



BETWEEN EXHAUSTION AND FRUSTRATION: THE CRUCIBLE EXPERIENCE OF THE EARLY-CAREER PRINCIPAL

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Abstract

The current study seeks to address whether preparation programs are helping candidates anticipate and adapt to the changing and increasing expectations placed on principals. Another guiding question focuses on the nature and effectiveness of the internship. The study also considers the kinds of mentorship and other support early-career principals receive, whether that mentorship is formal or serendipitous. Finally, the study probes how principal preparation programs might revise current offerings to provide additional support for aspiring and early-career principals.

The purpose of the current study is to cull the perceptions of early-career building administrators, focusing on their principal preparation programs, their internships, their formal and informal mentors, and the kinds of support they received—or wish they had received—as neophytes in the principal role.

Keywords : Principal, Early-Career, Mentor, Support, Intern, Burn-Out

The role of the school principal has become increasingly complex and unsustainable over time, with demands coming from multiple sources—including state policies, superintendents, parents, and systemic gaps. Research recognizes the principalship as the highest-leverage position to drive student learning (Grissom et al., 2021); and yet abundant research and information concludes that the role of a school principal has become so multi-faceted and demanding that it is nearly impossible for one person to address all of its complexities (Goodwin et al., 2005; Kafka, 2009; Knight, 2023). The role of the school principal has transformed significantly since it emerged in the late 19th century (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Kafka, 2009). As the intricacies of the job and the intersection between schools, society, and the political landscape grew, there was a “layering-on” to the scope of work (Goodwin et al., 2005). While new duties, responsibilities, and forms of accountability added up, nothing was ever taken away from what was expected of a school principal. Those new expectations came from federal mandates; arose from changes in our society based on everything from world wars to the civil rights movement to the rise of social media; and developed out of a growing perception that schools need significant reform, reform that school principals were best positioned to usher in as change agents (Beck & Murphy, 1992; Rousmaniere, 2007).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced temporary shifts in how schools operated, including providing additional funding for social services; but when funding ended, schools reverted to pre-pandemic organizational structures while still being expected to meet these new demands. Among principals, this mismatch between expectations and support has led to increasing burnout and turnover, and declining interest in education leadership positions. About 11% of principals left that leadership role between the 2020-21 school year and the 2021-22 school year (Szeto, 2026).

An additional “layer” is the lasting effect of the pandemic compounding an existing trend in children who are in or now enrolling in schools. In children of all ages, there is a well-documented increase in acute behavior challenges, increased absenteeism, and signs of social development delays due to missed social experiences with their peers for several formative years (Fullan, 2020; Haidt, 2024; Rapaport et al., 2024). These problems persist; yet the structures of our systems remain the unchanged, and so it falls on principals to solve these problems and be held accountable for change.

Structures for meeting students’ needs so that they are ready to learn are no longer sufficient. The work of ensuring that students are learning is still the job of school principals, who are often held directly accountable for increasing overall performance and ensuring equitable outcomes across demographic differences. While some

principals are still thriving in their roles, it takes intentional effort on their part (Reyes-Gonzalez, 2007). A recent study conducted in Canada found that middle school principals in that country often experience demands that may lead to burnout and, for some, a decision to leave the principalship or the profession (Beck, 2026).

Principals' deteriorating work-life balance is not the only problem resulting from this situation. Schools that see turnover in leadership are unable to make sustainable changes that could lead to the success of the children enrolled there. Further, if the trend of increased burnout continues and there is diminishing interest from educators to become principals, we could face a critical shortage of leaders in our system of education (Fullan, 1988; Guthrie & Sanders, 2001; Hurley, 1992; Styron & Styron, 2011).

Nearly 20 public and private universities offer principal preparation programs in the state of Washington. In the current year, more than 300 candidates have received approval to complete their internship. Most of these aspiring building leaders will complete their internship at the school where they have been in a teaching or other certificated role. All preparation programs align coursework with the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standards, as required by the state's Professional Education Standards Board (PESB).

The current study seeks to address whether preparation programs are helping candidates anticipate and adapt to the changing and increasing expectations placed on principals. Another guiding question focuses on the nature and effectiveness of the internship. The study also considers the kinds of mentorship and other support early-career principals receive, whether that mentorship is formal or serendipitous. Finally, the study probes how principal preparation programs might revise current offerings to provide additional support for aspiring and early-career principals.

The purpose of the current study is to cull the perceptions of early-career building administrators, focusing on their principal preparation programs, their internships, their formal and informal mentors, and the kinds of support they received—or wish they had received—as neophytes in the principal role. Using purposeful sampling, we identified principals and assistant principals who are in the first five years of their administrative experience. All are employed in school districts in Washington State. After conducting qualitative interviews with participants, we coded each transcript using our research questions to identify themes. We elected to present our data using the narrative inquiry method (Patton, 2015; Tisdell, Merriam, & Stuckey-Peyrot, 2025). “The key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experiences told in story form....” (Tisdell, Merriam, & Stuckey-Peyrot, 2025, p. 41).

In presenting these narratives, we have anonymized participants using pseudonyms to mask their identities and the names of their districts.

Gretchen

Gretchen gives a first impression as one who is focused, serious, capable, athletic. As we talked, she offered detailed insights into her personal and professional journey. She has been an elementary building leader in her district in western Washington for four years, three as an assistant principal and then, for the past year, in a different building, as principal. Before starting her principal preparation program, Gretchen taught math and science in the middle grades in a K-8. Before embarking on a pathway from classroom to principal, school leaders often get a “tap on the shoulder” from a school administrator—perhaps the principal or the superintendent. For Gretchen, that tap came from her principal, an affirmation that she had the fundamental personal and professional attributes to lead a school community.

As the spouse of an active-duty officer in the United States military, Gretchen has welcomed opportunities to be a quasi leader for other military spouses. Periodic deployment—TDY in military parlance—is a reality for military personnel, whether officers or enlisted. In her community, Gretchen has provided an important link between families who remain home while their spouse is deployed.

