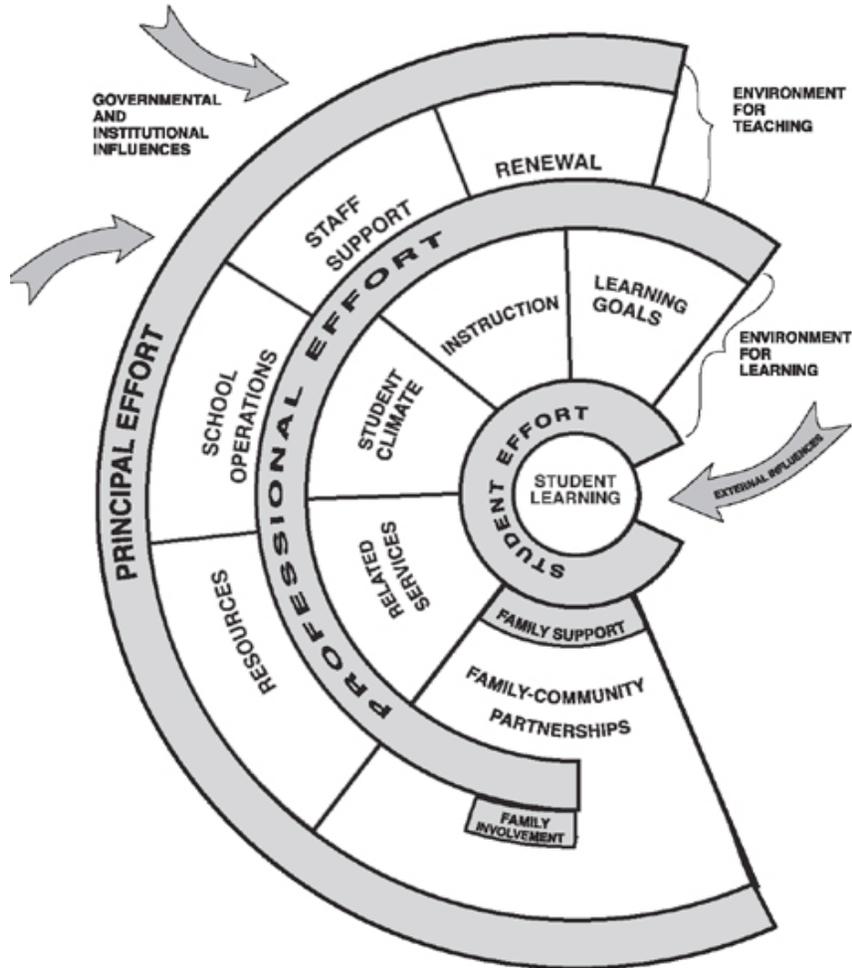
1967) or theories of action (Robinson, 1993) that facilitate the selection of problems to alleviate and to create conditions necessary to support effective teaching and learning. Our accomplishment model (see Figure 2) is an action theory that recognizes the diversity among schools and the need for continuously unique problem solutions.

For schools, accomplishments are those positive conditions that foster and support student learning while focusing attention on results (Brethower, 1997). Each accomplishment defines a condition or a state of affairs that contributes to student learning. These conditions constantly evolve as new issues arise, the school's staff and students respond, and the principal exercises leadership.

Accomplishments become meaningful as they are elaborated by "success criteria" that define the desired features accomplishments. For example, one way or another, every school creates some kind of learning-conducive climate, seeking to sustain it over time. While generally positive, a school's climate might detract from a school's student-learning goals, depending on the climate's sustained features: mutual respect for all or support for one group or another. Success criteria help define what school personnel mean, for instance, by an engaging, safe, participatory, and welcoming school.

Thus, accomplishments provide a unit of analysis for knowledge and practice once a school's major responsibilities are described in an *accomplishment model*, in our case the Framework for School Leadership Accomplishments (FSLA). This set of accomplishments provides a

Figure 2: The Framework for School Leadership Accomplishments.



conceptual model of a school's work, detailing the results that obtain from each of its major processes (Brethower, 1997). The FSLA defines accomplishments that, when taken together, provide a comprehensive but parsimonious taxonomy of the challenges that school leaders face.

As Figure 2 shows, the FSLA nests these accomplishments and initial impacts to show an expected path of influence. Beginning at the center, the focus is on student learning, a school's primary goal. The accomplishments (the white sections of the figure) and initial impacts (the shaded portions) that affect student learning are organized into two

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tiers of influence, those that support student effort and learning (the environment for learning) and those that support professional effort and teaching (the environment for teaching). One of the nine accomplishments, the family-community partnership, supports both.

