



## A Conceptual Framework for Preparing 21st-Century School Leaders: Aligning Qualification Standards with the Evolving Role of the Principal

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### ABSTRACT

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The role of the school principal has transformed significantly, demanding a new set of skills and competencies to navigate the complexities of 21st-century education. This conceptual paper addresses the need for aligning qualification standards with this evolving role by proposing a comprehensive framework for preparing effective school leaders. The framework identifies key 21st-century competencies, including digital literacy, data-driven decision-making, leading diverse communities, change management, and strategic thinking. It then explores how these competencies can be effectively developed through various strategies, such as formal training, mentoring, and professional learning communities. Furthermore, the paper examines how qualification standards can be aligned with these competencies through appropriate assessment methods. The proposed framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of these elements, providing a coherent and practical approach to ensuring that school leaders are equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of contemporary education.

### KEYWORDS:

21st-Century School Leadership, Principal Leadership Development, Qualification Standards for Principals, Competency-Based Leadership, NEAP Leadership Programs

### INTRODUCTION

The role of the school principal has significantly transformed, shifting from primarily administrative functions to encompass instructional leadership, community engagement, and fostering positive school climates (Leithwood et al., 2004). This evolution, driven by increased accountability, diverse student populations, technological advancements, and complex societal challenges (Fullan, 2016), necessitates a shift from traditional management skills to a comprehensive set of competencies for contemporary educational leadership. This requires examining current qualification standards and leadership development programs to ensure alignment with the evolving demands of the principalship. While traditional principal preparation emphasized administrative tasks, today's educational landscape demands leaders who are also instructional visionaries, change agents, and community builders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007), necessitating a focus on specific 21st-century skills and competencies.

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This paper directly addresses key questions related to preparing effective 21st-century school leaders: What specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions (including digital literacy, data-driven decision-making, leading diverse communities, change management, collaboration, strategic thinking, systems thinking, and emotional intelligence) do they need? How can these competencies be developed (through formal training, mentoring, on-the-job experiences, professional learning communities, and self-directed learning)? How can qualification standards (including selection criteria, evaluation metrics, and licensure requirements) be aligned with the evolving role and these competencies, considering various assessment methods (e.g., NQESH, performance-based assessments, portfolios)? How has the principal's role changed, and what new challenges and opportunities (e.g., accountability, diverse stakeholders, various leadership styles) do they face? This paper proposes a framework for preparing 21st-century school leaders by aligning qualification standards with the evolving role of the principal. This framework posits that changing demands necessitate specific competencies, which should inform robust qualification standards and effective leadership development programs. This interconnectedness is visually represented in Figure 1, illustrating the relationships between

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the evolving role, competencies, standards, and programs. This alignment ensures school leaders are equipped to address 21st-century challenges and opportunities, promoting student success (Robinson et al., 2008). Subsequent sections elaborate on each framework component.

### 21st-Century Skills and Competencies

21st-century educational leaders face unprecedented challenges and opportunities within complex, interconnected school systems operating in a rapidly changing global context. To effectively navigate this landscape and foster innovative learning environments that promote student success and address diverse community needs, they require a distinct set of skills and competencies beyond traditional management practices. This section outlines these essential 21st-century skills and competencies. In today's digital age, leaders must be proficient in technology for communication, data analysis, instructional support, and professional development. They must understand technology's transformative potential for teaching and learning, guiding staff in effective curriculum integration. Effective leaders cultivate a technology-embracing school culture, providing professional development and ensuring resource access. They use data dashboards to monitor student progress and inform instructional strategies, leveraging technology for effective communication with parents and the wider community. Ertmer (2005) emphasized the importance of pedagogical content knowledge related to technology, arguing that leaders must understand its enhancement potential for specific subjects. This digital literacy is foundational for data-driven decision-making, enabling leaders to access, analyze, and interpret digital data.

Effective leaders also rely on data for decisions ranging from resource allocation to instructional strategies, using it to identify areas for improvement, monitor progress, and evaluate interventions. They establish data collection and analysis systems for student achievement, attendance, and behavior, using this data for identifying trends, setting priorities, and making evidence-based decisions. They foster a data-driven culture, encouraging teachers to use data to inform their practice. Wayman et al. (2004) found that effective data use leads to greater student achievement gains. This data-driven approach requires systems thinking to understand the interactions within the school system and the impact of changes.

