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# Competency Mapping: A Process Approach to Improving and Sustaining Quality in Afghanistan's Primary Education System

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# **Competency Mapping: A Process Approach to Improving and Sustaining Quality in Afghanistan's Primary Education System**

## **Introduction**

The Afghanistan Ministry of Education has launched a process for improving primary schools in Afghanistan. How to improve teaching and support high-quality instruction are two of the main elements in this process. A crucial element in sustaining improvement is to articulate and come to agreement regarding an analytic framework that describes the competencies required for effective teaching, instructional leadership, and school management.<sup>1</sup> This paper is an overview of a means to structure a process that both anchors and sustains an effective improvement implementation strategy. The process has the following six elements. These do not have to be sequential; it would be useful if some took place concurrently.

- Agreement upon an institutional strategy to use competency frameworks to provide both immediate and long-term practical support in strengthening the education system.
- Development of competency frameworks for school principals, head teachers, and teachers.
- Determination of the adequacy of the newly-developed competency frameworks, including the current status of teachers' and educational administrators' performance, and resolving how best to deploy them as tools to implement a national strategy for instructional improvement.
- Development of a training curriculum and training approach to orient teachers, school managers, and instructional leaders about how to effectively use the competency frameworks for instructional improvement.
- Establishment of a standards or credentialing board to assess the implications of the frameworks for credentialing instructional staff, and develop a policy consensus and operational strategy for instituting a process of teacher credentialing.
- Design of a national strategy for using the competency frameworks as a tool to guide the ongoing (in-service) skills development of teachers, instructional leaders, and school managers, and systematically assess their performance.

This paper also briefly discusses the concept of a competency framework and how the steps outlined above can contribute to strengthening system support for teachers and high-quality instruction. It is not a full implementation plan.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that good teaching and effective administration cover only one of four areas that are needed in order for quality teaching to take place. The other areas are 1) willingness and effort by the learners; 2) a network of families, communities, and peer culture that is supportive of the educational process; and 3) opportunities for teaching and learning to take place (security, sufficient facilities, time, and resources). The point of introducing this list is to highlight the fact that quality teaching can only take place when there is a cluster of conditions that are present. This needs to be kept in mind when thinking of implementation and strategic coordination.

## **Competency Mapping: Implications for Ministry of Education Strategy**

Competency mapping entails development of three-dimensional “competency frameworks” that provide detailed analytic descriptions of the competencies required for effective work in key occupations within the education service delivery system (teachers, principals, and other education system staff). Such competency frameworks provide a foundation for Ministry of Education guidance to provincial and district offices and local schools regarding standardized, systematic assessment of education staff performance. These frameworks also provide a map for developing pre-service and in-service training curriculum.

A competency framework recognizes that individual occupations within the educational service delivery system have specific competency requirements. But it also recognizes a common thread that links all of the roles within the education system—all education system jobs focus primarily on ensuring effective student learning. The competency frameworks we are developing (the framework for school management and instructional leadership is finished and the one for teachers will be completed in January 2007) go well beyond a broad “vision” or mission statement, or set of standard job descriptions. They explain in detail what effective education personnel—teachers, principals, or supervisors (and others)—do. This provides a map for rapidly and efficiently enhancing the supervision and professional development of teachers.

To move forward, the Ministry of Education would adopt an inventory of desired “core” competencies that are used to describe and set expectations for all occupations under its umbrella. Critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and interpersonal relationship skills are all examples of “core” competencies that most public and private institutions include in competency frameworks for their employees. These guide employees’ skills development.

Integrated and effective staff recruitment, in-service training, performance evaluation, and career advancement require a common structure that “locates” each of many interrelated education system roles within the overall education service delivery system. In addition to facilitating the recruitment process for education personnel, it facilitates the career development of teachers who want to advance into positions as headmasters, school principals, or support roles such as technical specialists or methodologists. It also helps instructional management and leadership personnel better understand how they can support high-quality instruction. It is not adequate to simply revise job descriptions for various positions within the educational system without articulating how they are related and how they differ. A competency framework facilitates cross-occupational skills development (multitasking) and provides multiple but clear pathways for career development and advancement across various occupational sectors.

