Education administrators' professional standards: The Malaysian perspective

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Schools' leadership are central to the task of building schools' environment and culture that promote learning for all students. Second only to the influences of classroom instruction, school leadership has been shown to have very strong influence on student learning. In Malaysia, where the education system is undergoing reforms, school principals have been given new deals in terms of tasks and responsibilities. They are expected to be educational visionaries, curriculum and instructional leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations and communication experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, as well as guardians of various legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. The competencies they require in order to perform these new roles professionally have been spelled out in great detail in the Malaysian School Principals' Competency Standards 2006 (MSCPS). The MSCPS describes the knowledge, the professional values and commitment, and the actions or performance(s) that the principals have to know, to commit, and to do in order to achieve the core purpose of leading the schools. The discussion will focus mainly on how the standards have been developed and tested.

Key words: School leadership; school principal; Malaysian School Principals' Competency Standards 2006; standards

Introduction

In the current setting, most people will agree that there should be 'no excuses' for schools with low test scores or a high student drop-out rate. The 'no excuses' reformers maintain that all children can attain academic proficiency without regard to poverty, disability, or other conditions, and that someone must be held accountable if they do not. That someone is invariably, their teachers (Ravitch, 2012). However, other education reformers argue that it is not only the teachers who should be blamed, but school leaders and local education administrators should also be held accountable, as they are the decision-makers of crucial issues such as funding, class size, teaching time tables, teachers' workload and resource allocation for the schools (Ravitch, 2012).

In Malaysia, school leaders are called head teachers and principals (head teacher is for primary school; principal is for secondary school). This also includes their deputies or assistants. In essence, they are the 'head' of the school. However, their directives come

from education administrators, who are based in the local Education Department. Although local education administrators are not directly involved in the teaching and learning process, however according to Ravitch (2012) they can also be held accountable for the performance of the schools.

The head teachers/principals are in many ways the most important and influential individuals in any school. Sergiovanni (1995) adds:

> It is his/her leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for learning, the level of professionalism, and the morale of teachers and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become - if a school is vibrant, innovative, child-centered place; if it has a reputation for excellence in teaching; if students are performing to the best of their ability - one can almost always point to the principal's leadership as the key to success (p.83).

The issue of who is actually responsible for students' performance and achievement in school always makes for interesting and heated debate. Much research has been conducted on the relationship between students' learning and performance to the head teacher/principal's leadership styles, skills, personality, practice, knowledge about instruction, interest in ICT, professional development and training, etc. Some have found good correlation, while others weak ones. What ever the findings are, head teachers/principals are always considered the person who has the power and authority to make the difference in the schools that would affect students' learning and achievement. For this reason, the head teachers/principals need to have good standards of practice or benchmarks that would ensure the quality and effectiveness of their roles and functions, within and outside the schools. In Malaysia, the roles and functions of the head teachers/principals have changed quite drastically over the last 10 years following the continuous reforms of the education system.

The Role of Head Teachers/Principals in Malaysia

In general, school principals play a vital and multifaceted role in setting the direction for schools (from now on, I will use the term 'school principals' to mean both, head teachers and principals). Due to public demands for schools to be more effective and to focus on students' learning, the roles of school leaders have since changed. Evidence suggests that second only to the influences of classroom instruction, school leadership strongly affects student learning (Leithwood, et al., 2004). Principals' leadership are central to the task of building schools' environment and culture that promote powerful learning for all students (Robinson & Timperly, 2007; Portin, et al., 2009; Seashore-Louis, et al., (2010); Wallace's Report '09 (2010). According to the UNESCO 2009 Report (UNESCO, 2009), the roles of school principals have changed to suit the needs of the job market and economic demands. Principals are no longer to be just an administrator in schools and work within the confines of their office and the school fence. Now they have to play the roles of a transformational or change leader, an instructional leader, an entrepreneur, a community facilitator, a resource and finance manager, as well as being the school's external relations manager. These are the new roles and functions of principals of the 21st century. However, these ideas are not new. Way back in the 90s, Ubben and Hughes have already indicated that schools can make a difference to the level of students' performance. They said "how good or poor the school performance is, it all depends on the person who leads the school" (Ubben & Hughes, 1997 in Quah Cheng Sim, 2011).