When the spouse is deployed and something happens at home, you can't just send an email and say, “Hey, my grandma died.” Or something happens to a child, or there's an emergency. So the family comes to me, and I communicate with the [base] command. It's for the safety of the person who is on TDY.

Though not necessarily school-related, Gretchen's connection with other military families has helped her see how the leader needs to look beyond logistics and numbers to embrace how circumstances thrust upon a family may impact the big picture. The small stuff easily trumps the what may seem paramount. A military spouse contacts Gretchen and, with fear in her voice, explains that her husband has just been deployed and has left \$200 at home to last for the next four months. Gretchen has resources and connections on base who can step into the gap.

At the time that Gretchen began coursework in her principal preparation program, she was a single mother. She balanced taking classes at night, teaching every day, and providing the parenting and stability her young children needed. She reflects on those classes as having laid a solid foundation for her transition from classroom to assistant principal. Gretchen says, “My program was comprehensive and covered everything that I would need. I felt really

prepared.” Coursework helped broaden Gretchen’s perspective and see parts of the school community that were outside the classroom setting.

Her year-long internship in her K-8 school reinforced what Gretchen had learned in her coursework. The isolation and upheaval imposed by COVID had passed; Gretchen was now dean in her school. Her principal, a veteran of several years, thrust Gretchen into a variety of leadership opportunities. “I was both feet in. She wanted to be a partner with me. The hands-on stuff was where I got to practice and learn,” she says. Learning the skills needed for teacher evaluation included accompanying the principal on observations and scripting the observation at the same time the principal took her own notes. “Then we would compare our notes and questions after the observation.”

Gretchen remained connected with her university mentors throughout the internship and even after she began her first administrative position as assistant principal. “The connections and support we had with the faculty and especially the internship advisor were important—to be able to call the advisor, ask questions, and just brainstorm was an incredibly helpful tool.” Those periodic conversations, whether by phone or over coffee, continued as Gretchen took the step into building administration. For three years Gretchen forged experiences as an AP and developed alliances with other building administrators; but she received little mentoring. She did, however, maintain a relationship with an administrator in her previous district, a relationship that Gretchen had developed with a caring veteran principal in whom Gretchen felt she could confide. As she donned the assistant principal’s role, Gretchen remained connected with this mentor; through frequent, informal conversations, Gretchen shared the greatest challenges she was experiencing. She also remained in contact with her advisor from her preparation program. “I called my advisor a few times. Just having that relationship with him, you know, just finding those people that are ... are maybe a little more disconnected.”

“Being in the AP seat taught me even more how to treat people,” Gretchen said. “You don’t necessarily learn this through coursework. It’s experience.” She also learned about herself—the line she is willing to draw that points to her values.

I learned to identify my hard lines. You know, what am I... what am I really about? At the end of the day, am I gonna be able to leave the building and say I did what’s best for my teachers and my kids?

During the interview with the superintendent for the principal position, Gretchen asked what kinds of support the district would provide for a new principal. The superintendent replied, “What kind of support do you need?” Gretchen did not know how to respond. “I didn’t know what I needed help with, but I knew I needed somebody. You just don’t know what you don’t know.” In the absence of intentional mentoring from her district, Gretchen reached out to another principal, someone whom she trusted.

I just said, “Hey, would you be willing to be my unofficial mentor this year? Just somebody when I have just simple questions of how do you do this in your building, or what does this look like that I can call?” And she was wonderful.

Sometimes Gretchen would drop by to see her colleague at her school, or they would meet over coffee. Most often, though, they talked as they drove to school. A Wednesday morning phone chat became their ritual.

As she began her first year in the principal’s role, Gretchen learned that the mentor she had adopted in her previous district had been hired in her current district as assistant superintendent. The new assistant superintendent set up regular meetings with principals in their schools.

She would just walk our building with us if we didn’t have anything on the agenda; or if there were things we needed to sit down and I wanted to ask her, she was just mine, you know, for an hour. Just totally mine. Gretchen reflects that having the right person to call is a critical piece to the mentorship puzzle. She has crafted a relationship over several years with her current assistant superintendent. “I can’t begin to explain how supported I feel. I...I mean, I could call her anytime, any day, any... It doesn’t matter. She is the most amazing person!”

We asked what kinds of resources Gretchen might find helpful, including support from the state principals’ association. She reflected on what she has experienced and how the challenges of being a building leader may lead to burnout. She has had principal colleagues who have walked away from being a principal. “I can see why the burnout rate is the way it is, because I see what needs to be done. I have the heart to do it and to help, but I’m only limited as to how much I can do.”

Ursula

For Ursula, the move from classroom to building leadership offered a new role in a new school district—and at a different grade level. And yet, after only two years as an elementary administrator, she found herself eager to return to the classroom. What did she encounter in the principalship that prompted her change of heart?

As an undergraduate at a state university, Ursula had majored in science and, for a time, entertained aspirations of becoming a veterinarian. Her love of science proved compatible with becoming a science teacher.

Ursula completed a master's degree in teaching, with a special education endorsement. After a few years teaching science in a small rural school district, a district with fewer than 100 students in kindergarten through Grade 12, she and her husband moved to a larger, more urban community. There Ursula took a position as a middle school special education teacher; two years later her love of science prompted a move to a high school science classroom.

Ursula reflects on her principal preparation program positively, noting that she remains in contact with several of those who attended classes with her. She completed her internship at the high school where she taught, mentored primarily by one of the assistant principals, a veteran administrator whose resume included teaching in an international school. As she completed her principal preparation program, she applied for assistant principal positions and was offered a job in a small, rural district within driving distance of her home. Her children were young: one and a half and seven.

