

**Developing Principals in China:
Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategic Directions**

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical review of the policy landscape of contemporary Chinese education, and the essential role of school principals in the national reform for “Quality-Oriented Education”. With cultural and historical context in mind, and the impact of political and societal forces taken into consideration, the authors examine the major challenges faced by Chinese schools and the demand for a new generation of school leaders. An assessment of the existing principal evaluation and training system is conducted and a framework of strategic directions for systemic professional development is proposed.

Introduction

Since the inception of momentous economic and political reform policies in 1978, the world has witnessed remarkable social changes in the People's Republic of China. Today, new technology, internationalization, international trade, political changes, consolidation of industry, privatization, and demographic changes – all forces that brought on by globalization are affecting China just as they do in other developing countries. The massive change of the socioeconomic landscape has brought significant shifts in governance structure, financing schemes and accountability policies with direct impact on the education system. In the mean time, societal mandates pertaining to the quality of education have been elevated, where graduates of the school system are facing an increasingly complex labor market in need of knowledge workers who are creative and adaptive. Consequently, the role of educational leadership, especially the role of school principals is getting significant attention from policy makers and educational administration scholars (Chu, 2003; Lin, 2003; Huang, 2004; Wang, 2004). A movement of principal professionalization that aims at cultivating newer and stronger leadership is gaining momentum.

In this paper, we ask: How is principal professionalization defined in today's educational context? What are the major challenges faced by the Chinese schools and their principals? What are the implications of the national reform mandates in regards to developing a new generation of school principals in China? What strategic actions must take place to develop school principals?

Professionalization through Professional Development for Principals

As civilizations advance through natural and social sciences, certain occupations gradually acquire the status of a profession. The term professionalization as a sociology label is loosely applied to increasing specialization and transferability of skill, the proliferation of objective standards of work, the spread of tenure arrangements, licensing, or certification, and the growth of occupations (Vollmer & Mills, 1966). In other words, professionalization defines a process and a progression that an occupation goes through to establish standards and norms, garnering specialized and distinctive skills, and ultimately gaining well-recognized legitimacy.

The advancement from occupation to profession is a complex and lengthy evolution, however. Whether an occupation may eventually reach the professional stage is contingent on several important conditions. The key difference between an occupation and a profession is that professionals are those who have received specialized education and training, equipped with field-specific knowledge and skills, and practice their occupations based on a set of collectively recognized standards (Larson; 1977; Collins; 1979). Furthermore, the process of professionalization requires reputable professional associations, protection of members' job territory, and formal code of ethics to ensure quality of membership and service (DiMaggio & Powell; 1983; Elmore, 2007).

Some suggested that occupations in the labor market be classified into three categories: professional, semi-professional, and non-professional, where lawyers, medical doctors, accountants and the alike fit in the first group, whereas many "borderline cases" such as school administrators, teachers, and social workers are "still in the process" (Wilensky, 1964, p.142).

While debates over whether principalship fits the definition of a true profession linger, the movement of developing school leaders professionally has gained significant momentum around the world. Taking the school as the locus of professionalism (Sykes, 1999), studies have shown the value of leadership in setting the school's vision and mission, providing instructional directions, and in fostering teacher professional community that leads to effective school improvement (Louis, Marks, and Kruse, 1996; Youngs & King, 2002).

We posit that professionalization of principalship may be approached at two levels. At the aggregate level of the occupation, it is the collective and incremental effort of reaching eight objectives for professional recognition: (a) extensive specialized training; (b) comprehensive knowledge system; (c) respected ethic code; (d) clear practice standards; (e) rigorous qualification requirements; (f) professional autonomy; (g) relatively high social esteem and income level; and (h) established professional organizations. At the individual level, professionalization can be interpreted as principals' efforts in gaining professional knowledge, skills, and aspirations for continuous personal growth and career advancement. Both collective and individual efforts are indispensable, where individual professional development is the foundation for collective occupational progression toward professionalization.

Principal professional development is vital to professionalization. From the individual perspective, it is the path of conscious and continuous personal pursuit in professional growth; from the societal perspective, it is the key mechanism to systemically build an educational leadership force in response to new societal changes.