Traditionally, most Malaysian principals are inundated with administrative duties – causing them to have little time to focus on innovation in the school. A local study by the Malaysian National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP, 1998, in Quah Cheng Sim, 2011) found the majority of principals devoted their full time only on matters pertaining to administration and management, and they were not directly involved in teaching. These findings are in line with the Malaysian School Inspectorate Report 1993 (Laporan Jemaah Nazir Sekolah, KPM, 2009 in Quah Cheng Sim, 2011), which stated that many principals do not teach, check teachers' teaching records, or supervise the teachers in the classroom – as they are required to do, according to the Malaysian Administrative Circular 3/67, Revised 1982. One of the reasons given is that the principals lack sufficient knowledge of curriculum and instruction. Other reasons given is that they were not competent enough and hence unable to change their roles from that of a doer or a follower into the roles of a leader and a forward-thinking planner.

In the past, Malaysian principals were usually chosen from the best and most hardworking senior teachers. Although some of them were excellent teachers, but more often than not, they do not have the leadership and entrepreneuralship skills to lead the schools. Many were reported to have low levels of confidence, especially in dealing with the demands from parents and society (Rusmini Ku Ahmad, 2004).

The Changing Expectations and the New Roles of School Principals in Malaysia

In September 2010, Malaysian government launched a Government Tranformation Programme (GTP), which aims to increase the socio-economic growth of Malaysia towards making the country a developed and high-income nation. Six National Key Results Areas (NKRAs) were identified, with one of them focusing on "Improving Students Outcomes". This specific NKRA is concerned with increasing access to, and quality of, basic education for all. It also includes raising standards of the overall education system through creation of High Performing Schools (the crème de la crème of schools), New Deal for Headteachers and Principals (Bai'ah), and a Program for School Improvement (SIP) (Figure 1).

This New Deal initiative aims to change the roles of principals to motivate them to increase students' outcomes and the school's performance. Under the New Deal initiative, schools are categorized into 7 Bands, with Band 1 for the best performing schools, while Band 7 is the lowest performing schools. The top 2% of high achieving head teachers and principals (if their schools achieve Band 1) are to be given a cash reward of RM7,500 (approximately US$2,550) each. The teachers in those schools are also to be rewarded: the top 5% of the teachers in the school will receive RM1,800 (US$650), while the rest receives RM900 (US$300) each. The supporting staff each receives RM500 (US$180).

Based on this New Deal, in 2010, 586 head teachers and principals in high performing schools (HPS) received the stipulated rewards. The following year in 2011, the number of HPS increased, with at least 20 more schools added to the list.

There is also the promise of non-financial rewards to be given to principals who exceed the target of students achievement and overall school performance for three consecutive years. In such cases, the principals will receive an offer for attachment with reputable institutions locally and abroad, or they may receive an accelerated promotion to a higher post with a much higher salary scale. As it is now, after two years of implementation, we can see that the New Deal initiative is producing results. The principals and their teachers, together with the students, parents and local

community/agencies are working very hard to ensure their schools qualify for HPS status, even achieving the highest ranking of Band 1 or 2.
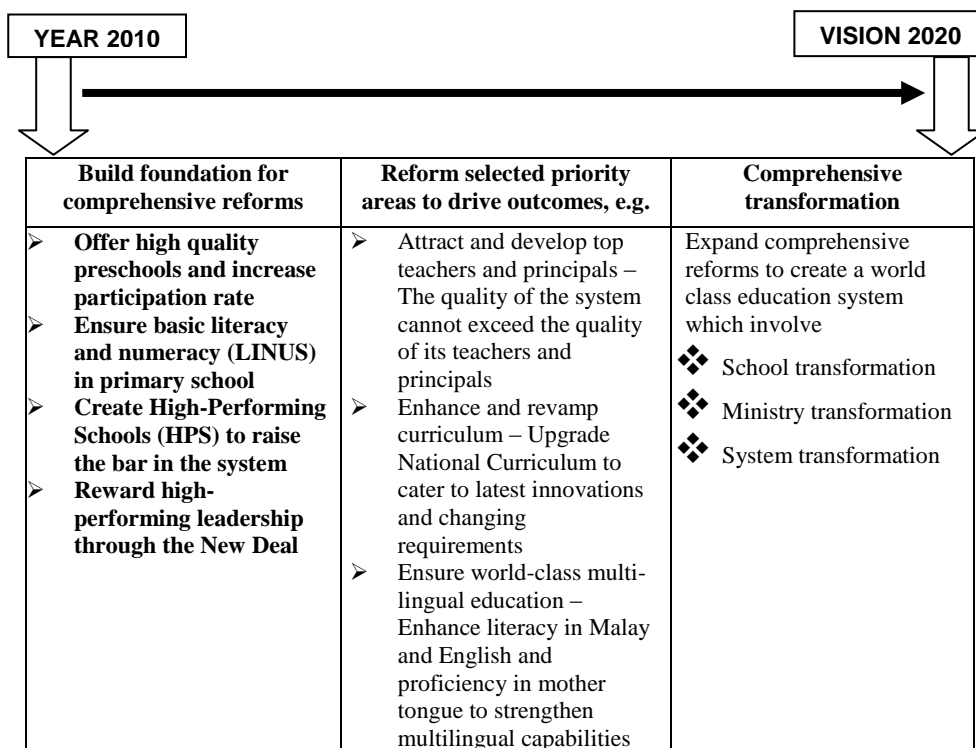
YEAR 2010		VISION 2020

