

## The Key Role of Administrators in Supporting Teacher Leadership and Professionalism in Southern Mexico

Edith J. Cisneros-Cohernour

*Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Mérida/Yucatán, Mexico*

Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>This work uses the results of three research studies conducted in southeastern Mexico to identify critical issues for teacher leadership and professionalism. The results indicate that educational reforms during more than twenty years have not always considered the sociocultural and economic context of the schools, nor the preparation needs of the main actors at the school level. Likewise, the traditional power structure in schools has influenced the success of educational reforms promoting teacher participation and leadership. It was also found that, although there are challenges and limited resources, it is necessary to improve the preparation of school administrators and supervisors, since they have a high influence on the training of in-service teachers, as well as on the implementation of new educational practices and policies. It is also necessary to improve the preparation of in-service teachers, to increase their possibilities for teacher leadership. Moreover, findings from the study identified important aspects that can facilitate teacher leadership and professionalism in effective secondary schools: a sense of ownership among stakeholders at the school level, leadership that supports change, strong discipline policies, emphasis on student success, not only in academics but also in music and sports, teacher professional development focused not only on improving</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b>  <i>Received</i>                      April 30, 2020    <i>Accepted</i>                      September 9, 2020</p> <hr style="border: 0.5px solid black;"/> <p><b>Keywords:</b>  <i>Teacher leadership,                      Educational administrators,                      School supervisor,                      International studies.</i></p>

*teaching and learning, but also on how to support student personal development. Lessons from the three studies indicate the important role of the context as well as the key role of authorities, administrators and school supervisors in facilitating or inhibiting teacher leadership and professionalism.*

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### **Introduction**

Mexico, like other Latin American countries, faces challenges due to the low academic achievement of its students in standardized academic tests. Research from the Latin American Laboratory for the Evaluation of Quality of Education [LLECE], in thirteen countries in the area found that achievement in language in the region is considerably low. The results in mathematics were generally even lower than those of Language, apart from Cuba (LLECE, 2000). In the case of Mexico, as the National Plan for Development 2019-2024 (Mexican Government, 2019) states, 48% of Mexican students underperform in reading, 42% in science and 57% underperform in mathematics when compared with their pairs from other countries.

According to the National Plan for the Evaluation of Learning (PLANEAL), the results of a national student performance evaluation show that 49.1% of Mexican sixth-grade students reached the level of insufficient in Language and Communication in 2018. In Mathematics, the proportion of students with insufficient level was 59.1% in the same year. Performance results were higher in Mexico City and in the state of Aguascalientes in relation to other states. The



lowest results were found in the southern states of the country: Guerrero, Chiapas, Campeche, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz, and Yucatan.

In response to all these results, the Mexican government through his Department of Education, implemented different educational reforms in the last decades. The Educational Modernization Reform (SHCP-FCE, 1994) took place during the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). This reform established the decentralization of education, the integration of preschool, elementary, and secondary education as basic education, curricular and pedagogical changes, and greater production of educational materials for basic education. An important aspect regarding the preparation of teachers in Mexico was to require teachers to have a bachelor's degree. A national teacher professional development program was also created. Various strategies were also implemented to recognize teachers' work, by increasing teachers' salaries and creating economic stimuli to reward teacher merit.

The educational goals set by this reform continued during the presidential terms of Presidents Zedillo (1994-2000) and Fox (2000-2006). During these years, changes were made in the bachelors degrees at the Normal Schools in secondary education, preschool education, special education, indigenous education, artistic education, physical education, and preschool education.

Other educational reform in Mexico took place during the government of President Peña Nieto (Mexican Government, 2013). This reform focused mainly on the evaluation of teachers by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE, 2013), as well as the creation of full-time schools, the autonomy of school

management, and the creation of an educational information system (López, 2013).

The reforms stressed the key role of teachers for improving education. From the National Program for Modernizing the country in 1993, to the latest teacher preparation policies and evaluation reforms, as well as the creation of school support programs, such as *Schools for Quality (Escuelas de Calidad, Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2015)*, Mexico placed more responsibilities on teachers for improving the quality of education in the schools.

