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Special Note

This issue and the upcoming fall issue, to be published October 1, 2026, will be the final issues of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* as it will cease publication with the fall issue.



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Overcoming Barriers: Leadership, Culture, and the Bridge Between Policy and Practice

Kenneth Mitchell, EdD
Interim Editor
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Summer 2026

In my 50th year working as an educator, I have seen and experienced a lot. In my current role working with school superintendents in New York and doctoral students at my university, I am attuned to the many challenges that today's leaders face. These are perhaps some of the most challenging ever faced by America's school leaders and there have been some significant ones!

Aside from local, state, and federal political pressures, schools today are navigating an era of ambitious reform in such areas as deeper learning, restorative discipline, leadership and teacher pipelines, and a need to stay true to evidence-based practice. Yet the distance between aspiration and implementation remains one of education's most persistent challenges. The summer 2026 issue includes studies that illuminate a consistent truth: structural change fails without the cultural, relational, and developmental foundations to support it.

At the heart of overcoming barriers is leadership, which is reflected in each piece and aligns with the mission of this journal. Whether a principal articulating a school's higher purpose to sustain deeper learning, a district administrator wrestling with the uneven rollout

of restorative practices, or an aspiring leader working to master core competencies through a structured institute, the research points repeatedly to the leader as the linchpin of meaningful change. Leadership is not merely positional — it is the active work of building belief, aligning effort, and holding a community to a shared vision even when resources are scarce and resistance is present.

Yet leaders cannot succeed through will alone. Each study surfaces the critical role of culture and mindset as prerequisites for reform. Deeper learning requires conditions that diverge sharply from traditional schooling norms. Restorative practices demand that educators examine and shift long-held beliefs about discipline and relationships.

Leadership development programs must cultivate not just skills, but the professional identity and self-efficacy needed to lead in complex environments. In every case, the barrier is as much human as it is structural.

The research also exposes a troubling gap between policy and practice. Restorative approaches are codified in district policy yet falter in implementation due to siloed initiatives, unclear guidance, and insufficient

training. Leadership standards exist at the national and state levels, yet the assistant principal — often the leader most directly responsible for school-level change — has historically been underprepared for that role. Even the knowledge base available to practitioners is constrained: principals largely rely on practitioner publications rather than peer reviewed research, raising important questions about how evidence moves from scholarship to implementation at the school level.

Ultimately, the studies in this issue converge on a unified message: overcoming

barriers in education requires more than adopting new programs or writing better policy. It demands aligned systems, sustained investment in people, and a deliberate effort to close the gap between what research knows and what schools do.

The most durable reforms are those built on cultural coherence, purposeful leadership, and the institutional humility to recognize that change is not an event — it is an ongoing, deeply human process, a reality that we must not ignore as we stand at the precipice of a society—and its schools—that is being transformed by artificial intelligence.

(Interim Editor's note: Our final issue will be published in the fall. Thanks to all who have contributed or assisted with the Journal.)

Higher Purpose in Leading Deeper Learning

Ben Quist, BS
PhD Candidate
Management and Organizations
Ross School of Business
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI

David M. Boren, PhD
Associate Clinical Professor
Educational Leadership and Foundations
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT

Joseph N. Jensen, EdD
Adjunct Professor
Department of Education Leadership and Foundations
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT
and
Superintendent of Schools
Timpanogos School District
Lindon, UT

Abstract

This study considers the leadership behaviors and cultural conditions necessary for deeper learning to thrive amidst the many challenges faced in the pursuit of deeper learning in schools. Multiple school leaders at the district, secondary, and elementary levels were interviewed to identify themes, patterns, and relationships related to effectively leading deeper learning. A deeper learning positive deviant case study was then conducted to reify and enrich the findings from the leader interviews. We find that leading deeper learning does require behaviors and cultural conditions that are unique in the world of traditional education. We also discover that in the case study, the principal's ability to delineate and establish the school's higher purpose was integral to deeper learning's success.

Key Words

deeper learning, deeper learning leaders, deeper learning conditions, higher purpose, 21st century learning, future-ready leaders

Introduction

Concerned that schools' hyper-focus on academic performance is not adequately preparing students for the future, many have called for a reconceptualization of schooling that focuses more intentionally on holistic "deeper learning" (Hernandez et al., 2019; Mehta & Fine, 2019). Mehta (2022) invited educators to consider how we might shift our traditional academic grammar of schooling to one that more deliberately emphasizes students' future readiness.

In addition to content mastery, deeper learning seeks to cultivate lifeworthy skills and dispositions that contribute to student, teacher, and societal wellbeing and flourishing. Fullan et al. (2019) boldly claims that schools have the moral imperative to pursue deeper learning for all students, and particularly for students who are traditionally underrepresented. While many educators and stakeholders agree with the premise of deeper learning, few have made it reality.

We are interested in understanding the foundational leader behaviors and cultural conditions that effectively transform a traditional school to a deeper learning school, and whether those behaviors and conditions do, as Fullan and Kirtman claim, change "the nature of leadership" (2019, p. 106).

Literature Review

Principal leadership significantly impacts learning, both in more traditional and deeper learning schools (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2024; Richardson et al., 2021). This is consistent with broader organizational theories, such as Hambrick and Mason's Upper Echelons theory, which suggests that the vision, behaviors, mindsets, and priorities of the formal leader tend to trickle throughout and significantly impact the rest of the organization (1984). As Ellwood

Cubberly, a pioneer in the field of educational leadership, remarked over a century ago, "As is the principal, so is the school" (1919, p. 351).

Educational leaders operating within a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment (VUCA), pursuing harder-to-measure long-term outcomes will not likely find success relying on traditional approaches to leadership that rely heavily on bureaucracy, reliability, predictability, accountability, command-and-control, standardization, and compliance (Taylor, 1911). Rather, deeper learning cultures tend to rely on vision, trust, collaboration, innovation, risk taking, and a deeper commitment to a higher purpose (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

In this era of high stakes accountability, some educators feel that they are being asked by score-focused leaders to "set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation" resulting in "inner conflicts, inauthenticity and resistance" (Ball, 2003, p. 215).

In contrast, systems designed for deeper learning seem to help educators reconnect with their deeply held values and sense of higher purpose. Leading with higher purpose is not a matter of abandoning traditional outcomes; rather, leading with higher purpose places the prosocial long-term goals of deeper learning as the organizational driver, and as a result short-term traditional outcomes also improve (AIR, 2016; Yang et al., 2016; Rickles et al., 2016; Zeiser et al., 2014). Quinn & Thakor assert that leaders that tap into a powerful "prosocial goal that is defined not in terms of [short-term] output but in terms of the contribution the organization makes to society" will likely achieve both their desired short-term outcomes of student academic learning and long-term outcomes of student flourishing (2019, p. 3).

Background and Research Questions

In 2019, a state in the western United States published a state portrait of a graduate, which sought to clarify and support deeper learning. While not widespread, some schools and districts across the state courageously worked to respond to this deeper learning call. Within this state's context, the purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions:

Question 1. What leadership behaviors support the transformation from a traditional school to a deeper learning school?

Question 2. What cultural conditions are conducive to the transformation from a traditional school to a deeper learning school?

Methods

This study was carried out in two phases. During phase one we used a key informant snowball sampling approach to invite deeper learning leaders to participate in focus group discussions (Patton, 2015). We formed focus groups comprised of district, secondary and elementary school leaders from across the state. Employing a semi-structured interview protocol, we gave participants a scenario and asked them how to help the scenario school transform into a deeper learning school. Initial coding was completed by a blind reviewer and one of the lead researchers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

We compared themes, followed up with axial and selective coding, and shared our findings with participants through a member checking process that elicited participants' feedback and clarification.

During phase two we identified a positive deviant critical case school that

exemplified many of the deeper learning conditions and behaviors identified in phase 1 (Patton, 2015). This was a traditional comprehensive public high school that had an ethnically and economically diverse student population of approximately 1,400 students, well above average test scores, and had a disproportionately high number of students taking and passing Advanced Placement (AP) tests.

We conducted a one-hour focus group with 24 positive outlier teachers and administrators at this school and administered a survey containing 20 open-ended questions to these 24 positive outlier educators. Their responses were then independently coded by two researchers and a third coder conducted a thematic analysis of survey responses using artificial intelligence (Morgan, 2023). These three coders then conducted cross-coder comparisons of themes, patterns, and relationships from the three separate coding approaches.

Throughout the findings sections, participants are identified using alphanumeric codes to preserve anonymity. Letters indicate participant roles (e.g., E = educator, A = administrator, G = focus group participant), and numbers distinguish individual respondents.

Findings to Question 1: Leadership Behaviors for Deeper Learning

To summarize the most salient leadership behaviors identified across both phases of the study, we present the major themes along with their relative frequency and prevalence among participants (see Table 1). These findings highlight the leadership actions most consistently associated with successful deeper learning implementation.

Table 1*Leadership Behaviors Supporting Deeper Learning: Frequency and Prevalence of Themes*

Major Theme	% of educators who mentioned theme	# of theme mentions
Own, model, and communicate a higher purpose	79%	50
Distribute leadership and co-create shared vision	79%	46
Foster collaboration inside and outside the school	67%	43
Adapt, problem solve, and innovate.	58%	28
Consistently and patiently stay the course	88%	108

Own, Model, and Communicate a Higher Purpose

An overwhelming majority of teachers spoke about the importance of their leader owning, modeling, and communicating the school's higher purpose. Unsurprisingly, leading with higher purpose required the principal to be authentic in his belief in and pursuit of deeper learning. Indeed, the principal's "passion for deeper learning is what leads others to follow him. It's constantly something that is in his dialogue and is constantly reflected in his actions" (E19).

Multiple teachers reported that this passion spread throughout the school as the principal owned, modeled, and communicated the school's higher purpose through deeper learning. "As a new teacher coming in, not really knowing what it was going to be like, seeing that passion for that goal and having it not be just something that is said, but something that is clearly shown in every conversation and every action, that is what made me want to jump on more completely" (G1). "The principal must truly own the vision and still be 100% engaged.

If the principal simply turns it over to someone else, it won't flourish as effectively as if they own it" (E21). A school leader in Phase 1 shared, "You can't just be telling them what to do, you know? I mean, you've got to model through the meetings you lead, through the way you conduct business, through the way you collaborate ... It starts with us. We have to model that which we seek" (A5).

This sense of higher purpose, exhibited by the principal and felt by the teachers, tapped into a profound source of teacher motivation, which, in turn, changed how the teachers approached their work. Comments on how deeper learning tapped into teacher higher purpose were numerous: "It has given me a greater sense of purpose to what I do in my classroom, and it's given me more motivation to do a better job" (E19); "I have watched teachers, including myself become reinvigorated through deeper learning" (E12); "Diving into deeper learning will help you realign with your 'why' on becoming a teacher in the first place" (E1); "It gives additional purpose as opposed to just teaching my specific

content. It gives me a drive and reason to teach lifelong skills I believe in” (E3).

One teacher explained that while pursuing traditional outcomes “you can have really effective leadership; but I can effectively lead people to McDonalds, or I can effectively lead people to some really great restaurant... You can have really great effective leadership but if you're going somewhere that's kind of meh, who cares? But really great leadership is taking you to a really awesome place. It's a big difference. And I think that's for me what deeper learning is here. I feel like I'm being led somewhere I want to be” (G1).

Co-create a shared vision and distribute leadership

While a shared higher purpose facilitated the creation of a school vision, the principal also intentionally co-created that vision with his faculty and staff. Because the principal allowed the teachers access to the vision creation process, teachers felt ownership and commitment for the school's goals and were able to contribute their unique strengths in pursuit of those goals.