### **Why a Competency Framework for Teachers and School Leaders?**

A lot has been written about requirements for effective teaching, as well as for school management and instructional leadership.<sup>2</sup> Although it is difficult to exactly define high-

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<sup>2</sup> The main difference between school leadership and leadership in other businesses is the importance of the work to be done and its dynamic nature—i.e., the work materials and outcomes relate to the complex challenges of children’s development and what this means for communities. This makes school management more complex. Mistakes cannot be thrown away or ‘written off’; checklists of rules and regulations help, but more is needed. Ongoing informal observation, interaction, discussion, and assessment pay off—not just formal reports

quality administration or teaching, there are several threads that run through all of the responsibilities. Recognizing these threads, describing them adequately, and providing indicators of effective performance in them can break down the jobs of school administration and teacher into what we call “competency areas.”

This provides guidance for both the novice and experienced manager or teacher by helping them understand what they do well, what they don’t yet do well, and how to improve. For the novice, it provides a road map toward becoming a qualified manager/teacher. For the qualified manager/teacher, it provides insights for improving their effectiveness. And for highly accomplished managers/teachers, it provides a means for achieving advanced certification, taking on new professional responsibilities, and understanding how they can help others.

With a detailed “map” of the competencies they either possess or require, school principals, headmasters, and teachers can identify exactly what they need to learn and not waste time in taking “general” courses that tell them things they already know. Also, a framework of professional practice paves the way toward credentialing school administrators and teachers, and helps ensure that professional standards are maintained. Finally, a framework demonstrates to the stakeholder and the general public that educators hold themselves to the highest standards.

It is not possible to simply say that a teacher, head teacher, principal, methodologist, supervisor, or district director is “excellent,” “good,” “fair,” or “not adequate” because that sort of “report card” implies that there is a single dimension for measuring how well a person is doing his or her job. The reason a framework is needed as the foundation for assessing performance is that all of us are stronger in some areas than others. In order to become increasingly effective, school principals, headmasters, and teachers (and students) must be able to reflect on the many different dimensions of their work, and what they are doing more or less well.

### **What is a Competency Framework?**

A competency framework can be regarded as model, blueprint, or map—a mental tool that provides a systematic conceptual foundation for thinking and talking precisely about the preparation, assessment, and professional development of school staff engaged in managing, leading, or teaching in primary education. Using such a tool provides a systematic approach to strengthening local school management and supporting quality teaching. It also provides a guide for teachers to focus their own teaching and for education system administrators to learn what sort of teaching support is needed by teachers.

Using this sort of framework as a guide for planning and implementing training is guaranteed to make a positive contribution toward a stronger education service delivery system. It makes staff training more efficient by targeting specific skills development needs. It makes staff interactions with their supervisors and those they supervise more transparent by providing a common understanding of the roles played by teachers, principals, or headmasters. It makes

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using standard forms. This paper, however, does not address educational leadership in general, but focuses instructional effectiveness and leadership in the primary schools, which make up 87% of Afghanistan’s student enrollment.

skills development and training more effective by engaging staff in their own capacity building.

A competency framework also provides a tool to determine the sorts of observations that provide a reliable assessment of a person's performance in different aspects of their job. This is an important reason why a well-designed competency framework provides better guidance than traditional measures of job performance. It analyzes different dimensions of performance and also provides a means to develop performance assessment tools.

### The Structure of a Competency Framework

Over the past decade, many different schematic frameworks have been developed for analyzing and describing the competencies required for different occupations. What is common to all of them is that each seeks to identify a) the underlying characteristics that contribute to professional excellence in an occupation, and b) the activity “domains” in which professionals typically use those skills.

Virtually all of these frameworks are matrices that reveal how individuals use their skills and knowledge to effectively meet the demands of a particular kind of profession. All of these frameworks can be used to a) assess individuals' performance in a particular occupation, b) guide individuals' skills development efforts, and c) develop training curricula.