Studies of teaching professionalism in Mexico and Latin America are still scarce. Although the few publications in this regard allow us to perceive elements typical of the region that can affect the development of professionalism such as trade unionism (Avalos, 2010), the articles approach professionalism from an evaluative point of view of education and the performance of teachers (Sisto, 2011; Martínez & Lavín, 2017), and the resulting challenge of understanding new forms of professionalism (Sisto, 2011; Baloco, 2020). However, these studies are approached from purely theoretical perspectives, and lack empirical data to explore this phenomenon, which is why a systematic study of teacher leadership and professionalism is needed.

Among the few empirical studies of factors influencing teacher leadership, there was a study in central Mexico that focused on the role of the school principal, and its relationship to the low quality of students' education, especially in rural contexts (Schmelkes, 1997). Other research conducted by INEE (2003) and Martínez (2011) found that the lack of pedagogical preparation and leadership of teachers and principals could be the main factors negatively influencing the quality of education at the school level. It has also been pointed out



than a factor affecting the quality of education was the need for improving teachers' preparation and development (INEE, 2003).

There is a need for more research on teacher leadership in México and other Latin American countries, given the socioeconomic and cultural differences in the region, and that most educational research on the topic has been conducted in western nations.

### **Context of the Study**

This article analyzes research conducted in Yucatán, one of the nineteen Mexican states, located in the southeast of Mexico to identify critical issues for teacher leadership and professionalism. Yucatan is divided into 106 municipalities, nine geographic regions, or seven economic regions (Gobierno de Yucatán, 2020). The state population has been increasing in the last thirty years, according to the 2010 census there were 1,955,577 inhabitants living in this state. Currently the state population is of 2,102,259, about 43.5% of all state population lives in the capital city of Mérida.

The main language spoken in the Yucatan is Spanish, but people also speak the Mayan language. Indeed, after Oaxaca, Yucatan is the state with more than a third of its population speaking an Indigenous language. Data from the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development (CONEVAL, 2019) show that 40.8% of the state population lives in poverty. The council defines poverty when a person has at least one social deprivation (among the six indicators of educational backwardness, access to health services, access to social security, quality and spaces of housing, basic services in housing and access to food) and their income is insufficient to acquire the goods and services that they require to satisfy their food and non-food needs.

In Yucatan, 34.1 % of the population lives in moderate poverty and the 6.7% in extreme poverty. People are in extreme poverty when they have three or more deficiencies, out of six possible, within the social deprivation index, and have such a low income that even if they were to use all their income to acquire food, they would not be able to acquire the necessary nutrients for a healthy life. A person is in moderate poverty when not extremely poor. The incidence of moderate poverty is obtained by calculating the difference between the incidence of the population in poverty minus that of the population in extreme poverty (CONEVAL, 2019).

Most of the population from Yucatan has completed basic education. Data from the last census (2010) indicates that in Yucatan 141, 753 people older than 8 years old (6.7% of the population) are illiterate, 66% had completed basic education, while 19% have completed upper-secondary education and only 18.2% have completed higher education (INEGI, 2015).

Students from Yucatan are among those with the lowest academic performance in standardized tests at the national level. They are ranked in the lower sixth position, behind the academic performance of their peers at the national level (Yucatan Plan for Development 2018-2024, 2019). Indeed, 20.6% of the students from Yucatan are below the national average of 17.4% in those tests. This position has remained the same since 2008. According to the Mexican National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE, 2018), in 2018, 45.9% of sixth grade students obtained an insufficient level of achievement in language and communication, and 58.9% also obtained an insufficient level of achievement in mathematics.



## Background

This paper analyzed the results from three studies conducted in southern Mexico during 2007, 2011 and 2018 to identify important issues for teacher leadership and professionalism. The first study *Teaching of sciences in southern Mexico: Critical issues for improving teaching and learning* (Cisneros-Cohernour, López & Canto, 2007), examined the conditions for teaching science and the evaluation of student learning in science, the challenges faced by teachers attempting to improve teaching and its evaluation, and possible alternatives for improving science education in Yucatan Mexico.

The second study *The evaluation of the program Schools for Quality: A site base-management initiative* (Cisneros-Cohernour, 2011), focused on determining the main contributions of a Site-Based Management program in special education schools in Yucatan. It clarified the concept of quality used by different stakeholders at different schools and determined the ways the program contributed to improving school needs.