One teacher described how the deeper learning initiative may have differed if the principal had not been inclusive in his efforts: “If it was just the principal or administration telling the faculty that deeper learning was the direction the school was going to go, then we would have met quite a bit of resistance. Instead, teachers were part of the conversation all along and were able to give their input and opinions which created more ownership than just buy in” (E14).

Teacher commitment to the co-created school vision was further increased by the principal's insistence on distributed leadership. Teachers were viewed as leaders in their own classrooms who were responsible for setting deeper learning goals and creating curriculum

that would adhere to those benchmarks. For deeper learning “feels much more authentic and student focused when we have teachers leading the efforts in their own classrooms” (E15). Though distributed leadership is antithetical to more traditional command and control forms of school leadership, teachers saw it as “crucial” (E21) to their deeper learning efforts, likely due to the powerful combination of stewardship and collaboration which distributed leadership fosters.

Learn & collaborate with others inside & outside school or district

As deeper learning was a relatively new idea for some teachers, the principal provided “time and space” (E15) to collaborate on how they integrated deeper learning into their respective classrooms. According to one teacher, “weekly collaboration has helped me come up with a lot of new ideas to foster deeper learning.

It helped to collaborate with my own team, but it has also helped to collaborate with other members of the faculty. I never would have been able to come up with ideas all on my own, but I've been able to take bits and pieces from other people and apply them to my own classroom and my own interactions” (E19). Teachers found that “cross-departmental teaming” (E5) and collaboration was especially important as they learned how to integrate deeper learning into their curriculums. Some teachers also found great value in educating themselves about deeper learning by visiting other deeper learning schools, going to conferences, and seeking other professional development opportunities.

In particular, one teacher experienced a shift from a traditional teaching mindset to a deeper learning mindset while attending “a conference ... that was about deeper learning ... Seeing others talk about it and seeing the results they've had, made it feel legit and concrete to want to move forward” (E7). Thus,

the principal promoted internal, cross-departmental learning opportunities and provided resources to learn and collaborate with educators outside of the school, which resulted in a highly collaborative, deeper learning-focused environment.

Adapt resources & plans, flexibly problem solve, & creatively innovate

Educational leaders at deeper learning schools seem to find ways to adapt and align seemingly constraining logistical and compliance considerations (architectural design, budget allocations, schedules, staffing ratios, etc.) with their school's shared deeper learning vision. Some leaders are surprised to learn that what they initially viewed as set obstacles and parameters were merely the remnants of tradition ready to be re-examined and reshaped.

Deeper learning schools have a creative and flexible can-do mindset that often results in productive problem solving and innovation aligned with their deeper learning priorities. One school leader observed, "We have to throw out our preconceived notions of what it will look like, 'cause it's going to be unpredictable, and that's not a bad thing. That's what it really should be" (A5). A special educator at the case-study school described: "Deeper learning doesn't come from doing the same things that we've always done; it requires innovation ...

We began to discuss the possibility of incorporating deeper learning into IEPs and how impactful it could be. After that conversation, I was determined to come up with a way to combine deeper learning and IEPs. I had collaborated with the English 11 team each week ... I knew what legal requirements needed to be included in an IEP, so I was able to adjust it as needed to make [deeper learning] the driving factor of each

IEP. IEPs have become much more enjoyable for me and parents and have become much more meaningful" (E19).

The case study school re-arranged collaboration schedules, professional development offerings, hiring, assessment, grading, and other seemingly inflexible educational fixtures to support their deeper learning vision. This has required the school to learn how to "be comfortable with being uncomfortable ... On this journey, there is no one way, and our next steps are usually not clear until we've taken the previous steps" (E21).

Consistently stay the course and have patience in the process

Educators were relieved by how consistent the principal was in signaling the importance of deeper learning as their primary objective over many years. The consistency of deeper learning messaging, combined with moral support, kept deeper learning from fading into the bin of past initiatives. As one teacher shared, the principal "had a vision and did NOT give up but was a great cheerleader for us to keep trying" (E10).

This helped to counteract the "'new' educational ideas (that) come and go every other year it seems. It was great to focus on the same idea(s) year after year!" (E10). Keeping focused on deeper learning also bred a culture of "continuity ... trust and familiarity and safety" (E20) which helped teachers wholeheartedly embrace deeper learning. Another teacher advised: "Be patient. This is not a one-year implementation. But the results are so worth it" (E7). Another teacher observed, "We've been talking about this for years now and that makes it easier ... It was a little clunky at first and now it feels so natural" (E1).

Findings to Question 2: Cultural Conditions for Deeper Learning

In addition to leadership behaviors, participants emphasized several cultural conditions

necessary to support deeper learning. Table 2 summarizes these conditions, including their relative frequency and the proportion of educators who referenced each theme.

Table 2

Cultural Conditions Supporting Deeper Learning: Frequency and Prevalence of Themes

Major Theme	% of educators who mentioned theme	# of theme mentions
Safety and encouragement	96%	73
Trust and autonomy	88%	65
Humility and partnership	58%	23

Psychological Safety and Candor

Leadership had a prominent role in establishing the psychological safety necessary for teachers to be candid (Edmondson, 1999). Many teachers commented on the high levels of psychological safety at the case study school: “I never felt like I would get in trouble for something that I said because from the very beginning, it was very clear that my honest thoughts and opinions were wanted” (E19); “the permission from the principal has allowed for teachers and staff to feel safe to express their opinions” (E14).

The perception that difficult opinions could be honestly shared existed not only vertically between the principal and teachers, but horizontally between coworkers as well: “We can share ideas and even negative feedback with leaders and peers. Sometimes our ideas are not implemented but we are given reason why so that it makes sense” (E2). High levels of psychological safety led to a culture of

candor: “I feel that I can be honest about what is actually happening and I don't need to lie to look good/better ... we talk honestly and openly about what is actually happening and then create a real plan for improvement rather than just acting like we are already perfect” (E6). Another teacher said “I offered candor on multiple occasions. It was never used against me, and when I offered candid ideas the leadership of the school sought to understand where I was coming from. Sometimes it changed the scope of what we were doing and other times it didn't but I felt heard and empowered” (E12).

Safety Net of Permission and Encouragement

In addition to the need to speak candidly and openly, teachers needed leaders to give them a safety net by providing explicit permission and encouragement to take the risks necessary to pursue deeper learning. One educator stated

that “teachers need to know it's ok to do something out of the realm of content, and that if we make a mistake, we can learn from it and not be ‘penalized’” (E3).

That safety net needs to be explicitly communicated; in the words of another teacher, “administrative backing allows teachers to innovate. No teacher is going to openly try something that may ‘fail’ without express permission from administration” (E11). This safety net requires both consistent communication and tangible support: “At no point do we come down and say ‘Oh, you tried that and your AP test results went down by two percent, so let's have a sit-down conversation ... What support can we offer you’” (G1)? When the safety net is established, it transforms the teacher experience: “I know that I can try new ideas in my classroom without fear of repercussions. It is extremely freeing and makes me excited to come to work every day. I love my job and I feel I am able to show that to my students and be a much better teacher because of it” (E6).

Trust and autonomy

Deeper learning was facilitated by teachers feeling trusted, especially as they integrated novel material into their classrooms. Teachers shared that “being trusted as a professional teacher without being micromanaged is game changing” (E2), and “I know my admin trusts me to do the job they hired me for. I don't feel like I come to work walking on eggshells or constantly being watched/critiqued” (E6).

The trust extended by administration allowed greater autonomy for teachers. Autonomy enabled some teachers to engage more fully in deeper learning and “move forward with their own ideas in pursuit of deeper learning” (E3), introducing a level of personalization and ownership which was encouraged by the principal.

Other teachers, however, chose to integrate deeper learning at a slower pace, which, crucially, was also supported. “Our culture also feels very opt-in. We as teachers have the opportunity to work with each other ... and learn lots of things, but we are not forced to focus on anything” (E15). Perceptions of trustworthiness, combined with an opt-in culture that did not force teachers to implement deeper learning, appeared to increase engagement while creating an atmosphere which respected teacher agency and autonomy.

Humility and partnership

Humility and partnership between the administration and teachers were crucial in fostering a deeper learning culture. One of the leaders in Phase 1 described the importance of partnering with teachers in this work: “I'm going to jump in the pit with you. I'm going to jump in that learning pit and we're going to figure out how to do this together” (A13).

Teachers in the case study school felt like they were equal partners with leadership instead of mere observers, a sentiment that arose from the principal's humble orientation. “How lucky I am to have a principal that sees the faculty as his equals. I have felt that I had a voice and had the ability to impact the school” (E12).

One story exemplifies how the principal embodied the humility necessary to truly partner with his staff: “I clearly remember a PD day in which I jokingly asked my principal if he would take the parent phone calls if I shifted a specific grading and assessment policy. I was mildly shocked when he said ‘yes’. I spent the weeks of my Christmas break adjusting my policies and procedures. I was not only encouraged, I was excited. It changed my whole perception of the teacher-administrator relationship” (E11). The principal summarized it this way, “It really boils down to how you view other people. Do you view other people as

amazing and able ... or do you view people as they need to be told what to do? I think it's impossible to lead a deeper learning initiative if you believe at your core that people need to be told what to do. Because I think people are brilliant, and if we create the right conditions ... people will amaze us! (A6)."

Discussion

Our findings on the leadership behaviors and conditions supportive of deeper learning align with other recent findings (Harris et al., 2024; Richardson et al., 2024; Sliwka et al., 2024). In particular, the leadership practices and cultural conditions found by Malin et al. (2024) bear striking resemblance; namely, that deeper learning lends itself to an entrepreneurial culture in which risk and failure are ubiquitous, necessitating conditions of openness, collaboration, and trust, similar to the green-light culture for which Kay and Boss (2022) advocate.

Indeed, our study also reinforces other findings that certain leadership behaviors and cultures are not suited to deeper learning schools. As one example, in their study of deeper learning schools, Boren and colleagues found that it was "incompatible for principals to ask teachers to more fully engage students' minds, hands, and hearts through deeper, more distributed classroom learning while using traditional top-down, principal-centric leadership approaches with their teachers" (2021, p. 21).

In addition to pairing leadership behaviors with cultural conditions our research unveils a powerful mechanism which accelerates deeper learning initiatives: higher purpose. Teachers want to see their students flourish and feel deeply called to help students develop (Brunetti, 2001). An individual's sense of purpose paired with the desire to make a societal contribution provides a powerful orienting and motivating force steeped in moral

meaning (Gulati, 2022). Indeed, deeper learning's emphasis on whole child development and humanization (Mehta & Fine, 2019) creates powerful symmetry between deeper learning's objectives and teacher higher purpose.

In our study the principal tapped into the well of teacher higher purpose by humanizing both students and teachers, which propelled the deeper learning initiative forward. Thus, we argue that a leader's ability to delineate and communicate how deeper learning supports a shared sense of higher purpose makes leading deeper learning unique from more traditional educational leadership.

Limitations

This study has its share of limitations. Even though we interviewed leaders at K-12 institutions, the only teachers included in this study were at the case study high school. On the other hand, high schools may suffer from greater barriers to deeper learning than other institutions (Mehta & Fine, 2019), so it is possible that this study shows robust leadership conditions and behaviors that function in a more resistant environment.

Further research should consider whether these behaviors and conditions function similarly at elementary and middle schools. Second, we conducted this study with a purposeful sample of positive outliers. It would be beneficial to collect a broader sample of teachers at deeper learning schools.

Finally, the leader at our primary high school had several years to enact behaviors and cultivate cultural conditions that fostered a deeper learning environment. We acknowledge that since deeper learning is still gaining traction, many leaders will be relatively new and inexperienced in leading deeper learning; thus, research examining leadership at an earlier point in a deeper learning initiative

could provide valuable insights regarding how deeper learning leadership operates at different stages of the process.