Reflecting societal demographics, schools are increasingly diverse. Effective leaders create inclusive environments where all students feel valued and supported, understanding the importance of culturally responsive teaching and creating opportunities for success. They promote these practices, address equity and access, and foster a welcoming climate, engaging with diverse families and community members to build strong partnerships. Khalifa et al. (2016) advocate for culturally responsive leadership, emphasizing understanding

student cultural backgrounds for equitable learning. Leading diverse communities requires emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills to build relationships and navigate complex social dynamics.

The constantly evolving educational landscape requires leaders adept at managing change and fostering innovation. They identify improvement opportunities, implement initiatives effectively, and create a culture of continuous improvement. Leaders create a shared vision for change, involve stakeholders, and support implementation, fostering experimentation and learning from mistakes. Fullan (2016) emphasizes leaders as "change agents" guiding schools through transformation. Change management requires strategic thinking and visioning to anticipate needs and develop long-term plans, along with collaboration and networking to build support.

Effective leaders build strong stakeholder relationships, including teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members. They create collaboration and networking opportunities to share best practices, access resources, and build support. They establish professional learning communities, foster teacher collaboration, and engage with parents and community organizations. Collaboration and networking are essential for leading diverse communities and managing change. 21st-century leaders must think strategically about their schools' future, developing a clear vision, setting goals, and creating plans. They develop a shared vision, involve stakeholders in planning, and monitor progress. Strategic thinking is crucial for change management and innovation, enabling anticipation of future needs and long-term planning. Schools are complex, interconnected systems. Effective leaders understand these interactions and the impact of changes. They use systems thinking to identify root causes and develop holistic solutions, analyzing school-wide data to identify trends and considering the impact of decisions on all stakeholders. Systems thinking is essential for data-driven decision-making, enabling understanding of data interrelationships. Finally, effective leaders build strong relationships, communicate effectively, and manage conflict constructively, demonstrating empathy, self-awareness, and social skills. They create a positive climate, build trust, and resolve conflicts effectively. Emotional intelligence is crucial for leading diverse communities and building collaborative relationships.

### LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Developing the previously outlined 21st-century skills requires strategic, multifaceted leadership development. This section explores key strategies, linking them to competencies, discussing best practices, and acknowledging contextual influences. Formal training (university programs, district initiatives) provides foundational knowledge and skills, effectively addressing competencies like digital literacy

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through training on data management, online platforms, and instructional technologies. It also enhances data-driven decision-making through data analysis instruction and develops strategic thinking through leadership theories, planning models, and change management frameworks. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) emphasize high-quality preparation with theoretical foundations and practical experience. However, formal training is most effective with application and reflection.

Mentoring/coaching offers personalized support, effectively developing emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. Mentors provide feedback on communication, conflict resolution, and stakeholder relationship building. Coaching helps leaders develop self-awareness, identify strengths/weaknesses, and set professional goals. Effective mentoring involves structured processes with clear goals, regular meetings, and reflection, prioritizing mentor-mentee matching based on shared interests. Kram (1985) highlighted mentors' career (sponsorship, coaching) and psychosocial (role modeling, counseling) functions.

On-the-job experiences provide valuable application opportunities in real-world settings (school improvement, budget management, diverse community work, new program implementation). These experiences foster change management and innovation through experimentation, learning from mistakes, and adaptation. They also enhance collaboration/networking. Structured on-the-job experiences with reflection/feedback are most effective. Yukl (2010) suggests challenging assignments and experiential learning are crucial.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) offer collaborative spaces for educators to learn from each other, share best practices, and engage in continuous improvement. PLCs are effective for developing instructional leadership as teachers/leaders analyze data, develop assessments, and implement evidence-based strategies. They also foster collaboration/networking. Key PLC elements include focus on student learning, collaborative culture, and continuous improvement. DuFour et al. (2010) emphasized PLCs' power in improving school effectiveness through collective inquiry. Self-directed learning is increasingly important. With online resources, journals, and networking, leaders can own their learning. This is effective for developing digital literacy as leaders explore technologies, use online courses, and connect with other educators. Self-directed learning requires self-discipline, motivation, and source identification skills. Knowles (1975) emphasized adult learners' self-direction and learning responsibility.

Strategy effectiveness varies by context. Mentoring may be more effective in smaller schools. Formal training may be more beneficial where standardization or new policies are needed. Cultural context influences mentoring relationships (hierarchical or peer-based). Understanding these contextual factors is essential for effective leadership development.