As a new assistant principal, Ursula enjoyed the benefit of an experienced principal who knew the landscape of the school district. She quickly formed relationships with teachers and staff. "I really loved working with the families. I loved working with my staff. I thought it was fantastic," she recalled. The budget in her new district stood in contrast to the more abundant funds that were available in her previous school district. Toward the end of that first year, the district determined that drastic layoffs would be needed to bring the budget under control. Her principal and she made plans as to how they were going to tell 30% of the teachers and a similar number of paraeducators that their positions would not exist the following year. "It was awful. I felt so bad for those people. But then I was also thinking, 'How are we going to run [next year]?'"

In the midst of the financial and personnel chaos, Ursula's principal was elevated to a new position in central office. Ursula accepted the offer to become principal—with one year in the assistant principal's chair behind her—in the hope that the district would fill the AP position her promotion left vacant. Though the district promised additional support, that did not eventuate.

Class sizes grew dramatically. Fourth-grade classes had 40 students. She was the sole administrator in a school with 300-plus students in a community that agonized with poverty and dysfunction. Ursula reflected,

The biggest issue that I was running into was just the intensive needs of that community. Lots and lots of poverty, lots of trauma. And then that was amplified by the fact that it was so rural. So there was not a lot of resources.

The poverty in the community impacted the students in ways that Ursula could not adequately address. She recalled a student whose mother, an addict, would either take or sell the medication her son needed to remain regulated in school. On occasion, lacking the medication he had been prescribed, the child would exhibit such extreme behavior that Ursula would call the local fire department, whereupon the child would be transported to the nearest hospital for psychological help. The boy might return to school weeks later.

Ursula had enjoyed the mentorship of her assistant principal during her internship. In her assistant principal role, her principal had provided that mentorship. She also stayed connected to Gail, a classmate from her principal preparation program, who had been appointed to an elementary assistant principal role in the district where Ursula had taught. As APs in schools with similar needs, Ursula and Gail might talk infrequently, but, Ursula recalled, "Gail was a really good sounding board when we could connect." In addition, others in her cohort who had moved on to administrative roles might connect informally.

As Ursula took the helm in her second year, her superintendent coordinated with the state principals organization to provide a mentor, a high school principal in a neighboring school district. Ursula said, "I think [the superintendent] was really trying to help, but it actually provided more work for me." Any meetings with her mentor had to occur at the end of a long school day. "I felt like the time that it cost me [to meet with my appointed mentor] was not worth the benefit." Ursula recalled an afternoon when she had scheduled a meeting with her mentor at her school. The day turned out to be a dumpster fire of student referrals. Near the end of the school day, one of her particularly vulnerable students locked himself in a bathroom, in fact used as a storage closet, in a classroom. A paraeducator joined Ursula in trying to coax and calm the boy as he ransacked the locked space.

The boy full blown attacked us. He was like beating us with a broom. At one point he was strangling the para with her scarf. And he had broken a dustpan. And it was like pointy and jagged, and he was trying to stab us with it. I mean, it was this whirlwind in this little tiny bathroom that we were dealing with.

Her mentor waited in her office. The catastrophe in the closet ended. The boy went home. Ursula made sure her paraeducator was okay and sent her home. "I was a mess mentally, physically," Ursula said. "I'm pretty sure I was bleeding somewhere and didn't realize it." Her mentor made a visual assessment of Ursula as she entered her office. "So, how was your day?" he began. "I didn't know where to begin," Ursula said. Ursula had not yet completed the paperwork and answered the emails that had accumulated during the day. She would, as usual, do the tasks and make the phone calls that could not wait until tomorrow. The extra hour she spent with her mentor meant Ursula

would get home even later. Once again, her children would be in bed; in the morning she would dress in the dark and drive to school.

The principalship can be isolating. The other elementary principals in the district became Ursula's best, most empathetic source of mentoring. Just having a sounding board, a colleague who will listen without judging, can make a difference. Ursula recalled:

It was much better with [my principal colleagues] because I felt like I could really take my hat off and just not have to worry about professional appearances or trying to filter out what I said. Behind closed doors [with my principal colleagues], I could take it off. And they'd be like, "Yeah, man, I totally get it!" It was refreshing in that way.

Among the benefits of tapping into principal colleagues was their accessibility—during the school day—to talk and offer their insights. "The big thing was availability, like actually having time during your workday." Ursula mimed pressing the buttons on a cell phone. "I could just boop, boop, boop, 'Hey, I have a situation. What are your thoughts?' And I knew I could just call them. And they wouldn't be all like, 'Oh, my gosh, I can't believe Ursula doesn't know this!'"

As AP Ursula had been the first point of contact for any student behavior concerns, but her principal had the lead role in the bigger picture of running the school. They shared the load of evaluating teachers and support staff. Now Ursula found herself on the point of the spear for all matters related to school administration. Her school housed the district's elementary program for K-6 students with emotional and behavioral disorder. Many of her students had IEPs; others did not have IEPs but should have been evaluated. One day she dealt with 37 office referrals. She frequently rode the bus with children whose behaviors might cause the driver to park the bus on a country road and then wait for someone from the district to intervene. With her special education endorsement, Ursula found herself in the role of special education director, in addition to principal. When she was in the AP role, her principal had campaigned to keep his assistant principal, a counselor, and a Title I teacher. Ursula had no AP, and the district had withdrawn other supports. "I could have stayed there," Ursula said. "I would probably still be there if we had a dean or an assistant principal to just share that workload in some way."

The extremity of tasks she faced at school placed Ursula in conflict with her role as mother. "More days than not, I would wake up and get to work not having seen my girls in the morning," she recalled. "And then I would get home and they would already be in bed. That was hard." She called Gail, her "best buddy," who had completed the principal preparation program with her and was now an elementary assistant principal in another school district.

I was like, "Gail, I have a decision to make. I either have to decide that I'm going to be a good principal and a pretty lousy mom, or I can choose to become a good mom and be a pretty lousy principal."