Conclusion

Not only will improving learning for students better prepare them for the rigors and opportunities of the future, it will likely result in schools that are more humane, engaging, and transformative. As one leader summarized, “If you're focused on deeper learning and the whole child, you're really engaged, you're

really invested, and your job is fun. You know, it's exciting” (A12).

The behaviors and conditions needed to support the complexities and challenges of deeper learning will require ongoing research and investigation. Understanding how we can better develop humane, compassionate, “future-ready” graduates must be a priority for all educators in any sphere, and it will only happen with supportive school and district leadership. This study helps move this important conversation to a deeper level.

Author Biographies

Ben Quist is a PhD candidate in management and organization at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business. His research focuses on productive conflict resolution, with particular emphasis on moral and value conflicts. E-mail: benquist@umich.edu

David Boren is an associate clinical professor in Brigham Young University’s Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations. His research focuses on leading deeper learning, school leader preparation and development, and fostering trust and wellbeing in schools. E-mail: david_boren@byu.edu

Joe Jensen is the superintendent of Timpanogos School District and an adjunct professor in Brigham Young University’s Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations. His research focuses on leading deeper learning and administrator development. E-mail: jjenson@timpsd.org

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Overcoming Barriers to Restorative Practices Implementation: What District Leaders Can Do

Elise T. Pas, PhD
Research Professor
Department of Mental Health
Bloomberg School of Public Health
Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD

Shoshana Oppenheim, MSPH
SITE Coordinator
Saga Education
Chicago, IL

Thomas David Graham, MPH
Evaluation Specialist II
Institute of Clinical Excellence and Innovation
Centerstone Behavioral Health
Nashville, TN

Mia N. Campbell Ukejiana, MHS
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Mental Health
Bloomberg School of Public Health
Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD

Abstract

Restorative practices (RP) are increasingly written into discipline policy. RP has demonstrated improvements in school discipline, relationships, and climate but implementation challenges exist. This qualitative study explores these challenges with ten district personnel. Data were transcribed and coded by three authors. Five themes emerged from thematic analysis by all authors: investments (i.e., in training, coaching, and time), supportive state and local policy, data and accountability (i.e., to examine implementation and outcomes), shifted mindsets and school culture, and alignment (i.e., with other district initiatives). Key challenges included limited resources and capacity, incompatible belief systems, lacking policy clarity and practice guidelines, and too many siloed initiatives. To improve scaling and sustainability, participants sought clear implementation and evaluation guidance, alignment, and training networks.

Key Words

restorative practices, implementation drivers, implementation barriers, qualitative research, district interviews, practitioner needs

Introduction

There is emerging policy and practice interest in Restorative Justice in K-12 schools. In criminal justice, Restorative Justice (RJ) shifts traditional methods of crime response to an approach defined by restoring or repairing harm, engaging the community in developing resolutions, and supporting re-entry into the community (United Nations, 2003). The adaptation of RJ within the educational context, often referred to as Restorative Practices (RP), focuses on achieving school safety while maintaining an inclusive school culture built on strong relationships (Fronius et al., 2019). As of 2020, 21 states adopted laws noting implementation of school-based RJ/RP as an alternative to exclusionary discipline (Georgetown Law, 2020).

This policy approach contrasts with “zero tolerance” policies that mapped specific safety-related behavioral infractions to exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions, expulsions) responses due to concerns about drugs and violence in schools (i.e., in tandem with the criminal justice War on Drugs in the 1980s). Over time, these “zero tolerance” responses came to be used for non-safety infractions, including relational concerns like disobedience and disrespect (Gregory & Evans, 2020). Of growing concern is the high frequency of their use, systematic inequities in their use based on student race and ethnicity, and the increasingly clear link between schools’ use of exclusionary discipline and subsequent youth criminal justice involvement and incarceration, often described as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (e.g., Hemez et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2014). This has resulted in increasing attention toward RP as a potential solution by school districts.

In education, RP consists of both preventive practices to foster healthy relationships within learning communities and responsive practices that can repair damage

caused by harmful incidents (Song & Swearer, 2016). A core prevention tenet is that authentic relationships between students and teachers will shift interactions positively and promote improved student engagement.

To create these foundational relationships, there is universal and regular engagement in a community building circle (CBC) where youth and teachers share personal ideas, perspectives, and experiences in response to specific prompts, while sitting in a circle and utilizing a “talking stick” to promote power-sharing and engaged listening (McCluskey, 2018).

It is hypothesized that these preventive practices lay an important foundation for responsive practices. RP response to incidents include restorative dialogue, when minor issues are addressed informally to avoid wider conflict often using a set of five open-ended questions, and restorative conferences, where parties in conflict convene for reconciliation with a practitioner to repair harm and determine appropriate sanctions for the person who perpetrated (Fronius et al., 2019).

Though most of the early research focused on responsive practices (Fronius et al., 2019), recent rigorous studies testing preventive school-wide practices demonstrate reductions in overall discipline incidents, and improved relationships and climate (Augustine et al., 2018; Bonell et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2022) though not all studies show these impacts (Acosta et al., 2019).

Further, research about implementation research has lagged, particularly in relation to large scale efforts (Fronius et al., 2019), leaving unanswered questions for districts on how to best support implementation. There are also gaps with policy. Despite the promise of these preventive RP practices, only a couple of states’

laws frame RJ/RP as a whole school and preventive approach where nearly all focus on RP as a responsive action (Georgetown Law, 2020).

“Implementation science,” which has emerged to better understand the factors related to successful and unsuccessful implementation of interventions across contexts, is a useful lens for RP implementation research. Implementation science documents barriers and drivers of implementation that are organizational in nature (e.g., structures that facilitate or act as barriers), individual (e.g., beliefs, knowledge, efficacy, competency), and practice/framework features (e.g., see Scaccia et al., 2015; Han & Weiss, 2005, NIRN, 2015) that are applicable to RP. This field has emerged in response to the challenges that a wide range of fields, including education and physical, behavioral, and mental health, face with implementation.

Current study

Applying implementation science to RP implementation, it is expected that a range of organization, person, and framework-specific factors relate to implementation challenges. To examine this explicitly, we engaged key informants across a state with a law supporting a shift to preventive restorative approaches about their districts’ implementation experiences.

Our research questions were:

- (1) How do districts support implementation in schools?
- (2) What are facilitators of implementation?
- (3) What are the challenges of implementation?
- (4) What are the resources needed to support implementation of restorative practices?

This study fills important research and practice guideline gaps by elucidating ways key education leaders can scale and sustain RP

efforts by anticipating challenges and needs for implementation.

Method

Study context

In 2019, the state assembly passed a law requiring that “restorative approaches” be integrated into each local education agency’s discipline policy. This arose from state concerns that schools were excluding too many students, especially minoritized students, with out-of-school suspensions and the impacts this had on student engagement and the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2014).

While the law provided a range of “restorative approaches,” we were specifically interested in RP. The state has county-based districts which range in size, with the smallest school system consisting of five schools serving about 1,700 students and the largest with 210 schools serving over 160,000 students.

Participants

District personnel whose job duties included supervising and/or overseeing training, technical assistance, coaching, or other support for RP in schools served as key informants.

There were five participating districts with ten key informants in total. For two of the districts, only one key informant attended, there were two key informants present for two districts, and one district had four informants present. Most personnel had a coordinator or director role, and some had decision-making power with modest budgets allocated to RP. None had direct supervisory roles over school leaders or teachers.

Districts were selected to represent the geography of the state (i.e., including urban, suburban, rural, and fringe communities), the range of district sizes (i.e., small to large, where

the extremes were not included), and the known number or years since beginning RP implementation. The lead author conducted the interviews with another university partner.

Qualitative method

The study used focus group interviews to collect data rooted in a blended paradigm of pragmatist and constructivist philosophies (Savin-Baden & Sajor, 2014). Drawing upon the pragmatist philosophy, we aimed to address a practice-driven research question and balance different qualitative analytic approaches (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Utilizing interviews and multiple analyses (see below) allowed the method to center on participant experiences, aligning to the constructivist philosophy.

Data collection procedure

Qualitative data were collected in late 2021 with five districts through either a focus group or individual interview following a single protocol. Questions elicited input about organization, implementer, and programmatic barriers and facilitators related to training and ongoing support procedures, budgets, data collection, implementation successes, challenges and areas for growth, alignment of multiple “restorative approaches,” and RP-supportive district and state infrastructure. The interviews were conducted using a conversational style (Krueger, 2014). This study was deemed non-human subjects research by the authors’ Institutional Review Board.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed by Rev.com and the lead author de-identified all transcripts before review. The lead and two other authors read all transcripts three times: once for holistic understanding, once for coding/tagging content, and a third time to identify categories or themes (Elliott, 2018). Our thematic analysis blended inductive and deductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We had specific research

questions that anchored the codes (i.e., support provided and needed, barriers, and facilitators) without a priori coding dictionary. Coders did so independently and then extracted codes into a new document for discussion by the three authors. These data were then re-read by the lead and second author multiple times, working both independently and collaboratively through discussion, to distill coded data, refine themes and sub-themes, and thereby re-organize the data. At this point, we noted how final themes related to known implementation science theories, following more of a deductive approach.

Positionality

As researcher identities, experiences, and training impact how we interpret qualitative data, we include a positionality statement for all authors to provide context. The first author is a white female research faculty member and school psychologist whose research focuses on state-wide implementation of school-based prevention. The second author is a white female with experience as an educator and public health researcher focused on eliminating disparities in health and education. The third author is a white male with experience in comprehensive and therapeutic schooling environments who researches school-based mental health. The fourth author is a Black female public health researcher and graduate student who studies the intersection of mental health, social justice, and environmental factors.

Results

Five themes related to all research questions were extracted from the thematic analysis and included: 1) investments, 2) supportive state and local policy, 3) data and accountability, 4) shifted mindsets and school culture, and 5) alignment. Some of these themes contained multiple sub-themes and many are interrelated.

Investments

Participants shared the importance of investing time and resources into training and coaching. Investments were context-dependent and related to district size, scaling approach, and years since implementation launch.

Training and coaching with external partners

Participants named the value of partnerships in providing training and ongoing coaching to schools and the limited capacity of schools and districts to implement independently.

Most districts partnered with external organizations for training, and each provided some internal support. One school district described integrating training with other priorities (e.g., multi-tiered system of supports). Some districts had a train-the-trainers model, and others had a coaching model with school-based champions/coordinators. One district leader explained that following an external training, they used a train-the-trainer model “so we built our capacity immediately.

So, we trained 12 trainers and then like really started doing lots of trainings” for school-based professionals. Participants also talked about district training, including “one of the goals that we have as a district team is to build capacity in the district, just in their knowledge of what restorative practices is.” They also expressed thinking critically about how to invest in and expand coaching efforts.

An avenue identified was a regional or state-wide network, where one participant reflected, “I’m even wondering; if all of us LEAs [local education agencies] are trying to figure out how do we get more coaching, could we establish two or three times a year where there is some LEA wide trainings for restorative practices? And so, between all the different counties, if we had one person from

each, we could create smaller teams that could do the training.”

Champions

Participants identified district-level and school-based champions (e.g., administrators, teachers, and social workers) as key players to support implementer buy-in and implementation.

District champions were established through district “positions to this work, which has been instrumental in supporting this process.”

Speaking to school champions, one person described “prior to full building training, we ensured that we had what we call champions. So, we took about an eighth of our staff and trained them ahead of time and let them get comfortable for about a year ... And then we came back with full training, so that the champions could support the rest of their colleagues.”

Funding

There was variability in how districts paid for training and supports. Most districts voiced uncertainty about long-term funding.

