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### Top of the C.L.A.S.S. Connecting Leadership and Student Success

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# Chapter 21

## Top of the C.L.A.S.S. Connecting Leadership and Student Success

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter highlights the direct correlation between effective leadership and student achievement. The development – and execution – of a concrete leadership framework is necessary for organizational structure and serves as a standard of excellence that surpasses any potentially harmful influences (such as race, socioeconomic status, family structure, gender, culture, and disability, among others). The establishment of this agenda occurs as individuals continually strive for self-fulfillment. Through this process, one can effectively guide others while working towards their own personal and professional objectives. Ultimately, this distinguishes successful leaders from the rest and represents the goal to which leaders should aspire: the ability to consistently serve as a reflective thinker and practitioner in all aspects of life. Only then can one's daily efforts toward self-fulfillment be evident in professional practice. Therefore, as underscored here, understanding the direct connection between leadership and student success is paramount.*

### INTRODUCTION

Gorton and Alston (2012) markedly note that most individuals not only lack awareness of their values, attitudes, and how they are affected by them, but they also lack criteria and standards for evaluation. In light of this, while the reflective leader's job is to impact and impart change, how can this be done without an accurate knowledge of self? What would be the purpose of being a master teacher but an

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awful human? The reflective leader is an information-sharer and an avid communicator who sets high expectations – first for oneself, then for others – acknowledging that all pathways to progress begin with acknowledging self.

Whitaker (2010, 2013) states that change is inevitable; growth is optional. In a rapidly changing world, educational leaders must choose growth – for themselves personally and for the organizations they serve – and determine how to achieve that growth. In transitioning from educator to leader, one must quickly learn that one is not merely managing organizations, structures, and institutions. Instead, the effective leader directs people; this knowledge alone makes all the difference. People are not robots programmed to do whatever they are instructed to do. Instead, people require interaction, communication, feedback, reinforcement, and consistency. The journey to acquire these elements as an expert educator undoubtedly takes time. Understanding this, one must realize that the work of reflection is primarily internal, but not until it becomes manifested in our daily choices does it impact those around us (Scheffer et al., 2012). Thus, the effective leader must face the significant factors related to student achievement and the lack thereof. Regardless of race, socioeconomic status, family composition, gender, culture, or disability, all students need access to resources, support from their adjoining community, and, most importantly, a framework, culture, climate, and environment in which success is embedded.

The creation and implementation of a tangible leadership framework, then, is necessary, not simply as a structural encasing but, more importantly, as a standard of greatness that usurps all seemingly pejorative factors (including, but not limited to, race, socioeconomic status, family composition, gender, culture, disability, etc.). The establishment of this agenda transpires as one continually strives toward self-actualization (Johnson, 2022, 2023). Through this, one can effectively lead others as they also endeavor to attain their personal and professional goals. At the core, this separates efficacious leaders from the fold and what leaders should constantly aim for – the ability to serve unremittingly as a reflective leader-practitioner in life first. Then, and only then, can one’s daily work on the path to self-actualization be reflected via professional practice.

## **LEADERSHIP CONNECTION: THE GEAR UP PROGRAM AT UTC<sup>2</sup>**

During the midpoint of the first complete cycle (2011-2018; second cycle, 2018-2025), we were granted the opportunity to investigate and assess the efficacy of UTC’s GEAR UP program (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) on positively impacting student academic achievement and preparing them for success in and beyond college. The program primarily services three high-need schools in Chattanooga, TN. The students associated with GEAR UP have been identified as “at-risk;” thus, several interventions have been implemented. This work includes but is not limited to the participation of teaching assistants during school hours, counselors and interventionists who facilitate the after-school program, and a 2-week “boot camp” each summer, all to get and keep students ever-ready for college life (2011-present).

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, program providers work with the students mentioned above from the time they begin sixth grade through their senior year, including their anticipated transition into college. The Director of GEAR UP continually emphasizes the fact that the primary goal of the program is to increase the number of students who enroll in college after high school. GEAR UP is functioning under a renewable seven-year grant period, with a budget totaling over \$3.2 million in funding for each cycle. Commencing in the summer of 2011, the first cycle of the GEAR UP program concluded

in the summer of 2018, and the second period is currently underway (2018-present). As it stands, this provides us with the perfect opportunity for assessment, reflection, and revisiting of the program's intended goals and a chance to make tangible, constructive recommendations for continued progress.

During the Fall 2014 – Spring 2015 school year, the students involved in the GEAR UP program were completing the end of their school years as 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders after initially being inducted into this program as 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders. By the final year of the grant period (Summer 2017- Summer 2018), the students had been tracked from middle school through the transition to high school until they were high school seniors and prospective first-year college students. GEAR UP, according to the Program Director (2011-present),

Serves students who attend schools that traditionally do not send their students to college in very great numbers. Only eighteen percent of students who attended GEAR UP schools graduated from high school and entered college. Fifty-one percent of ninth-graders in Hamilton County graduated from high school and enrolled in college. That is the gap we are trying to address.

Our involvement in accomplishing the goals mentioned above is both personal and professional. Pertinent to socio-demographic status, the student population reflects the very communities and backgrounds we ourselves are most familiar with. Author #1 is a first-generation American, identifying as an “Afro-Caribbean-American.” She understands firsthand the toils associated with living and identifying as “other” in the modern-day United States. Author #2 is a Black man, born and raised in the mid-South region of the U.S.

