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POLICY BRIEF

A Statewide System of Leadership Development

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## **A Statewide System of Leadership Development**

Imagine a new way of growing, supporting, and sustaining school leaders in our state. Picture a system built upon foundational blocks of ongoing professional learning, cohort-based support, coaching, and mentoring matching each leader's context. Finally, imagine a system so robust that we see new data and trends that reverse horrific and compounding negative consequences of leadership turnover.

Now, what if I said we are facing a leadership crisis and if we don't move from imagining to action, our entire system sits in the balance? Recent research from the University of Washington (February 2024) confirms the tenuous position of school leadership in our state. We are seeing higher turnover rates of principals than teachers in our state. Why? Simply put, inadequate preparation, support, and ongoing professional learning combined with unrealistic workload and responsibilities are resulting in higher turnover rates and an exodus of school leaders.

Take this alarming data and combine it with ongoing Wallace Foundation research on the impacts of highly effective school leaders and the results should be both alarming and a call to action. We must do something. We are well beyond admiring a problem. If we truly care about equity and ensuring that every school has effective leadership, then reimagining and rebuilding the system should be top priority for us all, not just AWSP.

As we consider what a new Statewide Systems of Leadership Development (SSLD) could look like, we must acknowledge current systems, agencies, practices, and policies. We must highlight what is working well, what's missing the target, and what needs to be abandoned and/or rethought. To help us conceptualize this, we suggest using the AWSP Leadership Continuum of Aspiring (pre-service leaders), Launching (leaders in years 1-2), Becoming/Building (leaders in years 2-5), and Mastering (leaders 5+ years). This continuum will help provide a framework for both current and potential future supports.

### **The Leadership Continuum: ASPIRING**

#### **ASPIRING: Current Reality**

How do we as a state currently prepare future school leaders? Teacher leaders can enroll in one of 18 different principal preparation/credential programs in our state. Each program is unique in cost, delivery, time to credential, and content. All are held to the same standards of accreditation and connection to the NELP Standards. In any given year, there are 175 - 225 aspiring leaders across the state. Thanks to ongoing state

funding, some of those aspiring leaders can apply for an internship grant through AWSP. The money is not enough to be distributed to all interns in a current year, therefore the grant is competitive and awarded to those that are selected through an essay based application. Recipients of the grant are able to use sub days that allow them to engage in school leadership activities during the school day and provide the intern with “experiential” learning opportunities. Combined with the internship, AWSP also coordinates regional Aspiring School Leaders “cohort-based” series of which only about 60% of yearly interns attends.

We know that the role and demands placed on school leaders has grown exponentially in the last 15 years, contributing to high turnover rates. Demands have increased, the funding to support those demands has not. In 1995, I received the intern grant and was awarded 45 days of coverage. My local school district contributed another 20 days, providing well over a semester’s worth of “reality” training. I felt I was prepared to take my first job as an assistant principal thanks to my internship, cohort-based in-person principal prep program, and a cadre of current leaders who served as mentors and coaches.

Current reality is interns are receiving up to 20 release days. This is an increase from past years of an extra 10 days. Prior to this increase, interns had 8 - 10 release days for their internship. The increase in the number of days was done with the intention of allowing the intern to better engage with authentic leadership opportunities. More days to learn and grow in their leadership ability and capacity is great, but it’s not enough. The bigger question is how can we expect our future leaders to be prepared for the demands of today’s schools with such a limited number of days in their practicum experience? We would never approve of a system that had a student teaching experience of 8, 10, or even 20 days, yet it is somehow alright for future school leaders. That is not right. It’s not only inequitable, it’s unjust, and does not allow an aspiring leader to properly prepare for success in their first year. Something has to change.

## **ASPIRING: The Future**

### **What are the simple short-term adjustments we can make now?**

- 1. Require participation in AWSP’s regional Aspiring Cohort-based Networks**
- 2. Increase funding for the statewide Intern Grant Program**

AWSP, WASA, Educational Service Districts (ESDs), PESB, and all 18 principal preparation programs (WCEAP) must come together to collaborate, redefine, and rebuild what preparation should look, sound, and feel like regardless of program or zip

code. All aspiring leaders should be confident in knowing they will be adequately and equitably trained and prepared to face the realities of the job. Participation in regional “aspiring” cohorts should not only be encouraged but also required, and all stakeholders should be involved in collaboration and delivery. This group of organizations and agencies must unite and form a new bond, urgency, common purpose, and ongoing structure.

