

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

Office of Accountability

Washoe County School District

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of five, hour-long focus group interviews with school leaders participating in the Washoe Academy of School Leaders (WASL) conducted in May 2019. The purpose of WASL is to provide professional development, administrative support, and collegial mentoring to encourage the development of leadership skills among aspiring leaders. The focus groups were conducted during the last session of the 2018-19 WASL program with participating Assistant Principals, Deans, Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSAs), Teachers and Central Office staff. This report identifies the primary strengths and weaknesses of the program, and opportunities to improve the program in the future.

Overarching Strengths of Program across Groups

All groups believed WASL enhanced their leadership capacity, including those who participated in the Nevada (NV) Leads program prior to WASL. Those who attended NV Leads, for the most part, believed WASL helped connect the dots from NV Leads to leadership experiences specific to Washoe County School District (WCSD). Staff in all focus groups were unanimously appreciative of the following aspects of WASL:

- Networking opportunities, both with other WASL participants and with other district and school leaders.
- Time and activities designed to help them hone their own leadership story and focus their own leadership priorities.
- Activity designed to help them find and communicate connections among initiatives like SEL, 21st Century Learning, and Equity and Diversity.
- MTSS “Student Story” activity
- PLC session
- New principal panel

Overarching Weaknesses/Opportunities to Improve Program across Groups

Across groups, several themes about what could improve WASL in future years emerged:

- Nearly all groups mentioned wanting better differentiation of content given their prior background of experience. Many suggested a needs assessment survey before WASL to help identify the content that would be most useful/least duplicative for them.
- NV-Leads graduates believed the SPP and SLO activities were duplicative of activities they completed in their master’s program. Non-NV Leads graduates had more favorable attitudes towards those sessions.
- Non-NV Leads participants were disappointed they did not receive mentoring experiences with principals/Aps/Deans as prior WASL cohorts received.
- Most groups requested additional sessions on discipline, including theories of discipline, restorative practices, and real-world approaches to discipline at different school levels (elementary vs. secondary).
- Several groups requested additional information on special education and compliance procedures.

Evaluation of the 2019 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 five, one- and two-day sessions spread out over the course of the school year.

The 2018-2019 school year marks the seventh year of WASL. Several changes were implemented to the structure of WASL this year:

- Inclusion of more teachers and Central Office staff as participants
- Coordination of content with Nevada Leads program, a UNR master’s program designed to build teachers’ education leadership capacity
- Re-designed curriculum to meet needs of WASL students with background in NV Leads.

This report presents the results of end-of-year focus groups with participants of WASL.

Evaluation Method

Five 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 leaders.

Office of Accountability staff conducted five semi-structured focus groups with the 36 participants of WASL. Staff were divided into groups based on their position: 1) Assistant Principals/Deans- 2 groups, 2) TOSAs/Central Office Staff (implementation specialists, program coordinators, area administrators, etc.; and 3) Teachers – 2 groups. 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.

Teacher Group #1

Strengths of the Program

Teachers in this focus group found that many activities in WASL were useful and built upon their NV Leads experiences. Participants appreciated that WASL emphasized how many **support structures** were in place to support new administrators, helping them feel more confident about transitioning to leadership positions. As one commented, “All the different activities reinforced that we aren’t out there on our own island – we don’t have to know everything; we don’t have to do everything on our own, and I think all those activities reinforced that.”

Participants expressed that they felt like WASL helped them **establish who they were as leaders**. “It opens the door to have your own voice – you are going to face things but you are going to resolve them on your own beliefs – it’s really about finding out who you are as a leader and not who you need to be based on how other people are leaders.” Others thought the session on aligning initiatives (21st Century, SEL, Equity and Diversity) helped them see important connections in how initiatives support each other.

Teachers especially appreciated opportunities in which they learned and heard from current administrators on the challenges they faced on a daily basis, including through the new principal panel. They also appreciated activities where they spent time learning how to solve conflicts, like during the School Performance Plan (SPP) process, and having the time to collaborate and figure out what they would do if we ever faced certain challenges.