Participants named COVID relief, Title II, and state funds, among others as specific financial tools to support RP implementation. Many identified that clear and consistent funding streams would be helpful. One participant seeking state investment shared, “I think...that if we're required to do it [RP], it can't always fall on the [district] system to pick up the time for it. From a budgetary standpoint... Money's tight.”

Allocated time

Time was identified as a needed investment to facilitate implementation, and participants spoke to the importance of required time in the school day. Some districts blocked time in the school schedule for teachers to conduct proactive CBCs. They also raised the importance of school-based protected time.

One person shared that at one school, “there are people that want to do other things during that time period and the administrators, and the counselor are adamant. ‘You don’t pull kids; you don’t do testing. You don’t do interventions. This is what the entire school is doing for that first part of the day. And it is sacred and will not be touched.’”

Adequate staffing

Issues with investments in allocated time, training, and funding for RP were exacerbated by high rates of turnover, particularly among leadership, and by teacher shortages following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking to the impact of turnover, a participant noted “you might have a school where all of your administrators are trained, and you might have a school where no one is trained anymore, because we’ve had that attrition for two years.” Further, some schools and districts struggled to find adequate time to train new teachers and money to compensate them for time spent in training.

Supportive State and Local Policy

State policy and guidelines informed RP implementation. Interviewed districts spoke to how state and local regulations supported their implementation and shared desired state supports to enhance implementation.

State regulations

Most interviewed districts began implementation prior to the 2019 legislation, in response to earlier student conduct guidelines and regulations, particularly related to disproportionality in exclusionary discipline. One participant shared, “the discipline regs in 2000 and I don’t know, ’14, ’15 is when RP first started showing up in some language and we, at that point, I think all kind of put our heads together [about how to shift to RP].” Another district shared how critical the 2019 regulations were to implementing RP: “we were one of the

last few that had not directly embedded restorative approaches, restorative practices in our discipline work. So that was part of my responsibility when I first came on in this role, was to work on that policy, and then really revamp our whole discipline matrix to make sure that this piece was reflected in there.”

Desired state policy and regulations

Participants expressed the need for top-down messaging to support district leaders in gaining buy-in across all personnel and providing clear expectations for practice, noting that vague language created challenges to find a unified vision for this work. One participant noted how it feels critical to have “very, very, very clear messaging straight from [the state department of education], straight from legislature to administrators, that this is the path we’re going in and this is what the path looks like, as opposed to ‘there’s this new thing.’” Another participant shared a need for “some overarching roadmap for [school] systems in terms of what it looks like along the way from an implementation to ... sustainability for folks to be able to see” and asking, “what are some things that are the non-negotiables that need to happen to be considered RP? And how can the state support folks to get there?”

Local implementation policies from district and school leaders

Given the guidance from state regulations, participants spoke to the role of district policies. Multiple participants emphasized the importance of school board and superintendent buy-in to secure needed funding and resources. One shared, “stuff that comes from the top down is going to get implemented as opposed to [district personnel] receiving stuff from the state at our level and go up. So, when your superintendent or your board says, ‘This is what we’re going to do,’ guess what, this is what we’re going to do. And that’s where money gets allocated.”

Data and Accountability

Participants shared the importance of collecting data to track implementation and to examine the effects of RP and shared consideration of different evaluation efforts. They discussed looking at discipline data, training records, and surveys from external partners. Some spoke to the challenges measuring fidelity and raised concerns that RP was not being implemented as intended. They expressed interest in identifying and utilizing meaningful fidelity and outcome measures. One participant summarized these challenges by saying, “we really want to include the word integrity with the word fidelity, because it's easy to do a checklist. But where are you going to get the integrity piece from? And how can you assess the integrity? It's easy to say, every teacher's doing a circle... but did that impact the culture and climate? Did it impact a feeling of belongingness, a feeling of connectedness, inclusion?”

Shifted Mindsets and School Culture

There was a repeated discussion about mindset and culture and how that intersected with buy-in and implementation.

Required shifts

Participants shared that implementing RP required building strong teacher-student relationships that were less hierarchical, representing a shift for many schools and educators, which could be hard to get staff buy-in for. A participant reflected, “I don't know that everybody believes in that power of relationships” illustrating implementer barriers. A leader also noted how a mindset shift was needed for moving away from exclusionary discipline: “we're not trying to get rid of kids here. There's no getting rid of them. Like that's part of that reframing of restorative...they're coming back to you. And it's never the goal to get rid of them ... so that is a very different mindset than what those conversations looked like before I came into this role.” They also spoke about how schools have long focused

strictly on academics and RP represented a shift from that too. One participant shared, “for the first time in 25 years, we as a [school] system are looking at social emotional learning as just as big a priority as academic learning” indicating how new this approach was for schools.

Further, they shared that RP implementation can dynamically shape and inform school culture. “After going to the four-day training, it really showed me that this is really about creating a climate and a culture. It's not about just stopping suspensions.” Another reflected on how RP shifted culture among teachers outside of the classroom as well. “This started out [as] a focus on the school-to-prison pipeline and reducing exclusionary discipline for students, but it has quickly become much more about adults.” And continued, “it has grown to include adult satisfaction in their jobs and ability to work together.”

Tools and activities that influence mindset

Participants spoke about strategies to support mindset shifts including thoughtfully selecting who to train, creating incentive systems, and providing space for adults to engage in restorative practices themselves. One district shared how just exposing people to the practices could shift their approach with youth, while also talking about engaging *all* adults. One person highlighted their engagement of school resource officers and said: “If I can get cops to do circles, even if it's instructional circles in their DARE class, and they can see the benefits of it ... And then the five questions, if you give the five questions to a cop, that changes their whole investigation strategy.” Another district collaborated with external partners to build administrator buy-in with regular administrator circles and noted how much the administrators appreciated it. “Some of those circles, they're still meeting on their own ... They love the space that was created for them. And it just organically grew into

something else that some of the cohorts continue to meet.” To incentivize training, one district “paid people to come and get the training, which of course when you pay people to come for a training, you get all walks of life. But that's also interesting because people who wouldn't necessarily sign up for that are like ‘Oh, well I need [professional development or PD credits] ...’ And it's [a state department of education PD] credit. So, we make it one [state] credit and they get paid to come and so that's very enticing to people.”

Alignment

Because the state law listed a range of “restorative approaches” (of which, RP was one), most districts were implementing many other approaches in tandem with RP, including social emotional learning (SEL), trauma-informed care, and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and struggled to align them. Participants reflected on the importance of alignment and recognized that there were too many siloed initiatives. A participant shared, “we had asked [schools] for a PBIS action plan [and] in the spring, we asked for the RP action plan. So, another thing that we'll have to work through is how many different action plans do [they] need? Because ultimately a lot of this stuff should be under one umbrella of planning.”

As a solution, many districts built restorative practices into their multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). Given the state's long history building PBIS infrastructure, they shared that they leveraged the concepts taught in PBIS about the need for data, systems, and practices to support RP implementation and outcomes. One participant said, “prior to all of this starting, PBIS had been in place for quite a long time in the district and so...that's been an integral piece of anchoring the work we're doing now to work that's been done for a long time through the PBIS framework.” Another participant described the natural alignment of

RP to PBIS initiatives: “restorative practices isn't a new thing to add to your plate. It's the plate with which you put everything else on.” Other leaders shared similar sentiments about RP's deep ties to SEL, mental health supports, and trauma-informed approaches, all efforts that have received increased attention by districts in recent years.

Discussion

The themes that emerged indicate that implementation of RP is complex and multilayered with several facilitators and barriers to implementation. As evidenced in the number of sub-themes and quotes, investments followed by policy were main topics of multifaceted discussion. Discussion of mindsets and culture threaded through many discussion and related to programmatic features and buy-in. Data and alignment were discussed in all interviews but to a lesser degree. In looking to the field of implementation science, most themes map well to the “implementation drivers” identified for school-based implementation by the National

Implementation Research Network (NIRN, 2015). These drivers include: (1) competency (i.e., features that promote individuals' abilities to implement), which participants discussed as barriers with teacher and leader buy-in and the school culture, (2) organization (i.e., infrastructural features that reduce implementation barriers, track progress, and provide needed investments and supports), which participants described as barriers and facilitators of investments as well as in their described need for better data and alignment, and (3) leadership (i.e., the people and strategies that promote and sustain implementation), which participants referenced through discussions of champions and offering opportunities for training.

Participants also identified clear gaps and concerns for district and state leaders to

address. These included sources of funding and protected time, guidance for alignment of related initiatives, and support for evaluation, including identifying meaningful measures of fidelity and school climate and student outcomes.

District participants also identified some ways to build efficiency through cross-district, regional, and state partnerships; consideration of those connections and building state-wide or within state infrastructure could be both fiscally efficient and support gaps in district's current capacity. District leaders may consider how to leverage relationships with university partners to support these training goals but also measurement and evaluation goals.

Notably, research also maintains that appropriate policies on multiple administrative levels are needed to support the school culture shift necessary to improve individual outcomes (Fagan et al., 2019), which was highlighted in participant responses discussing district capacity (e.g., dedicated district roles and training of district personnel).

There was consistent emphasis in the need both for clear policy and practice guidelines; there was recognition that policy could enhance buy-in and that clarity in core components of RP would help support implementation.

Emerging literature has also examined how implementation strategies can boost implementation by improving drivers or off-setting barriers to implementation. Identified

implementation strategies can address buy-in, readiness, and alignment (Cook et al., 2019).

While ongoing coaching is known to support implementation within research and by practitioners, research also suggests that first addressing people's mindsets and belief systems that may run counter to an intervention shows promise for improving implementation (e.g., Larson et al., 2021) and may have relevance to RP implementation given these themes. This may be an area for districts to consider.

In fact, some participants alluded to this in discussion about mindset shifts that followed adults engaging in the practices themselves and feeling the impacts of the practices (e.g., in the case of administrator circles and with SROs).

Conclusion

A growing body of research suggests RP can be impactful in improving school discipline and many states require or encourage their implementation; however, school districts have limited guidance on how to best implement RP.

This study clarifies that investments in external partners, coaches, time and resources, as well as thoughtfully addressing buy-in, and alignment with other district level initiatives are high-leverage tools to change school culture and disciplinary trends.

Clear policies with established learning networks can further support schools in implementing RP to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and improve student outcomes.

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Author Biographies

Elise Pas is a Research Professor in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Department of Mental Health. She has a PhD and MA in School Psychology. She studies universal prevention in K-12 schools, including PBIS, and studies how coaching and environmental and implementer factors support implementation. E-mail: epas@jhu.edu

Shoshana Oppenheim is an educator involved in school-based interventions designed to improve student academic outcomes and social-emotional wellbeing. She currently works at Saga Education. She completed a Master of Science in Public Health (MSPH) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Research interests include the intersection of mental health and education as well as childhood adversity and resilience. E-mail: shoshana.nasr@gmail.com

Thomas David Graham is a public mental health researcher and practitioner who is currently evaluating mental healthcare expansion initiatives in Tennessee public schools in his role at Centerstone Behavioral Health. He completed a Master of Health Science (MHS) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. His work aims to incorporate current research on etiology and best practices to improve mental health outcomes. E-mail: tdavidgraham@gmail.com

Mia N. Campbell Ukejianya is a doctoral candidate in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Department of Mental Health. She completed a Master of Health Science (MHS) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. She studies the intersection of racial discrimination, environmental factors, and adolescent depression and mental health disparities in marginalized communities. E-mail: mcampb76@jhu.edu

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Supporting Assistant Principals as Inclusive Educators Focused on Their Leadership Growth, Development, and Pipeline to the Principalship

Monica B. Smith-Woofter, EdD
Assistant Professor
College of Education
Learning, Technology, & Leadership Education
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Eileen M. Oliver-Eggert, EdD
Assistant Professor
Learning, Technology and Leadership Education
College of Education
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Jaclyn R. Nickel, MEd
Executive Director
Professional Educator Development and Partnerships
College of Education
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

Abstract

The assistant principal institute, a professional learning model aligned with national and state leadership standards highlighting six core competencies essential for school leaders, introduces and conceptualizes research to practice specifically for aspiring principals. Through partnership efforts between a university, state department, the institute is designed with the unique challenges and responsibilities of assistant principals who must demonstrate mastery of leadership standards, continuous school improvement, and inclusive education. The institute uses evidence-based research to inform praxis and address the critical need to develop and sustain effective school leadership for aspiring principals. The impact of participation in the institute on leadership growth and self-efficacy is currently under investigation.