Next, until we reimagine what an internship/practicum could look like, we must push for more funding to increase the release days for future leaders to actually experience the realities of the job. Up to 20 days of internship funding is educational malpractice. If we continue with the internship model as the main pathway for on-the-job training, then increasing funding must be a top priority.

### **What are long-term systems we can work toward in new policies, funding, and systems?**

- 1. Move to a Year-long Practicum Experience**
- 2. Require Participation in AWSP’s Regional Aspiring Cohort-based Networks**
- 3. Adopt the AWSP Leadership Framework and the School Leader Paradigm as the Standards for Principal Preparation Programs**
- 4. Develop a Statewide Residency Program for Future School Leaders**

I dream of a day when we refer to school leaders in our state as leaders who graduate and collectively enter the workforce as cohorts. For example, we’ve worked hard to increase consistency and effectiveness of preparation and can proudly announce the next generation of leaders as the “School Leader Cohort of 2025.” Every year, a new cohort graduates from the Aspiring portion of the continuum and launches successfully and effectively into their first leadership opportunities. Being a “member” of the 2025 cohort means one had a year-long state and district-funded practicum experience working as a Dean of Students while concurrently enrolled in a principal prep program.

Additionally, these Aspiring Leaders were required and funded to participate in ongoing regional “Aspiring School Leader” cohorts (ESD and AWSP collaboration) where groups shared and wrestled with relevant problems of practice. By the time someone finishes their year of preparation, they’ve been exposed to the realities of the work, strategic preparation, professional learning networks, mentors, and a new family of career-long colleagues from around the state. This new approach will build a solid foundation for the beginning of a highly effective and sustained leadership career and impact.

Currently the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards is the cornerstone of principal preparation programs and a guide in preparing our future school leaders. The NELP standards provide a strong foundation for preparing future school leaders by emphasizing essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for leadership. However, they fall short in addressing the specific needs of future school leaders in our state. Our state has adopted the AWSP Leadership Framework and the School Leader Paradigm as the approved frameworks for evaluating and supporting school leaders, making it imperative that aspiring leaders develop a deep understanding of these tools before entering the workforce. By prioritizing preparation aligned with these state-specific frameworks, future leaders will be better equipped to meet the expectations of their roles, foster student success, and drive school improvement effectively. Transitioning to training programs centered on the AWSP Leadership Framework and School Leader Paradigm ensures that new leaders are prepared not only for leadership broadly but also for the unique demands of leadership in our state's schools.

A residency program for aspiring school leaders offers a transformative approach to leadership preparation by providing rich, authentic experiences. Unlike traditional pathways, a residency immerses future principals in real-world leadership scenarios, fostering hands-on learning in the context of their future roles. This approach enables residents to develop critical skills such as instructional leadership, cultural competency, and systems thinking while under the guidance of experienced mentors. A well-designed residency bridges the gap between theory and practice, ensuring aspiring leaders can navigate the complexities of school leadership with confidence and effectiveness. By embedding aspiring principals in schools, they gain invaluable insight into the nuances of building relationships, managing change, and driving equity-focused outcomes, creating a leadership pathway ready to meet the demands of today's and tomorrow's education.

### **What would be an out of the box rethinking and innovation?**

- 1. Redefine Leadership Roles and Certification Pathways**
- 2. Grow Our Own Leadership Development Systems**

Let's start by redefining the role of the school principal. The job has grown to be nearly impossible, so instead of preparing future leaders for something we know is already overwhelming, how about different pathways for new roles in leadership? For example, let's stop expecting our school leaders to serve as both the manager and the instructional leader. Let's create pathways for those who inspire to serve as instructional

leaders and build preparation for them to truly move the needle on improving teaching and learning in the school. They would be hired to be the instructional leader and not carry the burden of daily crisis management and operations. These people are self-identified with leadership strengths from the Learning Domain (School Leader Paradigm).

At the same time, many leaders have strengths in culture and systems and could prepare to be the operational principal (manager) of the school. These leaders could focus their preparation on the realities of running today's schools while not having to worry about also serving as the instructional leader. Two different credentials, two different roles, two different pathways to leadership, and more reasonable job expectations that will certainly reduce turnover, increase job satisfaction, and increase the candidate pool of qualified and intentional leaders. Addressing the overwhelming nature of the job by redefining the roles would solve a wide array of issues and kick the door of possibilities wide open.