Her children, she explained to Gail, were her first, non-negotiable priority. "I can't do this anymore," she said. "I think I need to leave being a principal." It was summer, the end of her first year as principal. "The experience I had made me never want to be a principal again."

Zach

Zach's professional career spans more than 20 years. His education includes a master's degree in education as well as a terminal degree in another field. And while Zach spent a short time working in this other field, he found that his true passion was in education.

He now counts 18 years as an educator in a variety of roles, including long-term substitute, teacher, and building administrator. He has been an assistant principal for six years, in two Washington school districts. His vocal support for a teachers' strike when he was a teacher may have soured how that district saw him as a potential administrator. "Because of my leadership in the strike, I heard through back channels that there were some district administrators who were very clear, like, 'Oh yeah, [Zach] will never be administrators in [this district], not after this.'" When he found a cool reception to his overtures to move from classroom to an administrative team, Zach looked to another district where he became a high school assistant principal.

Reflecting on any encouragement he received to consider school administrator, Zach notes one of his supervisors, during a two-year period when he served as a curriculum facilitator in the central office, told him he would be a good candidate for pursuing a building leadership role. Apart from that tap on the shoulder, Zach credits his experiences as a classroom teacher with pushing him to begin an education leadership master's program. He had strong building leaders in his early career. "I saw how they operated to build structures and systems, how they supported teachers, how they supported students, how you could build supports that were bigger than just the classroom, how you could help ensure student success." But he found the relationships he created with students the most rewarding part of his job. "My motivation was probably the relationship building you do with students," he says.

Zach recalls, “The principal program pushed on us from thinking of education from the teacher’s perspective to more of that leader perspective. It got me to thinking about schools in the system sense.” The program encouraged each candidate to develop and understand their own leadership philosophy. That sense of core values has guided Zach in his early years as a school administrator.

That’s been foundational to understanding the work, because so much of what I’ve had to do as a high school administrator has been discipline, and special education, and compliance, and making sure that.... You know there’s these really important parts about making sure you’re upholding people’s rights, because you don’t want to get sued, but even bigger than that, there’s just the human kind of element to it.

During his internship in the middle school, he worked closely with an assistant principal who had been in parallel positions in other schools in the district. The principal, whom Zach viewed as a strong and capable leader, missed a lot of time due to a serious medical issue. Zach and the assistant principal ran the building. Whether managing the mundane events that characterize a large middle school or a memorable and frightening occasion when a parent reported an armed man on the sidewalk in front of the school, and Zach and the AP were the day-to-day glue.

Zach saw the AP’s impact on students. The key to the assistant principal’s influence, in Zach’s view, was his ability to form relationships. Zach recalls, “How [the assistant principal] handled himself and conducted business and treated kids and families—it was really just profound.”

Being an assistant principal is its own rewarding kind of job, Zach says. “I don’t think [the assistant principal] ever got as much credit as he probably deserved,” Zach reflects. “People often look down at long-term assistant principals, like, ‘Why aren’t you a principal? What’s wrong with you?’”

Zach describes his internship experience as unique. To accumulate the state-required number of hours, he supervised the lunchroom and after-school activities. Like many an assistant principal, much of his experience derived from investigating teacher referrals for student behavior infractions.

It did give me opportunities to engage in, like, discipline. And not just issuing the discipline, but examining the discipline data. It gave me my first insight into a different approach to discipline, looking through an equity lens, a restorative lens, where, yeah, there are consequences, but we’re also considering a bigger picture.

The restorative approach to student discipline guided Zach’s thinking as he embarked on his first serious foray into building leadership at a large high school in a neighboring school district.

As we interviewed participants for the current study, we asked about the kinds of mentoring they received as they embarked on their first position as an AP or principal. For Zach, as he entered the role in a new district, he received no mentorship, whether provided formally by his district or informally by his principal. “There were three assistant principals that I worked with, who were all experienced. And they were the closest thing to mentors for me. We were all doing the same job. I leaned heavily on them, and I trusted them—respected them.” The principal, however, provided little mentorship. Zach recognizes that many districts have mentorship programs or assigned mentors for new principals and assistant principals. He reached out to the state principals’ association, but he found scant resources to help him navigate his frustrations.

After three years, Zach was ready for a change. He found an interim assistant principal position at a high school within commuting distance of his home. Now, at last, he found a mentor. “It was the first time I had a principal whom I trusted—because of their leadership and how they treated people,” Zach recalls. “And I was blessed to have two assistant principals I worked with who were also very experienced. I leaned on both of them, and I learned an absolute ton.” As with his previous district, and as he experienced in working with his assistant principal during his internship, the most helpful mentorship came from his day-to-day conversations with his assistant principal colleagues in his building.

Ingrid

Many educators who shift from a classroom role to a role as a building leader receive encouragement from a principal or superintendent who sees potential. For Ingrid, that initial nudge came from an assistant principal at the high school where she taught. “I had an assistant principal that was like, ‘You’re distinguished. My advice for you is you need to take the next step and become an administrator.’”

As a member of her English department, Ingrid had already begun to coach colleagues. She reflected on coaching opportunities she developed with new teachers. “I was like, ‘Well, I’m thinking about doing this. Do you want to plan this together?’” She found fulfillment in collaborating with and guiding colleagues. She added,

When you're wandering around on your prep period looking for things to do, like, "What's happening in the hallway?" Like, "How can I help?" You know it's time for the next step. The tap on the shoulder was more of a shove off a cliff!

At the time she started her principal preparation program, Ingrid could count at least eight people in her school who had completed their principal licensure program at the same university. She felt a growing sense of confidence as she took coursework. As we talked, she named several specific classes that have proven foundational to her understanding of key issues a building administrator may encounter.

Through the classes she took, she developed relationships with classmates. Some were from large districts, like Seattle; others were from small, rural districts. "The camaraderie in the cohort was an important part because I learned so much from my colleagues and their experiences." Ingrid remains in contact with people who were in her program.

