

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

Office of Accountability

Washoe County School District

June 2017

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of three, hour-long focus group interviews with school leaders participating in the Washoe Academy of School Leaders (WASL) conducted in April 2017. 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 2016-17 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 incredibly positive about their experiences in WASL, commenting that every grain of information they learned was something they thought they would apply in their position. They were particularly positive about the entry plan, principal panel, and the presentations by Jim Hugey and JoEtta Gonzalez.

Areas for Growth

APs recommended changing the school visit structure to more of a one-on-one shadowing format, so they could ask questions informally and see a “day in the life” of a principal. They suggested several other topic areas that would be beneficial in future years, including discipline practices, managerial leadership, vision development, and legal issues.

Deans

Areas of Strength

Deans were equally positive about WASL, and appreciated Alyson Kendrick’s facilitation skills and all of the opportunities WASL allowed for them to learn about the day-to-day details of being a principal. They agreed that the entry plan, principal panel, Jim Hugey’s session, and the mock interviews were particularly beneficial.

Areas for Growth

Like the APs, Deans also requested more one-on-one time with principals during school study visits. They also recommended building in time to debrief their study school experiences with colleagues following the visits.

TOSAs and Coordinators

Areas of Strength

TOSAs and Coordinators also valued their WASL experience, particularly the networking and collaboration opportunities it allowed. They were especially positive about all of the guest speakers, the leadership story development and entry plan activities, and the mock interview process.

Areas for Growth

TOSAs and Coordinators thought that more time could be spent on managerial leadership (e.g. dealing with conflict, managing office staff, operations), and less time on instructional leadership. They also suggested that it would be helpful to have more time devoted to studying and solving real world issues, including problems of practice that WASL participants identify from their own school.

Evaluation of the 2017 Washoe Academy of School Leaders: Results of End-of-Year Focus Group Interviews

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 2016-2017 school year marks the sixth year of WASL. This report presents the results of a series of end-of-year focus groups with participants of the WASL program.

Evaluation Method

Three interviewers from WCSD’s Department of Accountability conducted hour-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.

Three semi-structured focus groups with the 26 participants of WASL. Staff were divided into three groups based on their position: 1) Assistant Principals and interim Assistant Principals, 2) Deans; and 3) 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 Principal (and Interim Assistant Principals)

Strengths of the Program

Assistant Principals and Interim Assistant Principals were overwhelming positive about their WASL experiences. Overall, APs believed WASL helped improve their communication skills, prepared them for their current role, and helped them think through their vision of what they wanted to do in current and future roles. APs also appreciated that WASL provided realistic guidance about what leadership roles were like, as one AP described:

Yeah, I think there is sort of a sensational vision of what that role [principal] will be like and that's the big surprise... And I think they were good at helping to temper some of that, it gave you a real idea of what you are working towards.

APs highlighted **Jim Hugey's** presentation as a particularly useful session, noting that his honesty about the job, extensive real life experience, and ability to connect theory to real practice was incredibly helpful. They also noted that his experience as a head hunter added a particularly unique type of experience for them to learn from, since he was able to describe how he approaches hiring strong leaders. Area Superintendent **JoEtta Gonzalez** was also lauded for her presentation for similar reasons. Her vast experience and knowledge base was evident, and that her talk was filled with inspirational ideas and useful tips. Her discussion about developing a vision for leadership was particularly commended. Several APs also appreciated that both Jim and JoEtta also had non-linear pathways to leadership, which resonated with their own circuitous pathways to their position.

APs also appreciated the **new principal panel**, and particularly liked hearing about the “aha” moments principals’ experienced during their first year, noting that the real life anecdotes helped them develop their entry plans. As one AP said, “yep, when I heard that [during the new principal panel] I thought, I’ve got to include that in my entry plan, that was a smart move.” That said, APs thought that having more principals on the panel would be helpful, as the two who were there were both from elementary school. They also recommended having first and second year principals speak, noting that it would be nice to see folks in their first year, and those who “came out the other end”, so that WASL attendees could hear second year principals reflect on what they would have done differently their first year. They also thought it might be beneficial to Deans and TOSAs to hear from APs (including the ones in WASL), since moving from Dean to Principal was a big jump and hearing about the next interim step might be more useful.

APs believed the **entry plan** was a valuable exercise, noting that they could see how it would be helpful for interviews as well as in their first year of the principalship. They noted it was where you “put all the thoughts of what you want to do or think you’re going to do and then helps you to prioritize, since you can’t do all of that in your first year. It makes it more realistic.” Staff appreciated doing the plan in a group and thinking through the activity with colleagues, but thought it would be helpful to see different versions of other people’s entry plans, since most of their examples were from elementary.