Key Words

assistant principal, self-efficacy, principal pipeline, aspiring principals, professional learning, professional development, inclusive education, leadership competencies

Retaining effective principals, increasing teacher retention, and providing relevant, professional development to build a robust professional educator's workforce is a growing need across the nation. In the 2022 Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) report for the Commonwealth of Virginia conducted in the post-pandemic era, the teacher respondents indicated that fifteen percent of teachers are *leaving* or *most likely to leave* by the end of the current school year (JLARC, 2022). As teacher attrition continues to be one of the top priorities of focus in education, principals will require continual learning and support while serving in their leadership role to navigate the educational challenges the future holds. Principals need to determine what works best for their teachers and identify the support necessary to encourage teachers to remain in the profession.

Principals play a critical role in retaining teachers and through their leadership effectiveness they influence teachers' experiences within their schools. Accordingly, the James Madison University, College of Education's (CoE) external initiatives department prioritizes supporting principals in refining leadership practices and enhancing self-efficacy to strengthen their capacity to support those within their purview. "Principals really matter. Indeed, it is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership" (Grissom et al., 2021, p. xiv). Similarly, assistant principals (APs) have critical roles in schools and their leadership influences impact school outcomes like that of the principal's. Supporting principal leaders through the *research to practice* mindset is the foundational approach that the CoE implements within both the Virginia Principal Support Program (VAPSP) and the Virginia Assistant Principal Institute (VAAPI), which focuses on early career principals and assistant principals respectively. Current

research and literature support the necessity to invest in the professional growth and development of both principals and assistant principals. VAAPI is the primary discussion presented in subsequent sections.

The discussion introduces the Virginia Assistant Principal Institute, a professional learning model aligned with national and state leadership standards and research best practices. VAAPI emphasizes six core competencies essential for school leaders: vision, communication, people development, systems, instruction, and inclusion (reference Appendix A). Grounded in a research-to-practice framework, the institute informs ongoing practices and offers customized professional learning. While assistant principals serve as key future leaders, current professional development or training models often lack structure, intentional, targeted learning experiences to prepare them adequately for the role of the principalship (Burkett, 2021). An overview of VAAPI's structure, content, and initial impact are discussed within subsequent sections.

Research Informing Praxis Research to Practice: JLARC's 2020 and 2022 Reports: Expectations and Identified Needs for Leading School Improvements

In 2018, the JLARC members assessed the protocols, practices, preparations, and management of special education in K-12 Virginia Schools. The report brought to light several relevant areas for improvement regarding leading special education that involves oversight of the Virginia Department of Education and statewide school divisions. The comprehensive review identified twenty-seven recommendations in the report that either directly or indirectly impact the responsibilities and supervision of school level administrators. Several overarching themes for improvement

were recognized in the assessment including special education student identification processes, eligibility determinations, Individualize Education Program (IEP) development and implementation efforts, appropriate student placements, providing and delivering proper services for students with disabilities, and the progress monitoring of students with disabilities outcomes (JLARC, 2022).

The responsibility for leading and supporting effective special and inclusive education instruction in school rests on the shoulders of school principals and assistant principals. However, the lack of knowledge and professional preparation to proficiently support special education successes is highlighted by an interview conducted with a special education teacher recorded in the JLARC 2020 report. “On a daily basis, you have an unskilled administrator, a provisionally licensed special education teacher, and a provisionally licensed or unskilled general education teacher trying to sit around and craft an IEP” (JLARC, 2020, p. 40). The report establishes that “about one-third of a sample of IEPs reviewed by JLARC staff lacked a description of the student’s academic or functional needs, and one-quarter did not describe the effect of the disability on the student’s educational performance” (JLARC, 2020, p. 37). Insufficient IEP development may suggest that assistant principals and principals, who are responsible for ensuring that IEP teams develop thorough, quality, and legally compliant plans, may not fully understand all IEP component development or may not be reviewing the IEP with the necessary oversight required by administrators. During the JLARC (2020) report, school divisions were three times more likely to fill special educator roles with provisionally licensed instructors than that of any other subject matter position (p. iv). These documented statistics expose the need for school administrators to continue developing their leadership skills to serve as effective

instructional leaders for all students. Not only is it essential for school leaders to continue furthering their leadership growth and learning, but they must also undertake the charge of providing relevant, continued professional development for underprepared classroom teachers.

Recruitment and retention of effective teachers is strongly identified as a key necessity, within the JLARC reports. Although not directly specified by the role of responsibility, the documents express the need for improving staff morale and for providing opportunities regarding continued teacher development. Building positive school culture and offering ongoing personnel development are commonly recognized as key standards for all school leaders. The data analyzed in the reports indicate that a strong teacher workforce is diminishing across the state due to low morale and job dissatisfaction (JLARC, 2020; JLARC 2022). Teaching positions once held by well trained, professional educators were noted to be filled with less qualified and more inexperienced educators. At the time of the JLARC 2020 publication, “Thirty-seven percent of local special education directors responding to JLARC’s survey reported that their division experienced moderate to substantial difficulty retaining qualified special education teachers. Sixty-nine percent of responding directors reported that they experience moderate to substantial difficulty recruiting and hiring special education teachers” (p.76). The difficulty in filling these critical professional educator positions creates additional challenges for administrators to meet desired student and school outcomes. According to the *Report to the Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia JLARC 2022* report in the aftermath of the pandemic, recruiting and retaining qualified and prepared classroom teachers has only increased with “94 percent of divisions surveyed experiencing recruiting difficulties and 90 percent

accounting for difficulties to retain educators (p. iii).

The JLARC Report (2022) noted that following the return to in-person instruction, significant increases in chronic absenteeism were identified, particularly for at-risk populations. “Black and Hispanic students that were chronically absent increased 12 and 13 percentage points, respectively, in 2021–22 compared with the averages over the five years before the pandemic” (JLARC, 2022, p.12).

Closing critical learning gaps for children who miss daily, relevant instruction compounds the problem of moving the needle towards improvement when classroom instruction is led by teachers who are underqualified. With teacher quality declining and losing more professionally licensed teachers from the field, school administrators require sound and relevant professional leadership development to address mentoring provisional and out-of-field teachers, leading instruction, and building positive school cultures. Both the JLARC 2020 and 2022 reports clearly identify meaningful areas where continued professional development for both administrators and teachers should remain a priority focus for both the VDOE and statewide school divisions.

Research to Practice: Design and Implementation

Developed through a partnership between James Madison University and the Virginia Department of Education’s Special Education Division, VA-API responds to the unique challenges and responsibilities of assistant principals, including mastery of leadership standards, continuous school improvement, and inclusive education. VA-API also promotes ongoing opportunities for reflective practice and the application of leadership competencies embedded within real-world situations across schools and school divisions.

The VA-API professional learning series, delivered throughout the year in both virtual and in-person formats, fosters networking and collaboration among assistant principals. The model addresses the critical need for tailored professional development and advising support to strengthen and sustain effective school leadership, especially with a targeted focus on leading special education. Evaluation and preliminary research are underway to examine the institute’s impact on leadership growth and self-efficacy.

The hybrid model of the VA-API is designed to meet the developmental needs of assistant principals while keeping their busy schedules in mind. In person learning events expose participants to key concepts and activities focused on six core competencies while shorter, virtual sessions are a continuation of a particular component from a previous in person session. For example, the first session for the current cohort focused heavily upon leading inclusive education. The subsequent virtual session provided participants with time to delve deeper into discipline and documentation as it relates to students with disabilities. Additionally, all professional learning events, whether in-person or virtual, provide VA-API members with the chance to collaborate, analyze case studies and scenarios, and problem-solve with their peers.

Another key component of the institute design includes the integration of community of practice (CoPs) partnerships. Each VA-API cohort member has been assigned to another AP to serve as a thought partner, collaborator, and confidant. Pairings were made purposefully so that CoPs worked at the same grade level spans (elementary, middle, high) within different schools or school divisions. The intentional method of assigning pairs provides VA-API participants the opportunity to network with assistant principals in similar roles but

different contexts, affording a safe space for problem-solving and feedback.

As districts face the challenge of filling both teacher and principal vacancies with highly qualified candidates, the need for a strong leadership pipeline becomes even more urgent. "Forming a university-district partnership to provide leadership development programs for experienced APs is a promising practice to develop a well-prepared leadership pipeline" (Hayes & Burkett, 2019, p. 503). These partnerships allow JMU CoE to integrate research-based practices with real-world applications, ensuring that assistant principals gain the skills and experiences necessary to step confidently into the principalship. When assistant principals are prepared through high-quality professional learning, districts benefit from a pool of well-equipped candidates ready to lead schools effectively and students benefit from the continuity and strength of leadership that drives achievement.

Studies consistently support that assistant principal's mentoring and networking are important for their professional growth and development (Goldring, 2021). The VAAPI is designed to include mentoring, professional growth, and networking with peers. Master et al. encourage job-embedded coaching, professional learning with a peer cohort, a focus on school operations, as well as instructional leadership as necessary aspects of professional development for assistant principals (2020).

Research to Practice: Building Capacity and Self-Efficacy

Building capacity and confidence for school leaders in praxis is a necessary commitment. The lack of assigned responsibilities in an assistant principal's purview area allowing for leadership experiences that every principal must master impedes the assistant principal's growth and development in those areas.

Particularly, if assistant principals are never assigned instructional, special education, and fiscal related duties, then they do not have the opportunity to refine and master the necessary skills and competencies to become accomplished in those areas. Experience is foundational and necessary for building capacity and influencing self-efficacy. While first-hand onsite experiences within the assistant principal's educational setting are critical, additional ongoing professional learning supports must also be available to increase self-efficacy and build capacity, which is a component of the institute. Therefore, VAAPI incorporates and customizes professional learning experiences to: (a) refine leadership skills necessary for success as aspiring principal leaders, (b) receive mentoring support to improve praxis, and (c) network with other assistant principals from varied backgrounds and educational settings. It is also extremely important to ensure that assistant principals can learn more about their leadership roles and responsibilities within non-evaluative, safe spaces. VAAPI affords participating assistant principals the safe spaces to acknowledge what they know and do not know. They also learn from and network with their peers, gaining valuable insights and opportunities to reflect and improve practice.

It is imperative that assistant principals work with and receive mentoring and coaching from principals who are familiar with the dynamics and expectations of the State in which they are employed and have experience relative to the assistant principal's specific grade span. Burkett (2021) states, "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" (p. 12). Thus, VAAPI is led by veteran principals who have served as principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia and worked at all three grade spans.

Research to Practice: Professional Learning, Growth, and Development

Continuing to grow professionally matters in every field. School leaders are required to actively pursue ongoing professional development for maintaining current licensure, and to understand best practices for effectively supporting the professional learning of teachers and staff. Addressing continuing learning needs of teachers aligns with the instructional leadership responsibilities for school administrators. As instructional leaders, principals and assistant principals need to possess a richer and more comprehensive understanding of schoolwide academics to plan appropriate instructional reinforcements for faculty and staff. Principals and assistant principals need to have confidence in the determination of appropriate professional learning options within their schools. Therefore, intentional and tailored support is necessary for administrators.