Build foundation for comprehensive reforms	**Reform selected priority areas to drive outcomes, e.g.**	**Comprehensive transformation**
➢ **Offer high quality preschools and increase participation rate** ➢ **Ensure basic literacy and numeracy (LINUS) in primary school** ➢ **Create High-Performing Schools (HPS) to raise the bar in the system** ➢ **Reward high-performing leadership through the New Deal**	➢ Attract and develop top teachers and principals – The quality of the system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and principals ➢ Enhance and revamp curriculum – Upgrade National Curriculum to cater to latest innovations and changing requirements ➢ Ensure world-class multi-lingual education – Enhance literacy in Malay and English and proficiency in mother tongue to strengthen multilingual capabilities	Expand comprehensive reforms to create a world class education system which involve ❖ School transformation ❖ Ministry transformation ❖ System transformation

Figure 1. The Foundation for comprehensive education reform in Malaysia and the National Key Result Areas for Education (source: The Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2010)

These are the new expectations for the head teachers and principals in Malaysia. They find that if they succeed, they will be rewarded with big bunches of 'carrots'. And if not, then a nasty 'stick' will remind them not to remain mediocre.

So far, the performance-based assessment of the schools have been carried out fairly and with transparency. It is conducted by the School Inspectorates (NAZIR in the Malay language) and the Malaysian Quality Assurance Board (MQAB), based on elements such as academic performance, students holistic development and co-curriculum. These are the criteria deemed to have an impact on student outcomes.

The results of the assessment are linked to the ranking of the schools. Principals in low performing schools (Band 6 and 7) are given special assistance and a School Improvement Toolkit (SIT), to help identify areas of weaknesses in their schools. They also are encouraged to seek the necessary support from the Ministry of Education, parents, teachers and the community at large, to address these issues quickly.

Should the schools continue to underperform for 2 to 3 years consecutively, they will be put under a Remedial Program. The head teachers and principals of these schools

might also be transferred out, or given other functions, or they might be placed in the 'pool', if their schools continue to underperform.

It is correct to say that the school principal's post is now considered as one of the toughest posts within the Malaysian civil service. Their roles now have increased exponentially to include a staggering array of professional tasks and competencies. Principals are expected to be educational visionaries, curriculum and instructional leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations and communication experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, as well as guardians of various legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. In addition, principals are expected to serve the often conflicting needs and interests of many stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, district education officials, unions, and state and federal agencies. For them to functions effectively, therefore they must have very special attributes and competencies, as well as the right personality.

Malaysia Head Teachers and Principals' Leadership Competencies

Leadership competencies more or less describe the characteristics, ability and skills of a person to lead his/her organization to achieve effective performance or results. Leithwood, et al., (2004) outlined three sets of core school leadership competencies. They are: (i) developing people, i.e. enabling teachers and other staff to do their best to improve students' learning; (ii) setting directions, i.e. developing school's vision; and (iii) redesigning the school culture to achieve the goals. These are very broad sets of competencies for school principals.

In Malaysia's case, research by a team of professionals from the Aminuddin Baki National Institute of Educational Leadership and Management, Ministry of Education (2005) has identified 26 competencies required by principals:

1.   Vision Building
2.   Quality Focus
3.   Strategic Thinking
4.   Proactive
5.   Achievement Orientation
6.   Instructional Development
7.   Knowledge Sharing
8.   Curriculum Focus
9.   Supervision
10.   Problem Solving
11.   Decision Making
12.   Managing Change
13.   School Improvement
14.   Creativity & Innovation
15.   Financial Management
16.   Physical & Assets
17.   ICT Management
18.   Performance Management
19.   Capacity Building
20.   Communication
21.   External Relations