We have the best resource for future school leaders sitting in our schools: our students. Why can't we explore and create a K-12 program that not only encourages our students to consider education as a career, but moves them down the path of initial certification connected to a university program? I realize that some schools and districts across the state have "Teacher Academy" courses, but the key word is "some." If we want to build a solid future and robust army of educators in our state, then we must start with our current students. They are our future.

## **The Leadership Continuum: LAUNCHING**

### **LAUNCHING: Current Reality**

What does our state do to support new and/or newly assigned school leaders? This might be a little alarming and concerning, but the answer is not much. We have 295 districts across the state with various levels of support, induction programs, and resources available to support new school leaders. As decreasing budgets have put pressures on superintendents to reduce administrative/central office funding, the ability to support new leaders has become more difficult and inequitable. The other factor influencing local support systems is the high turnover rate of central office and superintendent positions. It is very difficult to establish systems of support for new leaders when senior leadership is also a revolving door.

During a new leader's first year, the only requirement they have at the state level is to participate in six days of instructional framework training. And, if the leader is a principal in supervision of an assistant principal, then they must also participate in an AWSP Leadership Framework training (12 hours or two days). Beyond that there are no additional requirements for training, support, mentorship and/or coaching. This is a statewide problem of practice greatly contributing to high attrition and turnover rates of new leaders. Currently, a range of 200-300 new leaders enter the system each year. Most of whom don't receive any first-year ongoing professional development and are also not paired with an officially and appropriately trained mentor. The state allocation for "Principal Mentoring" is grossly inadequate and barely scratches the surface to meet the necessary demand in supporting our leaders during their first year.

## **LAUNCHING: The Future**

### **What are short-term simple adjustments we can make now?**

- 1. Require participation in Year 1 Cohort-Based Training**
- 2. Require context matched Mentoring and then Coaching**

One simple policy adjustment that could easily impact the system would be to add more requirements for first-year training and support. AWSP in partnership with each of the nine ESDs could provide ongoing regional cohort-based professional support if all new leaders were both encouraged and required to attend. If attendance in first year support was a requirement as part of maintaining a provisional certificate, we would greatly impact the success of our new leaders. Again, if these same leaders were already participating in ongoing regional cohort-based networks as "Aspiring" leaders, then they would already have established familiarity, trust, routine, and professional relationships with their regional network of support. This is simply carrying over from Aspiring into Year 1 of Launching.

Current funding for mentors in the system is inadequate and not providing the level of support required for our new leaders. There is currently no requirement to have a mentor which could also be changed at the policy level. Additionally, mentoring for principals and assistant principals needs to be run through OSPI's Best Program with the same attention and success provided to new teachers and not place the burden on AWSP. It would make sense for AWSP to provide insight and support to the program and serve as the trainers for mentors, but not continue to run what should be a massive program carried by the state. Adding funding to this area of support wouldn't require a

massive budget request. A slight budget increase, policy change, and shift in responsibility could be a manageable and short-term adjustment.

### **What are long-term systems we can work toward in new policies, funding, and systems?**

- 1. Require participation in regional ESD Year 1 Cohort-Based Training**
- 2. Establish Y1 requirements for Provisional to Continuing Certification**

Shoestring district budgets combined with the impact of leadership turnover within central office leadership positions are major contributing factors to gaps in support for principals throughout the state. Just as we say zip code shouldn't be an indicator for the educational experience for our students; nor should we say the same for access to wrap-around supports for first year school leaders. If we want the best for our students, then we need to foster and support the success of the new leaders in the system. Encouraging leaders to attend and participate in regional ESD Year 1 Cohort-Based Training is not enough. It must be required as part of certification maintenance. We must rethink what maintaining principal certification looks like in our state and elevate the importance of ongoing training to levels similar to what we expect of our medical professionals. To move from a "First Year Provisional Certificate," a candidate must participate in and meet agreed upon standards of first year leadership effectiveness.

At the same time, districts must be able to create internal systems and structures that provide coverage for school leaders to be able to leave their buildings and participate in ongoing professional support. We must remove the "I can't leave the building" mentality from the entire system no matter the zip code. If we are going to require ongoing training, then we must work together to imagine and create robust systems of building and district coverage that include a statewide system of principal substitutes, elevating teacher leaders, regional networks of retired school leaders willing to serve as substitutes, etc.