In general, the frameworks relate competencies to the awareness, knowledge, attitudes, aspirations, skills, beliefs, and character traits that underlie an individual's ability to function in different areas of human social interactions. They focus not just on actual behavior, but also on the ability to draw upon these underlying resources to achieve desired results. The focus on behavior itself—as well as on the awareness, knowledge, attitudes, aspirations, skills, beliefs and character traits—is extremely important for professional development in all areas (for example, in medicine and business management, as well as in education). As in these other areas, reviewing the competencies needed for school administration or teaching requires the need to focus on both what the competencies (should) look like in action as well as on the results (that should be) achieved. It is for this reason that the framework for school managers, instructional leaders, and teachers should make reference to underlying *traits* as well as work *domains*; that is, to both what an individual brings to and does with the clusters of tasks for which he or she is responsible.

### Occupational Clusters

Contemporary occupational analysis streamlines organizational planning and analysis of workplace competencies by referring to “occupational clusters” or “job families.” This is because many kinds of jobs in a sector (e.g., in education) are related. The clusters of tasks in education commonly are divided into school management and leadership, teaching, and support. However, the focus of every task in a school is directly related to “professional” teaching and fostering effective student learning. Thus, to a large extent, the competencies for school principals and instructional leaders such as head teachers overlap those of teachers. The effectiveness of the school management team in providing and supporting effective educational leadership is singularly important for achieving high-performing schools. Teachers cannot do it alone; school managers must be instructional leaders who work productively with teachers, promote effective teaching, develop positive teaching and learning environments, encourage community support for education and the children within

it, and foster excellent student outcomes. (See BESST’s “Literature Review for School Management Competencies” for further discussion of this topic.)

### Dimensions of Competency

The framework we use for describing a profile of competencies links performance to the following professional performance factors or “dimensions” of competency.

*Skills*—Skills refer to peoples’ abilities to do the key things required to carry out their jobs effectively. For example, school principals, like politicians and marketing executives, must have excellent communication skills for talking with students and understanding what’s on their minds, for inspiring and supervising the teachers who work for them, and for reassuring parents and engaging them in their children’s education. Being skilled sometimes requires underlying aptitudes. However, aptitudes are generally thought of as being inborn, while skills are acquired (and can be lost sometimes if they are not practiced). Skills acquired in one context, or set of experiences, can (and must) be brought to bear in other contexts from time to time. It is for this reason, for example, that an educator who has excellent communication skills must be constantly engaged in developing that skill further—because he or she will face novel problems, and because even skilled communicators may find one kind of communication (e.g., writing memos) harder than another (e.g., counseling an employee).

*Knowledge*—Formal job descriptions tend to describe competencies in terms of knowledge—what a person must know to do their job well. However, as important as knowledge is (especially in jobs such as that of a medical doctor or a historian), it is not sufficient by itself. Knowledge is the foundation for effective job performance in particular jobs, but not a sufficient condition. School principals, for example, need to know the regulations and policy guidelines relevant to school administration, students’ and teachers’ rights and responsibilities, and child development. They have to build upon this knowledge to supervise their staff effectively.

*Behavior*—Formal job descriptions tend to define jobs in terms of “duties,” but actually almost all jobs are somewhat open-ended. This makes it hard to draw up a definitive list of things that need to be done to excel in any job. This is particularly true for supervisory and managerial jobs such as the job of a school principal. However, it is practical to analyze jobs and assess job performance in terms of what people actually do on the job—since sometimes individuals encounter difficulties in applying their skills and knowledge. For example, school principals may know about how parents’ support affects children’s school success. However, they must also be skillful in talking to parents. They must actually be able to do well in the difficult situation of a meeting with parents to resolve problems a child may be experiencing in school. Therefore, when describing behavior within a competency framework, we describe a cluster of “behaviors”—characteristic sorts of activities that school principals are expected to do well.