The third study on *Teacher preparation and practice in effective secondary schools in southern Mexico* (Cisneros-Cohernour, Canto & Patrón, 2018), focused on identifying the common characteristics of effective schools and for determining if teacher professional development at these schools was related to its effectiveness

## Literature Review

Empirical studies on the factors that can promote or inhibit teacher's professionalism have been approached from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives (Bartholdsson, 2020; Joo, 2020; Khasanah, Kristiawan, & Tobari, 2019; Nolan & Molla, 2019;

Purwantiningsih & Suharso, 2019; Toh, Diong, Boo, & Chia, 1996). All of them have consistent results that establish that teacher professionalism is a complex phenomenon.

Legrottaglie & Ligorio (2017) found that development of teacher professionalism is a dynamic process that is nuanced by the professional experiences of teachers, as well as by their attitudes about their role as teachers, both in their student stage and as teachers (Rodríguez et al., 2019; Suyatno *et al.*, 2019). For example, second career teachers (teachers who were initially trained in a profession other than education), take advantage of their experiences in their first profession to have a positive effect in their schools (Nielsen, 2016; Ro, 2019). Other studies indicated that teacher training plays a more important role than years of experience, with independent learning, cooperative learning, and in-service learning having a positive and relatively similar effect on teacher professionalism (Toh et al., 1996). Thus, for example, it has been found that teachers' digital competence, defined as a "confident, critical, and creative of ICT use to reach the goal that related to the work" also directly influences teacher professionalism (Mangiri *et al.*, 2019; p. 1729), while other studies pointed out the importance of mentoring programs so that teachers can make lesson plans suitable for the needs of the 21st century (Alimah *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, staff management is a relevant variable to consider in the analysis of teaching professionalism (Wong, 2017). For example, when the rules, procedures, and communication are clearly defined and written they facilitate greater teaching professionalism (Cheng, 1996). However, the use of manual-based programs, that is programs that are carried out in accordance with specific administration guidelines, maximizing the possibility that the





intervention will be carried out consistently in all settings, with scientific evidence for teacher professionalization could be seen as a devaluation and subordination of teachers (Bartholdsson, 2020). This contrasts with current trends in certain countries, like Sweden, that seek to prescribe standards and practices for teaching work (Kirsten & Wermke, 2017). The autonomy of the school and teachers has also been seen to play an important role. Studies in contexts where schools enjoy greater autonomy (general and curricular) and empowerment indicate that they encourage the development of teaching professionalism in such a way that it responds to the needs of the immediate context (Gobby et al., 2018; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005)

Meanwhile, other studies have pointed out the effect that the dynamics of interpersonal relationships with their co-workers have on their professionalism. For example, some studies have found that distributed leadership hurts teacher professionalism, possibly under the assumption that they can perceive an increase in their functions without necessarily being reflected in an increase in their authority (Joo, 2020). However, some elements of distributed leadership, such as collegial work and collaboration among teachers have also been seen to have a positive effect on teacher professionalism (Gobby et al., 2018; Wiyono & Triwiyanto, 2018), mostly because it has an effect that improves trust in their co-workers.

However, perhaps one of the most studied and noted school factors is the role of principals in teacher leadership development. For example, principal supervision that provides orientation to teacher, has been seen to have a positive effect on teacher professionalism (Cheng, 1996; Dimyati *et al.*, 2019; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). It has also found that the administrative skills of the principals, and the

organizational climate affect the teachers' professionalism, with the administrative skills of the principals being the variable that usually contributes more to this effect (Bianome et al., 2016). This is related to other study that have indicated that a human and symbolic leadership of school principals is positively associated with professionalism (Cheng, 1996).

Finally, other factors such as teacher evaluation can also affect teacher professionalism. For example, it has been found that external teacher evaluations, evaluations started mainly from levels above the local school and with a control approach, tend to have a negative effect on teachers and their professionalism, creating an environment in which mistrust is perceived towards the evaluation (Hult & Edström, 2016). This is consistent with literature that indicates that teacher professionalism is positively related to trust toward the principal, colleagues, and the school community.