Our roles as instructional leaders in this capacity (2011-present) allow us to bridge a multitude of pertinent factors – educational theory, conjoined with practice, along with our own distinct identifications as Black Americans – one from an immigrant family, the other with deeply seeded American roots – and to apply these essential components forward in an active, authentic, and tangible manner. To move this needle forward, we connect the seven Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS) to the corresponding leadership application(s) in the sections below, highlighting the critical link between effective leadership and student success.

## **TILS STANDARD A: VISION/SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT/COLLABORATIVE PLANNING/DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS/IMPLEMENTATION OF VISION**

An exemplary leader (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024) is one who:

- Is a leader at the district/state level in strategic planning and mentors developing school leaders in this school-level process.
- Is able to effectively replicate the process of establishing goals/strategies that support the school's vision/mission and ensure all students are successful while mentoring other school leaders.
- Is able to systematically create and sustain a valuable organizational structure that supports the school's vision/mission/goals and ensures that all students learn. Routinely assesses how the structure supports the vision/mission/goals and adjusts when needed. Is able to coach other leaders through this process.
- Consistently facilitates the cyclical process of developing, implementing, evaluating, and revising school-wide improvement planning that is data-driven. Is able to assist other school leaders in this

### ***Top of the C.L.A.S.S.***

continuous school-wide improvement process and articulate/demonstrate how to improve upon their practices.

- Consistently develops collaborations and partnerships with parents/guardians, community agencies, and district leaders that support the cycle of continuous improvement. Is able to assist other school leaders in identifying methods and systems to replicate positive and effective partnerships.
- Is able to articulate this belief and act accordingly in a consistent manner. Is an active advocate for this belief at the district level and beyond.

A visionary, then, is one who is committed to continuous improvement; an effective instruction leader implements a systematic, coherent approach to bring about continued growth in the academic achievement of all students (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024).

## **Connecting Leadership and Student Success**

What is the effective leader's role in articulating and implementing a tangible vision, impacting school improvement, and collaborating for planning and data-driven decision-making? Though generally without comparison groups, previous research suggests that data-driven decision-making can potentially increase student performance (Johnson, 2022). When school-level educators become knowledgeable about data use, they can more effectively review their existing capacities, identify weaknesses, and better chart plans for improvement (Duff et al., 2023; Wohlstetter et al., 2008).

According to Isaacs (2003), as critical decisions are being made based on data, every school leader must have an arsenal of skills in collecting, manipulating, analyzing, presenting, and evaluating data. Halverson et al. (2007) note that the capacity of school leaders and teachers to transform traditional schools into organizations able to respond to the feedback of standardized testing represents a significant step in our understanding of the next generation of school leadership practice. Successful implementation and teacher use of a data presentation system requires that the data initiative be supported by strong leadership. School leaders "must not only model use of data but also establish conditions that support and encourage teachers to grow in their use of the system" (Wayman, 2005, p. 303).

Lastly, Kerr et al. (2006) identify the importance of leadership in effective visionary execution, as leadership is often essential to combating low staff buy-in and cultural barriers, which have been ascertained as significant challenges to data-based decision-making. Ingram et al. (2004) identified several widely held teacher attitudes and beliefs incompatible with data-driven inquiry. For example, teachers often discounted assessment data because they had developed their own personal metrics for determining success that had little to do with their students' test scores. Teachers who had a "weak sense of efficacy and did not believe that they had an influence on their students' achievement data were also unlikely to buy into data-based decision-making" (Kerr et al., 2006, p. 499).

The work required to circumvent this is immense; therefore, the ideal visionary must embody the qualities one would expect to identify in a productive leader. According to Möller et al. (2009), the need to see oneself positively and the profound benefits of these positive cognitions on choice, planning, and subsequent accomplishments transcend traditional disciplinary barriers and are central to goals in many social policy areas. More generally, "individuals in all walks of life are likely to accomplish more if they feel competent in what they do, are self-confident, and feel positively about themselves" (Möller et al., 2009, p. 1130).

What is leader commitment? Chan et al. (2008) define it as the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization. Even further, there are three primary qualities: (a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the institution, and (c) a strong intent or desire to remain with the organization (Chan et al., 2008, p. 598). The efficacious leader executes a tangible vision, effectively impacts school improvement, and collaborates for planning and data-driven decision-making.

The ability to handle and own what constitutes "self" remains critical to one's leadership ability. Regardless of what one might be experiencing personally, it remains necessary to maintain a high level of professionalism. The ability to be professional, stay committed, and successfully rise to any challenge is a marker for the successful leader. Knowing how to execute on a professional level, regardless of the state of any personal affairs, is the call of one who aspires to be an effective leader.

## **TILS STANDARD B: SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE/SAFETY/ DISCIPLINE/RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES/CHANGE ISSUES**

An exemplary leader (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024) is one who:

- Is able to provide evidence of how the school's culture honors differences, values ethics, recognizes equity issues, and nurtures collaboration. Has knowledge of internal and external constituencies that influence the learning agenda. These cultural values are sustainable. Is able to mentor other school leaders in the development of this process.
- Advocates, nurtures, and leads a culture focused on student learning for all students. Is able to provide evidence of success. Plans and executes professional development based on cultural needs. Serves as a mentor to other school leaders in establishing such a culture conducive to student learning.
- Develops and sustains a safe, secure, and disciplined learning environment. Is able to provide evidence of success. Serves as a mentor to other school leaders in establishing such an environment.
- Uses the knowledge of rigor and relevance to ensure reflective thought. Is able to document evidence of this and articulate strategies that ensure students/staff/parent groups develop self-discipline and are engaged in learning. Serves as a mentor to other school leaders in developing these leadership skills.
- Consistently plans for, facilitates, protects, and maximizes instructional/learning time. All school structures and practices support learning. Serves as a mentor or coach in assisting other leaders in establishing such a culture of learning.
- Ascertains the strengths of staff members to form teams that continuously examine relevant data and share responsibilities and ownership of an improvement plan that is aligned with student learning goals. Is highly competent in setting up conditions for effective teamwork and serves as a change agent in the school and district setting. Serves as a mentor or coach in assisting other leaders in establishing effective leadership teams.
- Has established the processes that identify the need for change, effectively leads the implementation of productive changes within the school, and continuously reassesses related outcomes. Serves as a coach for other leaders in successfully implementing change in a school culture.

