

**Focus Group Interviews with Participants of the  
Washoe Academy of School Leaders**

Office of Accountability

Washoe County School District

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## Executive Summary

This report presents the results of two, hour-long focus group interviews with school leaders participating in the Washoe Academy of School Leaders (WASL) conducted in April 2018. The purpose of WASL is to provide professional development, administrative support, and collegial mentoring to encourage the development of leadership skills among aspiring principals. The focus groups were conducted during the last session of the 2017-18 WASL program with participating Assistant Principals, Deans, Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSAs), and District Coordinators. This report is intended to identify the primary strengths of the program, weaknesses of the program, and opportunities to improve the program in the future.

### Assistant Principals

#### *Areas of Strength*

Assistant Principals were overall very positive about their experiences in WASL, and thought that collaborating and networking with other school and district leaders was incredibly beneficial. They also thought WASL provided a much needed “big picture” perspective of the broader district. APs also commented that the entry plan and 30/60/90 activities were particularly applicable, useful experiences that helped prepare them for future leadership positions.

#### *Areas for Growth*

APs thought that more hands-on, practical activities were the most beneficial aspects of WASL. In alignment with this global recommendation, they suggested changing the school visit structure to more of a one-on-one mentoring experience. They also wanted mock interview questions to align more closely with the questions asked in principal interviews. They also requested additional content on school budgets.

### Deans, TOSAs, Coordinators

#### *Areas of Strength*

Deans were equally positive about WASL, and appreciated the time and space to reflect on their leadership philosophy and approach. They also appreciated the collegiality they had built with other district leaders and colleagues. They especially appreciated the honesty of new principals during the principal panel.

#### *Areas for Growth*

Like the APs, Deans/TOSAs/Coordinators also requested smaller study school visit groups, or shifting to a one-on-one mentorship experience. They also recommended more of a focus on the managerial, administrative aspects of school leadership, rather than focusing on instructional leadership.

## Evaluation of the 2018 Washoe Academy of School Leaders: Results of End-of-Year Focus Group Interviews

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### Background

In the 2011-2012 school year, the Washoe County School District instituted the Washoe Academy of School Leaders (WASL), a program that provided administrative support and professional training to develop leadership skills among aspiring principals. The mission of WASL is “to develop a new generation of outstanding, transformational building-level leaders in Washoe County.” The academy was comprised of six, one- and two-day sessions spread out over the course of the school year. Through targeted professional development and professional mentoring, academy participants build their individual capacities in six critical areas:

- *Leadership*
- *Leading learning*
- *Creating an accountable school*
- *Leading and managing people*
- *Managing resources*
- *Building relationships*

The 2017-2018 school year marks the seventh year of WASL. This report presents the results of two end-of-year focus groups with participants of the WASL program.

### Evaluation Method

Two interviewers from WCSD’s Department of Accountability conducted 45-minute long focus groups with academy participants to identify which aspects of the WASL curriculum were most beneficial, which areas of the curriculum could be improved in the future, and whether WASL had increased their confidence to become successful school administrators.

Two semi-structured focus groups were conducted with the 16 participants of WASL. Staff were divided into two groups based on their position: 1) Assistant Principals, and 2) Deans/TOSAs/Coordinators/Directors (implementation specialists, program coordinators, area administrators, etc.). The moderator guide used to structure the focus groups is included in the Appendix. All sessions were tape recorded and transcribed.

Focus group themes emerged through analysis of transcripts using the SWOT analytic framework, in which the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities for improvement, and external Threats to improvement of the program are identified. This report describes the key findings of the focus group interviews by staff role so that WCSD can more effectively capitalize on strengths, address the weaknesses, seize opportunities for improvement, and mitigate challenges for next year’s WASL program.

## Assistant Principals

### Strengths of the Program

Assistant Principals were overwhelmingly positive about their WASL experiences. Overall, APs believed WASL helped prepare them for their future role as Principal. They particularly mentioned that interacting with other APs helped them better understand their role, and exposed them to others' experiences in the same role. **Exposure to different experiences** helped them better understand their role, but the collaborations also provided them with a support network they could rely on even outside of WASL. They were also able to learn more about their own school's strengths' and weaknesses. Through interactions with other school leaders and hearing from new principals, they also appreciated the realization that all new leaders have a learning curve, and that no one is fully prepared for the complexities of being a school principal. APs appreciated building a network of colleagues across the district, including the WASL facilitator, Alyson Kendrick, that they could rely on and ask questions of when needed.