The open space in the right of Figure 2 symbolizes the many external influences over which a school exerts little or no influence: For example, the economic status of the community and the attractiveness of television and recreational opportunities are largely outside a schools' control. The FSLA supports a theory of action for daily problems linked to student learning. This linkage occurs as (a) principals select problems for attention that have the greatest potential for improving one or more accomplishment, (b) strategically select which accomplishment may best affect student learning, and (c) address the problems so that a school's accomplishments improve. This means that principals implement "leadership for strategic focus" (Bellamy et al., 2007) to diagnose local needs and organize a school to concentrate on improving related accomplishments.

Organizational Context and Depth of Repertoire

Unique characteristics of schools, teachers, students, and communities mean that principals reach accomplishments and support learning through many different approaches. Schools are people- and relationship-intensive places that operate in frequently surprising ways. Differences in how students learn often require adaptations in curricular and instructional approaches. Differences in school cultures affect how new programs are implemented. Differences in expectations across communities affect what approaches are accepted and which are challenged. As schools attempt to sustain reliable results in the face of such differences, standardized prescriptions rarely work.

In this context, it is neither enough for principals to know only one way to meet each of a school's accomplishments nor realistic to expect research to identify one best way that is effective for all schools. Evidence-based practice is useful, but, like a physician treating a condition for which multiple medications have been tested and approved, the task only begins with the diagnosis. Then, it is necessary to consider the efficacy of available treatments, which ones are affordable, which are likely to be used, what risks of side effects are tolerable, and so on. Similarly, effective principal practice depends on a deep repertoire of multiple strategies to address each accomplishment. Such practice also requires ways to monitor the results of actions so that unsuccessful strategies can be replaced quickly.

Because circumstances of practices can differ so much, the profession's knowledge necessarily contains multiple options rather than a small number of specific prescriptions. And because principals confront endless choices about which problems to pay attention to, individual practice requires well-developed skills at monitoring and diagnosing school needs (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003). Consequently, a principal needs both a deep repertoire of alternative strategies and a well-structured individual knowledge base. Experts see more than novices do as they diagnose situations and plan responses, and this expertise depends on having knowledge that is structured around core concepts in a field (Chi, Feltovich, & Glaser, 1981; Chase & Simon, 1973).

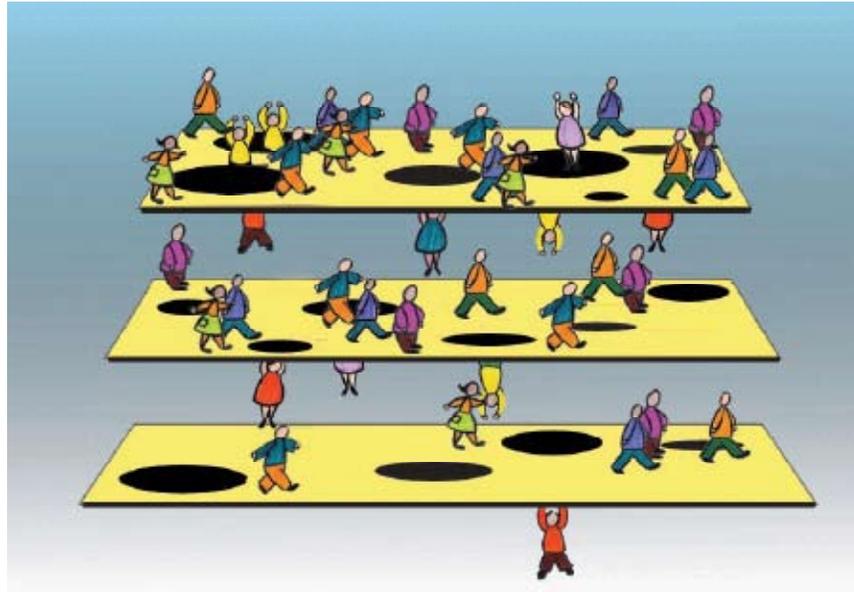
The expectation for high reliability in student learning—ensuring that practically every student will develop proficiency in core subjects—underscores the need for a deep repertoire of approaches for each school accomplishment. No matter what leadership and instructional strategies are used initially or how well supported these strategies are in the field's research, few succeed with all children. The expectation for reliability in schools simply exceeds the reliability of any single procedure or program. Thus, this deep repertoire of strategies is required not only to adjust to local circumstances but also to shift to new strategies when the chosen approaches do not work with individual teachers or students. As schools work to achieve reliable learning, leadership also involves selecting normal operations from many possibilities and constantly monitoring results so that it is possible to shift to back-up strategies with they are needed (Bellamy, Crawford, Huber-Marshall, & Coulter, 2005). This "Swiss cheese" model is illustrated in Figure 3.