Developing professional learning experiences that are customized and framed to incorporate core leadership competencies that align with national school leader standards are essential for ensuring consistent, high-quality educational leadership that fosters effective school improvement. The national Professional Standards for Educational Leaders “communicate expectations to practitioners, supporting institutions, professional associations, policy makers and the public about the work, qualities and values of effective educational leaders” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 4). “The work of school leadership involves articulating and influencing others to achieve the goals of the school” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; as cited in Crockett et al., 2018, p. 307). Leaders and facilitators of the VAAPI professional learning sessions are continuously designing and developing inclusive education learning experiences aligned to the six core leadership competencies.

VAAPI embeds inclusive education within all professional learning (PL) events that are customized to meet their needs. The authors and co-designers of the assistant principal institute developed professional learning activities for the first PL event that included deepening the assistant principal’s knowledge and understanding of their role and responsibility as the Local Education Agency (LEA) representative relative to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities and how these example activities were enhanced through mentoring/advising efforts from special education experts in the field and their peers.

Research to Practice: Leading Inclusive Education

Inclusive education practices are integral components of each VAAPI professional learning session because “school leadership that has the potential to improve outcomes for students with disabilities requires knowledge about leading, teaching, and learning informed from a variety of sources including theoretical analysis, empirical research, and practical experience” (Crockett et al., 2018, p.307). Lambrecht et al. (2022) argue that “within the context of inclusive education, fostering equity by offering the best education possible to all students is one of the main goals of schooling (p. 947). Their longitudinal research study concluded that instructional leadership activities, such as overseeing IEP implementation, and transformational leadership practices, such as providing feedback and establishing structures and norms for a collaborative culture, were identified as practices supporting inclusive education (Lambrecht et al., 2022) and improved student outcomes.

School leaders, including assistant principals, interact with students with disabilities on a daily basis. The ways in which

school leaders engage with these students help establish norms and expectations that influence how effectively teachers support students in inclusive settings (Sider et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Ross and Gray (2006) asserted that school leaders have “significant indirect leadership effects on student achievement through their influence on teachers’ self-efficacy, commitment, and beliefs” (as cited in Sider et al., 2017, p. 7).

Given the ramifications of IEP compliance, the ethical responsibility to provide high-quality instruction for all students, and the need for equitable outcomes, it is incumbent upon school leaders to ensure their leadership and schools reflect inclusive education. The VAAPI offers in-service assistant principals professional learning that embeds inclusive practices within all professional learning events. Examples of essential skills and knowledge include understanding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the administrator’s role as Local Education Agency (LEA), facilitating IEP meetings, managing compliance, and providing instructional feedback and support to general and special education teachers and collaborative teams. Learning activities include in-person and virtual sessions that combine professional presentations, opportunities to engage in dialogue, case study analysis, and action planning within professional learning networks of assistant principals from across the Commonwealth of Virginia. Participants also have access to digital resources which support inclusive education and all core competencies within the VAAPI framework.

Initial VAAPI Research Findings and Implications

The VAAPI research project is currently underway. The first PL session for the 2025-2026 academic school year was held in fall 2025. Initial VAAPI research findings and

implications gathered from the pre-survey (Appendix B & C) and PL exit survey provided the PL facilitators with feedback, to improve practice and consider future PL content that assistant principals are wanting to learn more about. The survey requests feedback relative to the quality of the session content and applicability in practice and confidence in leading related efforts within their school building.

Based on initial data analysis from the pre-survey, members of the VAAPI identify Leading School Vision and Inclusive Education as the core competency areas that APs feel least confident in leading (Appendix B). Additionally, multiple essential skills under each core competency were identified as areas in need of further development by assistant principals. Some of these essential skills included leading instructional improvement aligned with school goals, engaging stakeholders in shaping and refining school vision, facilitating difficult conversations with students, staff, and families, and leading professional learning focused on inclusive instructional strategies and specially designed instruction (Appendix C).

When asked about positives and key takeaways from the anonymous Exit Survey for the first PL session, APs acknowledged appreciation and value in the Community of Practice (CoPs) partnerships that were created to allow for networking and peer support by fellow assistant principals. Assistant principals also acknowledged the importance of the inclusive education content provided. One assistant principal participant stated positively about VAAPI, “The opportunity to network and talk through real life scenarios was so helpful. I had never seen the codes with regards to being a LEA, so that gives me important information I needed but didn’t know about.” A second participant added as a takeaway, “LEA training, CoPs and an opportunity to network

and hear how things are going in other places and common challenges, being able to join VCASE [Virginia Council of Administrators of Special Education] and learn so much about SPED [special education], hoping to establish an SDI [Specially Designed Instruction] walkthrough for staff.”

When asked for feedback for improvement, feedback from the PL Exit Survey revealed the assistant principals’ desire to continue engaging in real life scenarios (or case studies), as well as spending as much time as possible engaged with other assistant principals rather than other division leaders. Furthermore, when collaborating at a conference, such as VCASE, participants shared that they want to stay for the duration of the conference and be afforded the time to engage in all scheduled concurrent sessions versus being pulled out for shorter mini sessions that were offered simultaneously with current division colleagues. Three different assistant principals presented feedback for program improvement relative to the aforementioned. The first assistant principal stated, “I enjoyed the keynotes and breakouts with VCASE and the principals’ group, but I feel like I go to conferences with my division leaders frequently—I would prefer staying with the assistant principals.” A second assistant principal added, “I would have liked to have stayed for the whole conference as I enjoyed the breakout rooms —Next year it should be so that we all can attend the full time.” The third assistant principal emphasized that the professional learning sessions should “Continue to provide scenario situations for us to work through.

Conclusion

The assistant principalship is a unique role. It is often the first leadership position individuals assume when leaving classroom instruction while also serving as a stepping-stone to the principalship. When used strategically, the

assistant principalship becomes a powerful tool for supporting the successful operation of schools while simultaneously building a strong leadership pipeline.

Research consistently shows that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its impact on what students learn at school” (Leithwood, et al., 2004, p. 5). While teaching is the most powerful lever for student success, leadership creates the conditions that make great teaching possible. Strong leadership shapes school culture, drives instructional priorities, and ensures that resources and systems support teaching and learning. But leadership is not the work of one person. Assistant principals are a critical part of the school leadership equation. If one wishes to maximize the impact of leadership on student achievement, one must invest in developing assistant principals as instructional leaders.

Development of leadership skills for assistant principals cannot be left to chance, nor should assistant principals be relegated to responsibilities which focus solely on discipline and operations. Through intentionally designed professional learning—such as that offered by the Virginia Assistant Principal Institute—and engagement in all aspects of instructional and school leadership, one can prepare assistant principals to lead instruction, manage change, and build collaborative and inclusive school cultures. In this way, one can not only prepare future school principals for tomorrow, but can also increase leadership capacity in real time, serving the needs of our schools today.

The VAAPI is helping to create a pipeline of future school principals with university, state, and division partners. Initial feedback obtained from program participants confirms that the format and structure of VAAPI is building a strong network of confident leaders across the Commonwealth of Virginia. Through collaborative partnerships

and professional learning anchored in the six core competencies, VAAPI is supporting the professional growth of assistant principals to

refine inclusive leadership practice and promote efficacious assistant principals on the pathway to the principalship.

Author Biographies

Monica B. Smith-Woofter, professor of practice at James Madison University, holds a bachelor's from Virginia State University and advanced degrees from East Carolina University. She taught high school math and served as an administrator in P-12 before becoming an assistant professor. E-mail: smithwmb@jmu.edu

Eileen M. Oliver-Eggert is an Assistant Professor at James Madison University's College of Education and a former elementary and middle school administrator. She holds advanced degrees from the University of Virginia in Educational Leadership. E-mail: olive2em@jmu.edu

Jaclyn R. Nickel is an educator and administrator with experience spanning K–12 teaching, school leadership, and state-level consulting. She currently works in higher education supporting collaborative initiatives for in-service teachers and administrators. She lives in Virginia with her family. E-mail: nickeljr@jmu.edu

Authors' Note

Program design and implementation were developed by the authors incorporating evidence-based research practices. A framework of the evidence-based research praxis was presented at the 2026 Eastern Educational Research Association Conference, Clearwater, Florida, United States, under the research to practice category. Data collection and preliminary analysis are ongoing as this is an active research study that is in year one of the project.

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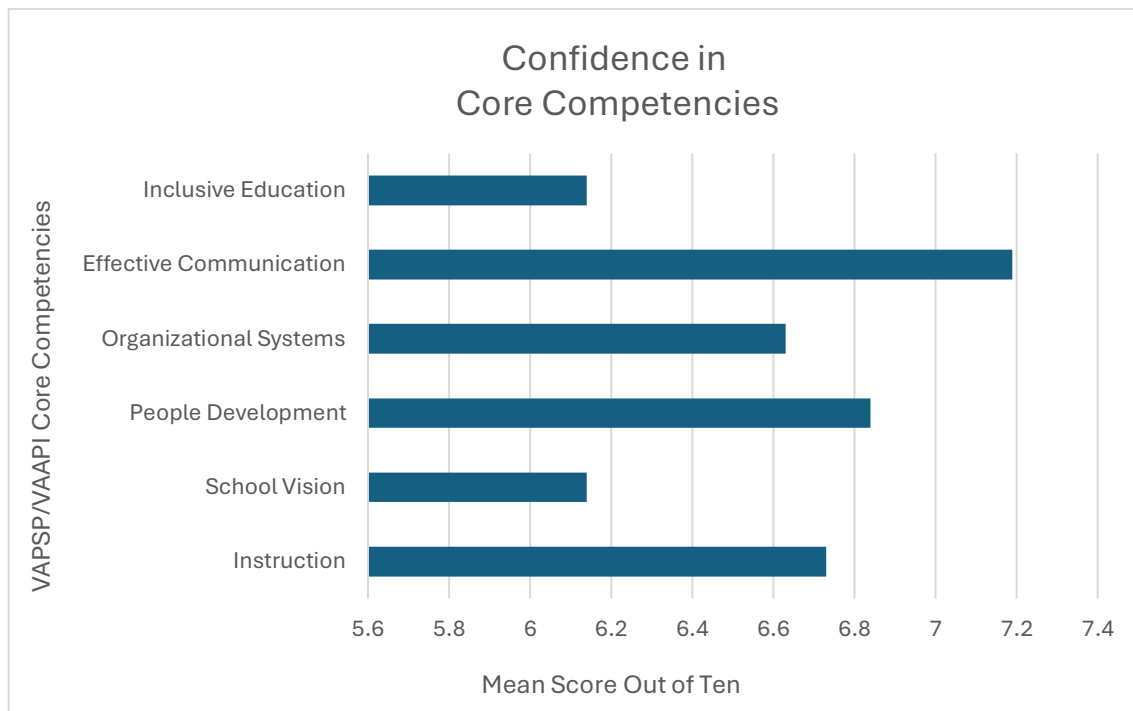
Appendix A

VAPSP/VAAPI Core Competencies Conceptual Framework



Appendix B

VAAPI Pre-Survey Data: Core Competency Averages



Note. The bar graph illustrates the self-identified confidence level mean score for each core competency for members of the Virginia Assistant Principal Institute. The confidence rating scale went from 0 (lowest confidence rating) to a maximum of 10 (highest confidence rating).