Most APs indicated that WASL provided them with **resources they could take back** to their schools and that their principals were receptive to hearing what they had learned and incorporating some of the curriculum they learn at WASL and apply it at their school. APs were especially supportive of the **entry plan activity**, and thought it provided thoughtful guidance on factors to consider when starting at a new school in a leadership position. As one participant explained, "It's a great planning session that helps us not only think about what we each would do at a school but also the gaps in my knowledge, and what I need to work on before becoming a Principal." APs commented that quality of all the **guest speakers** had been really high. Each appreciated hearing the perspective of Jim Hugey. They also each found the **30/60/90 activity** to be very useful and some have implemented in their jobs already.

### Weaknesses of the Program/Areas for Improvement

When asked what they thought was less useful about WASL, APs' primary concern was that they had really hoped to learn more about **how to do a school budget**. None had ever seen or worked on a budget in their current position, and they all feared they would not be able to do this effectively without additional training.

APs also commented that the **textbook** used in WASL was overly theoretical and not easily applicable. In particular, they thought it focused too heavily on instructional leadership. As one noted, "We have all been teachers, so we have had years of instructional leadership discussions." APs requested a textbook and a curriculum that provided more instruction around the managerial side of administration, with activities that were highly practical to the job they were going to do.

**APs also mentioned school visits** as an area of weakness for several reasons. First, several noted that the schools they attended were disorganized and did not seem like they had planned for the visit. Principals at the study schools also expressed uncertainty about what they

#### Assistant Principals

##### Strengths of Program

- Collaboration and collegial network building
- Applicable resources they could use at current site
- Entry plan activities
- Guest speakers

##### Opportunities for Improvement

- More applied, less theoretical content and practical activities
- More information on school budgets
- Have principal mentors rather than school visits

were supposed to be showing WASL participants. They also commented that the majority of what they saw when they visited focused on information they already knew as APs. Participants also commented that the school visits were brief, and that principals were often interrupted as issues arose at the school (e.g. by student behaviors or parents needing to meet). APs recommended that it would be better to have mentor principals, or at least have principals meet with the WASL class on a more informal, small group basis, and on more occasions. Even if these meetings occurred afterschool, it would help develop a more meaningful experience for the learner and not put so much on the plate of the principal during the school day.

## Deans, TOSAs, Coordinators

### Strengths of the Program

Overall, participants in this group were incredibly positive about their experience in WASL. All of the respondents indicated that they felt better prepared for future leadership positions. In general, they appreciated that WASL provided them an opportunity to have time and space to **reflect on who they were as leaders**. Further, staff felt better prepared to ask the right questions of leadership. As one participant described, as a result of WASL, they now thought more broadly about the impact of their decisions on multiple stakeholders, including thinking through answers to, “who is this decision impacting?” Several noted that WASL had helped them think about the **larger picture of the district** and leadership. One staff member noted that hearing different perspectives across the district develop their own view of how to lead a school. Others noted that WASL exposed them to the wide variations in schools across the district, which helped expand their understanding of the types of school experiences they might have in the future. As one person noted, it “blows my mind how different schools are.”

Like APs, participants in this group noted that the **collegiality** of WASL was a particular benefit, and that building a network of other leaders helped them build their confidence to lead since they had developed a community of coworkers that “had each other’s backs.” Several even requested more cross-school collaboration.

Participants in this group highlighted a few activities and sessions that were particularly helpful, including the presentation from Equity and Diversity, which one participant commented had led them to “deeper thinking and reflection on practice.” Several participants mentioned that they thought the first week’s focus on leadership with consulting teachers was helpful. Staff were unanimous that the principal panel was especially helpful. They noted that principals’ honest conversations about what it was like to be a new leader in a building was refreshing and illuminating. They appreciated that the new principals were willing to talk about the challenges they faced, and also helped them learn strategies for adjusting to their new roles. Finally, most staff in this group thought the 30/60/90 assignment had helped them see that they “got it.”

#### Dean/TOSA/Coordinator

##### Strengths of Program

- Exposure to “larger picture of district”
- Collaboration and collegial network building
- Opportunity to reflect on leadership
- New principal panel

##### Opportunities for Improvement

- Better coordination with NV Leads and HR
- Replace study school visits with principal mentoring

### Weaknesses of the Program/Areas for Improvement

Participants in this group highlighted a few areas of WASL they believed could benefit from improvement. First, although participants thought the **mock interviews** with feedback were helpful, they thought they could be improved by including more questions relevant to what was actually asked in pool interviews. Second, several mentioned that many of the **outside reading assignments and response activities** were not valuable since they were not often discussed in class. As a result, the outside readings and responses felt like “busy work.” Furthermore, a few staff mentioned that their college courses had used the same texts, so the information was particularly redundant for them. That said, some staff noted that the appendices in the texts were helpful.