As she approached the internship year, Ingrid shifted from a full-time teaching role to a 0.5 FTE position. This meant a half-time salary, a choice she was able to make, but one she knows most interns cannot afford. This choice allowed her to teach two classes and then dedicate more time than usual to the internship. In addition to having the extra time to invest in the internship, Ingrid found her administrative team at the high school eager to offer authentic administrative experiences. "I was very lucky in my internship," she recalls. "I had authentic access to my principal, the administrative team, and to all the conversations they were having. They were invested in me. I was boots on the ground."

The tasks the team assigned to Ingrid were authentic. At the time, her school was exploring a new bell schedule. In the summer that preceded the internship year, Ingrid's principal said, "I want you to make a five-period trimester bell schedule." The task included researching other high schools with similar demographics. Ingrid laid out all relevant information and prepared the team's presentation to the school board for approval. "They trusted me," Ingrid said.

The relationship she had with her university supervisor during the internship was pivotal. "One thing I appreciated about my internship was the relationship I had with professors." She named core faculty members who had taught the majority of the courses in the program. The faculty, without exception, had deep experience as school administrators. Each one had strong connections to school districts that fed into the principal preparation program. They also had strong historic ties to the leaders in those districts. The program assigned one of those professors as Ingrid's internship supervisor. Ingrid recalled, "[My university supervisor] seemed to genuinely care about my success. He was available. He was accessible. He was willing to help." She continued: "We [interns] were afforded real opportunities. The relationships were there, and real, significant conversations. Every intern should experience that relationship."

As the internship year ended, Ingrid's high school had a vacancy for an assistant principal. In a very competitive job market, Ingrid received the superintendent's—and the school board's approval. Over the next six years as assistant principal in two schools at two distinct grade levels, the mentorship she encountered occurred in two distinct stages.

As she stepped into the role of assistant principal at the high school, the principal became her guide and role model. The district had appointed him to an interim role upon the departure of the previous principal at mid-year. His job, he explained to Ingrid, was to get her and the high school "to the finish line." A decades-long veteran with classroom and administrative experience in the school district, the principal took a genuine interest in helping Ingrid become effective as a school administrator. Both she and the principal had deep roots in the district and in the community. "He had a vested interest in my future, but also in the future of the school." They met every other week for about an hour. At the end of Ingrid's first year, the principal moved to another position in the district; but he remained a dedicated mentor for Ingrid. She blocked out time for their biweekly chats, taking pains to prevent interruptions during their dedicated, "sacred" time. When they met, she would turn off her ever-present radio unless she knew an emergency was developing somewhere in the school. "I think a part of the success we had, and his success, was that he knew the system," Ingrid said. "I could ask him system-level questions." His advice also helped her navigate some professional landmines, the kind that can stall or upend a career. At the end of her third year as high school AP, her mentor told her she had "graduated."

The second layer of mentoring for Ingrid occurred when she moved from the high school to an assistant principal role at an elementary school in the district. There she again established a mentoring relationship with the principal, a veteran whom the school district had hired from another school district. Ingrid sees her current principal as providing more informal than formal mentoring. "She's a partner in every way," Ingrid says. The shift from high school to elementary also brought changes in Ingrid's perspective. At the high school, a teacher might be assigned to three different classrooms. Ingrid saw each classroom as "district space." By contrast, she learned that, in the elementary grades, teachers regard their classrooms "as, like, a sacred place." She notes, "I've learned more the nuances that define the elementary grades."

Since Ingrid has served as an AP in two schools in the same district, we inquired about the extent to which the building to which one is assigned shapes the early-career building administrator. Reflecting on her first assignment at the high school, Ingrid said,

It's the administrative team that I think really shapes who you are as an administrator, because they're the ones that you're working with all the time. They're the ones you trust. They're the ones you lean on. You can learn a lot from your team members.

Ingrid spoke enthusiastically about all aspects of her preparation for her role as assistant principal: her principal program, the internship at the high school where she taught, the mentorship she received at the high school and elementary levels. What might she suggest to improve how principal candidates are prepared? Her rich internship was, to some extent, serendipitous. She had chosen to make her internship a high priority, opting for a 0.5 FTE contract to allow her to delve as deeply as possible into the systems and challenges that accompany building administration. The typical intern layers the requirements of that role on top of the requirements of a full-time teaching contract. Ingrid says she wishes every intern could have the flexibility she had. By the end of a day during her internship, she might tell a colleague, "I've done 20 backpack searches today. Like, glove up! Let's go! That's part of your role as an AP in a large comprehensive high school. I got to see how the sausage is made." Clearly making her extensive internship experience the norm for all principal interns would require a change in state funding for interns. Ingrid recognizes the financial commitment required but is insistent that the investment would be rewarded with better prepared school leaders.

We also asked what, if any, changes principal preparation programs might make to support early-career building leaders. Ingrid said she misses the social interaction she had with colleagues who completed their principal certification with her. She remains in contact with one of those colleagues and schedules time to meet and chat regularly. "It would be great if, like that first year, we still had some Zoom meetings quarterly," she said. "I mean, even if you're in Year 2, you're welcome." She also said she would welcome continuing mentoring from active-duty principals and superintendents. "The job can be lonely," she said. Having a trusted ally on whom one might call—but not someone who is an evaluator—would support an early-career principal or assistant principal in the midst of an unfamiliar situation. "It would be like, 'Hi, it's Ingrid. Do you have time for a chat? I want to process something with you.'" A friendly voice on the other side of the conversation would provide timely advice and assurance.

