# Next-Level Leadership: Preparing Assistant Principals for Campus Leadership

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**Abstract**

The workload of campus leaders continues to increase with new expectations for evaluation and supervision, changing legislative mandates, and mounting pressures for improved school accountability. Educational Leadership preparation programs are built on national and state standards related to principal leadership and competency. However, while principal preparation programs have focused intently on instructional leadership development for future principals, most educational leadership candidates do not immediately enter the principalship but rather start their administrative careers as assistant principals. School districts can implement a comprehensive training protocol for their emerging principals using research-based practices to ensure assistant principals have the training, coaching, and mentoring necessary for the next level of leadership. The professional development strategies presented here can be pivotal in ensuring that individuals are prepared for campus leadership and potentially mitigate principal burnout. Increasing the competencies of assistant principals to prepare them for campus leadership will help support the future of the school district and ensure a pipeline of strong leaders.

**Introduction**

The job of a school principal is challenging, stressful, and requires significant training and preparation (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cooley & Shen, 2003; Friedman, 2002; Griffith, 1999; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Petzko, 2008; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Wells, 2013; Wells et al., 2011). The workload of campus leaders continues to increase with new expectations for evaluation and supervision, changing legislative mandates, and mounting pressures for improved school accountability (Wells, 2013; West et al., 2014). Researchers have studied the demands of the jobs of a campus principal and identified numerous stressors that simply come with leading a school. Klocko and Wells (2015) researched principal workload stressors that impact principal leadership and identified distinct aspects of the job of a principal that can lead to personal burnout. Campus principals from previous studies have reported stress related to personal workload management, struggles with the demands of being an instructional leader on campus, stakeholder accountability, managing professional tasks, and handling conflict as stressors caused by the pressures of the job (Klocko & Wells, 2015). With the significant stressors that school leaders face, it is essential that school districts use various professional development strategies to support their emerging assistant principals to ensure their success when they are ready to take on the role of campus principal.

Principal leadership is second only to teacher competency in impacting student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005). Educational Leadership preparation programs are built on national and state standards related to principal leadership and competency. However, while principal preparation programs have focused intently on instructional leadership development for future principals, most educational leadership candidates do not immediately enter the principalship but rather start their administrative careers as assistant principals. Principal preparation programs generally provide students with a wide

range of competencies for future campus administrators, but many assistant principals still require additional training and support from their school districts to fully prepare them for the rigors of the principal's office. The professional development strategies presented here can be pivotal in ensuring that individuals are prepared for campus leadership and potentially mitigate principal burnout. Increasing the competencies of assistant principals to prepare them for campus leadership will help support the future of the school district and ensure a pipeline of strong leaders. These research-based practices in leadership development are not necessarily innovative practices in the field of principal preparation, but they are significant to create meaningful professional development for assistant principals for the role of campus principal.

## Literature Review and Guiding Questions

The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the literature on principal preparation and provide a comprehensive recommendation on appropriate and rigorous training and support for new administrators beginning their careers as assistant principals. The literature also provides analysis of aspects necessary for school leaders to support their work and mental health. The literature is clear on the point that professional development and support is critical for the growth of new administrators and is an essential element to improving the principal pipeline. Guiding questions used for this discussion are:

1) What research-based methods and resources can school districts use to identify, plan and train a potential pool of candidates for campus leadership positions?

2) How can school districts implement mental health and wellness resources to prevent principal burnout? What tools are available for school districts to identify early onset symptoms of work burnout?

3) How can school districts design professional development sessions that address
   specific and measurable leadership strengths and constraints? How do school districts
   identify ineffective principals and work to coach and mentor these individuals?

4) What methods of communication are most essential for school leaders to use
   regularly to engage with members of the school community?

5) How can school districts design and implement effective professional development
   protocols to improve school leaders? What are the most effective mentoring and
   coaching programs available to support school leaders?

**Identify, Plan, and Train a Leadership Talent Pool**

To develop a structured approach to promoting qualified candidates to the principalship, school districts should engage in developing an extensive succession plan. Using long-range planning and analysis of its leadership pool, school districts should develop a strategy for retaining and developing internal candidates for campus leadership pools. Significant to this strategy should be an extensive professional development protocol designed to springboard assistant principals into the principalship. Various key data points can be used including evaluation data, principal recommendations, and observation data. District officials should work to identify a candidate pool of experienced assistant principals that are ready to become principals with school district supported training and development. While many school districts often require three years of assistant principal experience prior to entering the principalship, after that timeframe many still lack important skills necessary for campus leadership.