Social and Political Context

School-level leadership occurs in a unique social and political context in which the criteria for success constantly are in political play. Acknowledging that the primary goal of schools and their principals is student learning simply begs further questions. Whose learning? What learning is important? Should schools support character education, physical education, and social development, or focus solely on academic objectives? With limited resources, should schools give special attention to advanced work for children who are well ahead of their peers and working toward competitive college admission or focus on remedial work for those who are struggling? Naturally, as changes occur in priorities, a school's success criteria will change as well. For example, what might be the difference between a school whose community highly values competition for top grades and one that values inclusion for large number of new immigrants?

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Figure 3: A Swiss cheese model for leading schools—backups at each level.



Conflict over goals is not unique to education. Yet in medicine and in many other professions, goal conflicts often are resolved through deliberation and consensus building within the profession. Accounting standards and goals, for example, are set primarily by accountants working collectively, and the prevailing conception of justice evolves from collective action in the legal profession. When professionals are able to determine their goals, it is possible to reach a working consensus on relative weights given to competing values and to develop broadly-accepted definitions.

What is unique in educational leadership is that decisions about purposes, goals, and values are shared with the formal political context in which schools work. While all professions are subject to external scrutiny, few must bend to the often informal and more immediate context of local expectations and pressures from families and community members. Federal and state constitutional guarantees give state legislators and locally elected school boards considerable say in the purposes of education in their settings, and current practice in many districts even devolves this authority to local school councils. These extra-professional bodies have the authority and responsibility to establish school goals and purposes, making school goals a constantly evolving outcome of many levels of input. Nevertheless, professional dialogue about the nature of

educational goals is essential (Cambron-McCabe, 1999; Furman & Starratt, 2002; Goodlad, 1996; Larson & Murtadha, 2002), and professional voices are critically important in these deliberations, as even the most compelling professional proposals are mediated by very public and too often expedient processes for establishing educational goals.

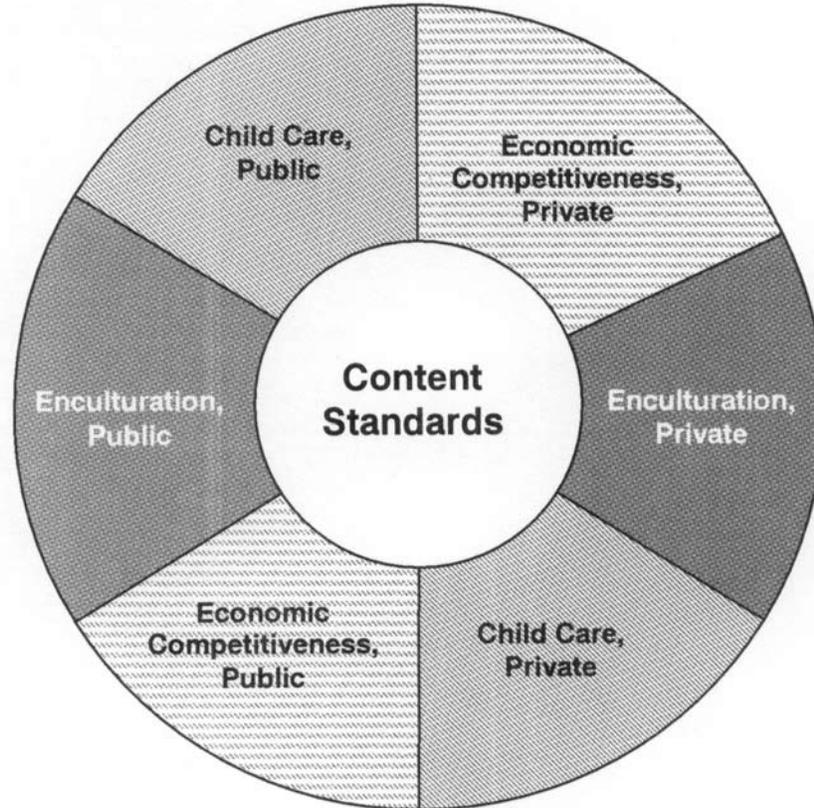
In this context, a principal's role is directly affected by the fact that school goals are locally unique and evolving. Knowing what a community values is necessary to diagnosis and planning as well as determinant of leadership and other principal strategies. One of these, leadership for sustainable purposes, focuses attention on leading and maintaining community conversations about local goals and priorities so that school people, parents, and community members can be clear about expectations for performance over time (Bellamy et al., 2007). Regardless, three competing expectations frame discussions of goals for schools and principals. Schools are expected to (a) support students' enculturation and personal development, (b) prepare students and their communities for economic competitiveness, and (c) care for children in ways that support their personal and social adjustment (see Figure 4). Each of these three expectations has public benefits as well as private benefits associated with the interests of particular families, groups, or communities.