Charlotte

Many principals cut their teeth on the role of building leader with an initial appointment as assistant principal. After proving their mettle in that supporting role, a principalship may be the next step on the career ladder. Charlotte is an exception. She had 20 years of classroom experience at the elementary level and an advanced degree in another professional field. Typical of many internships, Charlotte was placed in the elementary school where she had been a teacher. "I had a very good internship," she reflected. "I loved being at my school because I was part of everything." However, if she were designing the perfect internship, she would advocate for gaining hands-on experience in more than one building, perhaps at both the elementary and secondary levels.

The benefit of having an internship at the school you're at is that you're there. But the benefit of having an internship at another school would be that you're privy to different systems. You're privy to a different style [of leadership] than you're used to with your principal.

Charlotte took advantage of opportunities to visit a middle school in her district, but she felt somewhat of an outsider in the absence of a formal plan to broaden her experience beyond the elementary level. She now reflects that a more intentional multi-focus internship might have given her the foundation to feel competent as a building leader in both elementary and secondary grades.

As her internship drew to a close, Charlotte applied for and was appointed to an elementary principalship in her district. Because she did not follow the customary route of submitting an application and then being scrutinized in two or more interviews, including a session with faculty and staff and another with the superintendent, Charlotte's temporary title was "interim" principal. "It was interim because of the union rules in our district," Charlotte explained. She understood from the outset that her new staff would have an opportunity at mid-year to weigh in as to whether they would lend their imprimatur to her title. The staff survey proved overwhelmingly positive.

Formal mentorship in her first two years in the role of principal fell short of what Charlotte might have hoped. Her district supervisor had many great qualities, Charlotte acknowledges, but adds, "I would not say mentoring new principals was really a strong point." As a beginning principal, Charlotte needed specific guidance and support, notably in areas such as building budget and teacher evaluation. "Those are the two things you can get fired for," Charlotte reflected. "Make sure you're crossing your T's and dotting your I's." Instead, her mentor tended to give broad praise—"You're doing great! You're doing fantastic!"—which Charlotte internalized as pressure and

dread of failing to meet expectations. In addition, as she perused student test scores, Charlotte felt she and her staff should be focused on instruction and student achievement. “When I first got [to my school], we were sending fifth graders to middle school who couldn’t read.” For Charlotte, this was a “hair on fire” realization. “It was frightening,” Charlotte said. At the end of her second year, Charlotte weighed whether she should remain in the principal’s chair. She reflected, “Honestly, I’ve never worked harder at anything that I’ve done in my life than this job, and it just felt really demoralizing.” Feelings of falling short haunted her sleep. She contacted her therapist in the hope these conversations might shore up her innate resilience.

At the end of Year 2, a new elementary director, with many years experience as a principal in a different district, became Charlotte’s supervisor. Immediately Charlotte sensed a new cohesion as to expectations to which elementary principals would be held. She began by telling her new director that, at the end of the previous school year, she had sat on the fence as to whether to remain in the principal’s role: “I was just blunt with him, like, ‘I really considered leaving this position at the end of the year.’”

In an early meeting with the director, Charlotte told him what she had been experiencing. He said, “I don’t want you feeling this way.” The new director told Charlotte that their starting point would be goal setting. And he would visit, watch, and listen. On one visit he might praise Charlotte for her practices. On another, he might caution, “Let it go for now. You can always come back to that later.” Charlotte’s new mantra became, “Don’t water the weeds,” an expression she appropriated from a conversation with a fellow elementary principal.

Charlotte engaged in conversations with other principals. Some were, like Charlotte, elementary principals. Others were building administrators at the middle school and high school levels. “I was just a sponge,” she says. “I just found people who I thought were doing a really good job, and I would call them up. I’d be like, ‘Show me what you’re doing. Can you share this document with me? How are you handling this?’” Some staff, she found, are fiercely, doggedly resistant to change, despite her urging in a new direction. “Some staff do not like change—at all,” she said. As Charlotte shared her frustration with one of her principal colleagues, that colleague said, “Sometimes you need to move forward and cheerlead the teachers who are leading the way.” “I can do that,” Charlotte said.

Among the self-revelations that came from these mentoring conversations was Charlotte’s realization that other principals might help her develop a new strategy or skill. Charlotte is a self-acknowledged rule follower. She tends toward student discipline that is restorative, not punitive. Engaging in sharp-elbowed confrontations is outside her comfort zone. She described her experience as a new principal as “layered.” Charlotte found colleague-mentors who could share strategies that increased her toolkit and helped her develop the cohesion she sought.

Charlotte’s principal preparation program cemented relationships with professors and with her university internship supervisor. The frequent meetings with her university supervisor, together with monthly meetings with other interns in her cohort remain indelible parts of her foundation for becoming a principal. As she considered how her early-career experiences have shaped her and presented challenges, she wondered aloud whether some of the connections she formed with her university might have been sustained as she entered the principalship. The state principal association offered workshops for interns and for new principals. In her first year as principal, Charlotte attended some of these workshops; however, her first district supervisor discouraged her participation. In hindsight, Charlotte sees how a continuing relationship with her university mentor, in collaboration with other veteran principals, might have been helpful.

If we want to get into the brass tacks, a three-year post program, a cadre where current principals participate, where your university mentor drops in, and where you’re talking about the things that you’re doing. Having a mix of first-, second-, third-year principals talking about their experiences. And having veterans who care about the process, principals who want to help new principals. That would be fantastic. I would definitely have done that.

Gail

Gail’s career has spanned the U.S., from the Carolinas to California, back to the Carolinas, and then to Washington State.

Early influencers included her father, who dissuaded her from pursuing a career as an artist. She earned her baccalaureate degree in English, but also earned credits in art. She received additional training in special education. She credits a principal with shaping her early expectations, including offering encouragement to take risks and try new ideas. Her principal had experienced poverty as a child, and he embraced his opportunity to help every child be successful. During Gail’s time at the school, the dropout rate declined from 12% to 6%.

With experience under her belt, Gail and her husband carefully explored school districts in Washington State. Gail interviewed for a position and was offered a position teaching Language Arts. She and her husband sold their home in the Carolinas and purchased a new home in Western Washington.