### **What would be a way out of the box rethinking and innovation?**

- 1. Context-Based Hiring Practices**
- 2. Principal Certification with Micro-Credential Areas of Expertise**
- 3. One Statewide Leadership Hiring/Data Portal**

Imagine a time in the future when the entire state is describing the language of leadership through the lens of the School Leader Paradigm. And with that, postings for open positions adequately describe both the context of the school/district and context of the desired leadership. Let's end the malpractice of throwing new leaders into



impossible first-year leadership situations without common and clear understanding of the full context at play. This is bad for everyone involved and carries massive professional and financial implications. If a school is lacking “systems,” then the job posting should clearly articulate a need for systems leadership. If a school is in a culture crisis, then the posting should emphasize looking for someone with high skills in relationship building and culture. If the school has a new leader every year, then perhaps a totally new approach needs to be considered for that building.

As the role of school leadership continues to expand in complexity and demand, so does the need to provide targeted training and expertise. While we rebuild the ongoing principal certification process, perhaps we should explore a micro-credential model at the same time. This would allow leaders to pursue additional training and expertise for their own professional growth, but also to help them increase success in their current context. Other states have built principal micro-credentials aligned to the School Leader Paradigm, so we wouldn’t need to recreate the wheel. We would only need to create the need and value in our state through policy adjustments and funding. What’s one example of a micro-credential that would be valuable? Special Education. Another one? Conflict Management.

Lastly, to elevate the important role school leaders play in the system, perhaps we should create a one-stop-shop data portal for all school leaders. This portal would be where every school leader in the state creates and maintains their leadership portfolio, current certification levels, micro-credentials, and job status. It would serve as the hub for both those seeking jobs and those looking to fill jobs. Candidates would simply activate their file when pursuing administrative positions and districts would have access to a list of not just candidate names, but also areas of expertise, contexts, micro-credentials, etc. This could really streamline both the maintenance of certification processes, but also the urgency of matching leaders to schools/districts throughout the state.

## **The Leadership Continuum: BUILDING**

### **BUILDING: Current Reality**

When we are talking about the compounding consequences of leadership turnover in the system and the horrific impact on students, staff, and school communities, we are talking about the “Building” portion of the continuum. We are seeing the greatest turnover in years 2-5 of leadership tenure. This might be the greatest unspoken inequity

in the educational system. When change is needed in our schools, there is an absence of the required leadership.

Leaders tend to navigate the first few years in a new building establishing relationships, trust, and culture before attempting to lead systems changes. After one or two years of observing and analyzing the systems that need to be changed, modified, and/or abandoned, they begin to make “systems” related leadership moves. Too often leaders encounter deeply entrenched, adult-centered, and inequitable systems requiring incredible leadership skills to navigate change management. Unfortunately, these barriers too often result in an unsuccessful change process and the demise of the leader, hence another change in leadership and a repeat in the cycle. The antiquated and inequitable system persists, and our students suffer the consequences.

If we really care about equity and the educational outcomes for our students, then we must start talking about supporting those leaders who are working in our schools with the students with the greatest need. This is equity work. If we unpack the schools across our state identified as “in improvement,” what is the correlation between that data set and the frequency of leadership turnover? There are far too many examples of this compounding impact of leadership turnover that we are well beyond admiring the problem, and must start openly talking about funding and supporting the sustainability of leaders in our schools with the greatest needs.

## **BUILDING: The Future**

**What are short-term simple adjustments we can make now?**

- 1. Require participation in regional Cohort-Based Training during the first 3 years of leadership as part of certification**
- 2. Fund Mentoring/Coaching through Years 1-3**
- 3. Require annual training and certification for all principal supervisors**
- 4. Create a statewide School Leadership Oversight Taskforce**

Instead of hoping for the best with our school leaders when they are hired and thrown into daunting leadership roles, let’s build a statewide system that includes both funded and required ongoing leadership support. To stop the churn of leadership, leaders need to be able to gather with each other on an ongoing basis in a safe space to share problems of practice, leadership challenges, and best practices. Leaning on the statewide structure of the ESDs, we can create ongoing networks for school leaders throughout every region of the state. However, creating the networks and hoping people will come will not suffice. Attendance must be required and be connected to the

certification process and transition from a “provisional” certificate to a “continuing” (in current terms). We want to build a system with wrap-around support for all leaders regardless of zip code during the first three years of leadership (four years if you include the pre-service support).