Ongoing competition among these broad educational purposes and high variability among districts and schools have encouraged the development of content standards that specify what students should know and be able to do as a result of their schooling (Resnick & Nolan, 1995). By reducing ambiguity and discretion, many hope that standards will help schools achieve a more limited but commonly accepted set of valued outcomes.

However, as central as content standards are today, they only partially address school purposes. In addition to helping students reach content standards, schools are expected to influence student development and support families in ways not so easily assessed. Student safety, pursuit of individual interests and talents, character development, friendships, community service, and personal relationships between students and adults still matter, regardless of test results. And different communities emphasize different purposes in the informal pressures that they bring to bear on schools and their leaders.

Consequently, a principal's challenge is to understand and shape the relative weight of these purposes in a particular school's community through ongoing conversations. Then, the resulting information both shapes leadership for strategic focus and effective action and undergirds leadership for sustainable purposes. Such leadership requires knowledge of competing values and purposes of education, understandings of local priorities, skills in leading conversations that sharpen shared commit-

Figure 4. Six competing school purposes of public education partially reconciled through content standards.



ments among school constituents, clarity about how one's own values fit with those of a school's community, and consistent engagement with community constituents on matters of purpose, priorities, and goals. In short, it requires principals to address issues of ends as well as means, constantly integrating purpose, priority, and action. It also suggests that developing and articulating goals for schools is a continuing part of each principal's responsibility, not a matter that can be defined simply through collective action of the profession, through decisions of elected officials, or through one-shot community forums.

Leadership as an Overlapping Annual Cycle

A year is a meaningful unit of principals' work, and each annual cycle provides the opportunity to integrate leadership for sustainable purposes,

strategic focus, and effective action in the unique context of one specific school and community. Schools, whether nine-month or year-around, tend to operate on annual cycles. Supplies and materials usually are ordered annually. Maintenance schedules are annualized. Budgets are built yearly, and school-improvement plans emphasize annual goals. Most successful principals begin planning for a school year months in advance, pay particular attention to the first days and weeks of school, respond to problems and opportunities throughout the year, and reflect on results in conjunction with planning for the next year. A school year creates a natural cycle of school leadership, with clear connections to prior and upcoming years.

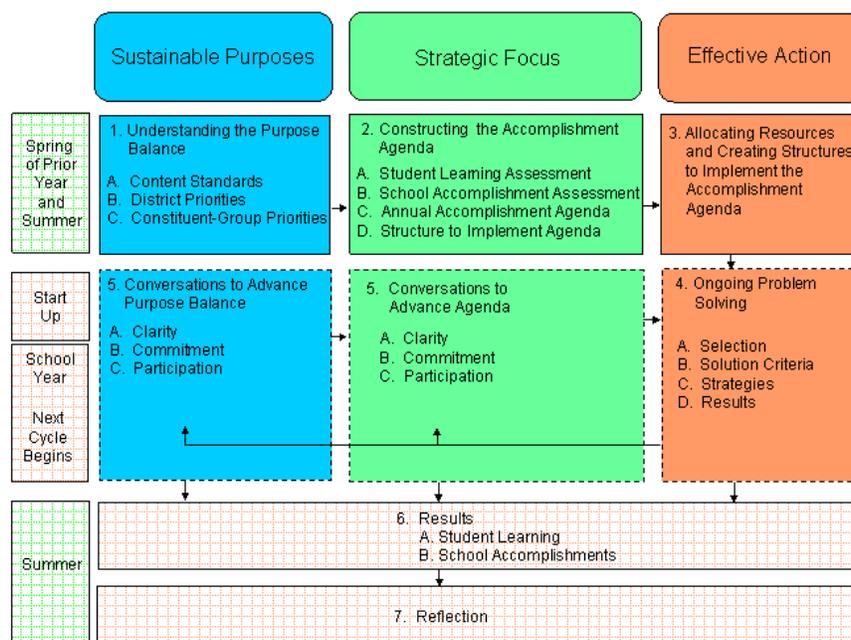
Each annual cycle (see Figure 5) creates a new context for school leadership, requiring adjustments to different students, teachers, and parents. And even though school purposes and programs are shaped over longer periods, the unique membership of a school community during each school year brings a new mix of interests, priorities, concerns, and goals. By adapting to these new circumstances, accomplishment-minded leadership becomes contextualized and purposive. In effect, each annual cycle provides the story board for a new narrative of school leadership.