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- Affirms with all stakeholders the mission, vision, and goals. Seeks input and leads stakeholders in relationship building that results in rigor and relevance for students and staff. Is able to assess this process and continually make adjustments. Serves as an “expert” with regard to this standard beyond the school level.
- Is continually researching, networking, and collaborating to understand research-based strategies/programs/issues. Effectively able to institutionalize research-based changes at the school and/or district level. Serves as a mentor or coach to other school leaders in this area.
- Builds and sustains strong relationships within community with families. Acts as a mentor or coach to other school leaders in this area.
- Continually collects data as a means to support accomplishments and celebrations and to plan for addressing failures. Serves as a mentor or coach to other school leaders in this area.
- Understands that communication with teachers, parents, students, and stakeholders is two-way, effective, and collaborative. Serves as a mentor to other leaders in the area of enhancing two-way communication.
- Actively recruits and hires teachers who exhibit professional and ethical standards, have strong instructional skills, are engaged in professional growth, and align their professional actions with the school’s mission. Is able to retain such teachers. Serves as a mentor to other leaders, the system, and/or the state in the recruitment, hiring, and retention of strong teacher candidates.

An innovator is committed to facilitating a culture of teaching and learning; an effective instructional leader creates a school culture and climate based on high expectations conducive to the success of all students (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024).

### **Connecting Leadership and Student Success**

What is the leader’s role in creating and impacting the school climate and culture, ensuring a safe and disciplined environment, maintaining positive relationships with families, and imparting operative change? The interactions that produce disciplined behavior (or indiscipline) are intermediated by the developmental needs of students; teacher, student, and school culture; student socioeconomic status; school and classroom composition and structure; pedagogical demands; student and teacher role expectations and capacity to meet the institutionally established expectations for their roles; and school climate (Osher et al., 2010). These transactions can involve student–school fit, bonding to school, academic demands, school support for at-risk youth, differential beliefs and responses of adults to challenging behaviors, and race, gender, and cultural factors.

Sato, Wei, and Darling-Hammond (2008) state, “Within this broad domain, research on learning flags the importance of providing formative or diagnostic information to teachers and students, providing clear expectations and goals for learning, creating coherence between assessment and curriculum, and supporting metacognitive practices” (p. 672). In this regard, educators play an essential role in determining the degree to which family, school, and community contexts overlap (Sato et al., 2014). Moreover, schools can increase collaboration by implementing activities specific to family and community involvement. Schools with comprehensive programs of school-family-community partnerships address involvement through activities directed toward specified goals and student outcomes (Jung & Sheldon, 2020; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

How does this pertain to schools’ macro and microclimates? School climate is defined as the quality and frequency of interactions among and between adults and students (Seitz et al., 2022). Consequently, this measure taps students’ perceptions of interpersonal and procedural dimensions of school life, including achievement motivation, appearance of the school building, fairness, order and discipline, parent involvement, sharing of resources, student interpersonal relations, and student-teacher relations (Seitz et al., 2022). Additionally, a school’s social climate directly influences a spectrum of student outcomes, from social-emotional functioning and behavior to grades and academic performance (Ozgenel et al., 2018). Peer social interactions – teasing and bullying included – have been shown to directly impact student performance. Similarly, student perceptions of school safety are significantly associated with school performance and outcomes (Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006).

According to Sheldon and Epstein (2002), research on student behavior has “focused mainly on identifying predictors and correlates of delinquency and other behavior problems. Studies reveal that selected characteristics of students, families, communities, and schools help predict students’ behavior in schools” (p. 7). Furthermore, the fact that delinquent behaviors “vary by age and gender suggests that interventions to reduce specific problems need to consider the developmental level of students most likely to be involved in these behaviors” (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002, p. 8). The findings mentioned above further support the necessity of effective leadership. Yet,

*The case for widely adopting a transformational image must necessarily clarify why instructional leadership images are no longer adequate. Leadership only manifests itself in the context of change, and the nature of that change is a crucial determinant of the forms of leadership that will prove to be helpful. A second assumption is that school restructuring will dominate the change agenda for school leaders for some time to come. (Leithwood et al., 2020)*

As we continue to learn, the influential leader creates and impacts a constructive school climate and culture, ensures a safe and disciplined environment, maintains positive relationships with families, and works to impart operative change.

The general teacher consensus is that teachers are the backbone of the school facility. This notion is true, in part. In actuality, the more capable the school leaders are, and the more efficient the system is, the more successful the teachers will be in their own practice. As such, on various levels, we appreciate the ability to teach in a classroom and take on additional roles within and beyond the greater school community. As we continue to grow, taking our experiences and education to the next level, we further understand the importance of ongoing personal and professional development and assessment. Moving the needle forward, the creator’s job is to graduate from crafting lessons to designing and implementing curriculum and instructional plans and leading others through their journeys to greatness.