### **How a Competency Framework Helps the School Principal and the Teacher**

In our analysis, we have described four domains of competency for the school principal and others who help him or her manage the school, provide instructional leadership, and support teachers and students. We have also defined competencies for the teacher. Although these are structured in a parallel way and are similar, they are more focused on a teacher’s work in the

classroom. In each of these domains, the job holder has to exercise leadership and have a constructive ability to promote and influence desired outcomes. Each domain or general area of competency has a variety of sub-domains, and a set of indicators for use in observing if and how well the sub-domain is implemented.

In any domain, a person must know if he or she is achieving the expected standard (e.g., for teachers, fostering teaching that cultivates children’s learning and personal development). Thus indicators must be observable and measurable in order to be useful. As such, they can provide guidance as to whether a school principal or teacher is doing “enough” of the “right things” for the students in the school, their families, and their communities. Competency frameworks must describe what the “right things” are. When the competency framework is “translated” into standard procedures that enable teachers and school principals to reflect about their own performance, we are describing what “enough” means. In this way, the competency framework provides a “mirror” for teachers and principals to think and talk about how they are doing and plan ways to improve.

### Basic Questions About School Staff Performance

Is the school principal (or teacher) doing enough of the right things to lead to the outcomes he or she is expected to achieve? What are the actual outcomes from his or her work? How can he or she best contribute to effective teaching or student learning?

These are the basic questions used to observe and assess professional competency. Indicators used to determine what an education staff person is doing and how he or she is performing need to be defined (as discussed previously). However, the expectation for a *specific level of performance* also has to be defined and observed. For example, is it okay for a school manager to only pay a little attention to the school facility (so that 10% of the students and teachers experience accidents or illnesses) if they are devoting their attention productively to other things? Or, is there a basic level of attention to the school facility that’s required? The basic level for a performance standard is, in our vocabulary, a *benchmark*. Setting benchmarks inevitably involves a good deal of negotiation, because it is essential that they are fair and attainable (not necessarily immediately, but in a reasonable period of time). Yet, at the same time, they must reflect high expectations rather than expectations that condone mediocrity, and a commitment to providing Afghanistan’s children the best possible education.

The setting of specific, explicit benchmarks quantifies expectations for performance. Consequently, this task is often thought to be purely a policy matter for the Ministry of Education. However, it also must involve the community or communities in which schools are located and, for that matter, teachers, principals, and supervisory personnel as well. All these stakeholders need to be involved in providing input regarding their expectations of school personnel. The kind of benchmarks defined is also an issue for review. For each sub-domain and performance indicator in a competency framework, acceptable performance benchmarks are listed. Because the process of establishing benchmarks is one where there may well be many different reasonable viewpoints, it is desirable that it take place in stages—learning along the way how to refine and make them still fairer, easier to use, and more powerful as tools for increasing instructional quality and improving the school environment.

## **Differences Between Competency Frameworks and Other Approaches to Performance Measurement**

There are other ways in which professional performance is discussed. The most common discussions use the terms performance standards, job or position descriptions, and performance objectives.

### Differences Between Position Descriptions and Competency Domains

Position descriptions, consisting of the required qualifications and intended roles a person will play on the job, are imprecise narrative descriptions of the general activities a person will or should undertake. In no way is a position description sufficient to understand everything that's required in a job; as we all know, we generally do not only a lot more than is written in the description, but what we do differs from the position description. A competency should reflect what's in a position but be more precise, comprehensive, measurable, and specific than a job description.

In contrast to a job description, a competency framework is a “diagnostic” tool that enables teachers, principals, and their supervisors to have a common understanding about what they can and should do to improve. In this respect, a competency framework also facilitates team building, teamwork, and collaboration within a school setting—helping everyone understand how they can work together to further their mission of fostering student learning.

### How Performance Standards Are Related to Competency Frameworks

Performance objectives and measurement are a means of explicitly describing and systematically assessing how a particular person measures up to the expectations of a given job. A measurement system is applied to a position and its place in the range of positions within an organization (e.g., a school). It assumes that the competency domains required have already been identified as well as deployed in the development of position descriptions. Thus, a competency framework is the foundation for any performance measurement system and can be used as a tool for effective recruitment, to guide professional development, to improve performance, and to make periodic employee evaluations fairer and more useful.