Her first principal in Washington praised her skills and attributes as a teacher but offered no encouragement for her to pursue school administration. She lacked, he said, the necessary traits to be a principal. However, he did say Gail was probably the most effective special educator he had worked with. “I’m not sure I was ever tapped on

the shoulder,” she said. “I was never told, ‘You should consider school leadership.’” Her next principal was a catalyst in her career progression. Urged by a colleague who had enrolled in a principal preparation, Gail decided to pursue principal licensure. Her principal pushed her into leadership roles and became—and remains—a cheerleader and mentor. “He has been my greatest mentor and support,” Gail noted.

Gail speaks warmly and positively of her principal preparation program. “You really think through the ideas, the laws, and you gain knowledge about the job,” Gail said. She noted that she was part of a cohort. She developed connections with others who aspired to the principalship, connections that she maintains today.

Gail notes that, as valuable as the classes in the principal preparation program were, the internship offered the real-world, boots-on-the-ground perspective of being a building leader. Gail explains, “The preparation program is like the skeleton; the internship puts flesh on those bones.” Gail’s internship occurred during COVID. She was deeply involved with the administrative team as the principal and AP adapted to the new normal. Their focus included students, families, and staff who now attempted to adjust to Zoom-based instruction. Her principal included her in conversations that may not be typical for an intern, including staffing conversations. Besides engaging in the day-to-day learning about being a building administrator, Gail immersed herself in as many aspects of building and district leadership as were available: going to school board meetings, volunteering for district committees, showing up for all the community events, subbing for administrators in other schools. “When you do that, you get a real sense of the day-to-day rhythm and the body of the work. My principal really encouraged me to get out there.” Describing her principal as a “master,” Gail noted:

He processed everything with me. [He] made the point that processing with all the stakeholders, setting the table, explaining the why, the how, the what, and carving the path strategically is how the work gets done. It was an invaluable lesson.

As the internship drew to a close, Gail interviewed for a curriculum position in her school district and felt she had done well in responding to the questions. After the interview, her principal asked her how she felt about the experience. “It was great,” Gail responded. “But I won’t get the position.” “Why not?” he asked. “Because they have designed the position for someone they already have in mind,” Gail replied. She was right.

During Gail’s internship, the district announced several administrative vacancies, including an elementary AP position and several dean positions. She interviewed without knowing which, if any, of these positions might be offered. “I interviewed along with the 10 or so other candidates, but I was already ‘on the list,’ so to speak, because of her principal’s strong endorsement and because I was a well-known entity during the internship.” She was appointed to an elementary AP job. was now in a Title I school with pressing poverty and abundant diversity. She credits the principal with providing the climate in which she could learn the AP role.

The district provided professional development for new APs, but Gail found these sessions lacked a clear focus on her particular school and how she might be more effective as AP for that community. The district’s program, she found, repeated, in a watered-down format, the work her principal preparation program provided.

When she moved from AP to interim principal at her school in 2025, the district essentially repeated the professional development she received as she became AP. “It felt more like work than increasing my job knowledge,” she said. Gail maintained her connection with the principal with whom she completed her internship and has relied on candid conversations with him to shape her thoughts.

Her new role offered a kind of crucible experience for Gail as an early-career building leader:

[My school] was definitely high impact. The behavior needs, MLL needs, low academics, high staff and administrator turnover, lack of community support, and general low morale, as well as the poor narrative [about the school] across the district represented a high mountain to climb.

Learning to problem solve on the fly and deal with intense needs shaped her sense of how to embrace others’ needs. “I learned how to prioritize problems and create systems that valued and served the needs and also elevated everyone’s humanity,” Gail said. “[The AP role] taught me so much about how to lead and how to make room for teachers and staff to lead as well.”

Reflecting on her internship and then on her early experiences as an assistant principal and newly-minted principal, Gail suggests principal preparation programs might provide supports that go beyond principal certification. Extending beyond the contacts she has maintained with classmates who completed their certification with her, Gail says program-sponsored “meet-ups” during her early years as a building leader would have been valuable. “It can be very daunting,” she said. “You’re exhausted and trying to do it all: deadlines, discipline issues. You feel confident in some areas and yet, perhaps, not in others. It would be great to have informal meet-ups to support one another.” She said that, in the first years of being a building administrator, she would welcome Zoom-based forums, a couple of times per year, with university faculty and colleagues with whom she completed her principal preparation program. “Opportunities to discuss the hard things, to give advice, and just share out would be super helpful.”

She also recommends additional supports for those who are anticipating their internships, forums that include access to those who have recently completed their internships and are now in AP or principal positions. Such informal sessions before the start of the internship would allow aspiring administrators to “learn from others before them how to ‘do it to the max’ and give a more realistic idea of the kind of energy and commitment the job entails.”

As for supports districts might offer early-career principals, Gail credits the assistant superintendent her district assigned to supervise her. “She checked in with me one or times each month, just to chat,” she said. “This was super helpful.” As to other supports the district might provide, Gail recommends a focus on nuts and bolts issues and operational support: “More about sharing ideas and problem solving, rather than reteaching what we learned in our principal preparation program.”

As we concluded our conversation with Gail, she reflected on what she has learned after taking on the role of principal, a sort of 30,000 foot view of her career change. “What most people do not really get is that this job is a significant lifestyle change,” she said. “It is a high-energy job.” She noted that, wherever you go, people recognize you. You have to give people your attention. “Everything matters. Your energy must be unwavering. And caffeine really helps.”

Findings

Our interviews limned several themes. Whether they felt they had received mentoring or instead had to learn what they needed to know on the job, participants emphasized the value of and need for mentoring. While some principals in the current study reported they had received support from district-sponsored sources, most noted that their most impactful mentoring occurred serendipitously through collaboration with colleagues who held similar positions. This parallels what Fraiser (2025) concluded: Building teams of support around principals, and promoting peer-to-peer collaborations could improve conditions for principals. He also recommended that principals and principal supervisors prioritize making time for networking with other principals and leaders (Frasier, 2025).