## **TILS STANDARD C: CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION/STANDARDS ALIGNMENT/ RIGOR/LITERACY/NUMERACY/DIFFERENTIATION**

An exemplary leader (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024) is one who:



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- Is able to structure and adapt the systematic assessment/evaluation process to known and unknown challenges in a variety of school settings. Serves as a mentor or coach to other school leaders in this area.
- Is able to assess the needs of other professional learning communities and lead them in analyzing and improving curriculum and instruction. Serves as a mentor or coach to other school leaders in this area.
- Is able to assist in structuring a rigorous curriculum with the necessary supports in place in diverse settings. Serves as a mentor or coach to other school leaders in this area.
- Is able to effectively embed literacy and numeracy in all subject areas and replicate with success in diverse settings. Serves as a mentor or coach to other school leaders in this area.
- Is able to assess and implement applicable research-based best practices in the cyclical process of instruction that results in continuous student improvement. This process can be replicated in a variety of settings and shared with other school leaders.
- Consistently engages school leaders in the monitoring and assessment of the curricular rigor. Participates in this process at the district, state and/or national level. Is able to lead others in this process of monitoring and evaluating the curriculum.
- Has established a routine and effective schedule for informing teachers and parents with appropriate assessment results. Serves as a mentor for other leaders in the area of assessment.
- Develops and implements a system to regularly communicate student academic progress and assessment results to parents, students, and teachers. Acts as a district leader or mentor to others in developing this standard.

The efficacious leader is committed to instructional leadership and assessment; an effective instructional leader facilitates instructional practices based on assessment data and continually improves student learning (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024).

### **Connecting Leadership and Student Success**

What is the good leader's role in facilitating curriculum and instructional excellence, ensuring alignment to all core and supplementary standards, and upholding a standard of rigorous and differentiated teaching and learning? Roach et al. (2008) note, "Accountability systems posit that to ensure effective schooling, the design and implementation of three components of the educational environment – curriculum, instruction, and assessment – must be coordinated (p. 158). Alignment, measured by the degree to which these components are conjoined, is an area of research and applied practice that has the potential to have a positive impact on learning and achievement for all students (Roach et al., 2008)

It is generally understood that students require differentiated services. The adoption and implementation of CCSS should result in a more rigorous curriculum for all students. As instruction in general education becomes more stringent, this will require an equivalent response to the gifted education curriculum (Anthony, 2013). Although there is still inconsistency in the connection between rigor and summative assessment, Fenwick (2012) asserts, "the goal of performance assessment is to capture all of the learning that occurs, which means that assessment tasks will be aligned more closely with learning outcomes and can be used to inform future learning" (p. 630). Most educational leaders' work in making curriculum decisions can be seemingly infinite. This work involves a delicate balancing act between identifying learning contexts appropriate to a particular community's local needs and meeting statewide

expectations and standards. How schools resolve this will clearly define the level of autonomy available to [invested stakeholders] (Herschell, 2001).

The continual issue is such that the call for higher standards and then for assessments that “police these standards, without providing any glimpse of how to achieve them, and without any recognition of the fiscal and non-fiscal resources necessary” (Grubb & Oakes, 2007, p. 18) cannot possibly produce effective reform. Moreover, as with the rest of the accountability movement, those calling for higher standards have been weak in enhancing the capacities of schools to meet these standards (Grubb & Oakes, 2007). There is a dichotomy between the curriculum taught in the classroom and evidence of learning on summative assessments. The ensuing crossroads causes educational leaders to consider the following two options: “forego any attempt to differentiate curriculum and assessment altogether, and accept standardized versions of both, or change the approach to assessment so that it is broad enough to encompass the sort of learning outcomes desired by the school system” (Herschell, 2001, pp. 23-24).

Student-focused instruction is a critical element in adjoining rigor with standards assessments. Stringer and Heath (2008) assert that the core of child-centered instruction supposes that positive self-concept or self-perceptions of competence are causal to many positive outcomes, including good academic performance (p. 329). The implications of this belief have been enormous for modern education: Belief in the necessity of eliciting positive self-concept in students is foundational to much of contemporary educational theory and practice (Stringer & Heath, 2008). We perpetually promote personal development because education’s key role is cultivating and sustaining modern democratic society while simultaneously offering equality of opportunity to all citizens (Weis et al., 2009).

Reflecting even now, we recall that for most beginning teachers, the first lessons involve the “what not to do” situations. That often comprises much of what new teachers generally learn during the first 1-2 years. From there, the focus turns to building one’s skill level, learning more than just how to be – and instead, learning how to be *through* who we are. Many educators wrongfully believe this is solely the school counselor’s job. That is wrong. In fact, this is the responsibility of all staff members in a school facility. If promoting, inspiring, and infusing a positive self-concept into students’ lives is not top priority, then what is? As educators, the primary reason for our advanced degrees is to continue elevating as leaders so that our students, mentees, and other constituents grow to reach the point of self-encompassment. We know that this begins and ends with us.

## **TILS STANDARD D: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STAFF AND SELF/TEACHER EVALUATION/TEACHER IMPROVEMENT/ MENTORING/PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY**

An exemplary leader (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024) is one who:

- Systematically supervises and evaluates faculty and staff in a manner that positively impacts the school environment. Serves as a mentor/coach/trainer at the district level in this area.
- Serves as a school and district leader in developing, promoting, facilitating, and/or evaluating professional development opportunities that are aligned with individual teacher/staff, school, and district needs.
- Models continuous learning and engages in personal and professional development. Is able to assist others in establishing appropriate professional growth plans.