The competency domains required for a school manager—i.e., the principal, the deputy principal, the head teacher, and all the teachers at the school—have to include the full range of knowledge, abilities, skills, and activities required to establish and sustain a working environment in which children learn well. Creating a map that charts competency domains to specific positions and articulated position responsibilities is a good way of seeing if the staffing design is sufficient to accomplish the tasks required. This is also good way to ensure that the people filling positions are engaged in the functions required to serve the overall education system. Performance measurement needs to focus both on the individual's “slice of the bread” and the nature of the whole loaf.

## **Making a Competency Framework a Practical Tool to Support Improved Instructional Quality and School Functioning**

Generally, there are three stages in the process of using a competency framework as a master tool for leveraging improved performance by teachers and school principals and other

education system managers and administrators. Together, these stages include ten steps required to develop a sound performance measurement system based on a competency framework. These are:

### ***A. Developing a Conceptual Framework***

#### 1. Conducting a Literature Review

The literature review should inform and educate key stakeholders and decision makers within an institution about specific research and implementation of international and national frameworks that have demonstrated particular levels of success. It should provide the foundation for what may be applicable and desirable for that institution's employees and contextual environment.

#### 2. Talking with Stakeholders

It is important that key stakeholders are included in the initial stage of framework development, and that their ideals and needs are added to ensure early acceptance and ownership of the framework and its purpose.

#### 3. Developing an Initial Framework Concept

The initial framework concept is the starting point where new ideas and desired institutional requirements are combined into a model for review.

### ***B. Reviewing the Concept Framework and Current Performance Status***

#### 4. Discussing the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Framework Concept and Revising It

This activity allows key stakeholders and framework designers to organize the concept framework into a broadly accepted design ready for testing. It is also an opportunity to ensure that key stakeholders' desires are sufficiently reflected within the concept framework, and that new ideas are understood and supported by them.

#### 5. Testing the framework

The framework and the concepts that support it are tested to ensure that it is applicable and functional within the contextual environment for which it was designed. It is also essential to maintain continual buy-in to the development process so that key stakeholders and decision makers understand and agree to the process for testing.

#### 6. Discussing the Results of the Test of the Framework, and Status of Current Performance

Once the results of testing have been finalized and the status of framework performance is ascertained, consensus will need to be reached regarding acceptance of the framework as the mechanism for advancing institution-wide competency development.

### ***C. Setting Indicators for the Level of Competency Required for Different Positions in the Education System***

#### 7. Establishing Standards and Devising Performance Indicators Based on the Competency Framework, Taking into Account Their Potential Impact on Current Teaching and Supervisory Staff as Well as Their Impact on Schools, Students, and Communities

The gathering of relevant literature needs identified by key stakeholders, results obtained through the testing of the framework, and subsequent modifications will be completed and the resulting framework will establish standards and performance indicators.

8. Developing Practical, Easy-to-Use “Tools”—Systematic Procedures to Measure, Assess, or Test Staff Competencies Based on the Framework and Performance Indicators  
Initial tools and systems will be developed in consultation with key stakeholders to ensure that the developed competencies are functional in creating the desired impacts.
9. Testing These Tools, and Developing a Feedback and Roll-Out Process
10. Final Presentation of Package to Decision Makers for Official Endorsement and Approval  
A presentation or series of seminars will provide an opportunity for high-level decision makers to endorse the framework as policy, and to consider mechanisms for generating funding that will enable national roll-out.

In order to proceed with a process of teacher credentialing that makes practical contributions to education system quality and efficiency, Ministry of Education officials and policy advisors will need to undertake these steps and involve both school managers/instructional leaders and teachers in the process.

### **From Competency Framework to Teacher (and Administrator?) Credentialing**

The Ministry of Education has, for the past two years, considered development of a teacher credentialing system as an important strategic priority. It is conceivable also, although this is a policy question for the Minister and education officials to answer, that a process for credentialing school principals, or possibly even other education system administrators such as methodologists, supervisors, and district and provincial directors, might be desirable.