They found most useful included the following:

- PLC role playing, fishbowl
- Prioritizing what would be most important for them to do in school and ordering their actions based on that list of priorities
- Looking at SLOs.

Weaknesses of the Program/Areas for Improvement

Teachers who had participated in Nevada Leads thought **NV Leads was much more rigorous**, and the quality of instruction and reading assignments were higher than they experienced in WASL. They also noted there was some overlap in content, particularly for those who completed the district interview class, which used the same book (*In the Arena*) as WASL. Although they noted the two instructors were “amazing” with “different backgrounds that complemented each other well,” they thought they could challenge WASL participants more in future years.

Teachers thought the least useful activities were those that seemed disconnected from reality. For example, some noted the fishbowl was not a real world activity that has more at stake and requires more rigor. They also thought it would be helpful to have more Board of Regent or

Teacher Group #1

Strengths of Program

- Exposure to types of district supports available to leaders
- Learning from current administrators and solving real world problems
- Alignment between initiatives (21st Century, SEL, Equity etc.)
- Establishing their leadership approach

Opportunities for Improvement

- More real-world experiences
- More opportunity to engage in other leadership experiences
- Less time on SPPs and more time on IEPs/discipline

directors come in and discuss their projects so they could know whom to contact to advocate politically or for changes in the district.

Participants expressed the desire to be **included in more leadership activities** the district already does, like LTL, or principal mentorships. They felt a lot of what district leaders did felt exclusive or far removed from their positions. Teachers did not necessarily see a clear pathway to leadership because they were often not included in these types of activities. They also wanted to know what the next steps were to becoming a principal. Teachers also wanted more opportunities at their school site to try out activities (like SLOs) and report back at WASL about their experiences. Some noted interim activities like homework would also be helpful in furthering their experience, “Like climate, if that is such an important topic for the district and the schools, give us some articles on climate to read – those are what we should be reading.”

As in other groups, teachers in this group thought that it would be helpful to engage in more differentiation, perhaps by having a survey prior to WASL about what areas of the curriculum would be most helpful/least duplicative given their prior experiences and future goals. Those who were in Nevada Leads were particularly critical of how much time they spent on **School Performance Plans (SPPs)**. Some noted that their schools rarely reviewed or spent time on SPPs and that even their principal was not familiar with the content they had received on SPPs. Those who participated in Nevada Leads commented they had already written three SPPs as part of that curriculum, so the WASL session was particularly duplicative for those graduates. Similar comments were expressed about the **session on SLOs**, with some commenting what they learned in WASL did not match what their principal knew about SLOs. These sessions indicated that the district message about those initiatives did not necessarily reflect the actual experiences with those activities in a school building.

Teachers also wanted **more time on more relevant activities** like using Infinite Campus or how to triage school challenges while balancing work and home life. Teachers also wanted to discuss behavior and reflect on real discipline plans. Staff thought they should have spent more time on IEPs, given how much more of their time at school were devoted to IEPs compared with other activities like SPPs.

Teacher Group #2

Strengths of the Program

Teachers in the second group were more positive about their time in WASL, and did not think it rehashed content from NV Leads. They especially appreciated **the interaction with peers, linking names to faces** within the district, and **networking** with staff who could help support them in future leadership roles. They were especially appreciative of the **Leadership Story** activity, and benefitted from verbalizing their leadership story with others. As with the other groups, they liked the crosswalk between the multiple initiatives (21st Century, SEL, Equity and Diversity). They also liked working with the SPP and SLOs and gaining exposure to the process and different tools. In both activities, they thought seeing what the data/process looked like at different grade levels was a helpful experience.

They did not think anything covered was irrelevant, and believed that going through WASL helped them organize their thinking, which would be beneficial for them once they were in a leadership role. Those in NV Leads thought having the two programs, WASL and Leads should be “a must” for all teachers and helped them “connect the dots” between what they had learned in the two programs. They also believed that overall, WASL designers were very thoughtful in developing content leaders need to have to be successful. They appreciated getting

a view into what administrators really do on a day-to-day basis, and became more aware of all the duties and responsibilities administrators face.