Appendix C

VAAPI Pre-Survey Data: Self-Identified Areas of Need

VAPSP/VAAPI Core Competency	Essential Skills
Leading Instruction	I effectively lead instructional improvement aligned with school goals. I successfully collaborate with teachers to implement evidence-based instructional strategies.
Leading School Vision	I feel prepared to engage stakeholders in shaping and refining the school vision.
Leading People Development	I can effectively support staff in setting and achieving professional growth goals that support academic outcomes for all students.
Leading Organizational Systems	I am confident in my ability to manage school resources to support instructional priorities.
Leading Effective Communication	I feel capable of facilitating difficult conversations with students, staff, and families.
Leading Inclusive Education	I am confident in leading professional learning focused on inclusive instructional strategies and specially designed instruction. I feel capable of using VTSS, MTSS, or RTI frameworks to ensure that academic and behavioral interventions are implemented equitably.

Note. The table illustrates the essential skills aligned with each core competency that participants in the Virginia Assistant Principal Institute self-identified as their greatest areas of need for professional growth and development.

Practical and Timely: The Journals Public School Principals Read

Benterah C. Morton, PhD
President
Perspectives Education and Leadership Consulting
Houston, TX

Matt Townsley, EdD
Associate Professor
Educational Leadership
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA

Abstract

This study involving 280 public school principals within ten states sought to identify the types of educational journals school principals read. The findings indicate that the majority of principals are reading practical and timely publications provided by professional organizations rather than peer-reviewed journals. *Educational Leadership*, *Education Week*, *NASSP Bulletin* and *AASA's The School Administrator* were the most frequently read periodicals.

Key Words

principals, educational leadership, educational administration, journals, research utilization

Introduction

School principals in US schools play a vital role in curating the school environment. This curation includes processes that involve selecting content-specific certified educators, evaluating, and training these educators and keeping abreast of cutting-edge strategies to guide student achievement. Amid all the roles and expectations placed on school leaders, when do principals have time to update their knowledge and skills? What is more, where do school leaders go to update their knowledge and skills? In many states, school leaders have access to regional education resource centers that provide professional development and training that keeps principals up to date with fresh ideas and ways of leading. Although regional education resource centers offer a wealth of support, they do not provide clear insight into what school principals read for self-development aside from what is offered during professional development sessions.

Amid the numerous forms of information school principals need to review daily to keep abreast of student achievement and student safety it is important to do so on an ongoing basis. Considering the wealth of national and international events that pose potential obstacles to student safety and academic engagement, where are school principals going to find the cutting-edge material with which to curate a safe school environment and facilitate lifelong learning? The current investigation replicates a similar study which sought to understand the publications practicing public school superintendents read (Author & Author, 2022).

The results from Author and Author (2022) suggest public school superintendents do not often read peer-reviewed journals and most frequently read *Educational Leadership*, *The School Administrator*, *Education Week*, and *The American School Board Journal*, which are provided by professional and trade

organizations. Departing from Author and Author (2022), the current study narrows the focus from district-wide leadership - superintendents to campus-level leadership - school principals. More specifically, the study highlights the importance of exploring the sources of practitioner reading resources as a function of identifying avenues for maximizing scholars' data-informed influence on practitioner behaviors and outcomes.

The overarching aim of many scholarly focused educational leadership consortia (e.g., ICPEL, UCEA) focuses on "building knowledge for the field and providing quality preparation and lifelong learning experiences for school and school system leaders" (UCEA, 2025). However, there is little known about the impact these types of organizations and the scholarly work produced by their members have on school principals. In a time of seemingly increasing stressors on principals caused by national and international events (i.e., COVID-19, political extremism, racial tension, etc.) it has become necessary to assess where school leaders are reading to support their development and decision making.

Moreover, are the sources they are reading providing the context and tools necessary to meet the actively changing landscape of education, including but not limited to the needs of diverse populations of students, and filling glaring gaps of education disequity illuminated by current world events (e.g., access to computers; internet connectivity; healthcare disparities; wage disparities, etc.)? While this research does not seek to respond to all of these indicators of a changing landscape, it does explore where leaders, specifically public-school principals in the United States of America, were going to figure out how to get help during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (October 2020 - April 2021).

Building on the work of Author and Author (2022) this study explores the *origins* of practitioners' (school principals) reading resources within peer reviewed journals and editor reviewed journals. Going beyond Author and Author's (2022) acknowledgement of the necessity to bridge the gap between educational leadership scholars and practitioners, we provide aspects of the foundational knowledge necessary to begin responding to the seemingly unanswered calls within the literature for more professional development for practitioners (see Walker et al., 2021). Moreover, the study employs a conceptual framework that informs why leaders appear to gravitate to practitioner journals instead of research journals.

Literature Review

Author and Author (2022) suggest district-level leaders prioritize reading practitioner-based publications to peer reviewed journals. This study tangentially responds to that call while focusing on campus-level school leaders. Research utilization provides the lens through which this study theorizes the impetus behind school principals' search for theoretical and practical sources to support their quest to benefit schools and the children they serve.

Research Utilization

A review of extant literature illuminated that research utilization, while used to explore various types of social science research and leadership through public policy, has few published connections with school leadership. Perhaps this is due to the seeming ambiguity of the term as noted by Weiss (1979). To make clear the term, Weiss (1979) collated seven different images of the processes and purposes of utilization: the knowledge-driven model, the problem-solving model, the interactive model, the political model, the tactical model, the enlightenment model, and research as a part of the intellectual enterprise of the society. It is Weiss' (1979) interactive model that is most applicable to this work. In this model

interlocutors seek to respond to issues by engaging multiple sources beyond simple research methods. For this study the interlocutors are represented by school principals across the United States of America who are seeking to enhance their practice using practitioner focused literature in lieu of engaging solely with empirical research published in top tier research journals. Likewise, this study replicates the methodology of Author and Author (2022) to grasp more concretely the use of educational leadership journals for the specific use of education leadership practitioners.

For clarity, we acknowledge that formal, peer-reviewed educational leadership scholarship has a place in influencing policy development and the actions of leadership practitioners. At the same time, we challenge the notion that there is a direct relationship between the readership of top tier research journals and leadership practitioners. As noted by Author & Author (2022) school superintendents across the United States report reading practitioner focused journals instead of top tier research journals. This study ascribes to the approach of Weiss (1979) by challenging educational leadership scholars to identify ways to make their research more accessible and relevant to the practitioners in the field.

Practical Applications

Since before the first educational doctorate (Ed.D.) was awarded at Harvard University in 1922 (Lagemann, 2000) there have been questions about the role of education scholars in the lives of education leadership practitioners. Shulman et al. (2006) echo concern for the seemingly *confused purpose* of the educational doctorate and doctorate in philosophy (Ph.D.) in education that have led to unclear distinctions between the two terminal degrees. For this article, we distinguish the two degrees by placing them into complementary worldviews. The Ed.D. is situated within the

worldview of the practitioner with its focus in preparing high level practitioners that are equipped to lead from within the field. Simultaneously, the Ph.D. is situated within the worldview of the researcher centered on developing education scholars that are equipped to inform educational practices through high quality, theory informed, peer reviewed, explorations. In a very basic comparison, practitioners are more in line with the Ed.D. worldview compared to Ph.D. worldview (see Shulman, 2006).

Contrasting these two worldviews provides a pathway for exploring the interplay between the roles of the scholar and the practitioner in actualizing educational goals geared toward student engagement and achievement. Educational Leadership practitioners (i.e., principles, superintendents, building, and district level leaders) across the United States possess both practitioner focused, and research focused terminal degrees in education.

At the same time, they often support the research of educational leadership scholars, whereas educational leadership scholars support the practice of educational leadership practitioners. While this represents the dependent interplay between the two worldviews, there are obstacles to this occurring in practice (see Levine, 2007; McClintock, 2005; Shulman et al., 2006). More recently Braun (2023) and Fraser et al. (2020) and others illuminated similar obstacles. While Fraser et al. (2020) challenged the relevance of academic research to practitioners within business, similar questions are echoed in education (Author and Author, 2021; Braun, 2023) and other fields. Some scholars challenge the incongruence of language between scholars and practitioners (Conaway, 2013), while others challenge the notion that the information intended to enrich the field actually makes it to practitioners (Williams & Coles, 2007). Still

others challenge the pace of decision making and sensemaking of leaders (Morton & Delmas, 2022; Morton et al. 2020; Schildkamp, 2019). Amid these challenges to the interplay between education leadership scholars and practitioners, there is hope. Walker et al., (2021) position professional development as an avenue to navigate these and other challenges.

This study does not answer the question: Why are school principals drawn to practitioner-based journals? Instead, the work provides valuable insights for practitioners and scholars in educational leadership to consider as we identify and chart new ways of overcoming the challenges that confine the effectiveness of the interplay between the two worldviews.

Methods

Drawing upon parallel procedures from the previous study focused on district-level leaders (Author & Author, 2022), the population of this study consists of all school principals in the contiguous 48 United States of America. To obtain a representative sample of principals, the states were divided into six regions: Pacific, Rocky Mountain, Southwest, Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast. Two states were selected from each region: Oregon and Washington (Pacific); Montana and Wyoming (Rocky Mountain); New Mexico and Oklahoma (Southwest); Iowa and North Dakota (Midwest); Arkansas and South Carolina (Southeast); and New Hampshire and New Jersey (Northeast). All public-school principals in these states were sent a survey to understand the professional publications they read, based upon a list of 29 possible journals.

Survey

For this exploratory descriptive study, the researchers developed a twelve-question survey which asked participants to share demographic information including highest degree obtained, year of earning their highest degree, year

earning their leadership credential, years as a K-12 administrator, years in current role, gender, and race. In addition, participants were asked to indicate up to five journals in the area of educational administration/leadership that they most frequently read. To cast the widest possible net, the researchers first included all journals listed more than once from within several different sources.

First, to ensure that we considered the journals most widely cited by educational leadership faculty, we looked at the top 25 journals cited in each of *EAQ* and *JSL* from 2000 to 2007 as noted in Richardson & McLeod (2009). Next, to ensure our list was up to date, we consulted the top 20 educational administration journals according to Google Scholar on February 2, 2020. Finally, we consulted the only available known report of

journals practicing school leaders read (Anderson et al. 2005). In addition to journals listed more than once within Richardson and McLeod's (2009) two lists and Google Scholar's lists, we included any journal that was solely listed in the Anderson et al. (2005) survey for comparison purposes. We did not include the journal, *School Foodservice and Nutrition*, from the Anderson et al. (2005) list because it no longer appears to be published.

Table 1 provides a list of the 29 journals included in the survey. In addition to selecting from the provided list, participants were also able to write in the name(s) of up to three journal(s) for choices not listed. To answer this study's research questions, only the questions regarding highest degree obtained, gender, race, and journals read were used in the data analysis.

Table 1

List of Educational Leadership Journals Included in the Survey

Journals	Cited in
Administrative Science Quarterly	EAQ, JSL
American Educational Research Journal (AERJ)	EAQ, JSL, Anderson
American School Board Journal (ASBJ)	JSL, Anderson
Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning	Anderson
Education and Urban Society	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Education Week	EAQ, JSL
Educational Administration Quarterly (EAQ)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis	EAQ, JSL
Educational Leadership	EAQ, JSL, ELJ, Anderson
Educational Policy	EAQ, ELJ

Educational Researcher	EAQ, JSL
Elementary School Journal	EAQ, JSL
Harvard Educational Review (HER)	EAQ, JSL, Anderson
International Journal of Leadership in Education	JSL, ELJ
Journal of Applied Psychology	EAQ, JSL
Journal of Educational Administration (JEA)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education	EAQ, JSL
Journal of School Leadership (JSL)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
NASSP Bulletin	JSL, Anderson
National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision	Anderson
Phi Delta Kappan (PDK)	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Review of Educational Research	EAQ, JSL
School Effectiveness and School Improvement	EAQ, JSL, ELJ
Teachers College Record	EAQ, JSL
Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers	Anderson
The Learning Professional (Formerly: Journal of Staff Development)	Anderson
The School Administrator	JSL, Anderson
Trusteeship	Anderson
Urban Education	EAQ, JSL

Note. EAQ = journals cited within EAQ as noted in Richardson & McLeod (2009), JSL = journals cited with JSL as noted in Richardson & McLeod (2009), ELJ = journals within top 20 educational leadership journals according to Google Scholar on February 2, 2020, Anderson = journals noted in Anderson et al. (2005).

Data collection and analysis

The research team obtained a total of 11,575 principal email addresses from the respective

state department of education web sites. Principals in these twelve states were sent an institutional research board approved query

inviting them to participate in the study during Fall 2020 or Spring 2021. A reminder email was sent to all participants at two and four-week increments. Of these email addresses, 619 of them were duplicates and 750 of them were no longer valid, leaving 10,206 potential participants. A total of 396 participants started the survey; however, upon review, 280 surveys (2.74% usable response rate) were fully completed following the data collection period.

In addition, the low response rate may be attributed to principals navigating an undoubtedly demanding and chaotic school

year stemming from a global pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2020). Given the context of this investigation, one limitation may be that those that do not regularly read journals chose not to participate and are therefore underrepresented in this data set.

Table 2 describes the gender and highest degree obtained of the participating principals. Some participants wrote in the names of journals that were noted in the list; therefore, the research team re-tabulated and verified the results after exporting them from the electronic survey platform.

Table 2

Gender and Highest Degree Obtained of Principals

Degree	Female	Male	Total
Masters	83	112	196*
Specialist	23	23	46
Doctorate	26	12	38
Total	132	147	280*

*Note: One participant identified as non-binary, and this data was only included in the overall totals.

Results

The 280 principals participating in this investigation read a total of 71 unique journals. The number of occurrences for any particular journal ranged from one to 189.

Table 3 presents the distribution of the top 10 journals in descending order, starting with the journals most often read by all principals.

Table 3*Journals Read by All Principals (n=280)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	189 (67.5%)
Education Week	166 (59.3%)
NASSP Bulletin	88 (31.4%)
School Administrator	75 (26.8%)
Phi Delta Kappan	24 (8.6%)
American Educational Research Journal	19 (6.8%)
Educational Administration Quarterly	17 (6.1%)
Harvard Educational Review	14 (5%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	12 (4.3%)
Journal of School Leadership	11 (3.9%)
Other journals combined (n=61)	141 (50.4%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	28 (10%)

Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7 present the distribution of the top 10 journals read by male principals, female principals, principals with a doctorate degree, and principals with a master's or specialist degree, respectively.

In each of these tables, the percentages add up to more than 100%, because participants could select *up to* five journals. *Educational*

Leadership, Education Week, NASSP Bulletin, School Administrator were read most often within each subgroup. *Phi Delta Kappan* was the fifth most frequently read publication overall and among all of the different subgroups. Male principals noted reading *Educational Administration Quarterly* at the same rate as *Phi Delta Kappan*.

Table 4*Journals Read by Male Principals (n=147)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	97 (66%)
Education Week	79 (53.7%)
NASSP Bulletin	51 (34.7%)
School Administrator	43 (29.3%)
Educational Administration Quarterly	13 (8.8%)
Phi Delta Kappan	13 (8.8%)
American Educational Research Journal	10 (6.8%)
American School Board Journal	8 (5.4%)
Journal of Educational Administration	6 (4.1%)
Educational Policy	5 (3.4%)
Harvard Educational Review	5 (3.4%)
Journal of School Leadership	5 (3.4%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	5 (3.4%)
Other journals combined (n=38)	56 (38.1%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	16 (10.9%)

Table 5*Journals Read by Female Principals (n=132)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	91 (68.9%)
Education Week	86 (65.2%)
NASSP Bulletin	37 (28%)
School Administrator	31 (23.5%)
Phi Delta Kappan	11 (8.3%)
American Educational Research Journal	9 (6.8%)
Harvard Educational Review	9 (6.8%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	7 (5.3%)
School Effectiveness and School Improvement	6 (4.5%)
Journal of School Leadership	5 (3.8%)
The Marshall Memo	5 (3.8%)
Other journals combined (n=34)	58 (43.9%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	12 (9.1%)

Table 6*Journals Read by Principals with a Doctorate Degree (n=38)*

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	32 (84.2%)
Education Week	23 (60.5%)
NASSP Bulletin	12 (31.6%)
School Administrator	11 (28.9%)

Phi Delta Kappan	9 (23.7%)
American Educational Research Journal	5 (13.2%)
Educational Administration Quarterly	3 (7.9%)
Educational Policy	3 (7.9%)
Review of Educational Research	3 (7.9%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	3 (7.9%)
Other journals combined (n=27)	25 (65.8%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	2 (5.3%)

Table 7

Journals Read by Principals with a Masters or Specialist Degree (n=242)

Journal	Number (Percentage) of Participants Reading Each Journal
Educational Leadership	157 (64.9%)
Education Week	143 (59.1%)
NASSP Bulletin	76 (31.4%)
School Administrator	64 (26.4%)
Phi Delta Kappan	15 (6.2%)
American Educational Research Journal	14 (5.8%)
Educational Administration Quarterly	14 (5.8%)
Harvard Educational Review	12 (5.0%)
American School Board Journal	10 (4.1%)
Journal of School Leadership	9 (3.7%)
Principal Magazine (NAESP)	9 (3.7%)

Other journals combined (n=46)	104 (43.0%)
I do not frequently read educational leadership journals	26 (10.7%)

Discussion

Educational Leadership, *Education Week*, *NASSP Bulletin* and *The School Administrator* were the top four publications read by all principals, male principals, female principals, principals with a doctoral degree, and principals with a master's or specialist degree; however, the fifth most widely read publication differed slightly among the subgroups, and only by a few percentages. Only one of these publications, *NASSP Bulletin*, is peer-reviewed and provided to members of the National Association of Secondary Schools Principals, with the remaining three publications being editor-reviewed. Among these editor-reviewed publications, *Educational Leadership* is a member benefit of the professional organization, ASCD, and *The School Administrator* is a member benefit of AASA, the school superintendents' association. Principals are often busy devoting their time to the daily management of the school; therefore, they may not regularly have time to devote to thoughtful and reflective reading (Fusarelli, 2008). Because of their affiliation with professional or member-driven organizations, *Educational Leadership*, *NASSP Bulletin*, and *The School Administrator* may be more readily available for principals to pick up from their email inboxes or mailboxes and read when opportunities arise. Similarly, *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine, the fifth most widely read publication overall and among all subgroups except for males, is a member benefit of PDK International.

In addition, there were only subtle differences among the journals read by each subgroup. While 67.5% of all principals, 66% of male principals, 68.9% of female principals

read *Educational Leadership*. Despite not being listed on the survey, 12 principals wrote-in that they read *Principal Magazine*, which is a member benefit for the National Association of Elementary School Principals. The top peer-reviewed journal on the list, *NASSP Bulletin*, is read by 34.7% of principals, and this journal is a (NASSP) member benefit. This may add further support to the idea that busy school leaders are more likely to read publications provided by professional organizations. During the timeframe of this study, school leaders were experiencing unprecedented challenges stemming from COVID-19 that may not be discussed in formal academic journals; therefore, they may have found themselves clinging even more tightly to editor-reviewed (and often more practitioner-oriented) publications that have a stronger potential for providing timely insights for school leaders. This finding is not surprising given that Author and Author (2020) also found that public school superintendents were also more likely to read publications provided by professional organizations.

Weiss' (1979) interactive model of research utilization suggests that school leaders seek to respond to issues by engaging multiple sources beyond simple research methods. During the global pandemic in which the study took place, school leaders were making decisions with little experience to draw upon. The dearth of experience, timeliness in which decisions needed to be made, coupled with the lag time of peer-reviewed research from data collection to publication, may have forced the hand of school leaders to rely upon shorter form practitioner publications. Indeed, the school leaders represented in the current study

may have been searching for timely guidance, regardless of the source, during this unprecedented time period.

One additional aim of this study was to expand upon the Anderson et al. (2005) report conducted nearly twenty years ago. *Educational Leadership* was the most frequently read publication in the current study as well as the comparison report. Furthermore, nearly one third of principals in the current study indicate they read *NASSP Bulletin* and over half read *The School Administrator*, which were noted in the Anderson et al. (2005) paper. One notable difference is *Education Week* which was read by over half of the principals in the current study but was not on the list of twelve journals provided to participants in Anderson et al. (2005) despite being around since 1981. Similar to *Educational Leadership* and *School Administrator*, *Education Week* provides a timely and practitioner-friendly look at K-12 education trends, which may explain its growing readership in the current study, despite not being a benefit of a professional or trade organization.

One notable difference between the journals read by principals in the current study and the journals read by superintendents (Author & Author, 2022) is *The American School Board Journal* (ASBJ). Over one fourth of public-school superintendents report reading ASBJ (Author and Author, 2022), while nearly six percent of male principals in the current study reported reading ASBJ. Given the focus of ASBJ, one might expect principals, who do not often work directly with their school boards, to read this publication less often. One reason male principals may read ASBJ is because they aspire to someday become superintendents. Despite that a majority of teachers are females, male superintendents outnumber females almost two to one (Blad, 2023); therefore, the small number of male principals reading ASBJ

compared to female principals generally aligns with current public school superintendency statistics.

The results of this study have implications for educational researchers, particularly those who seek to provide a more immediate impact on the field. With practicality and timeliness at the forefront of their minds, educational leadership scholars would be wise to look beyond writing for tenure or navel gaze and instead to disseminate their ideas to meet the needs of practitioners in editor-reviewed and membership-oriented publications practicing school leaders actually read. While the current study took place during the height of a global pandemic, a significant overlap exists between the journals principals read in 2005 and today, which suggests school leaders have continued to privilege the same practitioner-focused reading over time.

Conclusion

Public school principals participating in this study most frequently read *Educational Leadership*, *Education Week*, *NASSP Bulletin* and AASA's *The School Administrator*. Public school principals in United States schools have been required to wrestle with recent political unrest, social justice events, and other timely current events (e.g. COVID-19 and etc.) affecting the staff and students in their school. Further investigation is needed to understand the ability of educational journals to provide timely resources and evidence-based strategies that school leaders need to curate a safe school environment and facilitate lifelong learning. Additional research is also needed to understand who is authoring the articles in professional and trade periodicals that are influencing practicing school leaders. Regretfully, beginning in 2024, NASSP no longer publishes *NASSP Bulletin*, leaving practicing school leaders with one less publication to read. The journals

public school principals read are practical and timely and AASA has a model of both peer-reviewed and practitioner-facing publications that based on the readership of the current

study, appears to be one model to navigate the interplay between the practitioner and scholar worldviews.

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Author Biographies

Benterah C Morton, president of Perspectives Education and Leadership Consulting and former associate professor of educational leadership at the University of South Alabama, researches the role of instructional leaders in meeting the needs of diverse populations through mentorship, curriculum and instruction, and leadership preparation. E-mail: benterah@perspectiveseal.com

Matt Townsley, associate professor of educational leadership at University of Northern Iowa. Co-author of *A Parents' Guide to Grading and Reporting: Being Clear about What Matters* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023) and *Making Grades Matter: Standards-based Grading in a Secondary PLC at Work* (Solution Tree, 2020). E-mail: matt.townsley@uni.edu

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2014: 20%	2019: 19%	2024: 16%
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Interim Editor

Kenneth Mitchell, EdD

AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice

Kenneth.Mitchell@mville.edu