ADDRESSING THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LEADER

Surveying Principals and
District Leaders on the Professional
Development Needs of School Leaders

NASSP
National Association
of Secondary School Principals

About NASSP

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and voice for principals and other school leaders across the United States. NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student's potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the National Honor Society, National Junior Honor Society, National Elementary Honor Society, and National Student Council.

About McKinsey Academy

McKinsey Academy, part of McKinsey & Company, is a preeminent provider of leadership development for international business, government, and philanthropic leaders. It aims to unlock leadership potential and accelerate the transformation of organizations. Using research-based pedagogy, McKinsey Academy offers breakthrough content covering important aspects of organizational leadership.

Overview

The role of a school leader is ever evolving. School leaders must now be experts in communication, change management, organizational development, and collaborative, distributed leadership. They need to demonstrate these skills in a constantly changing environment, with diverse demographics and legislation that defines new expectations and accountability. Yet, despite the recognized importance of their role to student success, they often do not get the leadership development skills training they need.

In August 2016 and January 2017, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) distributed surveys to their members to learn about the skills principals need in order to meet the challenges of their job. Two hundred and eighty-seven principals and assistant principals participated in the NASSP survey and 102 superintendents, deputy superintendents, and district professional development coordinators participated in the joint NASSP and AASA survey.
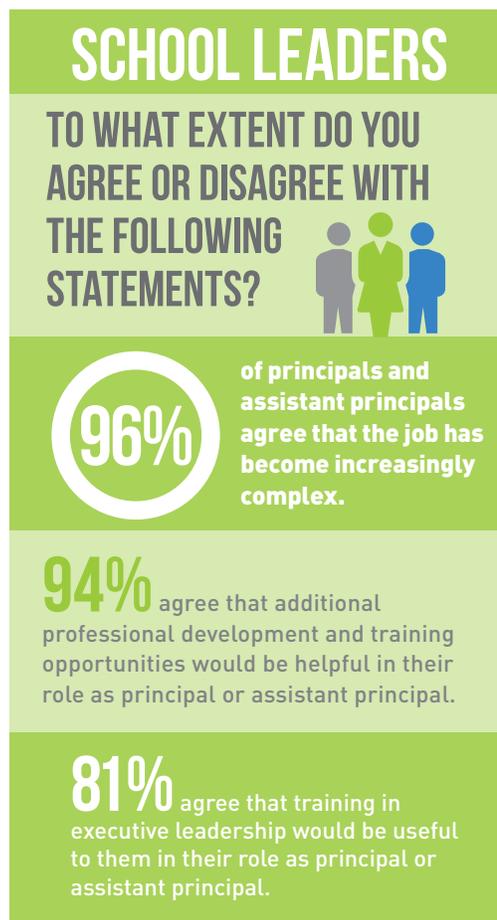
Coupled with the ever-increasing nuances of the principalship, the data most importantly indicates a critical need for better, more relevant professional learning opportunities that meet the requirements of today's school leaders.

This report disseminates key results of the recent NASSP and AASA surveys and offers recommendations to alleviate the skills gap cited by principals, assistant principals, and district leadership.

Quantitative Research – School Leaders

Of the principals and assistant principals surveyed, a staggering 99 percent stated that their jobs have become increasing complex. As a school leader, principals and assistant principals found many aspects of their responsibilities to be more challenging than in the past, including mastering challenging conversations, engaging parents and the community, maintaining an adequate supply of effective teachers, and managing their school budget and needs. School leaders also identified managing teams, providing feedback and coaching, and creating and maintaining an academically rigorous learning environment as particularly challenging responsibilities in their job.

Given their increasingly complex responsibilities, an overwhelming majority of school leaders (94 percent) agreed that additional professional development and training opportunities would be helpful in their role, and 81 percent agreed training in executive leadership would be useful. Although the majority of school leaders surveyed desired more effective professional development and wanted to participate in executive leadership training, fewer than a third reported receiving the executive training they needed and only a little more than half felt supported by their district through professional learning opportunities. In particular, more than three-quarters of principals and assistant principals stated that

SCHOOL LEADERS

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

96% of principals and assistant principals agree that the job has become increasingly complex.

94% agree that additional professional development and training opportunities would be helpful in their role as principal or assistant principal.