Weaknesses of the Program/Areas for Improvement

Teachers in this group wanted to see more time spent on the SPP process and have more content around the data and how to use it. Given all of the information provided, they thought they needed more time to finish the SPP process. They also expressed interest in having an entire session about the B.I.G. data warehouse with an expert on-hand to help answer questions in future years. As requested in the other groups, this group **wanted a session on special education**, including navigating procedures, and what types of support can be expected from the Special Education Department.

Some staff also requested a refresher on the next steps in the hiring process, including time dedicated at each WASL session to discuss possible responses to common interview topics/questions with colleagues. In general, teachers liked having the five sessions, but said that sessions scheduled during testing time were sometimes difficult to attend. They also noted that five sessions was about as many times as they could afford to meet since missing class time was difficult as a teacher.

Teacher Group #2

Strengths of Program

- Networking and interaction with colleagues
- Alignment between initiatives (21st Century, SEL, Equity etc.)
- Leadership Story
- Good extension of NV Leads

Opportunities for Improvement

- More information on data and how to use it (including B.I.G. data warehouse)
- More information on next steps in the hiring process for future roles
- More information on special education procedures

Dean/Assistant Principal Group #1

Strengths of Program

Deans' comments about their favorite activities paralleled those of the other groups. Their favorite component of WASL included the **networking and relationship-building**, including hearing different perspectives from their colleagues. They also appreciated hearing the experiences of administrators across grade levels, noting that the Dean position is sometimes isolating, and that WASL helped provide opportunities to see what the position looks like at other sites. Those who also participated in NV Leads thought WASL was "definitely worthwhile" and noted that WASL was much more specific to WCSD, which was helpful.

Discussing the **interconnections among SEL, 21st Century, and Equity and Diversity** was particularly helpful, with some commenting that they have already used and referred back to what they had learned in that session. Because school staff are often overwhelmed, deans saw value in being able to communicate connections across initiatives and effectively express their importance to others. They also thought making connections among more district initiatives would be beneficial.

Deans also liked developing their leadership story and leadership plans to help them set professional goals. Others noted that the **MTSS Student Discussion** "One Student and His Data

Dean Group #1

Strengths

- Networking and relationships
- Interconnections between SEL/21st/Equity and Diversity
- MTSS Student Data Story

Areas of Improvement

- Too much time on SLO/SPP
- Needs assessment survey prior to WASL to support differentiation
- Need sessions on discipline and master scheduling

Story” was insightful, including learning how to “reign in dissenters.” They also liked learning that the data was the starting point, but only as a place to dig deeper. They believed this activity paralleled real life well, and allowed them to think across grade bands to see differences.

Weaknesses of the Program/Areas for Improvement

Deans thought **too much time was spent on SLOs**, since many WASL participants had already had extensive professional development on the topic in previous years. Some also thought the **SPP activity and spending time on the data books was duplicative** to activities they had completed during Nevada Leads. Since the day was already data-heavy, some noted they “did not give the SPP a fair look.”

Deans also wished there had been a “**pre-assessment**” of **skills or information needs** prior to WASL, so that they could note what they had experience and what they needed more information on would help with much-needed differentiation and increase buy-in among participants.

Deans requested more information on discipline, including a discussion about how discipline “looks across the district.” Instead of just providing administrators with a matrix to follow, deans requested professional development in which they could see some mock discipline scenarios to help them understand how to code and determine consequences for student behaviors. They also thought a session about **how to set up a Master Schedule** would be helpful in future leadership positions, including how to organize assessments throughout the school year. Some requested sessions on the specifics of budgeting and implementing PLCs.

Overall, some deans felt overwhelmed by how much they still did not know about being an administrator, and what they still needed to learn to feel ready. As one dean explained, “I do not even know what the next level is looking for, so how will I know if I am prepared?” They noted this was a particular challenge for deans, who often have very different roles from one another. That said, they also acknowledged that much of becoming a principal required on-the-job learning that no professional development could adequately cover.