Assistant Principals

Strengths of Program

- Jim Hugey and JoEtta’s “real world” presentations
- New principal panel
- Entry plan activity
- Day-to-day details about what it is like to be a principal

Opportunities for Improvement

- Change study school visits to principal shadow days
- Add sessions on managerial leadership, legal issues, and discipline

Overall, APs liked the book the “**Principal’s Influence**” book, noting it was well-structured and easy to read, with lots of applicability to their role. APs also appreciated the **mock interview**, process, and getting feedback “without having everything on the line.” They liked that this component was optional, since some staff were already in the interview pool, and did not feel like they needed the mock interview process.

Weaknesses of the Program

When asked what they thought was less useful about WASL, APs could not identify anything that was not valuable to them, with one person noting, “this is a group who wants all the info possible before making life changing decisions, so I’m happy to get as much information about anything as I can.” A handful of APs noted that they did not think writing their **leadership story** was as helpful given how time intensive it was to prepare, especially when they were unsure about whether it would be used in their interview process. Some suggested it would be nice to spend that time developing their leadership vision, instead.

Some APs were not as positive about their **study school visit experiences**. Some noted that the principals they visited did not seem prepared or did not seem to know what they were supposed to be showing the WASL participants who arrived, “it was just a random panel where we could ask anything, but I didn’t know what to ask.” While some said that this eventually morphed into some good conversations, they felt like they could have gotten more information out of the visit if principals had received more advanced preparation. Others commented that the number of classroom visits they did while at the school seemed excessive, since they have done a number of classroom visits at other schools already. They recommended limiting the number of walkthroughs to one or two, and then having the principal comment on what they saw, so APs could learn from a more seasoned administrator what to look for during a walkthrough. Overall, participants wished they had had more time with the principal or assistant principal.

When asked how to improve school visits, APs suggested that a **shadow day** might be useful, in which they could follow a principal or AP around to get a sense of “a day in the life.” One AP said that that is the model used in the leadership program, Nevada Leads, and that the model is really effective. More casual one-on-one interactions were recommended, which APs thought would be far more beneficial than more formal presentations (“dog and pony show”).

Recommendations for Improvement

When asked what APs felt they needed more of before they became principals, they did not a few areas in which they would like to build their skills, including the following:

- **Building a budget**, though some noted that this is often so site-based, it may not be fruitful to do in this setting;
- How to have **tough conversations** with staff and parents (e.g., “what to do when a teacher is threatening to go to the union”, or a “parent is mad because you did not call them back within a half hour”);
- **Management**, more generally. For example, “I know you’re only as good as your office staff”, “So we put that in our plan, like day 1, ‘Office Staff Meeting.’ But, what are we doing in that meeting? What am I asking them to do?”;
- **Hiring well**, including interview question writing to identify high quality candidates who fill fit well in the school;
- **Discipline**, and particularly suspension practices. As one AP reflected:

For example, things like suspension. There's such a mixed message in our district, and decisions to suspend really seem to depend on the administrator. But, then you'll get diversity to come in and say they never encourage you to do that and you have your own role models who say you do sometimes. So, should I suspend this 1st grader like the matrix says? Or can I deviate from the matrix based on my own professional judgement? Will I be supported?

One person suggested hosting a discipline panel or having someone from the district level speak about the issue to help create your own vision of discipline.

- **Legal issues related to Special Education** and how to prevent lawsuits;
- How to establish a **vision** and carry that with you to all the schools you might work at in your career. How to state your vision succinctly;
- **Leadership in Central Office**, and what those positions are like and require in terms of experience.

Deans

Strengths of the Program

Overall, deans were incredibly positive about their experience in WASL. All of the respondents indicated that they enjoyed the entire WASL training program and felt much more confident in their ability to lead. Deans unanimously agreed that **Alyson Kendrick** did an outstanding job facilitating. They liked her “honest and direct approach to everything.”

Respondents indicated they enjoyed **spending time with on-site administrators**, though a few indicated wanting to spend time one-on-one with principals. They also enjoyed the collegiality and networking support among the cohort. All indicated that the guest speakers were excellent, and they especially enjoyed the leadership stories of guest speakers, indicating that the more personal stories were both enlightening and inspirational, as well as honest. The respondents felt that the leadership stories showed that a leader must be able to think outside the box, be flexible, and be able to multi-task on many different levels. They appreciated that guest speakers were willing to discuss barriers and the unique solutions used to achieve results in real-world, on-the-ground contexts.