Principal professionalization faces many challenges, among which the unique nature and the complexity the work of a school principal. As a key player in every education system, the role of the school principal is fundamentally different from many other occupations especially

those with for-profit motives. In promoting public education for the common good, countries share the vision that puts student learning and development as a top priority. For example, the 1996 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders and its newly updated 2008 version emphasize that school leaders' primary responsibility is to improve teaching and learning for all children (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, 2008). This call for accentuating student learning and development is echoed by standards-setting policies in many countries (Guthrie & Wong, 2007). The role of education in the society therefore sets a very high threshold of necessary dispositions, knowledge, and skills for effective principalship.

Challenges Faced by Chinese Schools and Their Principals

At the center of educational reform in China, the role of a school principal has been a focal point of discussion and research interest in the recent years. Identifying the core functions of school principals, developing training strategies, and advocating for principal professionalization became a major reform initiative in the 1990s (Chu, 2003). The initiative named *Professional Development for One Million Principals* was an excellent example of the central government effort which started in 1990. As a part of the initiative, an advisory committee was established to provide guidance on policies and training programs for school principals nationwide. The *Basic Education Principal Training Guidelines* of 1999 was another important benchmark for the advancement of principal development (Chu, 2009).

In this paper, we examine the challenges faced by principals in the changing social and economic landscape in four areas. Specifically, we connect the functions of Chinese basic

education with national goals and discuss how principalship is impacted by the macro policy imperatives.

The Challenge of a New Educational Mission

Education in Mainland China was regarded largely as a political and ideological device without its own mission and any autonomy prior to the political and economic reform period, which started in 1978 under the leadership of Premier Deng Xiaoping. Perhaps due to over-corrective measures, the pendulum has swung to another extreme in the recent decades where education is seen as the vehicle for economic development in a rather narrow sense. Positioning education as serving either a political or economic purpose, however, was too society-centric and leaves out the humanistic value of education. The idea of human development through holistic education was yet to be put forth.

Along with impressive gains of wealth and development, by the late 1990s decades of overwhelming emphasis on standardized testing to promote academic achievement gave grounds to both governmental mandates and societal demand for graduates that are well-rounded citizens, equipped with not only book knowledge but moral values, creative mindset, mental and physical health, and versatile interests (State Council, 1999, 2001a). Educators raised serious concerns over the consequence of the tightly-controlled, test-based education system that only prepares students to be proficient in exams but did not enhance creativity, problem-solving, and other important qualities. The Chinese curriculum reform, started in 2001, promotes new curriculum content and instructional practices that are localized and focus on the intrinsic value of knowledge.

“Quality-Oriented Education” (*su zhi jiao yu*) became the hallmark of the nationwide educational reform at the turn of 21st century (State Council, 1999, 2001a, and 2001b). It is important to find the construct equivalence of the Chinese word “*su zhi*” in order to fully comprehend the intent of the national reform. While it can be broadly translated as “qualities” or “traits”, it covers the domain of all-around development in four main areas: morality (*de*), intellect (*zhi*), physical health (*ti*), and arts (*mei*) (State Council, 2005). The push for Quality-Oriented Education is followed by the 2003 national policy of “Scientific Development Principles”, which calls for holistic approaches for student development. Quality-Oriented Education is a systemic change that involves the transformation of virtually every step of the current educational process and is being carried forward into every segment and every level of the nation’s educational system.

The new mission promotes a student-centered and learner-centered agenda. At least in its intention, it takes the purpose of education *beyond* the political ideology and economic development. Furthermore, it no longer measures educational success by academic achievement, that is, by test scores. The intrinsic value of education has been elevated and becomes more pronounced. Human development and contribution to social cohesion and harmony are now the new marching orders for Chinese education. To fulfill the new mandates of Quality-Oriented Reform, principals must first be leaders whose values are aligned with the humanistic core of the new mission, and to be capable of navigate the transition.

The concept of transformational leadership is attractive to Chinese scholars and practitioners alike because of the volatile nature of the education system. To respond to the external environment and the pressing need for skills and ability to cope with change, principals must learn how to crystallize values, to distribute authority and build teams, to establish flexible

structure, to open communication channels, and to internalize motivations (Bai, 2006).

Transformational leadership, often labeled as “change-oriented leadership” or “transformational leadership” (Leithwood, 1994; Yukl, 2002), was among the first leadership theories introduced and also frequently studied in China (Chen, 2006). The spotlight here is on organizational processes (e.g., supporting staff)—employing effective methods for getting the school and its members (staff, students, families, community agents) to become more productive (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Principals now have more responsibilities for school long-term development. They must plan the schools’ future ahead. They must learn how to do strategic planning. Some principals cannot adapt to the changes nor are they able to manage strategically and independently. They are used to relying on the directives of the government, and to managing day-to-day routines instead of utilizing big-picture type of strategies, often the result of the centralized management system and the lack of autonomy at the school level in the past.