Dean and Assistant Principal Group #2

Strengths of Program

Overall, participants were positive about their experiences at WASL, noting that it was particularly helpful to have dedicated time to **articulate their own strengths as leaders**. They appreciated **engaging with colleagues** and hearing multiple perspectives. They also felt that after WASL, they felt like they knew themselves better and could envision themselves in an assistant principal role. Many commented that WASL helped them focus their priorities in the event they became assistant principals or principals.

Deans benefitted from the **Leadership Story** activity, and having the opportunity to reflect on their leadership story with others for feedback, which they found empowering. As in every group, this group thought the **crosswalk among SEL, Equity and Diversity, 21st Century** was incredibly helpful, noting it helped them strengthen their work with teachers and administrators and provided clearer language to use with other teachers. They did note that they

could use more time on this activity to fully develop or process their own ideas. One even recommended making each initiative its own day, with a fourth day to tie the initiatives together.

They also had favorable attitudes towards the “**Our story, our strength**” exercise, saying that it was “Very powerful!”, and was something they had immediately used with other colleagues with great success. The session on **PLCs**, including what the purpose and structure should be was helpful, and something they felt they could readily apply in their current and future roles.

Overall staff felt the structure of the sessions, coursework, and homework was manageable, relevant, and facilitated good self-reflection. Although the book was used in prior settings, some noted that they read it differently in WASL now that they were in a new role, which was helpful. They also thought having interview reflection questions helped them tackle interviews better, but thought they would benefit from more practice.

Weaknesses/Areas for Improvement

Deans in this group noted the varying experience levels of the groups was challenging, and that WASL sometimes felt like an extension of Nevada Leads. They described this as difficult, because some information was entirely new to those who had not had NV Leads, and for some it was duplicative. “I would be frustrated if I had to be out of my building to go through SEL again because I have been doing that a long time. Although I understand how valuable it is to those who don’t have that experience. That is why is difficult to have this group together when we all come from different programs.” Some Deans in this group said there was **too much emphasis on NV Leads**, and felt that that cohort had already spent a lot of time together bonding, including time spent bonding with the instructors. They also commented that NV Leads participants also had valuable mentoring experiences with district administrators and department leads, but non-NV Leads participants did not get to know other leaders or network with administrators through WASL. They also felt like there was an attitude conveyed that the NV Leads students were more distinguished or deserved more recognition. As one summarized, “It felt like I know the person who owns this house...but I wasn’t invited to this party.”

They also advocated for a **pre-WASL needs assessment survey** where they could indicate what information they would like to learn and what they already had experience with in their current role to help with differentiation, “Maybe be able to select what you need; some people in this room are coordinators of some of these things—SLOs, school plans, etc. They should not have to sit through some of these things.”

Deans noted that in general they felt like leadership professional development in the district was not well-aimed at Dean, who were not teachers, but not yet administrators. They thought it would be beneficial to have access to a cohort of mentors to help them when they became Assistant Principals (including on topics like how to conduct evaluations). Information regarding all of the supports that are available when transitioning should be provided, as they thought the jump between Dean and Assistant Principal came with a different set of learning

Dean Group #2

Strengths

- Networking and relationships
- Interconnections between SEL/21st Century/Equity & Diversity
- Leadership Story
- Time to reflect on leadership practices

Areas of Improvement

- Needs assessment survey prior to WASL to support differentiation
- Less discussion of NV Leads program
- Need session on discipline

requirements that many deans might not have received. They noted that support for that transition was critical, and required strong administrative team support on-site and district-wide.

Finally, deans requested more sessions around discipline, especially because they often felt that deans are required to “figure it out on their own” with limited guidance. They thought discussing discipline-related classroom scenarios would be helpful, as would discussing discipline approaches for elementary versus secondary.