The intent of the selection process should be to identify and develop a pool of candidates who are already demonstrating accomplishments as assistant principals and have a clear potential for campus leadership. Once such individuals have been identified, school districts should

develop a training protocol that addresses the following research-based areas of assistant

principal preparation: Preventing Principal Burnout; \Developmental Activities; Leadership

Strengths and Constraints; Communication; and Developing Mentoring Relationships.

**Prevent Principal Burnout**

Anxiety is common in many professions. However, principals can often overwhelm

themselves with school district expectations, community issues, PLCs, emails, and paperwork.

The school leader's focus can be constantly heightened leading to chronic levels of stress that

can detract from being successful (Goleman et al., 2002). Principals can work daily in this

constant level of heightened stress and anxiety creating pressures that are often self-inflicted

when not managed appropriately.

This is a challenge for many principals. The pressures of the job, whether driven by

intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, often lead to a disruption in the principal's work-life balance. In

a study conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), school

leaders surveyed indicated that their many "obligations can require a huge time commitment,

impeding their work-life balance and limiting what they can accomplish on the job" (Levin

& Bradley, 2019). Principals in the survey reported difficulty spending time with their respective

spouses, completing paperwork at 2:30 am, or sacrificing time with family to meet obligations

related to the job of a campus principal (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Principals in the study also spoke of their responsibilities to their students and the school

community and the associated stresses. Several school leaders stated the said the stress of the job

is heightened by the emotional burden of supporting students (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Principals expressed in the study how the needs of students have grown over the years due to

societal pressures. One principal explained, "Whatever seems to happen outside of the school

community, meaning what's going on with our politics, our country, political agendas, seems to work its way into the high school" (Levin & Bradley, 2019, p. 5). It is not uncommon for principals to assume a role as advocate for their students while bearing much of the responsibility for the achievement of students, faculty, and the school community (Hayes & Author, 2020).

In 2017, 2,800 principals and other school leaders took part in a survey on principal health and wellbeing. The study conducted by the Australian Catholic University revealed that principals work long hours with more than 77% of participants reporting working more than 56 hours per weeks. Among those, 27% worked up to 65 hours every week. Significant to the study was that school principals are reporting much higher levels of work burnout than the general population. These individuals are also having twice as much difficulty sleeping due to higher levels of stress and are at higher risk of depression (Riley, 2017).

Within the past 20 years, there has been a rise in the numbers of businesses allowing elements of job flexibility for their employees. This dramatic shift in thinking has allowed for a growing movement to improve the work-life balance of employees allowing for remote adjusted working hours, or even work on evenings and weekends to free up portions of the day for family obligations. However, for the school principal, such flexibility has been highly limited. And for those principals who have some flexibility in their work hours, the results of these approaches have only provided a small degree of satisfaction for school leaders (Murphy & Sauter, 2003). While many businesses have developed policies on job flexibility with an understanding of the importance of work-life balance and the need to support families, school districts still have a reluctance to change either the job functions of the school leader or their daily routines and expectations (Murphy & Sauter, 2003).

With their numerous responsibilities, school principals often struggle to find the time to focus on the most significant portion of their job – instructional leadership. Carving out the time to conduct formal and informal evaluations is often difficult for campus principals when parent meetings, student discipline, grade level meetings, and other daily functions take priority. However, the pressures and expectations for increased student achievement and the improved instruction needed to achieve these results has become more prevalent since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and its reauthorization (Glass & Franceshini, 2007; Hess & Kelly, 2007). As principals work to keep up with new demands for increased student success, their evaluations are also being tied to the levels of student proficiency (McGhee & Nelson, 2005).

In a separate survey conducted by the NASSP, principals "acknowledged that the time needed to deal with disciplinary issues, such as inappropriate social media use, meant less time for instructional leadership" (Levin & Bradley, 2019, p. 5). Principals in the study reported that working to develop relationships "with the kids and the teachers has become more and more difficult" (Levin & Bradley, 2019, p. 6).

Without the proper support in place to help campus leaders manage work-life balance with the stressors of school leadership, many administrators often simply leave the profession. School leaders are often second to teachers when it comes to improving student outcomes. This means that when the administrator leaves the campus, a disruption occurs that can be devastating to the school community. A study conducted from data collected in North Carolina schools found that when a principal leaves a campus, the student achievement for the school generally experiences a decline for two years.

Campus principals are key in setting the direction for a campus success (Tucker & Codding, 2002). The body of knowledge has been clear in its aim to provide a pathway for

continuous improvement in the leadership process (Stronge et al., 2006). Once effective

processes have been identified they can by replicated, ensuring that more and more schools

become vibrant learning communities under the direction of outstanding leaders.