The annual cycle of school leadership—for most principals and their staff a 14 to 18-month period—generally begins in early spring with a principal reviewing the past year to build an understanding of how a school community emphasizes the various school purposes. While a working balance of these purposes constantly evolves, a principal's knowledge of the balance of school purposes provides the grounding for the school's annual goals and plans. A concrete translation of this balance occurs as a school's leadership constructs success criteria for each of the school's accomplishments. While many of the success criteria come from research that demonstrates what features of a school's accomplishments are related to student learning, these are supplemented in accomplishment-minded practice by locally defined criteria that reflect a community's specific balance of school purposes.

The next step in the annual cycle also occurs well before the start of a school year. An accomplishment agenda—a set of strategic goals for a school during the year—is established based on assessment of student learning gaps and analysis of how well a school is doing in relation to each accomplishment. In essence, this involves (a) identifying what subjects, students, and grade levels represent particular learning gaps; (b) assessing school accomplishments, against the success criteria, to determine which aspects of a school might be improved in ways that might affect the learning gaps; and (c) defining strategic goals for school improvement. The result is a plan to emphasize improvements in a few

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Figure 5. Annual cycle of school leadership.



critical school accomplishments. This accomplishment agenda then guides the initial structure for a school, including budgets, schedule, staff assignments, and policies that emphasize the accomplishments selected for attention.

As the actual school year begins with its daily operational challenges—the constant flow of problems and issues that principals face each day—principals select and frame problems that address the community’s mix of purposes and the annual accomplishment agenda. While these problems provide the means to improve school operations and learning outcomes, they also can be used to stimulate important conversations that advance a school’s purposes and agenda by deepening commitment, increasing participation, or sharpening the focus of goals and priorities.

Finally, a school’s annual cycle includes assessment of results and reflection on a principal’s approaches across these leadership domains. This assessment and reflection are done in conjunction with planning for the next school year, creating natural connections across years.

Implications for Professional Knowledge

The foregoing discussion represents part of a larger project in which we are exploring the implications of these five ideas for strategies to improve leadership practice, alternatives to existing preparation models, and approaches to advancing the profession as a whole. Here, we highlight implications of these ideas for the knowledge base and address how our approach might contribute to discussions of the scope and structure of the profession's knowledge.

Knowledge Scope

Given our five ideas, defining knowledge needed for professional practice essentially involves clarifying what knowledge principals need to work toward school accomplishments in differing local circumstances. This point has two important implications for the scope of professional knowledge, one related to simultaneous consideration of ends and means and the other pointing to a very eclectic knowledge base.

First, because work toward accomplishments involves defining a set of success criteria as well as drawing from a wide repertoire of action strategies, the knowledge supporting each accomplishment necessarily includes information about both ends and means. The ends—the criteria that define success—are partly developed in each local community, so knowledge is needed to lead discussions about what school conditions are just, equitable, effective, caring, and so forth. And knowledge about means—a principal's action strategies—is necessary to reach these success criteria once they are defined. In the daily life of school leaders, means and ends interact, each influencing the other recursively. Thus, accomplishments serve as a useful construct for organizing knowledge for work in such contexts by including both kinds of information. Neither is sufficient alone.

Second, the accomplishment construct frames an eclectic and pragmatic view of leadership practice. By specifying accomplishments and success criteria but allowing action strategies to vary as needed, the accomplishment perspective encourages those within a school to draw on information from many sources and research traditions as they work toward their goals and purposes. Defined by results rather than methods, accomplishments serve as a way to organize information about many different approaches that might be useful in working toward the accomplishment in various settings.