22. Team Work
23. Self Awareness
24. Social Awareness
25. Self Management
26. Social Management

Using these competencies, a framework for the Professional Competencies Standards for Head Teachers and Principals was developed. The competencies were regrouped into nine major domains or standards. The domains are:

1: Organizational management and leadership
2: Curriculum and instructional leadership
3: Co-curricular programs leadership
4: Management of students' development, learning and wellbeing
5: Financial and asset management
6: Administrative leadership
7: Management of learning environment and physical facilities
8: Personnel and professional development
9: External relations and partnership development

Within each domain, the standards describe what a principal needs to know (knowledge of), be committed to (professional values and commitment), and be able to do (actions or performance), in order to achieve the core purpose of leading the school. The MSPCS became mandatory in January 2007. The details of the MSPCS is given in Appendix 1. (The original print is in the Malaysian Language and this is a translated version of the standards).

Implications and Effect of MSPCS – Evidence from Research

The implementation of MSPCS was monitored very closely by the Ministry of Education through the School Inspectorate and the Local Education Officials. So far, research conducted by the Aminuddin Baki National Institute of Educational Leadership and Management, Ministry of Education (Rosnarizah et. Al., 2008) has revealed that, as up to 2008, Malaysian principals had successfully implemented seven of the nine standards. The highest proficiencies was observed for the domain of curriclum and instructional leadership. In another research, Quah Cheng Sim (2011) confirmed the findings that the Malaysian school principals are very good at and have successfully played their roles as curriculum and instructional leaders. The findings showed very strong correlation exist between the level of competencies of the principals and the level of students' academic achievement. Subsequently, a few other studies confirmed the same results (Bity Salwana Alias, et al., 2010; Sharma, 2011). These findings indicate that the MSPCS is slowly making its impact on shaping the leadership roles of Malaysian school head teachers and principals. The benchmarks set was high and so is the expectations. However more research is needed to properly assess the effects and implications of the standards on improving students outcomes in the long term.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of school principals in Malaysia is an ever-changing one. It has to evolve from being merely an administrative, bureaucratic position, to one that is visionary, fluid and interactive. Now, more than ever, does the role principals play in school matter. With some incentives, such as the 'New Deals' under the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) initiative, the head teachers, principals and teachers as well as students and their parents are more motivated now to work and strive harder for the success of their schools. They are especially very proud if their schools are listed as High Performing Schools (HPS) which means they are ranked top among the schools in the state. With MSPCS, the quality of management practice by the head teachers and principals has improved tremendously. Preliminary evidences collected showed that the standards has effectively guided head teachers and principals to lead with excellence.

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Appendix 1.   Malaysian school principals' competency standards 2006 (Standard 1-9)

STANDARD 1: ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP		
1.1 Knowledge of	**1.2 Professional values and commitments**	**1.3 Performance and best practices**
• National education policy and legislatures; global trends in education;	• Creative, innovative and very highly motivated to lead the school;	• Translates and apply knowledge about education policies, Acts, and local and global education trends into practice;
• Theories and principles of organizational behavior and management; and roles of transformative leadership;	• Committed toward creating the culture of life long learning for self and school;	• Demonstrates leadership through engaging with staff and sharing knowledge about effective teaching and learning in the context of the school curriculum;
• Tthe principles of effective leadership;	• Believes in the principle of equity, accountability, and integrity in leading the school;	• Develops vision and mission of the school;
• Strategic management;	• Dare in taking risk;	• Ensures the strategic planning takes account of the diversity, values, experience and context of the school and the community at large;
• The importance of technology and ICT to support teaching and learning;	• Committed to carry out all the responsibilities entrusted;	• Uses research findings and latest development in ICT to manage the school;
• Professional duties of teachers and personnel, and their professional development;	• Believes that both school and classroom climates promote effective learning and teaching for all;	• Nurture Life Long Learning culture in the school;
• Organizational change management;	• Aware that learning is placed at the center of any initiative for change.	• Implements change to suit future needs and challenges;
• Principles and techniques of organizational evaluation and appraisal and performance improvement.		• Conducts evaluation and continuous improvement of the school using the Malaysian Education Quality Standards instruments.