The Challenge of Pursuing Educational Equity

Equity in education plays an important role in constructing a more just society (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). Economic development in the recent years has also brought intensified social stratification and more friction among groups of difference socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Increased concerns over cohesion in larger society leads to more attention to how schooling is structured in China today. However, the importance of justice and equity to the future development of China has just only recently begun. Among the challenges, the practice of ability tracking presents a good example of the dilemmas faced by school principals.

Ability tracking occurs at the school level and at the classroom level in China. For decades, Chinese students in middle school and high school often are placed in different schools and classes. Students attend high schools of different labels, e.g. key schools or regular schools, according to their test scores. Best students go to key schools which can be divided into: provincial key schools, municipal/regional key schools, and district key schools. Within many schools, there are key classes and regular classes, also largely based on student achievements on course subjects. While many Chinese educators consider tracking as the most effective and practical way to achieve collective efficiency of education in light of the exorbitant size of student population and limited funding, more scholars and policymakers are seeing the undeniable severe consequence of leaving many students behind due to unequal distribution of teaching and learning resources. Key schools and key classes can get more resources because they can bring good reputation to local government, schools, principals and teachers. Often slow-track classes are more or less ignored while the fast-track classes are further enhanced.

The awareness and desire for socially just schooling are increasingly strong. The Compulsory Education Law (2006) stipulates that the practice of key schools and key classes will be eliminated. The role of principal as a moral leader that stands for equity and exercises the judgment and responsibility to promote inclusive education has become more important (Chu, 2008).

Moral leadership, a theory focusing on morality, has taken root in the Chinese education research studies and is considered as having the philosophical underpinning closest to the China tradition and culture (Wong, 1998; Ma & Sun, 2006; Gao, Wang & Lin; 2006). Sergiovanni (1992), among others, contended that a higher level of leadership authority is to be found in the professional and moral domains. When professional authority becomes a driving force, leaders

rely on standards of practice and professional norms as reasons to appeal to teachers for action or change (p.40). In the national pursuit of educational equity, Chinese principals are expected to first and foremost be a humanist that cares about every student. They must ask themselves: Which way is best to benefit every student, tracking or non-tracking? How may students' outcomes from schooling be freed from the effects of differences arising from students' socio-economic background or geographic location?

The new mission for “Quality-Oriented Education” and the pursuit of educational equity have set the *intention* of current educational reform policy – “quality education with equity” or “educational equity with quality” is now the systemic goal for Chinese education today. From here we turn to the *enactment* of the reform policy that entails two major reform measures: curriculum reform and governance reform.

The Challenge of Curriculum Reform

The implementation of Quality-Oriented Education largely depends on curriculum reform as its cornerstone. Specifically, learner-centered educational philosophy and individualized approaches are taking center stage. Teaching and learning goals that emphasize values and ethics, creativity and independent problem-solving, and citizenship-building were incorporated into the 15-year Strategic Plan for Education of the ninth Chinese National People’s Congress (State Council, 2001a), which was then revisited and confirmed in the Educational Reform Plan by the Ministry of Education in 2005.

The new priority has brought on important changes to teacher preparation programs, curriculum structure and content, instructional methods, and the ways to define school success and leadership effectiveness. Educators are pressed for providing visible and exciting results

without systemic support and competency-building training. The holistic approach for student development is exceedingly difficult to implement and assess, however. While such transformation is painstakingly taking place, principals are caught in between the existing testing system that measures school performance in terms of *achievement* and the enacted accountability scheme that calls for enhanced student *ability*.

This also means that many school principals are stepping into uncharted waters of designing and evaluating new curriculum content and instructional practices that are based on a new set of learning objectives.

Research has repeatedly identified instructional leadership as the most important role of the principal to propel school improvement (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides, 1990; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004). Chinese scholars found that the instructional leadership model particularly meaningful in helping principals focus on student learning, teacher professional development and the self-development of the principal (Bai, 2006; Zhang, 2005). The core for this strand of leadership include the ability of leaders (a) to stay consistently focused on the right stuff—the core technology of schooling, or learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment and (b) to make all the other dimensions of schooling (e.g., administration, organization, finance) work in the service of a more robust core technology and improved student learning (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert; 2003). The challenge, however, is for Chinese school principals to learn how to work with the teachers to optimize curriculum structures and processes and provide academic support for all students.