Taken together, these two requirements for individual professional knowledge suggest an inclusive professional knowledge base that includes four broad sources: (a) ethical and critical reasoning, (b) legal reasoning,

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(c) research in the social sciences, and (d) craft knowledge. Of course, these and other distinctions among types of knowledge are ultimately arbitrary, with constantly shifting boundaries among what one might categorize as craft knowledge, social science, ethical reasoning, and so on (Bohman, 1991). Figure 6 illustrates a way to structure knowledge bases organized around accomplishments, combining the sources of knowledge noted earlier with the two central questions about each accomplishment for which knowledge is needed.

Structure of Professional Knowledge

Knowledge structure is important. For individual practitioners, personal knowledge that is organized around fundamental principles or major ideas helps them notice patterns of meaningful information and frame problems and opportunities in their situations more effectively (Chi, Glaser, & Rees, 1982; Lesgold, Rubinson, Feltovich, Glaser, Klopfer, & Wang, 1988). For the profession as a whole, structured knowledge can support coherent professional preparation, underlie standards for licensing and practice, and support research on practice and practice outcomes.

The profession's knowledge also could inform two aspects of the question about success criteria for each accomplishment. The first addresses how the accomplishment contributes to valued student learning. This is largely a matter of asking what evidence exists for the claim that certain conditions in a school—the results achieved by realizing the accomplishments—enhance student learning. The question is similar to the many meta-analyses of school procedures (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993; Marzano, 2003) but with a focus on the impact of school conditions rather than the specific procedures used to create those conditions. For example, to establish empirically-supported success criteria for an accomplishment, say student climate sustained, one would ask of the accumulated professional knowledge, what characteristics of school climates are related to student learning?

The second issue concerns local development of these success criteria. Different emphasis on the private and public purposes of education results in different local expectations for school goals and for the accomplishments through which these goals are pursued. Success criteria translate these different expectations into concrete descriptions of what school conditions should exist.

Because of these local differences, the profession's knowledge cannot be limited to a list of generally accepted success criteria for each accomplishment. Instead, knowledge should help principals relate the conditions associated with each accomplishment to various mixes of

Figure 6. Illustrative structure for knowledge organized around an accomplishment.

Questions about the Accomplishment	Ethical and Critical Reasoning	Legal Reasoning	Social Science Research	Craft Knowledge
<p>Success Criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrated contribution to student learning • Reasoning that links the accomplishment to values, principles, and expectations 				
<p>Action Repertoire</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement strategies • Structural strategies • Direct-action strategies 				

school purposes that exist in their own communities as well as lead local conversations about goals and expectations. Knowledge supporting the definition of success criteria includes a broad range of ethical, critical, and legal understandings that help professionals lead discussions about school goals and their implications for school accomplishments.

The second question that helps structure knowledge around school accomplishment relates to the strategies that are likely to help principals meet the success criteria for each accomplishment. As noted earlier, knowledge in this area is needed to sustain a broad repertoire of approaches. To help organize the many possibilities, we have found it useful to distinguish among three types of strategies, with the assumption that effective leadership involves a mixture of all three: (a) *engagement strategies* that a principal might use to support the work of a school's professional community as it works toward the accomplishment; (b) *structural strategies* that define areas of responsibility, use of facilities, schedules, and other organizational interventions that can influence how an accomplishment is realized; and (c) *direct action strategies* that address the specific methods a principal or school's staff might use to handle a situation, routine, or responsibility that relates to the accomplishment.

Leveraging Knowledge with Narrative Cases

While the accomplishments in the FSLA offer one way to structure the profession's knowledge, the resulting organization may well be neater than the reality it seeks to inform. In practice, principals use knowledge in a much more integrated and contextualized way (Polanyi, 1962). Accordingly, a second structure for capturing the profession's knowledge appears useful as a complement to one that organizes knowledge around accomplishments. Narrative accounts of actual leadership experiences offer the opportunity to explore the link between the field's codified knowledge base and the contexts of practice. Currently, we do not have any way to capture systematically what practitioners actually do.

In this regard, we have recommended an annual case of school leadership that uses the components of Figure 5 as a broad outline for organizing principal's accounts of their leadership strategies and results (Muth, Bellamy, Fulmer, & Murphy, 2004; Muth et al., 2006). The intent is to develop cases that are comparable across instances and that can be used for principal professional development and advancement and also mined for generalizations across cases that could stimulate new areas of scholarship. Such cases provide ways to bring practice knowledge to the fore, to integrate this knowledge with traditional sources of knowledge in school leadership, and to use practice knowledge for leadership development, preparation, and continuing professional education.

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