### Aligning Qualification Standards

Aligning qualification standards with the evolving role of the principal and necessary 21st-century competencies is crucial for adequately preparing school leaders. This section examines developing specific qualification standards, the importance of valid and reliable assessment, the need for an integrated assessment approach, and the role of existing assessments like the NQESH. Developing specific qualification standards requires defining clear criteria demonstrating proficiency in each competency. For example, digital literacy could be demonstrated by using data analytics to inform instruction, effectively using learning management systems for online learning and communication, and guiding teachers in technology integration through professional development. Similarly, leading diverse communities could be demonstrated by developing and implementing culturally responsive policies, engaging diverse families and community members, and demonstrating commitment to equity and access. These criteria should be observable, measurable, and aligned with each competency's skills and knowledge. Stiggins (2005) emphasizes that clear learning targets and well-defined criteria are essential for effective assessment.

Ensuring assessment validity (measuring what is intended) and reliability (consistent results) is paramount. Validity requires alignment with qualification standards and underlying competencies. For example, a standard requiring data-informed instructional decisions should be assessed by tasks requiring data analysis and instructional plan development. Reliability requires consistent assessment administration and scoring, achieved through clear rubrics, standardized procedures, and trained assessors. Messick (1989) argues for a unified view of validity, considering evidence for interpretation and value implications.

An integrated assessment approach, using combined methods, is essential for a comprehensive view of candidate abilities. Relying solely on one method, like standardized tests, is limiting. A comprehensive approach might combine standardized tests (like the NQESH), performance-based assessments, portfolios, interviews, and observations. Standardized tests assess foundational knowledge, while performance-based assessments evaluate real-world application. Portfolios showcase growth, interviews provide insights into leadership philosophy and interpersonal skills, and observations provide direct evidence of leadership practices. Wiggins (1998) suggests assessments should be authentic and engaging, requiring application in meaningful contexts.

Considering the NQESH, it's important to evaluate its assessment of identified 21st-century competencies. While it may assess some foundational administrative knowledge, it may not fully capture complex competencies like leading diverse communities, fostering innovation, or integrating technology. For instance, it may not sufficiently assess using

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data analytics for instructional improvement or developing culturally responsive policies. Improving the NQESH or similar assessments requires incorporating a wider range of methods that directly measure these competencies. This might involve performance-based tasks, portfolios, or simulations requiring application in realistic scenarios. This aligns with the call for more authentic, performance-based assessments in leadership preparation and licensure (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010).

### Evolving Role of the Principal

The school principal's role has dramatically transformed from primarily administrative to a multifaceted one demanding instructional leadership, community engagement, and management of increasingly complex school environments. Understanding this historical shift provides context for current leadership challenges and opportunities and informs aligning qualification standards with 21st-century competencies. Historically, the principal focused on managerial tasks: maintaining order, managing budgets, and ensuring policy adherence. This "principal as manager" era emphasized efficiency and compliance. However, shifting societal expectations toward greater accountability for student outcomes and educational equity spurred the principal's role to evolve, emphasizing instructional leadership, with principals deeply involved in curriculum, teacher supervision, and effective instructional practices. This era highlighted the principal's role in improving teaching and learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

The 21st century further complicated the principalship. Increased accountability (e.g., standardized testing, performance ratings) pressures principals to demonstrate student achievement. This has fueled the need for data-driven decision-making, requiring principals to analyze data, identify trends, and use evidence for instructional and organizational improvements. Furthermore, increasingly complex school environments reflect diverse student needs and growing external stakeholder influence. Principals must navigate complex social dynamics, engage diverse communities, and build partnerships with parents, community organizations, and other agencies, requiring strong skills in leading diverse and inclusive communities. These changing demands have influenced necessary leadership styles. Accountability necessitates a data-driven, instructional leadership approach. Principals must analyze student data to identify improvement areas, provide targeted professional development, and monitor instructional strategies, aligning with Robinson et al.'s (2008) research emphasizing instructional leadership's impact on student outcomes. The increasing complexity of school environments and stakeholder engagement also call for collaborative and distributed leadership. Principals cannot work effectively alone; they must build strong leadership teams, empower staff, and foster shared responsibility. Spillane's (2006) work

on distributed leadership highlights distributing leadership responsibilities across the school.