The Challenge of Governance Reform

In the past decades the Chinese educational system has been under top-down centralized management, which can be categorized as being too direct and too micro. There was too much oversight over matters that should have been left with locals but too little attention to areas in need of policy-level intervention. Attempting to address this issue, *the Decision of Educational Management Reform* (State Council, 1985) and *the Chinese Educational Reform and Development Guidelines* (1993) stipulated that government should make necessary transition towards a macro-level oversight function and more management authorities be delegated to local schools.

Decentralization is global trend that aims at stimulating competition, attracting diversified funding, and more importantly, encouraging innovation and customer-centered services with local autonomy and ownership (Bray, 1999; Astiz, Wiseman, & Baker, 2002). The trend of educational reforms towards school-based management (SBM) has also become increasingly more prevalent in the Asia-Pacific Region (Cheng, 2002; Chu, 2007).

With schools in China becoming more decentralized, market-orientated and diversified, they are facing more accountability demands from the local government and community. The decentralized school system requires principals to have strong leadership and problem-solving skills to guide them in making a broad range of decisions. However, many principals find it hard to lead their schools with the traditional top-down management style. Three new principles are therefore needed to lead effectively in a decentralized and school-based management environment.

The first principle – *scientific* school management is data-based and evidence-based. “Today’s effective educational leaders use data extensively to guide them in decision making,

setting and prioritizing goals, and monitoring progress” (Goldring & Berends, 2009, p. 5).

School principals are responsible to use various sources of information to develop a culture of learning for teachers and for students. However, most Chinese principals lack the necessary skills and do not have the needed resources for effective data-based decision-making.

The second principle – *democratic* school management provides the foundation and assurance for scientific school management. What happens in the educational system reflects the pursuit for political democracy in the society at large. For the first time in the history of the People’s Republic of China since its inception in 1949, the central government issued a long-term plan for developing democratic political process (Timeline by the 17th National Congress, 2007). In essence, education about democracy and the democratic practice in the educational system form the foundation for political democracy. Rather than relying on bureaucracy, schools need leaders that can build professional learning organizations that consciously and continuously pursue wider participation and collaboration. New types of relationships among students, teachers, and leaders will need to be established based on shared vision and fosters innovation and improvement. However, despite progresses, transparency in school management and distribution of leadership are still lacking in many schools in the nation. The deficiencies are particularly salient in the lack of accountability structure that ensures public scrutiny of school management and the lack of participation of stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and students in decision-making.

Distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) is a relatively new concept distinct from the traditional hierarchical structure (Chen, 2006). With teachers actively participating in curriculum design and instructional improvement, the limited resources that a school receives is extended and enriched. However, because school context varies greatly from school to school,

region to region, implementing the distributed leadership model requires locally-driven strategies. The power of the principal indeed has increased along with the educational reform efforts. But often the newly gained school-level authority stops with the principal. Teachers are not sharing such authority. The democracy concept remains weak among school principals. A 2005 teacher survey found that teachers in schools with lower levels of student achievement tend to perceive their principals with concentrated administrative authority but fewer responsibilities, as compared with the perception of their teacher counterparts in key schools or higher rankings who reported more distributed decision-making practices (Chu & Yao, 2005). The same survey also studied the participation in decision-making as another key indicator for distributed leadership. Among the 960 teachers who responded to the survey regarding school management in the districts of Beijing Municipal Area, about 80% expressed desire in decision-making participation. However, when asked to rate the number of opportunities given to participate in deciding important school matters, fewer than 40% answered “many” or “some”, and the majority of teachers responded that they had few or very few opportunities. When asked about the level of participation in school management by parents, about 75% of the teachers reported that parents were rarely engaged. However, disaggregated data show that key school parents were perceived by teachers as being more active in school affairs as supposed to the parents of regular or low-performance schools.

The third principle – *legal-minded* management requires principals to put rules of law above all personal subjectivity. With a long history of highly centralized governance structure where well-established law and management transparency were lacking, the morality of the leader in power became the only hope for equality and fairness (Gao, Wang & Lin, 2006). However, as the government gradually establishes and reinforces laws and regulations for the

education system, the reliance on personal virtues must be accompanied by clear and coherent rules so that the rights and responsibilities of all participating parties are transparent. School principals must be not only moral leaders but the conscientious reinforcement for the new educational management system.