The group exercise conducted by **Jim Hügey** was also very popular and even indicated they would have wanted more of this type of exercise as it helped them better understand how others viewed them. Participants indicated that this feedback was both interesting and helped them identify their strengths and weaknesses as future leaders. Mock interview process was extremely helpful. Participants also indicated that having support by their administrator for

Deans

Strengths of Program

- Aly's facilitation
- Time with on-site administrators
- Jim Hügey's sessions
- Entry plan activity
- Mock interview

Opportunities for Improvement

- Provide post-school visit debrief opportunities
- Allow for more one-on-one time with principal during school visits

participating in WASL was helpful. For some other non-WASL trainings, respondents indicated that their administrator was not always supportive of their attendance, and encouraged them to skip some classes. However, with WASL, deans felt like their administrators universally supported their attendance.

Deans also indicated that creating leadership and **entry plans** were some of the best components of WASL. Respondents indicated that it was interesting to see how different all the plans were. They also appreciated hearing from guest speakers about how their entry plans differed from their real experience on the job.

Respondents believed that the **textbook was very good** but some did not feel that they spent enough time discussing their reading. Staff also valued having exposure to systems and how they worked in the district and getting to meet staff from other schools and district. Respondents felt that the **Study School Visits** were beneficial to their training and they liked having the opportunity to see how other schools operated. Deans did provide some recommendations for improving school visits (see recommendations below).

Overall, most staff felt that WASL prepared them well for their future leadership roles, and believed it was a good springboard for their future transition. Most of the respondents indicated that the major difference between current role (Deans) and the Assistant Principal role was the ability to make administrative decisions along with increased responsibilities. They all agreed that WASL helped them learn a lot about themselves, and particularly their strengths and weaknesses as leaders.

Weaknesses of the Program/Areas for Improvement

Deans listed a few areas they believed might need improvement. Some worried that if they did not use the information soon, like how to structure their budgets, they might forget what they had learned in WASL. One dean noted that “WASL was more of an overview of the system and wished there would be more “here’s how to do it (e.g. budgets)” and worried that they might not have learned enough on-the-ground information to help them in their new positions. Some recommended having **more “authentic” exercises** that would give them more hands-on, real-world experiences. Some deans suggested providing more opportunities for WASL staff to get to know the other non-dean members in the group, with one staff member noting “I don’t even know the names of some of the other participants.”

Deans also had several suggestions or concerns about their school visit experience, including the following:

- They felt like there should be at least one more school visit—elementary group should visit a secondary school and vice versa.
- They recommended adding a Study School site visit to WASL participants’ schools to see what is happening at their colleagues’ sites.
- One dean suggested it would be useful to have an opportunity to shadow non-traditional schools and roles, including (a) alternative schools, (b) area superintendents, and (c) central office.
- Some respondents felt the shadow groups were too large to be effective—a large group following one staff member was overwhelming to everyone. Others said when they got to their study school, they were formed into smaller groups to shadow various staff members. They liked that approach better.
- One dean noted that sitting in an IEP meeting during their school visit was not useful, particularly because they were there for 1.5 hours out of the 3 hours allotted,

commenting, “I do IEP’s all the time. To me, the time was wasted and I felt very frustrated that my experience wasn’t taken into consideration when designing the objectives of the visit, if any.”

- Other deans said at their visit they were asked “what do you want to see”, commenting that, “This is not helpful if you don’t know what you don’t know.”

Recommendations for Improving the Program in the Future

Deans recommended a few changes that would help future WASL participants have an improved learning experience. Several would like to have **follow-up WASL training sessions**, meetings, collaborations, etc. after initial training ends. Another suggested developing a brief guide book for administrators who are mentoring to give them a better sense of what information they should cover. Some Deans also felt like they were not able to spend enough time with their mentors and wanted to have a stronger relationship with them. They noted they only met a few times during the WASL process and did not feel comfortable asking them for a professional reference with so little interaction with them. Finally, all of the respondents suggested developing a “blueprint of objectives” for school visits, which would help tailor the visit to the experience of each participant to ensure that the time they spent at sites was useful given the limited time they had at sites.

TOSAs and District Coordinators

Overall, TOSAs and District Coordinators were equally positive about their experiences with WASL. They praised the overall quality of the **guest speakers**, and said they enjoyed hearing all of their perspectives. They again highlighted **Jim Hugey** as a particularly impactful speaker, and said he “was a great way to start and set the standard for what is coming next.” Staff also appreciated developing their **leadership story**, with one commenting “I never thought about it before taking this course, where I became more reflective from listening to other people’s reflection of their own leadership story.”