## **Methodology**

### **Design and Methods**

The three studies were qualitative and used an interpretive design involving multiple sources and methods of data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The main research questions and methods of data collection in each study follow:

Study 1. Teaching of sciences in southern Mexico: Critical Issues for Improving Teaching and Learning (2007). The main research questions were:

- What are the goals of science education and how are they interpreted and implemented by the main actors at the school level?



- What are the conditions and main challenges affecting science education and its evaluation?
- What are the possible solutions for improving science education from the perspective of the main actors?

The main sources of data collection involved content analysis of school documents and records, semi-structured and focus group interviews, as well as on site-observations at schools

Study 2. The evaluation of the program schools for quality: A site Base-Management Initiative (2011). The main research questions were:

- What are the main contributions of the program, particularly for the improvement of school management and its link with student achievement in special education schools in Yucatan?
- What is the concept of educational quality from the schools' perspective? To what extent does the program contribute to improving the needs of the participating schools?

This evaluation study used two qualitative designs: appreciative inquiry (Coghlan, Preskill & Tzavaras Catsambas, 2003; Preskill & Catzambas, 2006; Watkins & Mort, 2002; Webb & Preskill, 2005) and the Stake Responsive Evaluation model (Stake & Schwandt, 2006).

The main sources of data collection were document analyses, interviews, surveys, and seven case studies involving focus-groups, interviews, and on-site observations. The use of multiple sources and methods of data collection increased the strength of the evaluation design and provided valuable information for program improvement (Brandon & Fukonaga, 2014; Cousins, 2000; Patton, 2010).

Study 3. Teacher Preparation and Practice in Effective Secondary Schools in Southern Mexico (2018). The main research questions were:

- Do schools share similar characteristics?
- What aspects characterize the role (s) of teachers at the schools?
- What elements characterize teacher training and professional career?
- Who supervises and evaluates teaching work?

The research used a case study design including multiple sources of data collection, such as content analyses of school documents, semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers, and on-site observations

The first and third study were conducted in secondary schools for students between 12-15 years old. The second study was conducted in special education schools for students with disabilities.

### **Participants**

In the teaching of sciences in southern Mexico: Critical Issues for Improving Teaching and Learning (2007) study, the researchers conducted document analysis of curriculum and educational reform documents. In this study participants included two officials from the state Department of Education, 27 school principals, and 216 teachers of Mathematics, Physics, Biology and Chemistry teachers from 27 secondary schools. The schools were representative of the type of schools attended by different ethnic groups in the region.

In The evaluation of the program Schools for Quality: A Site Base-Management Initiative study (2011), researchers also analyzed



policy documents. The participants included Department of Education Officials (2), teachers (263), Special Education staff (54), and parents (270) from 27 special education centers.

In the Teacher preparation and practice in effective secondary schools in southern Mexico study (2018), researchers analyzed school and policy documents. The participants were two Department of Education officials, four principals, and 50 teachers.

### **Data Analysis**

All qualitative data from the three studies obtained from interviews, focus group interviews and on-site observations were transcribed, and classified in categories, and then themes, patterns, and relationships were summarized.

The quantitative data of the survey from *the evaluation of the program Schools for Quality: A Site Base-Management Initiative* study, were analyzed using the software SPSS version 24. The analysis included descriptive statistics of teachers' responses according to the three main aspects of the program: pedagogical practice, management, and social participation.

### **Results**

Findings of *Teaching of sciences in southern Mexico: Critical Issues for Improving Teaching and Learning* indicated that there were four main factors influencing the implementation of the educational reforms in secondary schools: curriculum, student related factors, assessment policies and teacher preparation and professionalism.

Teacher preparation and professionalism were identified as related to teacher motivation for innovation and to work effectively with adolescents. According to the results of the study, there were

factors negatively influencing professional development in schools. One of these factors was related to the type of policies for teacher hiring and for the assignment or working hours of teachers at the secondary schools. Most science teachers were hired by the hour and when there were vacancies in the school, administrators preferred to hire other teachers by the hour instead of increasing the number of working hours of teachers who were already teaching other science courses at the school. The situation resulted in teachers having limited opportunities to participate in professional development activities, since they needed to work in more than one school to complete their income.