In summary, to face the challenges presented by the new educational mission for all-around quality with equity, to implement curriculum reform, and to manage schools in the new governance structure, principals in China today must be transformational leaders, moral leaders, instructional leaders, and must be willing to practice distributed leadership.

Developing School Principals

Developing school principals is a historical and system-wide undertaking. To further the progress toward principal professionalization, we must build a knowledge base and provide systemic support for principal professional development. The challenges faced by Chinese schools today demand a new framework for school leadership development that defines professional standards, performance criteria, and more importantly, necessary leadership competencies. Fully acknowledging the collective contribution and occupational progress made by school principals in the recent three decades, we start the conversation on with two core components: principal evaluation and principal training.

Principal Evaluation

Principal evaluation is an integral part of school improvement. When designed appropriately, executed proactively, and implemented properly, it can enhance leadership quality

and improve organizational performance at three levels. At the individual level, evaluation can be used as a benchmarking tool for essential personnel functions such as documentation for annual reviews and compensation. At the level of continuous learning and development, evaluation can serve as a powerful communication tool, providing both formative and summative feedback to a school leader, enabling principals to make informed decisions regarding development and improvement by identifying gaps between existing practices and desired outcomes. At the level of collective accountability for school-wide improvement, evaluation can set the organizational goals and objectives for the school leader (Glasman & Heck, 1992; Goldring & Cravens, 2009; Marcoulides, Larsen & Heck, 1995; Oyinlade, 2006).

As discussed previously, the intended reform policy for holistic learning and all-around quality is yet to be fully implemented. Test scores, especially the college-entrance examination results remain as the main benchmarks for school performance. Although the 1997 *Guidelines for Basic Education Evaluation* has provided much needed and more up-to-date directions for schools, a comprehensive review of the national school evaluation policy indicates a significant gap still exists between reform imperatives and the current practices at the local level (Chu & Yang, 2009).

In 2007, the Chinese Ministry of Education launched the project named *School Evaluation in the Context of the Quality-Oriented Basic Education*. This project is headed by the National Center for National Assessment of Education Quality at Beijing Normal University along with a team of educational administration and policy scholars from various institutions and experts from the practice field of local schools. It is important to point out that the focus of this project is on the effectiveness of the schools. However, the essential role of school principals is evident as we examine the proposed quality indicators and implementation measures.

We first provide a preview of a new set of core components (in draft form) that have been proposed by the school evaluation project team (Figure 1). This school effectiveness framework and subsequent indicators were constructed to reflect the educational reform priorities. In this matrix there are five core components of school effectiveness. The first four are system-wide measures: student development, instruction and pedagogy, teacher professional community, leading and management. The fifth one is a flexible measure to be determined as a local priority.

Core Components Level 1	Sub-Components Level 2	Indicators Level 3
Student Development	Physical and Mental Development	Physical Health Health Awareness and Habits Emotions and Attitudes Communication and Collaboration
	Moral Behavior	Values and Beliefs Behaviors and Habits
	Academic Performance	Academic Achievement Analytical Ability (above subjects) Artistic Attainment
	Life Skills	Life Skills for Independence Community Experience
Instruction and Curriculum	Moral Education	Coverage and Involvement Format and Depth
	Curriculum	Curriculum Standard Alignment School-Based Curriculum
	Instruction	Instructional Methods Classroom Practice
Teacher Professional Community	Teacher Development	Teaching Ethnics Instructional Research and Training Training of "Core" Teachers Training of "Homeroom" Teachers
	Teacher Assessment and Incentive	Teacher Assessment Teacher Incentive
	Teacher Performance	Teacher-Student Relations Professional Behavior Impact on Student Learning and Development
Leadership and Management	Administrative Compliance	Mission and Goals Strategy and Goals for Development

	Leadership Team Building	Operational Integrity Departmental Responsibility Leadership Team Quality Leadership and Staff Relations
	Basic Management	Management Structure Safety and Discipline Support Functions
	School Culture	Campus Cohesion Classroom Team Building Support for Special Needs Students
	Resource Development and Utilization	Financial Management Facility Management Resource Development
Flexible Measure	(Locally determined)	(Locally determined)

