

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

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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.

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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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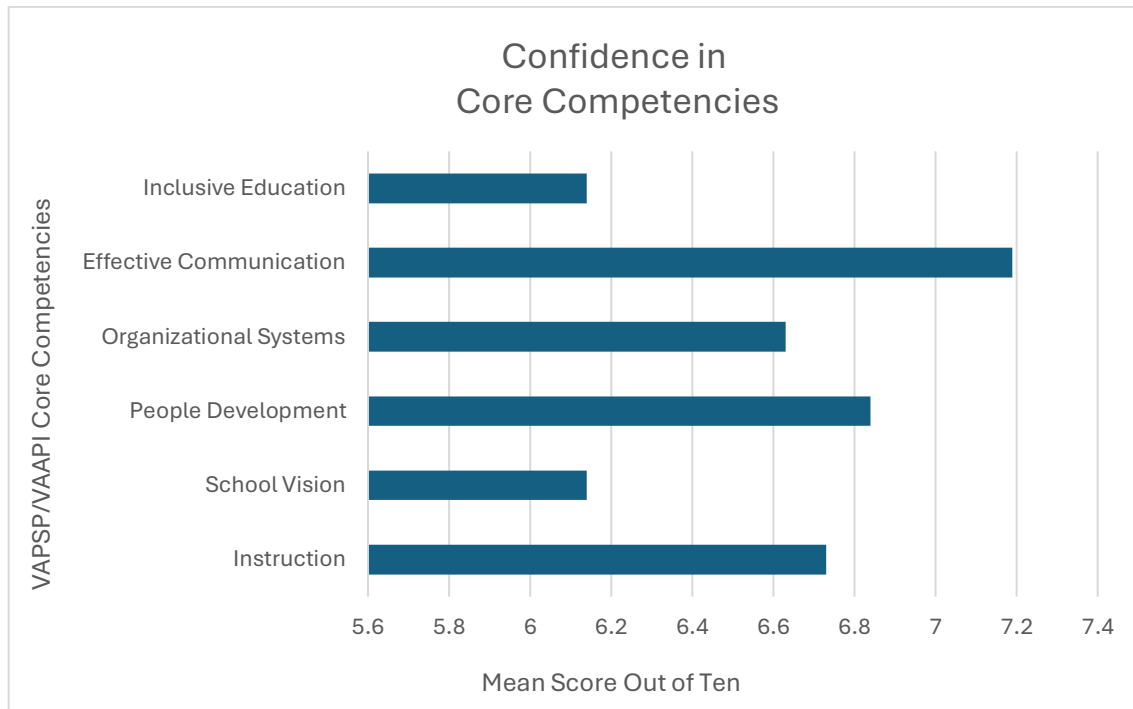
Appendix A

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.