In addition, because the most advanced teacher professional development programs were limited to part-time and full-time teachers, this left most secondary school teachers with few opportunities to improve their teacher preparation. This situation was aggravated by teachers limited mastery of the content knowledge and pedagogical competencies. Teachers stated that there was also a poor connection between the professional development activities with their professional needs and their work context. Secondary school teachers stressed their desire to be involved in in the processes of planning, implementing, and evaluating professional development activities., but the policies at the national, central, and local level limited their participation.

School supervisors and principals had a key role, influencing teacher participation in professional development, since they made the decisions for hiring and for implementing professional development initiatives at the school level. Their top-bottom decision-making style did not support teacher autonomy. In addition, because more principals did not have an education background or



preparation for the principalship, this negatively influenced their support for teachers' work and decision making.

Policy makers and state department authorities' implementation of the reform without considering school context and teacher needs for professional development, negatively influenced teacher participation in professional development and reduced the role of teachers in improving student learning.

The study also identified the need for preparing school administrators and local education authorities, as those responsible for teacher training programs.

Results from the study: *Evaluation of the program Schools for Quality: A Site-Based Management Initiative* (2011), indicated that teachers and parents' participation has increased in school activities because of the program. However, case studies provided no evidence that the greater involvement of teachers lead to a democratic management and true collective participation in decisions at the school level. On the contrary, participatory management, an essential element of the model that guides the program, does not apply, and the structure of authority in the schools remains pyramidal. In fact, the top-down leadership style of the principals at the schools was identified as an obstacle for teacher leadership and professionalism.

Although teachers increased their participation in the planning and implementation of the program, the school principal and school supervisor continued to control decision-making. Parents were only involved when required to obtain funds for supporting the program implementation. For many teachers, their school participation in the program also meant more responsibilities, which increased their stress level.

Another limitation of the program was that it did not provide training for teachers and other staff at the school level. When training was available, it did not always correspond to the real needs of teachers. Training was particularly important for schools where teachers were preparing students with multiple disabilities.

During the process of conducting the evaluation, it was evident that an important stakeholder that influenced program implementation and decision making at the school level, were the school supervisors. Their lack of teaching and administrative preparation in some cases, negatively influenced the access to the schools as well as teachers' participation in professional development and innovation. In the Mexican context, a school supervisor is an academic authority figure that is responsible for inspecting, controlling and verifying that schools function and organize themselves accurately, according to the established normativity, in order to provide quality education for all students, and to implement strategies for attending student problems in advancing in their studies, failing or dropping out from school, and situations that affect the rights of students to receive a dignified, equitable and inclusive treatment (Carrillo, 2018).

The *study on teacher preparation and practice in effective secondary schools in southern Mexico* was centered around four secondary schools known as effective because of the good performance of their students in standardized tests and for receiving high recognition from their communities as good schools. The schools represented the four types of secondary schools in the state: federally funded, state funded, rural secondary, and tele-secondary school. The last one is a type of secondary school, intended to students who live in rural regions or have difficult access to education. It provides education through





television broadcasts, as well as videos, audiotexts, model texts, songs, and images), interactive and a media library (Montoya, 1996).

Findings of the study indicated that the four secondary schools shared similar characteristics: a sense of ownership, leadership support for change, a strong discipline policy, emphasis in success not only in academics, but in the arts and sports, and teacher participation in professional development.

In all four schools, schoolteachers, staff, and administrators had a sense of ownership. In the federally funded school, most teachers were former students, including the principal. Teachers created an alumni association that had a key role in decision making. In the tele-secondary school, teachers and parents collaborated to give maintenance and cleaning of the school. They were also proud of their school garden and their student accomplishments. The rural secondary school and the state funded school were also proud of their schools and the accomplishments of their students.

Leadership was a very important element in all schools. The type of leadership, however, varied among the schools. In the federally funded school, the principal involved different actors at the school level and paid special attention to the alumni association. In the rural community, the principal was the leader of the school who involved teachers in searching for extra funding for the school. The state funded school had two principals, one was the official principal, and the associate principal was the political leader. In this school, both worked together and involved teachers and students to obtain financial support for their school. The tele-secondary school had a principal who was also a teacher, but leadership was shared among the three women who worked at the school. They were all graduates from a Master's degree program and two of them were studying for a

doctorate. They invested their own personal resources to help their school and worked extra time to prepare students for academic and non-academic competitions.