STANDARD 2: CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP		
2.1 Knowledge of	**2.2 Professional values and commitments**	**2.3 Performance and best practices**
• Policies, procedures and legislature related to curriculum and instruction;	• Hold to the principle that every students can learn and have the rights to receive high quality instruction; and appreciate the diverse needs of students;	• Develops curriculum and instruction policies for own school based on the national curriculum and knowledge about latest development in education;
• Strategies on curriculum improvement;	• Believes that students should be engaged in their learning;	• Ensures that teaching and learning is conducted according to the policies and guidelines;
• Effective instruction;	• Values students learning time;	• Implements relevant instructional strategies to enhance students performance;
• Best practices in teaching and learning;	• Believes that all children can learn and has high expectations for their achievement;	• Ensures that the design and review of school programs are based on evidence from research;
• Effective use of resources for teaching and learning;	• Committed to improve students' academic performance;	• Ensures that learning in the main trust of the school activities;
• Cognitive, affective and psychomotor development;	• Believes that setting intellectually demanding standards is critical to improving the learning of all students;	• achievement;Places high expectation and target on school
• Best practices in educational assessment and evaluation to improve program and students performance.	• Values cultural diversity within the school.	• Conducts continuous evaluation of the teaching and learning process, monitor and analyze teaching and learning performance, and provide feedback to teachers for their continuous improvement.

STANDARD 3: CO-CURRICULAR PROGRAM LEADERSHIP		
3.1 Knowledge of	**3.2 Professional values and commitments**	**3.3 Performance and best practices**
• Policies, procedures and latest development related to co-curricular programs;	• Believes that every student should be given an opportunity to participate in co-curricular programs;	• Develops school policies for co-curricular program
• Strategies to improve performance in co-curricular programs;	• Demostrates a high level of commitment toward co-curricular programs;	• Develops and implement strategic plans to improve students performance in co-curricular programs;
• Principle and best practices in managing co-curricular programs and activities;	• Able to facing challenges and solve problems related to co-curricular programs;	• Ensures that management of co-curricular programs are according to the rules and regulations;
• Research findings and technological development to support approches in co-curricular programs;	• Believes that co-curricular activities can develop students' potentials;	• Develops school character through co-curricula programs;
• Cognitive, affective and psychomotor development through co-curricular programs;	• Committed to using assessment to identify student strengths and promote student growth rather than to deny students access to learning opportunities.	• Develops students' cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills through co-curricular programs;
• Evaluation principle and techniques to improving co-curricular programs and students performance.		• Conducts program evaluation for continuous improvement.

STANDARD 4: MANAGEMENT OF STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT, LEARNING AND WELLBEING		
4.1 Knowledge of	**4.2 Professional values and commitments**	**4.3 Performance and best practices**
• Policy, legislation, and procedures on students affairs and wellbeing;	• Believes that all students can attain high levels of achievement and committed to helping them fulfil their educational potential;	• Develops school policies on students development and well-being;
• Principles of students holistic development;	• Concerns about students' welfare & wellbeing, safety, confort, harmony and health;	• Plans and structure activities that will motivate the students to advance their learning and develop their soft skills;
• Framework that support the development and wellbeing of students of different age and ability groups;	• Respects the unique qualities of each learner, and is committed to helping each of them develop self-confidence and competence;	• Establishes fair, respectful, trusting, supportive and constructive relationships with students and their parents across cultural boundary;
• Strategies to improve students academic performance;	• Sensitives toward students' future career needs;	• Monitors students' progress in order to provide focused support and feedback;
• Effective communication skills;	• Value relationships with students and parents.	• Communicates effectively with students and parents;
• Principles and technique of evaluating and improving students performance in education.	• Demonstrates commitment to monitor students' progress.	• Supports the evaluation of students' progress using various assessment techniques.

STANDARD 5: FINANCIAL AND ASSET MANAGEMENT		
5.1 Knowledge of	**5.2 Professional values and commitments**	**5.3 Performance and best practices**
• Financial procedures and guidelines set by the the Treasury Office, Finance Department;	• Value integrity, accountability, transparency, accuracy, and efficiency in financial and asset management.	• Comply with Treasury's instructions;
• Best practices in financial management;	• Value public money and properties;	• Ensure effective financial management;
• Strategies to improve financial management performance;	• Creative and innovative in solving problems;	• Implement strategies to improve financial management performance;
• Integrity and accountability in financial and asset management;	• Embrace the culture of maintanance;	• Conduct financial management with integrity and accountability;
• Latest technological in financial and asset management;		• Using latest technology to increase efficiency of financial management;
• Efficient approach to asset, stock and inventories keeping;		• Ensure that school assets, stocks and inventories are continuously updated;
• Best practices in financial monitoring system.		• Frequently monitor financial records and statements.