Staff also appreciated the **entry plan** development process, and thought that it provided a straightforward strategy on what they needed to do once they began leading at a site. As one person noted, “It’s a great bookend to who I have been until now, and then where I want to go. It seems like a good starting point when I begin the positions.” TOSAs/Coordinators also valued the **mock interview** process, and thought it helped prepare them well for future interviews. They also enjoyed having a lot of time to work with people in the room and learn from the broad diversity of WASL candidates.

TOSAs/District Coordinators were also very positive about **Alyson Kendrick’s** facilitation of the program, again mentioning that her openness and honesty about the practical nature of the work, and what it looks like in a building, was incredibly helpful. TOSAs/Coordinators were also positive about their **school visit** and being able to see an “on the ground” perspective. Staff reported that it was incredibly helpful to watch a principal “at work”, noting that at one site, they were able to “watch her deal with a sensitive student issue, and learn

TOSAs/Coordinators Strengths of Program

- All guest speakers
- Leadership story development
- Entry plan activity
- Mock interview
- Networking and collaboration

Opportunities for Improvement

- Add sessions on management and operations issues
- Add more opportunities to solve real world issues (case studies, etc.)

how she provides not only support to the students and staff, but also how she deals with these issues herself.” All staff noted that their one-on-one time was where they learned the most, but appreciated that in the larger group context, they were able to talk about grants, budgets, bell schedules, and other more general issues. Interestingly, as both APs and Deans suggested, they also thought it would be helpful in future years of WASL to be able to **shadow a principal** for a half of a day, so that they could see “things that that are not in the lesson plan or in a theoretical text.” They also suggested that providing an opportunity to debrief all together after the visit would be helpful, and even suggested it would be interesting to hear Alyson Kendrick’s perspective on the visit.

TOSAS and Coordinators praised all of the principal guest speakers and Aly for doing a great job of walking participants through real life scenarios, and that these speakers were more engaging than ones that were more theoretical. They also appreciated **Kenny Cervantes’** presentation, and that he “Took us through the details of how he started up at a new school. Things from staff meetings, to parent nights, and all of the multitude of things it takes for a first year principal to start up a school.” Overall, they liked any time where principals talked about authentic experiences and real-world examples, including the “good, bad, and ugly”, as it helped them to realize that the activities and systems that might work at one school may not work at another.

They also commented that WASL provided great **networking and collaboration** opportunities, and they were excited that it had helped them develop relationships that they could count on in the future. Because being a principal or in a leadership position seemed like a lonely position at times, being in class and processing the content with others in the same position let them learn how other people are approaching the job and discuss the problems that arise when you are a principal.

When asked how prepared they felt to enter higher leadership positions, some noted that they felt much more prepared after WASL, but were still intimidated about all that they might still have to learn once in the position, as one put it, “I feel very unprepared, but I am confident the perspective I gain from being on the job will be helpful.” They commented that WASL provided great opportunities to reflect on their practice and leadership vision.

Weaknesses of the Program

Some TOSAs and Coordinators wanted to learn more about **managerial issues**, since although they learned a lot about instructional leadership in WASL, they thought “70% of a principal’s day involves managerial issues, such as dealing with budgets, class schedules, teacher allotments, facilities issues, and things like that.”

TOSAS and Coordinators were also less positive about the **textbook** used for WASL, suggesting that the text may be valuable for people in administration position, but staff new to leadership positions really could have benefited from more of a focus on day-to-day details. They believed the textbook was overly focused on instructional leadership, which, for a group comprised mainly of TOSAs with recent teaching experience, they thought they really needed more information about the managerial side of administration. They also commented that the textbook case studies did not seem to follow up to the conclusion of the study to describe the outcomes of the initiative or practices put in place, even noting that the case study about Washoe was not actually a successful program, though it was lauded in the textbook.

Recommendations for Improvement

Overall, WASL participants in this group suggested they would have benefitted from more time learning about managerial leadership, and the day-to-day details about what it is like to be an administrator at a school site. They recommended collaborating with one another over real issues, like dealing with parking or tackling a case study of an example school that they could then follow throughout the year. In line with that suggestion, they commented that one presentation that could be improved was Jim Hugey's second day of material, because they engaged in activities that had limited practical application, and instead "came up with cliché's like 'all kids can learn' and 'always be positive' and put them on posters." They commented that while in theory this was useful, staying positive does not always help teachers struggling in the field.

Appendix A

2016 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?