With additional funding for mentoring, we also need to expand the mentoring opportunities to all leaders within their first three years and potentially beyond. We need to first identify and train mentors who serve each region of the state who also match the contexts of our mentees. In other words, if a female high school principal wants a mentor who was/is a female high school principal, then the system needs to provide such a mentor. Adequate funding must exist to meet the demand. And again, creating a mentoring system and hoping people will seek such support will not suffice. Authentic engagement with a mentor must be required and be connected to the certification process and transition from a “provisional” certificate to a “continuing” (in current terms).

While we begin to pay more attention to the support for our school leaders, we must also pay closer attention to those in another difficult position, our principal supervisors or managers. Currently in our state, those supervising school principals must participate in one training on the AWSP Leadership Framework. That training only has to occur once and could have happened ten years ago. There is no annual requirement for re-training. And, there is no official “certification” at the state level that demonstrates a principal supervisor or manager has met certain standards to serve in that role. We must create a new system that funds the ongoing training and support for those supervising school principals. This system must be required and must become a “certificate” that one must earn and maintain on an annual or semi-annual basis. This will help increase the effectiveness, impact, and empathy of those working to serve and support school leaders.

As we consider a new Statewide Systems of Leadership Development (SSLD), we must take an immediate step in creating a School Leadership Oversight Task Force composed of representatives of various organizations that have a stake in ensuring every school has a great principal. This taskforce will meet on an ongoing basis to monitor statewide leadership trends, track data, and serve as the feedback loop to state agencies and policymakers. Per the research from the University of Washington, focusing on leadership development is a shared responsibility in our state and this task force will be an ongoing example of this collaboration.

## **What are long-term systems we can work toward in new policies, funding, and systems?**

- 1. Increase (and adjust for context) the proto-typical funding model to add more assistant principals across the system**
- 2. Add more specificity and requirements to the recertification system in our state (annual training, micro-credentials, regional cohort-based training, etc.) with longevity pay attached**
- 3. Create policy/contract language that protects leaders to lead**
- 4. Address the Pay Gap between Teachers and Administrators**
- 5. Remove Bargaining Limits for Collectively Bargained Agreements**
- 6. Offer 3-year Contracts to all School Leaders**

Prior to COVID's interference on K12 improvement efforts, a statewide workgroup was beginning to address changes to the prototypical funding model. In addition to the conversations around adding more mental health coordinators, counselors, and classified supports, momentum had begun to address the need to fund more school administrative positions at the building level. If we are not going to examine the redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of school leaders, then we must add more assistant principals into the system to distribute the current workload and burden. This is a necessary step to not only keep our current leaders afloat, but to also encourage others to step into roles they see as possible and rewarding, not impossible and career ending. Addressing the prototypical funding model must also go way beyond an FTE count alone. The new system must consider the "contexts" of schools and districts. Two elementary schools with 500 students can look and feel drastically different depending on context (demographics, programs, history, local funding, etc.)

Currently in our state to maintain a principal certificate a leader must collect 100 clock hours over the course of 5 years. Prior to a few years ago, those were just 100 clock hours of training. Now, of those 100, 10 must be on "leadership," 10 must be on "equity," and 5 must focus on "government to government." That is the only requirement in our state for our school leaders to hone their leadership skills and attend professional learning to renew their certification. Perhaps it's time to bolster the system by bolstering the requirements by suggesting annual requirements and more specificity around what is determined as "Leadership" training? Perhaps it's time to consider putting financial incentives in for those who serve as effective school leaders over time and/or serve in schools with the greatest need? Perhaps, if we explore the notion of micro-credentials in our state, there is also a financial and recertification reward connected to such credentials?

Either way, we will not change the narrative to what is happening to the leaders in our state as they navigate the tenuous years of 2-5 unless we change what we expect as a state. Our expectations currently are low and the outcomes in the form of high turnover rate illustrate the lack of focus on leadership development.

Next, if we want leaders to lead the necessary changes in our schools, then they must be supported and protected to lead. It has become way too easy to remove a leader in the system not because of being ineffective, but more so because they've attempted to make improvements. Change is difficult, and quite often in education, impossible. We must as a system examine the barriers to change and work to mitigate those barriers so our leaders can truly dismantle persistent inequitable systems. More and more leaders are choosing to just manage the building vs. lead, because of the fear of making one wrong move thus resulting as career ending front page news, a social media page, a vote of no confidence, and/or a forced resignation.