In addition, participants in the current study reported that they had enjoyed strong, helpful relationships with their university supervisors during their internship. A recurrent theme was a recommendation that the principal preparation program intentionally extend connections with early-career principals through periodic forums that would include university faculty and recently minted principals. As Gail suggested, “It would be great to have informal meet-ups to support one another.”

A near-universal motif across the interviews was the specter of burnout, the sense that the scope and pressure of the principalship may exceed the capacity of the early-career principal to persevere. Frasier (2025) describes this phenomenon as “burn and churn.” The pressure to maintain a sustainable work-life balance can be especially daunting for principals assigned to high-needs schools. Families in Ursula’s school experienced poverty and trauma, circumstances that manifested in extreme student behavior issues that often consumed her day. As Ursula reported, she arrived at the conclusion that she could be a pretty good mother but a terrible principal, or she could be a pretty good principal but a lousy mother. She could not do both jobs well. This conflict led to her decision to leave the job. Similarly, after two years of feeling isolated in her principal role, Charlotte told her new supervisor bluntly that she had seriously considered not returning to the principal’s position. That supervisor’s pledge to watch, listen, and help her set goals steered Charlotte’s determination to remain. Seaman (2020), writing on the pressure of the principal’s role, noted a consistent theme of principals barely hanging on. Wedged between exhaustion and frustration, he concluded, building leaders are bending and on the verge of breaking.

Mentoring may incur costs beyond funding available for this purpose. The principals association in the state of Washington seeks to support new principals with mentorships. During the 2024-25 school year, the principals association was able to fund 100 mentors, even though in that year nearly 250 new principals might have benefited from having a mentor (Frasier, 2025).

Recommendations

Based on the interviews we conducted for the current study, and in light of the unmistakable themes that emerged, we offer the following recommendations.

Districts

Hiring a new building administrator involves an investment by school districts. In the best of years, a district may find a shallow pool of candidates eager to step into an administrative role. Many districts are experiencing constricted budgets and are having to make difficult decisions as to how a paucity of funds may be stretched to meet the many needs. Even in times of tight budgets, districts need to prioritize the support of newly hired principals, assistant principals, and deans. Support may include professional development, a mentor—possibly a supervisor—deliberately identified within the district, or a mentor provided by the state principals’ association.

The participants in our study universally identified the welcome benefit of support provided by a principal colleague or colleagues, seasoned administrators who understand the community and political nuances that, if

ignored, can sidetrack a new principal who is trying to show confidence and competence. The administrators we interviewed noted the value of having a caring ally willing to check in informally. One principal reported a standing Wednesday morning chat with her mentor as both drove to their respective schools. Participants reported that these alliances formed organically, not as the result of a mentor being assigned by the district or the principals association. Districts can nurture a climate that encourages principals to collaborate with each other.

Universities

Without exception, participants reflected positively on the learning experiences they encountered in their principal preparation program. In Washington State, the majority of candidates who seek an internship will develop the initial administrative skills in the building in which they have taught and within the constraints imposed by a full-time teaching contract. Few interns have the luxury of seeking a part-time contract to invest more deeply and deliberately in internship activities. However, one participant in the study opted for a 0.5 FTE contract as she completed her internship, a decision that many aspiring interns may find financially untenable. Several noted the potential benefit of an internship that included experiences in other schools and across the grade spectrum.

We also took note of early-career building administrators' desire to continue their relationship with cohort colleagues and with university faculty and faculty supervisors during the first 3-5 years in the assistant principal or principal role. Periodic "meet ups" with other neophyte building leaders and with faculty whom they trust and respect might salve the bumps that new principals often encounter.

Principal Associations

The Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP) offers an array of professional development opportunities for new and experienced principals. In addition, for early-career principals, the principals' association offers a mentorship program that is limited in scope. In the 2024-25 school year, less than 50% of new principals found a pairing with an AWSP-assigned mentor. We noted that one of the elementary principals in the current study was assigned a mentor who was a high school principal in another district, a mentor she could meet only at the end of the school day. She found that connecting with this mentor required her to sacrifice precious time with her young children. The current study suggests that a comprehensive mentoring program available to all new building leaders should be a priority. Furthermore, assigning mentors to new principals should honor the mentees' needs and take into account both geography and grade level similarity.

States

The current study would be remiss if we failed to note that the state of Washington leads the United States in the deep experience interns are expected to accumulate during a year-long placement. Licensure standards include 540 hours of internship, with not less than 50% of that time logged with students and faculty present. This requirement discourages principal preparation programs that might allow interns to log an abundance of hours doing activities scarcely related to becoming a principal. While we commend the state of Washington for the rigor that characterizes certification requirements, we recommend more support for the preparation of building leaders.

The Washington Legislature provides funding annually to provide release time for interns to be able to focus intently on the daily realities of being a building leader. At the outset of the Legislature-funded grant more than 20 years ago, the state provided \$1 million annually for grant recipients and allowed grant recipients to spend 45 days during the internship closely following their mentor principal. The current level of state funding is now less than half the original amount. In the 2026-27 school year, this fund will permit about two-thirds of more than 300 interns statewide to benefit from a more in-depth experience than would have been available in the absence of the grant.

The current study highlights the importance of rich, intense preparation and makes evident the value of making grant funds available more broadly, if not universally. We recommend that school districts, universities, and the principal association work together to promote the importance of state support for increased time for interns. We also recommend that state standards for licensure embrace internship experiences across grade levels. Furthermore, we recommend that districts, universities, and the principal association advocate for state funding that would allow for the creation of a cadre of mentors, mentors who have walked in the boots of the principal, available to early-career principals and assistant principals.

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