Figure 1: School Evaluation Framework and Indicators, Beijing Normal University, 2009

The construction of this school evaluation framework aims at incorporating the new reform imperatives into the quality indicators. First, it positions student development as the top priority to align with the purpose of “Quality-Oriented Education”. Student development is no longer just defined in terms of academic achievement but other dimensions such as attitudes, behaviors, artistic enrichment, and healthy life habits. Second, it gives local schools more flexibility in defining their own goals, a necessary condition for school-based and site-based management. It also puts more emphasis on proactive measures as supposed to reactive ones. For example, the core indicator “leadership and management” contains new criteria on resource utilization – with increased commitment from the central government to ensure equitable distribution, how to maximize funding becomes more important than securing resources.

Recent field research on the state of school evaluation in China indicates that how evaluation is conducted and how results are communicated are strongly associated with the perceive benefit of the evaluation to school improvement by school personnel (Zhao & Wang,

2007; Chu & Yang, 2009). In a 2004 qualitative study of principal evaluation in a large school district of Beijing, principals reported that the relevance and utility of evaluation were hindered by inadequacies in the credibility of the evaluators, the objectivity and timeliness of the feedback, and the alignment of evaluation criteria with real consequences (Zhao & Wang, 2007).

The design and pilot phases of the school evaluation project are paying special attention school and principal *self-evaluation*, which builds the capacity of administrative personnel to be more informed and skilled participants of the evaluation process at the local level. While establishing a strong external monitoring system is important, we conjecture that one of the most feasible and effective ways to provide formative assessment is for principals to practice vigilant and strategic self examination of their schools' performance in the areas that matter – the core components of student development, instruction and pedagogy, teacher professional community, and leadership and management.

Self-evaluation requires principals to fully comprehend the new quality indicators, to know how performance indicators translate into day-to-day behaviors, and to be able to collect, compile, and analyze multiple sources of data from teachers, parents, students, and the community. Without training and development, however, a majority of the principals will not be able to perform these tasks.

Principal Training

The State Education Commission (SEC, renamed the Ministry of Education in 1998) issued a document entitled *Strengthening the Training for Principals of Elementary and Secondary Schools Nationwide* in 1989. In 1995 the *Training Direction for Principals of Elementary and Secondary Schools* was issued by SEC. Principal training has since made much progress: Policies regarding principal training have been set up by both the central and local

government; the academic and professional level of principal training has increased with the participation of universities in the development and delivery of training programs; and more than one million school principals have taken part in the professional training and renewal training programs. Encouragingly, an increasing number of Chinese educational scholars are now regarding principal training as a viable field for theoretical and empirical research.

Currently there are three types of principals training: Induction training for school principal candidates; continuing training for principals who have a professional certificate for the principal position; and research training for those principals who not only have a professional certificate but also have exemplary performance in their positions. The induction training offers basic knowledge and skills that are considered necessary for effective school leadership. The continuing training offers trainees a broad range of curricula in education and educational administration. The research training usually offers trainees selected advanced topics for discussion and research.

Administratively, principal training is provided at four levels: (a) national level for selected groups of principals nationwide by the National Training Center for High School Principals in East China Normal University (ECNU) and the National Training Center for Primary School Principals in Beijing Normal University (BNU); (b) provincial level for high school principals; (c) city level for junior high school principals; and (d) district level for primary school principals.

Despite significant strides, principal training programs in China today are not able to meet the demands of principal development and school improvement. Although the roles and functions of principals are changing, the traditional principal preparation programs are not. First, programs are often fragmented with content that lacks theoretical and empirical foundation, and

pays little attention to practice. Second, opportunities to training have been unequal among principals due to great regional differences in resources, and there are big gaps between urban and rural areas, between developed areas and underdeveloped areas. Third, the training staff in many training institutions has been unable to keep up with the changing needs and rising expectations of the principals.

There are still many obstacles have to be overcome to support principals to participate in ongoing development: Principals are overwhelmed by the mounting day-to-day demands at schools where their time has to be spent on dealing with issues such as raising funds for operations, dealing with student (and sometimes parental) mentalities associated with the “one-child” policy, and capacity concerns over large class sizes especially in urban areas and higher grades.

We propose a leadership competency-building model that leverages existing and emerging leadership theories and models but fits the context of Chinese schools (Figure 2):

<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Leadership Demands</i>
1. New Educational Mission for Quality-Oriented Education	Transformational Leadership
3. Educational Equity	Moral Leadership
2. Curriculum Reform	Instructional Leadership
4. Governance Reform (Decentralization and School-Based Management)	Transformational and Distributed Leadership

Figure 2: Leadership Competency-Building Model

To build a principal training system that aligns with the reform priorities and school performance criteria, 10 strategic elements for principal professionalization will be needed. Each

element should be addressed with specific programmatic prescriptions for design and implementation. The elements are categorized into three main areas. For *content focus*, the programs should (a) be designed to improve principal competencies in transformational, moral, and distributed leadership, and (b) emphasize the development of instructional leadership. For *training methods*, the programs should (a) incorporate the use of reflective skills, (b) employ field-based learning and encourage action research, (c) have a mentorship component where academic advisors and field experts can work hand-in-hand to provide guidance and support, (d) value learner-centered approaches where the needs of each principal trainee can be assessed and provided with tailored training plans, and (e) use a cohort model to encourage peer-to-peer learning. For *quality and equity assurance*, the programs should (a) be accessible to all school principals – “No Principal Left Behind”, (b) be provided by qualified faculty and staff with their own knowledge and skills regularly upgraded, and (c) implement regular certifying evaluations with training institutions and provide timely feedback and technical assistance for improvement.

Future Research and Implications

It is foreseeable that five to 10 years from now, with the establishment of sound professional standards, active principal training, and valid and reliable principal evaluation that are aligned with the national educational reform imperatives, the effectiveness of principal leadership will get stronger. Such assumption might serve as an excellent premise for new research inquires that explores the relationship between enhanced principal development and the improvement of student learning over time. To deliver this promise, however, extensive groundwork must be in place.

As illustrated in Figure 3, an extensive web of alignment must be established and continuously examined and perfected for principal development to be effective. First, the definitions of effective schools (core performance measures) and the new priorities of “quality-oriented” educational reform must be aligned. Professional standards for school principals and the evaluation criteria for schools should also be consistent. The validity of the new evaluations for schools and their principals will be largely dependent on how they measure the intended performance in student learning, development, and equity. Finally, principals will need to be provided with feedback, coaching, and training that target the necessary competencies for professional development.

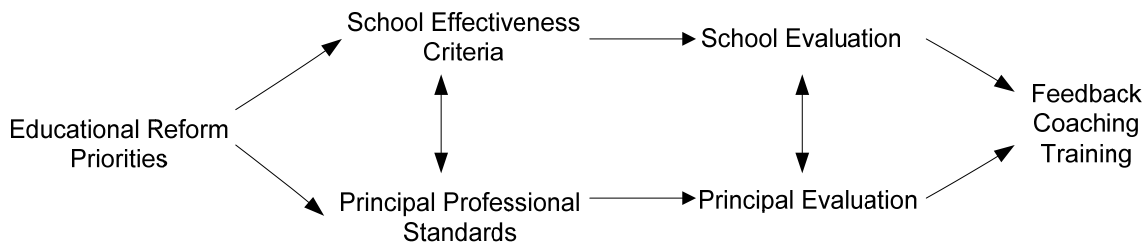


Figure 3: Systemic Alignment for Developing Principals

Each step will take tremendous amount of theoretical research and field work. The national study of *School Evaluation in the Context of the Quality-Oriented Basic Education* by Beijing Normal’s Center for National Assessment of Education Quality has taken the initial first steps. The research team started with collecting baseline data on school evaluation practices, instrumentation, usage, and feedback mechanism. In early 2009, the team took a systemic approach to obtain a snap shot of how schools are evaluated in China by collecting a national sample of school evaluation plans. A total of 207 school evaluation plans were identified and among them 155 were analyzed using a stratified random sampling method covering all

provinces and special districts in Mainland China. Validity studies are also being conducted on the newly developed school evaluation framework and indicators in selected school districts.

The pursuit of educational efficiency, effectiveness, and equity in China is at the beginning of a very long journey. The most populous nation with the largest scale of education in the world, China had 215,170,000 elementary and secondary students in 94,116 high schools and 396,567 primary schools with about 1,000,000 principals and deputy principals in 2006 (National Center for Education Development Research, 2007). The challenges faced by the schools and their principals are daunting, but the opportunities for building leadership capacity for one million principals are invigorating, and the potential impact on the world's education are profound. Educators in China stand ready to work closely with their international colleague to embark on this worthy journey.

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