STANDARD 6: ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP		
6.1 Knowledge of	**6.2 Professional values and commitments**	**6.3 Performance and best practices**
• General Order (government procesures) for public servants;	• Uphold integrity, fairness, accountability, diligence and perseverence in work;	• Operate within the government policy and guidelines in accordance with legislative requirements;
• Best practices in office management and administration;	• Value environment to support staff professional development;	• Exhibit leadership that results in effective day-to-day operation of the school;
• Strategies to improve quality of services;	• Believe in cooperative learning culture, share and distributed leadership;	• Ensure staff members engage in professional learning to establish and sustain effective learning culture in the school;
• Type of technology to enhance office efficiency;	• Believe that technology will enable administrative work to be done more efficiently, with precision, and systematically;	• Ensures the use of technology-based integrated management systems to successfully facilitate school operations;
• Staff appraisal and professional development.	• Appreciate and nurtures leadership potential of others in the school.	• Effectively manage personnel, with a focus to nurturing their leadership potential;
		• Promotes and enforces environmentally safe and healthy practices in the school.

STANDARD 7: MANAGEMENT OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND PHYSICAL FACILITIES		
7.1 Knowledge of	**7.2 Professional values and commitments**	**7.3 Performance and best practices**
• Guidelines on efficient management of physical facilities and learning environment;	• Value and appreciate accountability, security, cleanliness, neat and tidy;	• Manage the school resources effectively and efficiently to improve the standards of achievement;
• Organisation of learning environment for maximum learning	• Value learning environment that stimulate inquiry and thinking;	• Use effective strategies to promote students' interest in sports, physical activities, and co-curricular activities;
• Concept of professional learning culture;	• Value and respect ideas, discussions, dialogues, and intellectual activities in school;	• Establish and maintain effective/conducive learning environments where learners feel safe, secure and confident;
• New technologies to support teaching and learning, and assessment;	• Aware of emerging technologies and their potential uses in education.	• Use ICT to advance learning;
		• Challenge instances of prejudice, stereotyping, bullying and harassment in line with the school policies and procedures.

STANDARD 8: PERSONNEL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT		
8.1 Knowledge of	**8.2 Professional values and commitments**	**8.3 Performance and best practices**
• Policy and procedures of Human Resource Development;	• Positive and open minded about and believe that every staff is an asset to the school;	• Develop policy and procedures for CPD;
• Life long learning concept, model and theories;	• Priority for continuous learning	• Implement CPD through life long learning approach;
• Capacity building through Continuous Professional Development (CPD);	• Dynamic and committed to promote CPD in the organization;	• Allow teachers and staff to attend courses for their personal and professional development;
• Principles and techniques of staff assessment and performance appraisal;	• Believe strongly that shared leadership works better for the organization;	• Implement strategies for improving staff performance;
• Value-based leadership	• Appreciate staff contributions;	• Practice distributed and collaborative leadership
• The concept of distributed leadership	• Value high quality, balanced and stress free work culture;	• Practice team work;
	• Possesses high aesthetic value.	• Give recognition to staff for their individual and group contributions;
		• Conduct evaluation for continuous improvement of HRD programs.
		• Assess staff performance regularly and fairly.

STANDARD 9: EXTERNAL RELATION AND PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT		
9.1 Knowledge of	**9.2 Professional values and commitments**	**9.3 Performance and best practices**
• Education policy – global and local nerworking and communication;	• Believe that the world is open and boarderless and that school should communicate and built networking with the rest of the world;	• Build external relation policy for school and set goals for external collaborations and partnerships;
• Local tradition and cross cultural community	• Believe that interpersonal skill can help improve school through networking;	• Use resources from outside to improve school;
• Building smart partnerships	• Optimise the external resources to support learning;	• Actively fostering relationships with other schools and participate in appropriate school networks;
• Dynamics of collaboration and community relation	• Believe that parents and community can play very important roles to improve school;	• Encourage parents to become meaningfully involved in the school and in their own children's learning;
• Interdependance and collaboration between home (parents and families) and the school;	• Open minded and willing to listen and accept positive feedback from the community;	• Interdependance and collaboration between home (parents and families) and the school;
• Strategy for building community support for school.	• Value and appreciate the help given by others and the community;	• Establish collaborations with other schools;
• Understanding about CSR and stakeholders' involvement in school improvement.	• Establish positive and effective means of communication.	• Understanding about CSR and stakeholders' involvement in school improvement.