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- Provides leadership opportunities for the professional learning community and mentors aspiring leaders. Helps design leadership programs at the district, state, and/or national level.
- Works collaboratively with the school community to plan and implement high-quality professional development that is embedded in the school's improvement plan and directly impacts student learning. Assists with the planning and implementation of high-quality professional development at the district, state, and/or national level.
- Provides faculty and staff with the resources necessary for the successful execution of their jobs. Serves as a mentor/coach for other school leaders in assisting them in this area.

A pioneer is committed to professional growth; an effective instructional leader improves student learning and achievement by developing and sustaining high-quality professional development (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024).

### **Connecting Leadership and Student Success**

What are leaders' roles in implementing a culture of constant professional development, effectively mentoring, evaluating, and improving their teachers, and developing a professional learning community? Boucher et al. (2006) define faculty development as a tool for enhancing the educational validity of our institutions through attention to the competencies needed by individual teachers and the institutional practices required to promote excellence. As professional development research moves from its case-study base to increasingly more quantitative studies, using surveys and more structured observation and interview protocols, we need to employ the general lessons of when and how to apply specific data collection techniques to the study of professional development (Desimone, 2009).

It is pertinent to note that the success of ambitious education reform initiatives hinges, in large part, on the qualifications and effectiveness of teachers. As a result, teacher professional development is a significant focus of systemic reform initiatives (Garet et al., 2001). Similarly, a majority of teachers' knowledge is event-structured or episodic. This professional knowledge is developed in context, stored with characteristic features of the classrooms and activities, organized around the tasks that teachers accomplish in classroom settings, and accessed for use in similar situations (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

In response, influential leaders do more than announce that schools must operate as professional learning communities. They stipulate the specific conditions they expect to see in every school and build a common language to ensure clarity regarding their expectations (DuFour, 2012). Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2009) note:

*Even among those who believe that high-quality preparation is essential, there are sharp contrasts concerning the best approach. Most agree, however, that we lack a strong research basis for understanding how to prepare teachers to meet the challenges of urban schools. (p. 417)*

Nevertheless, the lack of evidence creates the opportunity for numerous potential 'solutions' regarding teacher preparation and little way to evaluate their promise (Boyd et al., 2009). Although relatively little research has been conducted on the effects of alternative forms of professional development, the research that has been undertaken, along with the experience of expert practitioners, provides some preliminary guidance about the characteristics of high-quality professional development (Garet et al.,

2000, p. 918). The research is evident; there continues to be an extant need for leaders who are willing, capable, and ready to establish high-quality, systematic, and explicit professional development models.

The path to leadership is not linear, and neither of our journeys was conventional. There was no mentor, professional development, handouts, good luck handshakes, or an encouraging pat on the back. As such, everything we needed to learn about becoming effective educators and leaders began on day one. We acquired the skills to be resilient and persistent during the earlier years, primarily because it was necessary. We learned the importance – and sheer necessity – of withstanding all of the turbulence and all of the red tape. Growth was and continues to be gradual, from sufficiency to competency, from competency to mastery, and from mastery to responsibility. A gradual progression characterizes this process, ultimately culminating in the transformation of individuals from consumers into developers and mentors. When considered and thoroughly examined, these factors result in a continuous enhancement of the personnel within an organization, fostering an environment dedicated to ongoing education, personal and professional development, and establishing and nurturing connections and networks between individuals.

## **TILS STANDARD E: LEGAL ISSUES/EQUITY/POLITICAL CONTEXT**

An exemplary leader (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024) is one who:

- Is able to assist in assessing other schools' needs and suggest standard operating procedures and routines that can be understood and followed by all staff.
- Is able to lead others in setting academic achievement for all students as the focus of the daily school operation.
- Is able to lead others in the allocation of resources effectively to achieve the school's mission.
- Is able to effectively lead others in the development of the school budget process and routine monitoring process.
- Is able to lead others in the mobilization of community resources to support the school's mission.
- Is able to lead others in identifying potential problems and is strategic in planning proactive responses.
- Is able to lead others in the implementation of resource management based upon equity, integrity, fairness, and ethical conduct. Is able to help others create a culture of shared understanding.
- Consistently and comprehensively plans for positive community and media relations. Is able to articulate the plan and align it with daily activities as well as long-range initiatives. Serves as a mentor to other leaders as they develop this standard.

A trailblazer is committed to school management; an effective instructional leader facilitates learning and teaching through the effective use of resources (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024).

## **Connecting Leadership and Student Success**

What is the effective leader's role in handling and circumventing legal issues, ensuring a climate dedicated to equity, and balancing the needs of all stakeholders within a very political educational context? The needs are vast (see *Figure 1 – ESEA, NCLB, and ESSA* – below). Firstly, Secretary of Education

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Rod Paige warned that state plans to “ratchet down their standards to remove schools from their lists of low performers’ were ‘nothing less than shameful’” (Rudalevige, 2003, p. 67). Thomas and Brady (2005) argue that the current accountability requirements under ESEA<sup>3</sup> and NCLB<sup>4</sup>, although a step in the right direction, were developed from a theoretical perspective and lacked an understanding of the complex issues involved in serving disadvantaged schoolchildren.

*Figure 1. ESEA, NCLB, and ESSA<sup>5</sup>*



Congress and the federal courts “embarked on efforts to ensure equal educational opportunity not only for racial and ethnic minorities but also for other groups... This newfound activism created tensions because educational policy traditionally had been the purview of state and local governments” (Yudof et al., 2012, p. 13).