81% agree that training in executive leadership would be useful to them in their role as principal or assistant principal.

receiving professional development in the following areas would be somewhat to very valuable for them:

- Community engagement: 84 percent
- Team management: 83 percent
- Data analysis: 82 percent
- Communicating for impact: 79 percent
- Cultivating staff leadership: 79 percent
- Mastering challenging conversations: 77 percent

However, in the past three years, more than half of the principals surveyed did not receive professional development in the areas of cultivating staff leadership, team management, conflict resolution, and developing effective communications, and close to three-quarters of respondents did not participate in professional development on community engagement.

School leaders were interested in a variety of professional development formats, with a majority of respondents indicating a desire for:

- In-person training through workshops and/or seminars: 76 percent
- School- or district-based professional learning communities: 74 percent
- A self-paced online course progression with a school-, district- or nationally based cohort of school leaders: 66 percent
- Online training with self-paced courses: 59 percent

When asked if their superintendent, deputy superintendent, district professional development coordinator, executive principal, board of education, or the principals themselves were the primary decision-maker or influencer of principals' professional development budget, more than half of the respondents felt that they influenced the budget amount, but 89 percent felt that their superintendent was the primary decision-maker or influencer. School leaders did feel that they had more control over the specific professional development programs they participated in, with one-third citing that they were the primary decision-maker, but many (87 percent) thought that their superintendent decided or influenced the specific programs they attended.

Quantitative Research – District Leaders

District leaders are also in agreement with principals and assistant principals on the complexity of the school leadership role, with 96 percent of district leaders agreeing or strongly agreeing that the role of the school principal has become increasingly complex. When asked about the responsibilities that district leaders felt were the most challenging for their principals and assistant principals, maintaining an adequate supply of effective teachers (82 percent) and engaging parents and the community led the list (70 percent). The next most significant issues were: creating and maintaining an academically rigorous learning environment (63 percent); mastering challenging conversations (59 percent); and providing guidance and opportunities for teachers (59 percent).

While district leaders felt that their district provided support to their principals and assistant principals through professional development opportunities, 90 percent also thought that additional professional development and training opportunities would be helpful to their school leaders. More than 80 percent of superintendents agreed or strongly agreed that executive leadership training was an area where their school leaders could use more support, and an overwhelming percentage of district leaders identified the following executive leadership skills as somewhat to extremely valuable areas their principals and assistant principals could use more training:

- Mastering challenging conversations: 94 percent
- Cultivating staff leadership: 92 percent
- Team management: 89 percent
- Communicating for impact: 89 percent

However, despite the value respondents found in having their school leaders possess executive leadership skills, just under three-quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were aware of training resources in areas of leadership development, team management, and communication, and only 54 percent agreed or strongly agreed that executive leadership training was a part of current professional development opportunities provided to their school leaders.

Superintendents were particularly interested in professional development formats that gave their school leaders an opportunity to work with their peers, including participation in school- or district-based professional learning communities (76 percent); in-person training (73 percent); a cohort approach that combined self-paced online training with group work and community forums with district-based principal cohorts (73 percent); and one-on-one online or in-person mentoring (71 percent). Similar to results of the school leader survey, superintendents identified themselves as being the primary decision-maker in determining the budgets and the programs for school leader professional development, but identified principals as being the chief influencers, followed by the district professional development coordinator.

DISTRICT LEADERS
TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

96% agree that the job has become increasingly complex.

90% agree that additional professional development and training opportunities would be helpful to their principals and assistant principals.

82% agree that training in executive leadership would be helpful to their principals and assistant principals.

Recommendations

Principals and district leaders agree: the role of the school leader is changing, exposing a need for additional professional development training, especially in the area of executive leadership development. Both school and district leaders identified a gap in the skills and training needed to meet the increasingly complex role of the school leader, and they also identified executive leadership training as one way to meet the needs of school leaders. Several recommendations, based on the results of the surveys, are highlighted below to close the skills gap identified by school and district leaders.

Provide principals with professional development programs that meet the changing needs of their role.
The role of school leaders has gotten increasingly complex, and school and district leaders have identified additional professional development and training opportunities as an important asset in developing the skills school leaders need once they are in their role. While both school leaders and district leaders noted that some professional development opportunities were already provided to school leaders, they also thought that additional professional development would be useful in helping school leaders develop the skills they need to cultivate staff leadership, master challenging conversations, and communicate for impact.

