



The Call for
Caring
School
Leaders

New professional standards serve as a guiding light for all aspects of educational leadership.

By Mark A. Smylie and Joseph F. Murphy



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In this time of academic rigor and high-stakes accountability, growing attention is now being paid to another key element of student success in schools: care and support. Indeed, there is increasing recognition of what educators and researchers have known for some time, that student success is keyed to the dynamic, strategic interaction of both academic press and care and support.

At the same time, increasing attention is being directed toward school principals and what they can do to promote caring and supportive learning environments in their schools. We have been studying literatures in education and of the helping professions to learn more about caring leadership and what principals can do to promote caring in their schools. In this article, we discuss what we have learned in the form of a model of caring school leadership. We also show how the newly developed and released Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015 (PSEL 2015) create a call for such caring leadership in schools.

Caring School Leadership

Caring school leadership is grounded in the idea that caring is a particular property of human relationships. Caring speaks to the qualities, matter, manner, and motivation of all action and interaction. Caring is directed toward the growth, well-being, and success of others. It is rooted in positive virtues, such as compassion, empathy, and kindness, and in mindsets that emphasize true understanding of others and motivation to act on behalf of others. Caring requires competence if the needs, concerns, and joys of others are to be understood and constructively addressed.

As a quality of action and interaction, one does not “do caring” apart from one’s work, nor is caring a set of particular behaviors. Caring can characterize most all leadership actions and interactions. It can infuse all aspects of a principal’s work, including developing and promoting a school’s mission, vision, and values; communicating expectations for teaching and student learning; providing instructional leadership; developing productive learning environments; securing and allocating resources; stressing rigor and

accountability; promoting positive student behavior; and engaging families and communities.

Caring school leadership has three main elements: leader caring, cultivating caring communities in schools, and developing caring beyond school. Each of these elements proceeds from the antecedents of leader caring noted above, and lead to an array of student benefits.

Leader caring refers to the caring nature of principals' actions and interactions, from one-to-one interactions to the exercise of their general roles and responsibilities. In addition, leader caring involves cultivating caring communities in schools for students. This entails developing the capacity for caring among others, social relationships that students have with adults and peers in school, and school organizational conditions conducive to caring. These conditions include structures that create opportunities for students, teachers, and principals to interact, to learn about and understand each other, and to engage in caring actions and interactions. These conditions also include school climate and culture, the social organization of the school, and organizational politics. Principals are called upon to strengthen those aspects of school organization that support caring and reduce the influence of those aspects that constrain or damage it.

Caring school leadership is also concerned with developing webs of caring relationships outside the school. It is concerned with shaping the influence of policy and institutional environments to promote caring in school and create well-being for those outside the school. An important aspect of a principal's work is nurturing relationships with families and other sources of student support within the community, which can strengthen the overall caring that students experience.

While principals may think themselves individually powerless to reshape the broad social, cultural, and political forces that affect their students, they can engage in local advocacy on behalf of their students, families, and communities. They can join others to address the social, political, and economic conditions that affect schooling and students more broadly. Much like public ministry, such advocacy and engagement are themselves acts of caring.

There is substantial evidence from research and from professional practice that caring leadership can promote wide-ranging benefits for

students. In addition to the tangible benefits from supports and services, these advantages include deeper learning, engagement, student belonging and social integration in school, and positive psychological states such as motivation and efficacy. There is also evidence that the experience of being cared increases one's capacity for caring.

PSEL 2015 and Caring Leadership

In October 2015, PSEL 2015 was adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, an "umbrella" organization whose members include NAESP, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the American Association of School Administrators, and other national organizations concerned with the development and support of the profession. PSEL 2015 replaces the ISLLC Standards that have shaped the landscape of educational leadership since 1996. Each standard addresses a particular leadership domain. (See table on page 19.) Together, the standards present a holistic portrait of effective leadership. The standards constitute a set of principles and expectations for educational leadership practice and for programs and policies designed to support the profession. They provide a guide for educational leaders' professional growth and development.

