

The Leadership Void in Schools:

Why Assistant Principals Are Expected to Lead Without Being Developed to Do So

Problem Statement

Assistant principals (APs) are expected to serve as instructional leaders, safety leaders, culture builders, and principal successors. However, a growing body of research indicates that **current and aspiring assistant principals are insufficiently prepared for these leadership demands**, creating a measurable **leadership void** within schools and districts.

What the Research Shows

1. Formal leadership preparation programs are misaligned with the AP role

Research consistently finds that most leadership preparation programs are **principal-centric**, leaving assistant principals underprepared for the realities of their positions.

- Craft (2016) identifies a persistent disconnect between leadership preparation programs and the assistant principal role, noting the “**inadequacy of formal preparation programs focused on the role.**”
- APs often enter the position with theoretical knowledge but **without role-specific leadership skills** related to supervision, safety leadership, culture, and instructional readiness.

Implication: APs are placed into leadership positions without leadership preparation designed for their actual responsibilities.

2. Professional learning and mentoring for APs is inconsistent or absent

Studies show that access to coaching, mentoring, and structured leadership development for APs varies widely by district and school.

- Wilson & Clayton (2020) report that the assistant principal role is **ambiguously defined**, professional learning opportunities are **uneven**, and “**few are prepared to assume the myriad tasks required of a school leader.**”
- Many APs report learning the role through trial and error rather than intentional leadership development.

Implication: Inconsistent development produces inconsistent leadership capacity across schools.

3. The field lacks consensus on how APs should be prepared and supported

A major research synthesis highlights the absence of systemic guidance for AP leadership development.

- A comprehensive report from the Wallace Foundation concludes that policymakers, practitioners, and researchers **have not reached consensus** on:
 - The core responsibilities of assistant principals
 - How APs should be developed as leaders
 - What systems should exist to support their growth
- The report emphasizes the need for **district-level systems** that ensure equitable access to mentoring, leadership development, and advancement pathways.

Implication: Without clear systems, leadership development depends on chance rather than design.

4. Assistant principals receive fewer targeted leadership development opportunities

Research focused specifically on AP professional learning reveals that assistant principals often receive **less role-specific development** than principals or teachers.

- Allen et al. (2014) found that APs report **limited access to professional development tailored to their leadership role**, despite expanding responsibilities in instruction, discipline, and school safety.

Implication: Schools rely on AP leadership while underinvesting in AP leadership development.

Conclusion: The Leadership Void

The research base is clear and consistent:

Schools face a leadership void not because assistant principals lack commitment or talent—but because **systems fail to intentionally develop them as leaders.**

When assistant principals are expected to lead without targeted preparation, schools experience:

- Reactive discipline instead of proactive culture
 - Safety compliance instead of safety leadership
 - Management activity instead of instructional impact
 - Leadership succession gaps instead of leadership pipelines
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Why This Matters for Districts

Intentional assistant principal leadership development is not optional—it is foundational to:

- School safety and climate
 - Instructional readiness and academic excellence
 - Principal pipeline sustainability
 - Leadership stability in high-need schools
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Key References (APA-Style)

- Allen, J. G., et al. (2014). *The professional development needs of assistant principals.*
- Craft, H. M. (2016). *The acclimation of new assistant principals. Journal of School Administration Research and Development.*
- Goldring, E., et al. (2021). *The role of assistant principals: Evidence and insights for advancing school leadership.* Wallace Foundation.
- Wilson, T. A., & Clayton, J. K. (2020). *Novice assistant principals' perceptions of professional learning experiences.*