Provide principals with access to executive leadership training programs so they can learn skills to manage their team, communicate with internal and external stakeholders, engage the school community, and cultivate a team through effective feedback and coaching.
School and district leaders both identified executive leadership training as an important area for professional development. However, while the mastery of executive leadership skills was identified by school and district leaders as most challenging, fewer than a third of school leaders reported receiving the executive training they needed and only 54 percent of district leaders said that executive leadership training was a part of current

professional development opportunities provided to their school leaders. Offering high-quality executive leadership training specifically for school leaders would meet their day-to-day needs and support district leaders in developing school leaders on the job.

Offer diverse training formats to meet principals' schedules and different learning styles.
Diverse training formats that meet school leaders' different schedules, time commitments, and learning styles will help school leaders better engage in professional development opportunities. School leaders were interested in a variety of training formats, including self-paced online training, in-person training, and cohort-based learning conducted either online or in-person. District leaders sought professional development that would give school leaders an opportunity to work with their peers, including online and in-person cohort-based learning and professional learning communities, and online or in-person one-on-one mentoring. Offering executive leadership development that combines self-paced online training to meet principals' busy schedules while also allowing them to work with a cohort of principals to share experiences and tap into a peer-to-peer network meets the desires of both school and district leaders.

Give principals more influence and decision-making over their own professional development budget and professional development programs.
While the school leaders surveyed felt that they influenced the professional development budget amount they received and had some influence over their professional development programs, most felt that the primary decision-maker or influencer was their superintendent. Superintendents agreed that they were the primary decision-makers for both professional development budgets and programs, but stated that school leaders were the chief influencers. To empower school leaders to become more engaged and invested in their professional development, school leaders should be given more control over their professional development budgets and be the primary or joint decision-makers in determining professional development opportunities.

In addition, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to reserve up to 3 percent of Title II district sub-grants for state-level school leader professional development. States and districts should commit to using the 3 percent specifically for professional development activities to support principals and build their capacity for effective leadership.

NASSP Professional Development Programs

In response to the feedback NASSP has received from its membership and the results of the NASSP and AASA surveys, NASSP has developed professional development programs that meet the needs of school leaders. To provide school leaders with the type of executive leadership development they desire, in the formats they seek, NASSP has formed a powerful collaboration with McKinsey Academy to create a professional development program that combines best-in-class management training with premier leadership development: The McKinsey Management Program for School Leaders.

This leading-edge, online program offers breakthrough content covering the most important aspects of organizational leadership contextualized to an educational setting. Using a dynamic online platform and research-based pedagogy, participants walk away with the real-world solutions they need to revolutionize their schools. Each five- to eight-week course in the program utilizes best-in-class techniques to develop specific management capabilities as well as provides tools, techniques, and real-life examples to enrich school administrators' leadership skills. The program also leverages the power of professional learning communities through online discussion forums and graded group work to connect principals with their peers from across the country, and continues the learning and networking opportunities with alumni events after participants have successfully completed a course.

PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL LEADERS WHO FIND TRAINING IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS TO BE SOMEWHAT OR EXTREMELY VALUABLE

PRINCIPALS AND ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS:

- **83%** Team management
- **79%** Communicating for impact
- **78%** Mastering challenging conversations

DISTRICT LEADERS:

- **94%** Mastering challenging conversations
- **89%** Team management
- **88%** Communicating for impact

In the NASSP survey, school leaders identified the following areas as somewhat to very valuable for them to receive professional development: team management (83 percent); communicating for impact (79 percent); and mastering challenging conversations (78 percent). These areas are addressed through the McKinsey Management Program for School Leaders, which includes 5- to 8-week courses around each of these key school leadership management skills. Participants who took the full three-course program during the 2016–17 school year reported very positive results:

- 100 percent of participants felt the courses covered the most critical skills school leaders need to succeed
- 100 percent felt better prepared to lead their organization as a result of the program
- 9 out of 10 participants would recommend the program to a colleague

The McKinsey Management Program for School Leaders aligns to ESSA's Title II requirement that funds are dedicated to improving principal quality and directly satisfies the requirements of the ESSA-defined Tier IV of Effectiveness.

Conclusion

As the role of school leaders has gotten more complex, both school and district leaders recognize the importance of high-quality professional development that incorporates training in executive leadership skills. As the CEOs of their school, principals are responsible not just for the academic instruction and environment in their school building, but also for the management of their team, school operations, and internal and external stakeholder communications. With the many roles that school leaders play, it is imperative that district and school leaders collaborate together to identify professional development programs that augment the skills principals need in successfully and effectively leading their schools to positively impact student outcomes.

For more information about the McKinsey Management Program for School Leaders, visit www.nassp.org/mmpsl.