Some staff noted that the 30/60/90 was an activity that might have been more applicable to those who intended to become principals. Some were able to adapt it to their own goals, but others had a difficult time applying it to their current positions. This challenge related to another overarching issue with WASL, in that some staff felt there could have been more differentiation in content by small group roles.

Other concerns were about WASL curriculum sometimes feeling somewhat **disconnected from other leadership opportunities** in the district. For example, some felt they were not sure if participation in WASL would have been beneficial to their application to the AP pool. Some noted that they thought there should be a certificate of completion. Others commented that WASL and HR should collaborate more closely so that the content and the preparation was more aligned with interview and application requirements for the administrator pools. A similar concern was raised about Nevada Leads, which some said felt disconnected from WASL and the content provided.

Some Deans and TOSAs noted that **being away from school** to participate in WASL was difficult, particularly when their administrator did not support their participation. Although many felt very supported by their administrator or supervisor, other building leaders did not see how it was beneficial to have them out of the building for WASL. Some staff even inquired if it was possible to have substitutes on days they were out for WASL to ensure there was adequate coverage while they were out. Others noted they felt and had heard from others that there was a general lack of support in District for beginning leaders.

Participants in this group had several suggestions to improve **study school visits**. Some stated they had not been inspired by the visits and that they had not improved their confidence or ability to lead. Respondents said that although they could see the potential benefits to doing the visits, they seemed poorly planned. They said WASL participants had not been provided with much guidance about the purpose of the visits or what to look for during their time at schools. They also felt that principals needed to be prepped beforehand on what to expect and what to provide visitors. Some commented that visiting in large groups had done a disservice to all, since it was potentially disruptive to schools and also meant that WASL participants were not able to get individual attention or ask all the questions they might have wanted to ask. Several noted that the three hour “ask and answer” session at some study visits was not a good use of time and would have benefitted from more structure. Respondents suggested that smaller groups would be more helpful in the future. Others suggested that eliminating study school visits entirely and replacing them with more long-lasting principal mentorships would be even more impactful.

## Appendix A 2018 WASL Evaluation: Moderator Guide

### **1. Usefulness of WASL Curriculum**

#### **Which areas of the WASL curriculum did you find most useful?**

Probe 1: What areas do you think most helped prepare you to be a principal/assistant principal/administrator?

Probe 2: What areas do you think helped you be more effective in your current role?

Probe 3: Was there any one presentation that you thought was particularly useful or that made you think differently about your leadership approach?

Probe 4: Was there any one activity you completed in your WASL training sessions that you thought was particularly useful or that made you think differently about your leadership approach?

Probe 5: Do you feel more confident in your ability to be an effective leader at your school as a result of WASL?

### **2. Areas of WASL Curriculum to Improve in Future**

#### **Which areas of the WASL curriculum do you think should be altered or omitted for future years?**

Probe 1: Which training area do you still feel like you might need some work on?

Probe 2: Was there any area that you wish you could have spent more time on?

Probe 3: Did you find any particular area irrelevant to what you do now or what you plan to do professionally?

Probe 4: Did you have sufficient time to complete the pre-work activities that were assigned?

Probe 5: Do you feel like the leadership qualities needed to become an effective principal can be taught through a program like WASL or are they something better learned through on-the-job experience?

### **3. Working with Study Schools**

#### **In what ways did your experience with your Study School Team help support your professional growth this year?**

Probe 1: How satisfied were you with the number of Study School Visits you had?

Probe 2: What topics did you cover during your Study School visits?

Probe 3: What activities did you conduct during your Study School visits that you found particularly useful?

Probe 4: Were there any activities you completed with your Study School Team that you did not find useful?

Probe 5: What suggestions do you have for improving the Study School Team experience for WASL cohorts in the future?

### **4. Competency to Become an Effective School Leader**



**Looking to the future, how do you feel about your competence to transition into a role as a principal/assistant principal/other school administrator?**

Probe 1: Do you feel adequately prepared to make the transition to becoming an effective school leader/principal/assistant principal?

Probe 2: What do you think will be your biggest challenge if you were to transition from your current role to the role of principal/assistant principal/other administrator?

Probe 3: What do you see as the primary differences between your current role and the role of a principal/assistant principal/other administrator position?

Probe 4: In hearing leaders' stories and shadowing principals, what leadership qualities do you think are most critical to becoming an effective school leader? What, if any, areas of the WASL training program developed your skillset in those critical leadership qualities?

Probe 5: Thinking about the McRel standards for effective principals, in which areas do you feel like you have most grown as a function of your participation in WASL? On which standards do you think you would not perform as well? Would further training help your development on those standards, or are those skills better learned on the job?

**Wrap-Up**

Would you recommend WASL to other aspiring leaders in our district?