Finally, although corrections have been made over the years of reestablishing the pay gap between the highest paid teachers and the lowest paid administrators, we have a long way to go. Many districts across the state are having difficulty filling administrative positions because teachers would actually take a pay cut (and leave the protections of the union) to step into an administrative role. This gap continues to serve as a disincentive to pursue a career in educational leadership. Longer hours, more contracted days, increased stress and anxiety for less pay is working against us and needs to be addressed at the state level, not be a local burden.

Removing the provision that limits the scope of bargaining for principals and assistant principals is a critical step toward empowering school leaders to advocate effectively for the resources, conditions, and supports necessary to drive positive change. This limitation undermines the ability of principals and assistant principals to negotiate for policies and practices that directly impact their ability to lead effectively, such as fair compensation, manageable workloads, and adequate professional development opportunities. By lifting these restrictions, school leaders would gain a stronger voice in shaping their roles and the systems they oversee, enabling them to address challenges that hinder their ability to focus on instructional leadership and student outcomes. This change would foster a more collaborative environment where school leaders, districts, and stakeholders work together to create conditions that support educational excellence and equity. Empowered with the ability to advocate for meaningful change, principals and assistant principals can lead their schools more effectively and ultimately increase sustainability of school leaders in their roles.

Making 3-year contracts the norm for principals and assistant principals is essential to fostering sustained, effective systemic change in schools. Transformational leadership takes time, and school leaders need stability to implement initiatives, build trust with stakeholders, and achieve measurable progress in student outcomes. A 3-year contract provides the necessary runway for principals and assistant principals to create and sustain long-term plans, such as improving instructional practices, fostering equity, and strengthening school culture. Importantly, a 3-year contract does not prevent districts from addressing instances of ineffectiveness or violations of the professional code of conduct, ensuring accountability remains intact. Instead, it creates a balanced framework where school leaders are afforded the time and stability to make meaningful contributions while maintaining high standards of performance and ethical behavior. Adopting this approach ultimately supports both the professional growth of school leaders and the success of the schools they serve.

### **What would be a way out of the box rethinking and innovation?**

- 1. Work with WEA to have teacher leaders serve as instructional leaders (conducting peer observations and evaluations)**
- 2. Create “Grade Level” Leadership positions that roll up with the students**

As stated previously, part of the dilemma facing many of our leaders is the expectation to serve as both the manager and instructional leader. For those in systems where support and resources are abundant, this is less of an issue. For those in systems absent of support and resources, daily survival and reactive leadership through a management lens is the only reality. I would also venture to say we’ve been deeply mired in the TPEP system for fourteen years and might suggest as part of a long overdue review of TPEP, we might also raise the question...Are today’s principals and assistant principals the right people to be leading instructional improvements? Do they have the time, attention, and resources to lead this important work? Or can we explore the notion of peer observations within the ranks of the WEA?

If we begin to examine statewide TPEP data on the number of teachers across the system rated proficient and distinguished, are those ratings a result of a high quality cycle of feedback from their school leader or an exercise of rushed compliance? Would a teacher find more value in ongoing growth feedback from a peer or the anxiety of “evaluative” feedback from an administrator. I know these questions create discomfort, but if we don’t hit pause as a system and explore every facet of what we expect of our leaders, then we won’t be able to reduce the turnover in our state. Is it time for us to rethink how we approach improving learning and teaching in our state?

You are clearly reading the “Deep Inside Scott’s Brain” portion of this paper, so humor me a little more. Can we reduce leadership turnover by exploring a rolling model of leadership? For example, if we increase the number of school leaders via changes in the prototypical funding model then maybe we can be open minded to the notion of “Grade-level” principals throughout the system. For example, one could be a 6<sup>th</sup> grade principal who rolls up with the students to high school. Perhaps a middle school could have one main “Principal/CEO” with grade-level principals at each level who roll up with the students. Just think about the power of continued relationships and student/family connections.

## **The Leadership Continuum: MASTERING**

### **MASTERING: Current Reality**

Being a principal is the best job in the world. It’s also one of the most challenging. Many describe it as the best, most challenging job in the world. There truly is no other job like it. If you’ve served as school leader successfully more than five years in a row in the same building, then you understand that statement. If you are still standing with a smile on your face after five years then you have hopefully created an incredible school culture, the systems to support that culture, and an environment where everyone is willing to take risks in their learning.