       However, whether school districts lack the resources for training their principals in

known continuous improvement models or perhaps because principals become complacent and

comfortable in their leadership roles, teachers who demonstrate success in the classroom become

frustrated with ineffective campus leaders and seek other opportunities. The financial cost of

replacing and training teachers is significant while the damage to the school culture and climate

often takes years to repair. While standardized test scores may demonstrate the "effectiveness" of

the campus leader to produce an acceptable accountability rating, the damage to teachers,

students, and the school community is often overlooked and immeasurable.

## Identify Leadership Strengths and Constraints

       Research indicates that assistant principals have increased confidence in understanding

their leadership style and how they relate to others (Hayes & Author, 2020). Participants in the

research report that they grew to understand themselves better specifically in how to identify

their leadership strengths and constraints. School districts can use this strategy to determine the

abilities of their candidates and use this information to build their leadership capacity. As district

leaders help their assistant principals recognize how they are perceived by stakeholders – inside

and outside of the school – these future leaders will learn how to use their strengths to better their

professional relationships with these stakeholders.

       In learning about their strengths, assistant principals will also recognize their constraints

and how these elements were limiting them from moving forward into the principalship. This is a

key point in advancing professional growth of future campus principals. Significant constraint

that was identified by research participants included conflict resolution, understanding various human perspectives on important issues, and listening to and processing teacher and student feedback. It is important that school districts work with their assistant principals to help them not only learn their leadership strengths and where they consistently succeed, but to recognize what their growth areas are and what is limiting them from advancing.

Coaching sessions can also help participants identify a leadership development goal, understand their current reality in meeting that goal, discuss options for achieving the goal, and help the assistant principal commit to a personalized action plan. Specific action plans can include developing skills in the areas of addressing leadership strengths and constraints, enhancing communication skills, and addressing specific professional learning needs.

### Communication

Another important area of focus for principalship preparation is the need to strengthen communication skills. Discussing instructional improvements for campus stakeholders and providing feedback to teachers is one of the communication areas that assistant principals most need to strengthen for an advanced leadership role. Assistant principals who conduct walkthroughs and teacher evaluations are often put in a position to improve instruction on their campus through constant feedback. Teachers who want to grow and improve welcome the feedback and support of their campus leadership. For struggling teachers, however, the feedback and evaluation from administration is often limited or unclear. This communication struggle often leaves teachers fighting the feedback and ultimately keeping them from growth or improved instruction. Research had indicated that assistant principals often struggle with having those critical conversations about improving instruction with teachers (Hayes & Author, 2020). Thus, providing assistant principals with opportunities to improve their communication through

practice and coaching will give future principals the confidence they need to support teachers in improving their instruction.

Aside from the importance of giving feedback, assistant principals should also learn how to speak clearly with details and build quality professional relationship with their teachers. The desire to better communicate with teachers to support them in their instruction was evident in the research. Participants learned how to provide simple facts with evidence and improve their listening skills. It is important that assistant principals understand the art of listening so they can give the highest feedback for the fastest improvement. Principals need to be able to listen to teachers, understand where they are in their professional growth, and allow them to be a part of the improvement process. This practice of reflective listening should be an integral part of the professional development and coaching of future principals as it makes the biggest difference in classroom improvement.

### Create a Quality Professional Development Protocol

When participating in a planned professional growth program, assistant principals report that their confidence and job preparation increase (Hayes & Author, 2020). The best quality training that school districts can offer is a locally developed training protocol with a coaching or mentoring program designed to provide assistant principals with the skills needed to lead a campus. The developmental activities that school districts create should consist of a regular and planned monthly training protocol created from specific professional development standards and taught by veteran principals. Following the training sessions, the assistant principals should be paired with veteran principals to serve as coaches who provide ongoing feedback and support during their training. Both the classroom sessions and the coaching sessions should be designed to increase the leadership capacity of the participants. Similar programs, such as university

faculty-developed sessions, use curriculum developed from the Professional Standards for

Educational Leaders (PSEL) (Hayes & Author, 2020). If school districts do not have the

resources to plan these professional development sessions, it is recommended that school

districts partner with local university programs to create a quality training protocol.

        The professional development needs of assistant principals was another theme developed

in the findings. Often school districts do not invest the time or resources to create and train their

assistant principal talent pool. The opportunities for grow and upward mobility is often never

offered or mandated by the district.