### **The Purpose of Teacher Credentialing**

Credentialing teachers is meant to guarantee that students are taught by competent, effective teachers. A sound competency framework is necessary as the foundation for a credentialing system—but once that is in place, additional consideration must be given to the processes for actually implementing a credentialing system. That analysis needs to consider how to make credentialing fulfill its promise.

The competency framework developed as part of this initiative would have three major impacts on credentialing. It would 1) identify teachers who need further in-service training to meet reasonable expectations; 2) identify teachers who are already fully competent, but also provide them some insights about their individual strengths and weaknesses, as well as direction regarding where to go for training to become still better; and 3) systematically identify teachers who have superior qualifications in one (or perhaps many) areas and make it possible to engage them as master teachers to help other teachers at their school or in the local district improve their instruction.

Ideally, a Ministry Standards/Credentialing Board consisting of relevant stakeholders and decision makers would be established to foster and review the institutionalization of the process and provide ultimate oversight and management of the system. There are a variety of sustainable board designs that should be considered, but it has to be noted that until such a board is established, temporary mechanisms will be needed to ensure that current competency development initiatives are not delayed.

Ideally, the competency framework would integrate teachers across all sectors of the education system—Regular Schools, Islamic Schools, Vocational Schools, and Literacy Programs; and across all teacher types—*Agir* and *Karmand* teachers. Ideally, teachers from different parts of the country should be involved. The overall process should include opportunities for the involvement of teachers working in community-based settings. It is also important that the developed framework can help guide teachers pursuing career development into areas where they have particular interest, strength, and potential—for example, as reading specialists, science teachers, mathematics teachers, or specialists working to improve parent involvement in children’s education.

An important consideration is that current teachers, head teachers, or school administrators should not feel that they are losing or being punished by the adoption of new standards. Development of a new competency framework, new performance indicators, and new standards for excellence should be seen as an opportunity for moving forward—for career development and the opportunity to learn new skills. This requires a “roll-out” process that is sensitive to the current capacities of people within the education system. The goal is not to focus on teachers’ or school principals’ inadequacies. Rather, it is to substitute designations such as “pass” or “fail” with others such as “needing more assistance,” “adequate as is,” or “master resource teacher.” These are issues that the Standards/Credentialing Board would need to consider. Additionally, as Afghanistan itself changes, the performance indicators and the competencies themselves may also evolve. It is therefore essential that a future Standards/Credentialing Board develop its capacity to not only be aware of potential change, but also to assess, lead, and manage future initiatives that address that change.

### **The Possibility of Credentialing School Principals and Educational Administrators**

If it is believed that school principals play an important role in managing schools and supervising teachers, it is useful to consider whether, like teachers, school principals (and possibly other education system administrators) should be credentialed. Their professional responsibilities are demanding, and they can make real contributions to their schools, the students enrolled in the school, and their communities. The initial competency framework we have already developed<sup>3</sup> is meant to provide a prototype of a competency framework for school principals. If desired, the performance indicators and measurement system built upon it could be used as the foundation for a credentialing system for school principals, and later other versions could rapidly be developed for other specific education system administrative roles/jobs—methodologists, monitors, supervisors, and others.

### **Present Status of Process**

Within the framework development process for Teachers and School Leadership, the Ministry of Education is presently at the stage in which it is offering the initial proposal of competencies for consideration and discussion by key stakeholders. A series of products that BESST has developed in order to support this discussion stage are ready to be provided by the technical development teams through a series of initial presentation seminars that will include:

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<sup>3</sup> “Strengthening Instructional Management in Local Schools: School Management Team Competencies” (Bianca Murray, Mohammad Javad Ahmadi, Ed Kissam, Jo Ann Intili, Trish Hernandez, Brett Rapley, and Craig Naumann, Project BESST, September 2006)

- a literature review and how it was developed.
- the proposed competency frameworks.

Presentation, discussion, and review of the competency frameworks (both the version for teachers and the version for school principals and their management and instructional teams) should proceed along with testing to review and refine the concepts. A timetable of seminar activities can quickly be developed in collaboration with Ministry of Education technical managers and policy advisors.