As a state, we are seeing reduced numbers of those serving five or more years in the same building. We are seeing an exodus of early retirements, transfers to the central office, transfers back to the classroom, long-term medical leaves, and departures from education as a whole. We are losing many of our state’s best principals and assistant principals. They are not leaving because they don’t love the job, they are leaving because they can’t do the job they love. We are seeing a drop in the number of experienced veteran leaders and an increase in younger more inexperienced leaders stepping into these demanding roles.

We cannot afford to lose these amazing leaders. They’ve “mastered” the art of leadership and are surviving navigating today’s demands of school leaders. We need them to continue pushing on their own individual professional growth while also pushing on the system at-large to improve. We need them to serve as mentors and examples of extraordinary leadership. We need them to share their best practices and engage with policymakers on ways we can improve the system while encouraging their continued impact both locally and across the state. Simply stated, we need to create incentives

and rewards in the system that keep our best leaders where they are needed the most...with students.

## **MASTERING: The Future**

### **What are short-term simple adjustments we can make now?**

- 1. Master Principals Serve as Regional Mentors**
- 2. Master Principals Serve as Trainers in Regional Cohort-based Trainings**

We can literally save our current cohort of new and newly assigned leaders by connecting them with master principals (those in years 5+) in a mentoring or coaching relationship. Our mastering leaders would love to give back but lack the system and structure in which to connect with new leaders. This could be an easy win by working within and across each of the nine ESDs to identify our veteran leaders and establishing a database of those who are willing to serve as mentors and/or coaches. We need a wide array and cross section of “Mastering” leaders to ensure as many contexts as possible are available to meet the demand of our new leaders. By combining our mastering leaders with our recently retired leaders we can create a robust system of expertise and experience to support the growth of new leaders in the system.

Furthermore, imagine if these same mastering leaders were willing to partner with AWSP and the ESDs to support the ongoing Regional Cohort-based trainings (Aspiring, Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3). Each of those cohorts require different attention and support that the expertise of our master leaders could provide over time.

### **What are long-term systems we can work toward in new policies, funding, and systems?**

- 1. Add Incentive-Based Pay for Continuity and Effectiveness**
- 2. Establish national networks and PLC for mastering principals**

There are very few incentives in the system for leaders to set goals and aspire to achieve. There really isn't any financial reward for serving as a lifelong principal or assistant principal. Perhaps the time has come for the state to explore incentive and/or longevity-based pay for school leaders who demonstrate effectiveness over time? Research on leading school change indicates that deep second order change often takes years to achieve, but we are not keeping leaders long enough to lead the work.

What if we had incentives in the system that might inspire our school leaders to serve in their communities as long-standing commitments (assuming they are high quality and



effective leaders)? What if we combined those incentives with the attainment of micro-credentials and service back to the leadership development of new leaders?

As I reflect on my years as a high school principal, some of my most effective were when I found a network of high school principals from across the country who were walking the same leadership journey. We leaned on each other for addressing problems, sharing best practices, testing innovative ideas, and therapy/encouragement. My school and district felt the benefits of the connections I created across the country. Imagine if we built a mechanism for leaders to connect with each other at regional, state, and national levels. The collective expertise would lead to a collective impact and positive consequences.

### **What would be a way out of the box rethinking and innovation?**

#### **1. Create a statewide sabbatical system for principals**

How many times have you heard someone in education say, “I’d be a much better classroom teacher or principal if I went back in now?” That is common rhetoric in the education field. Imagine if we created a system where leaders who’ve hit a certain mark in the system could have the opportunity for a Sabbatical where they could serve the greater good beyond their school? What if there was a cadre of leaders on Sabbatical across the state who we all could lean on to support the new Statewide System of Leadership Development? The impact of a Sabbatical system for both the leaders as individuals and the system as whole could be massive.

### **Summary Statement**

Thank you for reading this document with an open mind and willingness to engage in a statewide improvement effort. The examples mentioned in this white paper are my thoughts and ideas. They are not an official statement from AWSP, nor represent a board approved document. This analysis and proposal merely serves as a catalyst to inspire your own creative thinking in addressing the leadership crisis in our state. Thank you in advance for your own reflection, perspective, and insightful ideas.