        While there are many areas of improvement that school districts can focus their attention

to exploring communication skills, providing feedback, and improving instruction are all

important professional development activities that assistant principals need. Research has

indicated that when participating in a professional development program, participants felt an

increase in their confidence in instructional leadership. Other areas that school districts can

include in their training are vision/mission/goal-setting, supervising and working with teachers,

data-analysis, and leading professional development (Hayes & Author, 2020). Lastly, assistant

principals should be further developed in their understanding of instructional leadership in terms

of leading teachers using words such as "grow, support, and collaborate." This provides future

leaders with an appreciation for instructional leadership with an understanding of using data as

benchmarks and having critical conversations with teachers about effective instructional

strategies. School districts should provide professional development sessions, if anything, to

stress the importance of instructional leadership and improving teaching and learning to help

them feel more confident in being leaders for learning.

### Develop Pervasive Mentoring Relationships

A critical component in the development of a campus principal is building relationships. With the rigors of the campus, being an assistant principal can often feel like being stranded on a deserted island. Connecting with other assistant principals and developing relationships through coaching and mentoring with veteran principals can help the developing leader feel supported during their professional growth. Through the training protocol that the school district creates, participants can be grouped in small-group networks with other assistant principals in a similar context, allowing for informal peer mentoring. Each group and participant should be assigned a leadership coach for individual and group mentoring to help guide the participants through various scenarios or answer questions about campus leadership. Research has shown that assistant principals who participate in these networking opportunities report the advantages of collaborative learning and reflective thinking within their small networks (Hayes & Author, 2020). The opportunity to meet with other assistant principals and share common experiences allows the participant to feel that the information learned is significant and the training is grounded in their common experiences. Networking with colleagues helps participants to understand varying perspectives in similar experiences and supports a system of informal peer mentoring and relationship building.

Many assistant principals often report that they seldom have the opportunity to meet other assistant principals and reflect with them about problems they encounter on their campuses. Creating small cohorts within the professional development sessions allows participants to learn as much from other participants as they can learn from the planned trainings. There is a major impact on personalized training when participants have the opportunity build quality, trusting relationships with colleagues working in similar contexts with whom they can discuss challenges and ideas.

To prevent assistant principals from feeling isolated and lonely in their roles, creating a cohort model or networking model provides the opportunity to call on others and ask for help in a safe space where they do not feel judged for needing direction or guidance.

Another important practice for school districts to implement is the principal coaching/mentoring model. Having a veteran principal to serve as a trained leadership coach to support the individual participant's learning and goal setting further increases the assistant principal's professional efficacy and skill set. Assistant principals in the training protocol should meet with their coaches for one-on-one sessions throughout the year. The meeting should be scheduled between training sessions to allow assistant principals to give feedback and ask questions of their mentors. This critical piece of the professional training is designed to help the participants grow professionally through practice and reflection. This will increase participant confidence and is a valuable tool in developing their leadership skills.

## Create a Culture of Leadership Development and Succession Planning

The work that is required for succession planning and leadership development should not be abandoned after a year or two. The investment in quality leadership development should be embedded in the culture of the school leadership and remain a priority for ensuring a long-lasting leadership pipeline. Assistant principals should participate understanding that the purpose of the professional development program is to help support their growth to become a principal of their own campus. The training should provide the district-specific expectations to serve as a campus principal and provide a comprehensive overview of the district's vision and projected future growth. Participants need to be informed and grow in the image the district has for its leaders in alignment with data-driven projections and research-based practices. The developmental practices should focus on the district's mission, instructional philosophy, and professional

development culture. School districts should develop expectations for their leaders in the image they want the community to view their campus leaders.

The significance of creating a culture of leadership development and succession planning is rooted in the professional development of future leaders. The cost that is incurred in hiring and training assistant principals and principals is significant and wears on school districts' personnel and financial resources. When executed with fidelity, a strong assistant principal leadership training protocol will allow school district officials to plan for succession by working with principals to identify candidates for a "principal pool" to be considered for future principal openings.

## Conclusion

While creating and producing quality professional development, mentoring, and support for assistant principals is a significant undertaking for school districts that are already limited in their resources, the investment will create a highly trained pool of talented and skilled future leaders. The pipeline for strong campus leadership can be loaded with highly trained individuals who understand and can articulate the school district's culture, instructional philosophy, and mission. This will be an advantage for districts when the time comes for leaders to support district initiatives within the community. The pipeline will also address leadership inequities that develop and provide a long-lasting pool of skilled leaders. With appropriate planning and intentional investment, school districts can be poised for ensuring high quality schools, leadership continuity, and instructional improvement for decades to come.

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