All schools shared a strong discipline policy. They had codes of conduct that were shared with parents, students and all the school staff. The discipline code took into consideration the caring for the school resources and infrastructure, the respect of students to their peers and school personnel, as well as other norms regarding acceptable conduct and dress code at the school.

Teachers at the schools worked extra time supporting students' preparation for standardized testing. They also motivated students to participate in music and sports competitions. It was not surprising to find that students from the four schools had been among the winners on several occasions in competitions at the state and national levels, as well as in academic competitions at the local and national level in math and science.

All schools were recognized for the quality of their teaching and shared an interest in the professional development of teachers.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This work identified important issues related to teacher leadership and professionalism. Findings of the three studies provided evidence to support the conclusions of Wong (2017), Cheng, (1996); Gobby et al, (2018); Pearson & Moomaw, (2005) and Sterrett, (2015) in that administrator's leadership style and preparation at the central or at the school level is a variable that influences teacher professionalism and leadership. By maintaining a pyramidal leadership style, authorities of the Department of Education, as well



as principals and supervisors limited teachers' autonomy and motivation for innovation.

The lack of administrator's preparation and skills for their position in the two of the three studies negatively influenced teacher professionalism and leadership, as found in the study of Bianome et al, (2016). However, in this study the lack of preparation in education and leadership was not only for school principals, but also for officials at the Department of Education, and school supervisors.

Findings from the evaluation study, were partially consistent with the work form Joo (2020), since teachers who participated in the implementation of the site-based program felt they have increased their responsibilities, but this not necessarily reflected in their increased authority or income.

However, in the study of teacher preparation and practice in effective secondary schools in southern Mexico, it was found that in spite of all the contextual limitations, schools were effective once teachers became committed and engaged in a learning process aimed to improve their schools.

Teachers hiring and working conditions needed to improve, as well as the preparation programs for future teachers and administrators. Successful educational reforms promoting teacher leadership and professionalism may succeed if policy makers and administrators provide opportunities for teacher growth and improvement. Teachers should also participate in the design and implementation of professional development efforts that really meet their personal and professional needs.

An important factor not evident in prior studies of teacher leadership and professionalism that was found in the three empirical research studies analyzed in this article was the role of policies and

the external context. These factors influenced both administrator and teacher leadership. For example, the decision of hiring many teachers on an hourly basis to substitute a retired teacher, provided job opportunities for many teachers, but also had negative consequences since this decision affected teacher participation in professional development and innovation.

Some recommendations emerged from the studies, that could contribute to improving teacher leadership and professionalism. Government officials at the national and state department of education need to improve teacher preparation and professional development. They need to establish agreements with local universities to improve the opportunities for professional development for teachers and educational administrators.

In addition, policy makers and administrators need to take into consideration the inside and outside context of the schools when designing and implementing educational reforms. This is particularly important when new reforms are going to be implemented in regions with highly diverse and marginalized communities.

Future studies on teacher leadership and professionalism in Mexico could focus on some of the issues stated by Webber (2018), regarding the meaning of teacher leadership and professionalism, on how the design and implementation of current teacher preparation programs promotes teacher leadership, on how different actors (official administrators at the Department of Education, school principals, teachers and parents, define teacher leadership? And what are the challenges faced by teacher leaders trying to lead a sustainable development in their schools?



## Conclusion

The findings from the research examined in this article provide evidence that policies as well as politics play a key role in the selection of educational authorities, including local department of education principals and supervisors. The lack of preparation in education and educational administration of these actors can create obstacles or facilitate teacher leadership and professionalism.

The decision of principals and other administrators to engage with teachers in a learning process of improvement, that can lead to a sense of ownership that could improve the quality of education of the schools.

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#### About the author

**Edith J. Cisneros-Cohernour** is the Head of research and graduate programs and a full Professor at the Autonomous University of Yucatan, in the College of Education. Her work focuses on the quality of education, primarily through evaluation and development of academic personnel, school organizations and programs.

Email: [ecohernour@gmail.com](mailto:ecohernour@gmail.com)