Brennan and Naidoo (2008) assert that with an ever-changing chain of command come more subtle ways of maintaining positional advantage. Social and cultural capital provides know-how of where and what to study, which is crucial to eventual life chances but is denied to those from disadvantaged groups and communities. Wong and Sunderman (2007) remind us that policy tends to shape politics. ESEA, NCLB, and ESSA policies are no exception. Clearly, these federal policies are all ambitious. When lofty goals meet the reality of federalism, it is unsurprising to see implementation tension and intergovernmental conflict.

More than two centuries since John Adams observed that “the laws are a dead letter until an administration begins to carry them into execution,” that is how government still works, even in the textbooks. For the students in America’s public schools, how No Child Left Behind is implemented will determine how government works in real life (Rudalevige, 2003). Currently, with students’ regular use of the internet and, particularly, social networking sites, the boundaries of school districts’ jurisdiction have become increasingly unclear. The widespread adoption of “zero tolerance” policies and the extent to which they are unevenly applied to different groups of students have also generated legal and policy concerns (Johnson & Johnson, 2019, 2023; Yudof et al., 2012).

In the effort to advance both the ESEA and NCLB initiatives, ESSA’s goals include (1) Equity: Protecting disadvantaged and high-need students, (2) Academic standards: Requiring all students to be taught high academic standards to prepare them for college and careers, (3) Accountability: Giving states flexibility to develop accountability systems that best measure student success in their respective states, (4) Transparency: Laying out expectations of transparency for parents and communities, (5) Standardized testing: Requiring every state to measure performance in reading, math, and science, while

maintaining the federal requirement for 95 percent participation in tests, (6) Teaching time: Reclaiming teaching time from standardized testing so students have more time to learn, and teachers have more time to teach, and (7) Super subgroups: Prohibiting states from combining different sets of students into “super subgroups” for accountability purposes.<sup>6</sup>

In short, NCLB has impacted the landscape of educational reform at the state and local levels. When new initiatives reach a ‘tipping point,’ the federal-state-local balance of power will be altered further toward performance-based federalism (Wong & Sunderman, 2007). Where school building and district leaders lie on this spectrum remains to be seen in the era of ESSA. In this regard, there is still so much to learn about the legalities of school leadership on the job. A high level of stick-to-it-iveness is necessary for the effective leader. How can we develop positive relationships with staff, students, and families without being emotionally, mentally, and socially stable? Furthermore, how would we be able to build and plan effective reform if we could not prove ourselves to be capable? In essence, ESEA, NCLB, and ESSA notwithstanding, the goal is for no child to be left behind because no staff or family member will be left behind.

## **TILS STANDARD F: ETHICS/INTEGRITY/ADVOCACY/EQUITY**

An exemplary leader (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024) is one who:

- Serves as a mentor/coach in working with other leaders as they develop the ethical skills of integrity and fairness through the professional work.
- Serves as a mentor/coach in working with other leaders as they develop their ethical code/values through the professional work.
- Serves as a mentor/coach in working with other leaders as they make decisions within an ethical context that respects the dignity of all.
- Serves as a mentor/coach in working with other leaders as they advocate for (educational, social, and/or political) change when necessary to improve student learning.
- Serves as a mentor/coach in working with other leaders as they make decisions that are in the best interests of students and aligned with the school vision.
- Serves as mentor/coach in working with other leaders as they consider legal, moral, and ethical implications when making decisions.
- Serves as a mentor/coach in working with other leaders as they act in accordance with federal and state constitutional provisions, statutory standards, and regulatory applications.

An effective instructional leader facilitates continuous improvement in student achievement through processes that meet the highest ethical standards and promote advocacy, including political action when appropriate (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024).

## **Connecting Leadership and Student Success**

What is the leader’s role in creating and maintaining an ethically sound climate and upholding a culture of integrity, advocacy, and equity for all stakeholders? Despite the “pervasive influence of culture, it is not uncommon for [educational] literature to either treat strength as if it were an acultural concept or

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consider the topic solely from the perspective of the dominant culture” (Grothaus et al., 2012, p. 52). Yet, exclusionary educational environments have been “increasingly viewed as unacceptable, especially by those who argue that such environments maintain social, political, or economic inequalities. Inclusion as an ideal, however, has not typically become a reality” (Swartz, 2009, p. 1047). Additionally, Swartz (2009) notes:

*When educators, students, families, and community are taught or informed that “othered” groups are deficient, it becomes or seems normative to sort and label students using a standardized or one-chance-to-succeed deficit model. In this way, the ‘saturating cultural character of traditional schooling practices’ referred to as the ‘culture of power’ – remains largely unarticulated yet universalized. (p. 1051)*

Ethical action in teaching, according to Fenwick (2005, 2012), has been characterized as respecting the dignity and rights of each individual (from a non-consequentialist perspective) and endeavoring to generate the greatest benefit for the greatest number (from a consequentialist perspective) (p. 32). Reybold (2008) asserts: “Ethical teachers foster honest academic conduct, ensure fair evaluations, respect confidentiality, and avoid harming students by such behaviors as exploitation, harassment, or discrimination” (p. 281). Grothaus et al. (2012) propose that “critical consciousness involves recognizing the effects of social structures on people and acting against the oppressive elements of society...[this] is not always a pleasant or easy perspective to embrace” (p. 59).