Central Office Staff and TOSAs

Strengths of the Program

Staff in this group were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences, and there was group consensus that more administrators from central office should attend WASL as participants. Respondents believed it helped with **relationship-building, idea-sharing, and transitioning to different leadership positions**. Although scheduling to be out an entire day was a challenge for some, others noted that spending a full day reflecting on their practices was helpful and allowed them to “commit to the process.”

They listed the session in which they **cross-walked district initiatives (21st Century, SEL, Equity and Diversity, etc.)** was helpful, nothing that it helped create a schema for connecting the initiatives in a way that would help further implementation. Staff in this group also appreciated the **session on district data by Accountability**, noting that seeing how demographics had shifted over time and seeing WCSD’s results compared to other districts nationally was something they planned to use in their current and future roles. Spending time in teams reviewing data for the purpose of the **SPP** was also helpful. “Looking at those big school plans with people with such different perspectives, there were various readings of the data that I hadn’t seen, and then somebody would say ‘oh, what about this?’ and I would think ‘Oh, I hadn’t even thought about that!’”

Staff also believed that the session on **PLCs** was helpful, and thought that it reminded them to consider the theory behind PLCs and better assess whether PLCs were functioning properly at their sites. Finally, staff commented that they had learned a number of strategies from the WASL instructors, like purposeful listening, establishing norms, decision trees, that they planned to use again in other contexts.

Weaknesses of the Program/Areas for Improvement

Staff in this group who also took the “interview class” a year ago had already read the *In the Arena* book and thought there was a lot of overlap between the classes. Several mentioned that it would be helpful to review which leadership courses staff had already taken prior to WASL, or just ensure there was no overlap between classes commonly attended by WASL participants.

Some staff wanted more experience in the evaluation standards for administrators, including what artifacts might look like, and watching videos of principals in action and how

Central Office/TOSAs

Strengths of Program

- Collaboration and collegial network building
- SPP/Data theory session, PLCs, alignment between district initiatives
- Leadership strategies

Opportunities for Improvement

- Reduce overlap with previous leadership classes
- Administrator evaluation rubric guidance
- Access to mentors
- Online networking opportunities

they might be rated on the WCSD rubric. NV Leads graduates thought this would be especially helpful because their program had used a global set of standards, so they had not yet had exposure to WCSD's specific administrative standards. Staff also wanted more time on how to have and prepare for difficult conversations with staff, parents, and other stakeholders. Although lightly covered in NV Leads and more in-depth in a recent Blue Friday session, staff thought more time to practice those conversations would be beneficial. Staff also requested more time on some of the lesser known procedures for handling conflicts at schools, like what to do/whom to call when there is a major concern with a teacher, fight between a bus driver and parent, and other challenges for which there is no handbook.

Some also had hoped that they would be assigned a principal or assistant principal mentor, like previous cohorts of WASL participants NV Leads graduates had received. Respondents suggested using Microsoft Teams to develop a "Mentoring Area" would have been helpful so participants could have a cohort of Deans, Assistant Principals, and Principals to connect with virtually via discussion boards on topics like how to solve challenges for which there are no handbooks. They also thought having an online connection to share resources after WASL would be helpful for continuing the valuable relationships they had already established through WASL.

Appendix A 2019 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 leader in the district?

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 in your role 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: Was there any area that you wish you could have spent more time on?

Probe 2: Did you find any particular area irrelevant to what you do now or what you plan to do professionally?

Probe 3: For those of you who participated in the Nevada Leads program, did you feel WASL complemented your previous learning, or was it duplicative?

3. Structure of WASL

This year, WASL began in January and included five consecutive sessions, which differs slightly from the structure used in previous years. How satisfied were you with the structure of WASL?

Probe 1: Was five sessions sufficient or would you have preferred more sessions?

Probe 2: How do you feel about the timing, length, or sequence of the sessions?

4. Competency to Become an Effective School Leader

Looking to the future, how do you feel about your competence to transition into another leadership role?

Probe 1: Do you feel adequately prepared to make the transition to becoming an effective school or district 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 a different leadership role?

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

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

Wrap-Up

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