Framing challenges and opportunities as interconnected is crucial for 21st-century leadership. Increased accountability, a challenge with pressure to meet targets, also offers opportunities to demonstrate leadership's impact on student outcomes. Using data to track progress and celebrate successes builds stakeholder trust and demonstrates leadership value. Similarly, increasing student diversity, a challenge requiring addressing diverse needs, also offers opportunities to create richer, more inclusive learning environments promoting intercultural understanding. Fullan (2016) argues that effective leaders embrace complexity and see challenges as opportunities for growth and innovation. In short, the evolving principal's role requires leadership embracing data-driven decision-making, instructional expertise, collaboration, and adaptability. Recognizing the interplay between challenges and opportunities is essential for navigating 21st-century educational complexities.

### CONCLUSION

This study addressed a critical gap in literature regarding preparing school leaders for the complexities of 21st-century education, particularly within the Philippine context. Existing approaches often lack a cohesive framework aligning the principal's evolving role with necessary skills, qualification standards, and development programs. This paper proposed a conceptual framework emphasizing this crucial alignment.

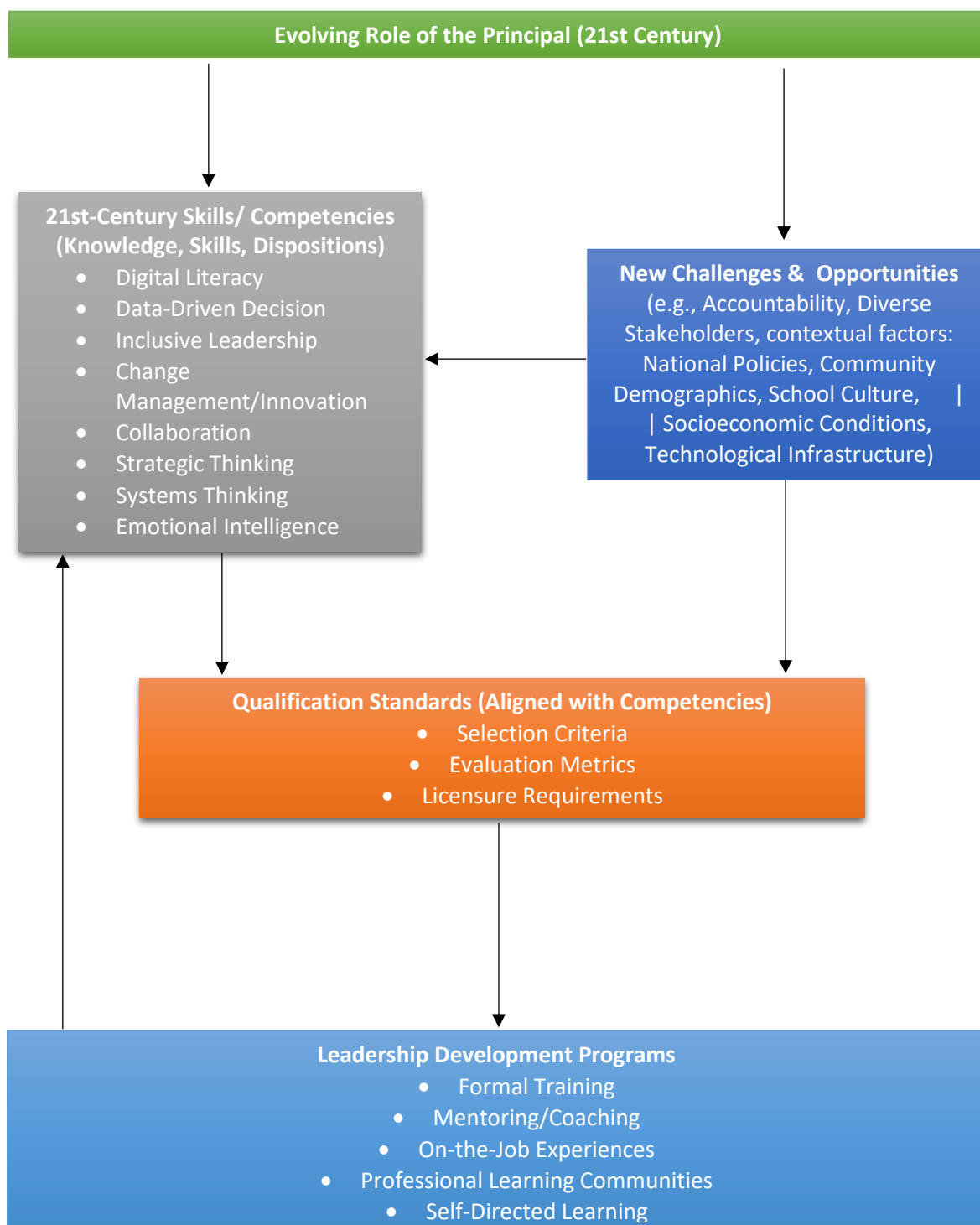
This paper's central contribution is a framework visually representing the interconnectedness of key elements for preparing effective 21st-century school leaders. This framework emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the principal's evolving role, the acquisition of key 21st-century skills and competencies, the alignment of qualification standards, and the crucial role of leadership development programs. This framework offers a comprehensive, practical approach for policymakers, leadership programs, and school districts in recruiting, developing, and supporting effective school leaders.