The work involved in practicing ethicality as a professional requires the skills, attitudes, and competencies necessary to make reflective and consistent decisions when confronted with ill-structured work-related problems (Reybold, 2008). The problem of ethics ranges from mere inconveniences to issues that alter student lives, but all are violations of core academic values of justice, learning, and community (Kezar, 2004; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2023). Furthermore, the social good is compromised as students see corruption as their role model for institutional behavior, observe learning as secondary to entertainment, and prioritize private and economic gain over social and public goals (Kezar, 2004; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2023).

Everson and Bussey (2007) recommend the following: (a) the case must be made for social justice; (b) use policy as a lever to address social justice; and (c) education of administrators for social justice must occur in multiple arenas with collaborative partners (p. 180). Educators should encourage the free pursuit of learning by respecting students and adhering to their roles as intellectual guides. The culturally sound leader can facilitate a climate in which the constituency is ushered through phases of cultural identity, from self-disparagement and inferiority through the discovery of discriminatory social arrangements to pride and perhaps to multicultural identities (Grothaus et al., 2012).

The legal and ethical ramifications associated with the educator’s role are substantial. In the quest to rein stakeholders in, we are reminded that allyship does not leave some on the outside looking in. There should not be an “us against the world” mentality. Instead, promoting whole-school cohesion in the fight for justice is critical. If the point is to correct societal wrongs on a large scale, then all stakeholders have a right and a responsibility to be included (Johnson, 2022).

## **TILS Standard G: Diversity/Larger Cultural Context/Global Society**

An exemplary leader (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024) is one who:

- Serves as a district leader and/or mentor/coach in working with other leaders as they involve a cross-section of the school community and stakeholders in appropriate diversity policy implementation, program planning, and assessment efforts.
- Serves as district leader in the area of recruitment, hiring practices, and retention of a diverse staff.
- Serves as a mentor/coach to other leaders and/or as a district leader concerning effective interactions with diverse individuals/groups in a variety of settings.
- Serves as a mentor/coach to other leaders in recognizing and addressing cultural, learning, and personal differences with regard to academic decision-making.
- Serves as a mentor/coach to other leaders in working with their faculty/staff in engaging families/parents in the educational process.

An effective instructional leader responds to and influences the larger personal, political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context in the classroom, school, and the local community while addressing diverse student needs to ensure the success of all students (TILS, 2014, 2018, 2024).

## **Connecting Leadership and Student Success**

What is the efficacious leader's role in promoting diversity and keeping one's school environment relevant and relatable to the larger cultural context of an increasingly global society? Generally speaking, according to Sevier (2009), "intercultural/intergroup education denotes efforts among educators to bring issues of cultural diversity, intolerance, and bigotry against minorities into schools and classrooms" (p. 23). Cummins (2023) informs us that no classroom or school is immune from the influence of the coercive power relations that characterize societal debates about diversity and national identity. Educators, in their interactions with culturally and linguistically diverse pupils, sketch their ideological stance relative to diversity, identity, and power (Cummins, 2023).

Increasing diversity raises questions about how educational leaders can deal effectively with the problem of constructing civic communities that reflect and incorporate the diversity of citizens and yet have an overarching set of shared values, ideals, and goals to which all [stakeholders] are committed (Banks, 2008; Banks et al., 2005). Pollet et al. (2014) inform us that "the relevance of cross-level interactions has long been recognized...whereby neighborhood or region effects might attenuate individual predispositions toward certain risks... attributes of the school can interact with traits at the pupil level to determine learning outcomes" (p. 417). Banks et al. (2005) offer the following assertion, "A school's organizational strategies should ensure that decision-making is widely shared and that members of the school community learn collaborative skills and dispositions in order to create a caring environment for students" (p. 39).

Scholars in this arena contend that an effective and transformative citizenship education helps students acquire the knowledge, skills, and values needed to function effectively within their cultural community, nation-state, region, and global community. The existing educational structure is only reinforced by multicultural rhetoric that fails to address seriously either systemic structures that discriminate against culturally diverse pupils or the role definitions of educators *vis-a-vis* diversity issues.

A just, multicultural school is receptive to working with all members of the students' communities. Schools must find ways to respect the diversity of their students as well as help to create a unified, super-ordinate nation-state to which all citizens have allegiance. Structural inclusion into the nation-state and



power-sharing will engender feelings of loyalty among diverse groups. As such, Craig (2009) mentions factors that contribute to leader distinctiveness:

*Race and culture considerations deeply shape [leaders'] identities, their reading of contextual situations, and their expressions of knowledge on the professional knowledge landscape of schools. It is apparent that reform initiatives are more likely to resonate with [leaders'] knowledge if they are attentive to matters of race, cultural relevance, and contextual appropriateness. (p. 601)*

Sevier (2009) suggests that perhaps only the “temporal distance of historical inquiry will enable us to comprehend how [educators] in our time interpreted calls for national unity and the role of schools in presenting the diversity and mutuality of experiences within American society” (p. 42). Thus, cross-level interactions might allow for a more accurate description of, and tests of predictions of, human behavior, allowing for individual attenuation as a function of characteristics of local environments” (Pollet et al., 2014).

For the leader, it is essential to become attuned to the demographic composition of the students, staff, and families under one’s care. Being present and available is a must, which often comes with increased visibility. Constituents need to see leaders who represent who they are and where they come from so they know that no pathway is (or at least no path should be) unavailable to them (Johnson, 2017, 2023). The only caveat is that one must rise to the challenge without overstepping one’s boundaries as an educator. Striking a proper balance means sometimes standing in the gap on behalf of others (interdependence), all while being careful not to become co-dependent.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **The GEAR UP Program and Beyond**

Expanding Access and Ensuring Success: Gear UP’s goal continues to be making education more accessible and enhancing engagement and support for all community members—students, faculty, and staff included. We, too, are dedicated to unlocking doors, creating opportunities, and championing inclusive excellence to pave the way for a brighter future for those we are all called and committed to serving.