PSEL 2015 directs principals' practice toward students' academic achievement, and to their social, emotional, and psychological well-being. PSEL 2015 is emphatic in its concern for the success and well-being of *each* student.

PSEL 2015 emphasizes "academic press," the ongoing effort to challenge students intellectually to develop academic knowledge and skills required for success in school and beyond. The standards stress academic rigor and accountability and they call on principals to set high expectations, create equitable opportunities to learn, and promote intellectually engaging and challenging teaching.

Recognizing that academic press is not enough, PSEL 2015 strongly emphasizes student care and support. Indeed, PSEL 2015 tells principals that if they pursue efficacious combinations of press with care and support, they will be able to build powerful relational communities in their schools that promote student success and well-being. The emphasis on student care and support is particularly visible in Standard 5, which directs principals to cultivate an inclusive, caring, safe, healthy, and supportive school community.

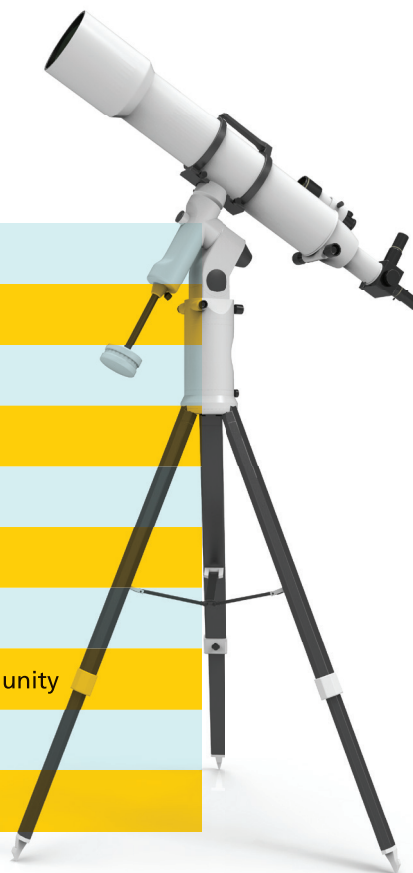


NEXT STEP

Want to learn more about the ideas in this article? Access the full PSEL standards document at www.npbea.org.

Areas of Leadership in PSEL 2015

Standard 1	Mission, Vision, and Core Values
Standard 2	Ethics and Professional Norms
Standard 3	Equity and Cultural Responsiveness
Standard 4	Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
Standard 5	Communities of Care and Support for Students
Standard 6	Professional Capacity of School Personnel
Standard 7	Professional Community for Teachers and Staff
Standard 8	Meaningful Relationships With Families and Community
Standard 9	Operations and Management
Standard 10	School Improvement




The components of Standard 5 challenge principals to create a school community in which each student is known, accepted and valued, trusted and respected, cared for, and encouraged to be an active and responsible member. Principals are to promote student engagement and positive conduct. They are to develop coherent systems of academic and social supports, services and accommodations, and extracurricular activities appropriate to students' learning needs. They are to nurture adult-student, student-peer, and school-community relationships to support student academic learning and positive social and emotional development. And they are to infuse the school's learning environment with the cultures and languages of the community.

This emphasis on care and support is visible in other standards. Care and support of teachers, other professional staff, families, and communities are central to Standards 6, 7, and 8. They are central elements of effective mission, vision, and core values in Standard 1, ethical principles and professional norms in Standard 2, and equity and cultural responsiveness in Standard 3. School operations and management in Standard 9 have important ramifications for care and sup-

port. And care and support are central to the processes and aims of school improvement in Standard 10.

Responding to the Call

In many ways, PSEL 2015 calls principals to make caring a hallmark of their leadership. Our model provides a framework that might help principals respond to this call. It challenges principals to consider all aspects of their leadership in terms of caring. It challenges them to reflect upon their understanding of others and their motivational orientations to support others' growth and success. It also challenges them to develop the personal and professional capabilities of acting effectively on the behalf of others. To frame principals' practice and professional growth accordingly will do much to promote student success in school. 

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