The framework (Figure 1 below) centers on the dynamic interplay between the principal's evolving role and acquiring key competencies. This evolving role, shaped by contextual factors (national policies, community demographics, school culture, socioeconomic conditions, and technological infrastructure), creates unique challenges and opportunities. These factors directly influence the demands on principals, necessitating specific competencies like digital literacy, data-driven decision-making, and leading diverse communities—essential tools for navigating modern school leadership. The framework posits that these competencies must inform robust qualification standards (selection criteria, evaluation metrics, licensure requirements), ensuring selected leaders possess necessary attributes. Furthermore, the framework highlights leadership development programs (formal training,

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mentoring, coaching, professional learning communities) as crucial for cultivating these competencies in aspiring and current principals, bridging the gap between existing skills and 21st-century demands. The schematic's arrows underscore the importance of this coherent, aligned approach, ensuring leaders are equipped to address 21st-century challenges and promote student success. This framework directly addresses the gaps identified in the introduction by

providing a more coherent and aligned approach to preparing 21st-century school leaders. This framework has implications for policymakers, leadership preparation programs, and school districts in their efforts to recruit, develop, and support effective school leaders. Future research could empirically test this framework's validity in different contexts and explore the effectiveness of interventions designed to develop the identified competencies.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Preparing 21st-Century School Leaders: Aligning Qualification Standards with the Evolving Role of the Principal.**

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### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the preceding discussions and framework, the following recommendations are offered for policy and NEAP program levels:

#### A. Policy Recommendations

1. DepEd should comprehensively review and revise principal qualification standards, including the NQESH, to ensure alignment with identified 21st-century skills and competencies (digital literacy, data-driven decision-making, leading diverse communities, change management, strategic thinking, systems thinking, emotional intelligence). This review should involve diverse stakeholders.
2. Policies should support contextualized leadership development programs tailored to specific school and community contexts, recognizing the influence of socioeconomic conditions, demographics, and school culture. This may involve regional or local adaptations of national programs.
3. Policies should prioritize investment in technology infrastructure and ongoing professional development for principals and teachers, focusing on providing reliable internet, appropriate hardware/software, and high-quality training on pedagogical technology use.
4. Accountability systems, while maintaining focus on student outcomes, should adopt a more holistic school evaluation considering factors beyond test scores, such as school climate, community engagement, and inclusive practices. This includes developing clear metrics for evaluating school leaders aligned with 21st-century competencies.

#### B. NEAP Program Recommendations

1. Develop competency-based training modules targeting 21st-century skills, incorporating diverse learning strategies (workshops, case studies, simulations, online resources) and practical application through projects/internships.
2. Strengthen mentoring/coaching programs by training mentors/coaches, establishing clear guidelines and support, and prioritizing mentor-mentee matching based on development needs.
3. Promote professional learning communities (PLCs) by providing resources/support to schools/districts and offering professional development on PLC facilitation/collaboration.
4. Incorporate more performance-based assessments (e.g., school improvement plans, data analysis, leading professional development) aligned with 21st-century competencies to demonstrate practical skills.
5. Explicitly address contextual factors' influence on leadership using diverse case studies/simulations

and providing reflection opportunities. Offer specialized training for leaders in diverse or socioeconomically challenged schools.

6. Establish a continuous improvement cycle, regularly evaluating program effectiveness and adjusting based on feedback, research, and evolving needs, including regular reviews of program alignment with revised qualification standards and principalship demands.

These recommendations aim to ensure school leaders are effectively prepared for 21st-century challenges and promote student success throughout the Philippines.

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