At present (2018-2025; 2025-beyond), we continue the iterative task of reviewing and analyzing the GEAR UP program data; these records include demographic and non-demographic information (attendance records, academic performance scores, behavioral infractions, and level of involvement) regarding the students serviced by this institution. Serving as an extended member of the GEAR UP program, this work took us through the end of the 2017-2018 school year (original cycle, 2011-2018) and into the current cycle (2018-present), ending in 2025. Throughout this time, we will continue to investigate program records and highlight the effects of program involvement on student academic performance. The final results will indicate the direct connection between leadership, academics, and student outcomes.

The role of the reflective practitioner, especially in this capacity, is the core element that comprises the ongoing art of thoughtful leadership (Johnson, 2023). Firstly, while there is no one without the other, what does exist here is a dependent and independent variable. The independent variable, reflective practice, undeniably begins with self. Any person committed to a life of professional development must realize that one’s personal development comes first (Johnson, 2023). The introspection and assiduous

work required is immense. A practitioner understands that this work is cyclical, for reflection tends to focus interactively on the outcomes of action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action (Schön, 1983). The process is recurrent; all actions, reactions, and interactions are connected, and sufficient time must be spent analyzing and personalizing these constructs. If this system is not adhered to, there will be failure because “when a practitioner does not reflect on his own inquiry, he keeps his intuitive understandings tacit and is inattentive to the limits of his scope of reflective attention” (Schön, 1983, p. 282).

Reflective leadership can only be implemented once a person can honestly face self, understanding that it “is a process of taking stock of ourselves, of objectively looking at our actions, our beliefs, and our espoused theories and theories-in-use” (Scheffer et al., 2012, p. 42). Knowledge, choice, and perception, taken collectively, constitute the mirror by which this takes place. A reflective leader is constantly growing, building, and inquiring. When someone reflects in action, this person becomes a researcher in practice; because experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into one’s inquiry. Our application and future growth are all dependent upon this very significant realization.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our emergence from entry-level staff members to leaders began over 20 years ago; we were educated, experienced, knowledgeable, and zealous and held referent leadership among our coworkers and peers. What we know now, unbeknownst to us then, is that we were far from ready for a life of formal headship. While we possessed many formidable qualities then, we were not genuinely committed to ongoing, reflective practice. In our 20s, we were both leaders by title. However, there was a missing element: Authority is what makes individuals leaders, but reflection – ongoing, honest, and objective reflection – is what makes them efficacious leaders (Scheffer et al., 2012).

What changed for us between then and now? We knew, theoretically, that only by reexamining ongoing patterns of behavior can we begin assembling a picture of the values, paradigms, and assumptions that give impetus to our actions and form our decisions. However, in putting theory into practice, it is vital to apply these truths daily. This includes trusting one’s constituents, delegating duties responsibly, and showing interest in the input of others beyond simply “doing the job.” Enlarging our scope, becoming better communicators, and tapping into the expertise of others have all led to the exponential expansion of our individual and collective visions. The right allies will constantly challenge each other in the pursuit of more. There is no more significant motivator than regular, ongoing accountability in one’s quest to improve. Just as iron sharpens iron, knowing-in-practice consists of a self-reinforcing system in which role frame(s), strategies of action, relevant facts, and interpersonal theories of action are bound together (Schon, 1983).

We now understand that if determination is critical to a reflective discipline, patience and perseverance are its “twin sisters. Reflective leadership – a reflective practice of any kind – is less about growing by leaps and bounds than pursuing a steady process of little-by-little, day-by-day” (Scheffer et al., 2012, p. 158). While the job of the truly contemplative practitioner is never complete, the remuneration is the emergence of a holistic person, one whose reward is the fulfillment of a reflective life. Today, through our daily commitments to being better, we fully understand that the work of reflection is mainly internal, but not until it becomes manifested in our daily choices does it impact those around us. Leaders, then, must confront the perennial challenges faced by educational institutions head-on, equipped with an array

of innovative strategies and a commitment to fostering equitable practices, from addressing inclusion, diversity, and belonging to navigating the complex terrain of school change (Mulvaney et al., 2024). While our achievements still matter, our legacy and ongoing commitment to growth and evolution matter even more. Thus, the progress toward self-actualization is never-ending. To that end, we understand that the work in this arena must continue for the sake of our current and future educational leaders. In our own transitions from sufficiency to competency (1980s-1990s), from competency to mastery (2000s-2010s, and from mastery to responsibility (2020s-present), we envision educational environments and networks as inclusive, welcoming spaces where everyone, regardless of background, feels a true sense of belonging and is empowered to grow and contribute their best (Johnson, 2016, 2017, 2022, 2023).

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.utc.edu/access-and-engagement/center-for-community-career-education/gear-utc-14>

<sup>3</sup> ESEA = The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, enacted in 1965. It is the United States' national education law and shows a longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students.

<sup>4</sup> NCLB = No Child Left Behind, the main law for K–12 general education in the United States from 2002–2015. The law held schools accountable for how kids learned and achieved.

<sup>5</sup> The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is a US law that governs the public education policy for K–12 schools in the United States. It was signed into law in December 2015 and replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

<sup>6</sup> Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): <https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn>