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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
Board of Editors	2
Sponsorship and Appreciation.	3
Editorial	4
Overcoming Barriers: Leadership, Culture, and the Bridge Between Policy and Practice by Kenneth Mitchell, EdD	
Research Article	6
Higher Purpose in Leading Deeper Learning by Ben Quest, BS; David Boren PhD; Joseph N. Jensen, EdD	
Research Article	18
Overcoming Barriers to Restorative Practices Implementation: What District Leaders Can Do by Elise T. Pas, PhD; Shoshana Oppenheim, MSPH; Thomas David Graham, MPH; Mia N. Campbell Ukejianya, MHS	
Evidence-based Practice Article	31
Principalship Supporting Assistant Principals as Inclusive Educators Focused on Their Leadership Growth, Development, and Pipeline to the Principalship by Monica B. Smith-Woofter, EdD; Eileen M. Oliver-Eggert, EdD; Jaclyn R. Nickel, MEd	
Research Article	45
Practical and Timely: The Journals Public School Principals Read by Benterah C. Morton, PhD and Matt Townsley, EdD	
Mission and Scope, Copyright, Privacy, Ethics, Acceptance Rates, Additional Information . . .	61

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Sponsorship and Appreciation

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Special thanks to interim editor Kenneth Mitchell, Manhattanville University, in selecting the articles for this summer's issue as well as the upcoming fall issue of the Journal. Without the support of AASA and Kenneth Mitchell, the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* would not have been possible.

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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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.)