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## School leader preparation and development programs: What teachers want

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### Abstract

**This article aims to contribute to the literature on school leader preparation and development programs. It seeks to do this by identifying and discussing elements that current faith-based education system teachers would like to see embedded in the creation of aspirant and novice school leader preparation and development programs. This research utilised a qualitative research design, adopting semi-structured interviews to collect employee perceptions. These teachers identified a five-element framework for leadership programs: School and Community; Working With and Through Others; System Understandings and Practice; Leadership Wellbeing; and Special Character. This paper proposes a number of recommendations that may assist in the development of aspiring and novice school leadership preparation and development programs within this faith-based education system.**

### Introduction

Developing and preparing effective school leaders takes time and intentionality, with the typical process involving challenges associated with self-identification and the seeking out of support and learning experiences to facilitate and assist the development of required leadership capabilities. It is even more challenging to have an education system play an active role in the identification of future potential leaders, encourage a culture of aspiration, provide support and learning opportunities for aspirants along the way, and to continue to provide quality development opportunities and support for beginning, or novice, school leaders.

It is unsurprising then, that much literature has

considered school leadership preparation and development programs in recent years. Yet while much of the literature around school leadership preparation and development reports on programs available to current principals or deputy principals, there is a comparative dearth of literature that focuses on the leadership development elements that teachers would like to see implemented in leadership preparation and development programs. While a growing number of research studies are considering the participant perspective of leadership preparation, few consider the insights these participants have regarding the elements they perceive should be included prior to their participation in such leadership programs. Incorporating such perspectives into these programs would likely encourage and enhance the involvement of those who may prove the most likely to fill future school leadership positions.

This paper examines a range of elements identified by classroom teachers and current school leaders that they would like to see implemented in school leadership preparation and development programs being offered in one faith-based education system for aspiring and novice school leaders. Previous research within the system that is the focus of this research has identified that only 1.8% of education system staff are actively seeking school leadership positions, yet another 19% remain open to the possibility of considering school leadership positions in the future (Williams & Morey, 2018). As such, the potential leadership development of current classroom teachers, and beginning school leaders, must now take on a renewed effort as the sustainability of leadership into the future is of chief importance to this education system.

### Literature review

With increased expectations and accountability in place for school principals, an ever growing number of demands are being placed on school leaders who are seeing significant changes in the nature of their work. In the Australian context, this is resulting in an

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increased focus on school improvement with ongoing pressures to deliver ‘extraordinary and sustained improvement and achievement’ (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2014). While a significant body of school leadership literature still identifies an ageing principal population, Heffernan (2018) notes that older principals can easily identify this increase in accountability and policy, but for the increasing number of beginning principals, this climate of increasing pressure is serving as their ‘normal’.

Educational literature, however, identifies that many aspiring and novice principals who complete school leadership training are inadequately prepared to meet this increased climate of responsibility (Gentilucci et al., 2013; Hernandez et al., 2012; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Razzak, 2013; Tingle et al., 2019). Much educational literature identifies the links between effective leadership and organisational performance, however, and as such recent years have seen increased attention paid to what constitutes quality school leadership development, with preparation programs a particular point of research emphasis (Barber et al., 2010; McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016; Tingle et al, 2019; Walker et al., 2013). It is noteworthy that in light of many preparation programs being perceived as not adequately preparing school leaders for the role, some school districts have moved towards developing their own leadership preparation and development programs that emphasise their own desired leadership standards (Taylor et al., 2014).

Historically, the group most likely to take on school principal positions have been middle leaders, given their exhibited leadership and current roles. Research from a number of differing Australian education contexts suggests that there exists an unwillingness of assistant and vice principals, deputy heads and leading teachers to aspire to be in the principal role (d’Arbon et al., 2002; Fink, 2011; Lacey, 2003b; Lacey & Gronn, 2005; McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016). Additionally, research also identifies the reluctance of classroom teachers to aspire to principal positions and outlines concern over the lack of suitable applicants willing to consider these school leadership positions (Cranston, 2007; Lacey, 2003a; McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016). There is also research to suggest that the length of teaching experience an individual has affects their career aspirations. One such study undertaken by Lacey (2003a) found that teachers with less than 5 years experience were more likely to aspire to the role of principal, while those with more than 10 years experience are more likely to want to remain in the classroom. This same research project also found that although there was a significant increase over time in the number of teachers aspiring to the assistant principal position, 50% of the younger teachers who had aspired to the principal position at

the beginning of their careers no longer did so.

One Australian national study outlined that only 1.4% of teachers reported an intention to apply for a principal position, and 7.1% of teachers would apply for deputy principal positions in the next three years (McKenzie et al., 2014). As mentioned, previous research from within the faith-based education setting which is the focus of this research paper has identified that while only 1.8% of educational staff were actively seeking a school leadership position, 19% of those who indicated they had not yet applied for a school leadership position envisaged doing so in the future (Williams & Morey, 2018). Thus, it is noted that whilst there appears to be a reluctance in some Australian education systems to consider school principal roles, a good number of teachers would be open to considering school leadership positions within this Australian faith-based education system.

Australian school education systems largely rely on the self-identification of aspiring school leaders managing their own pathway towards school leadership, given no mandatory principal preparation programs exist. Much literature laments the difficult journey of the aspiring school leader, with barriers, lack of support and encouragement, few suitable preparation programs, and minimal opportunities to gain broad leadership experience commonly identified (Bezzina, 2012; Gurr & Drysdale, 2015; McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016; Russell & Cranston, 2012). School education systems are largely left to develop their own requirements for school leadership positions, and as Gurr and Drysdale (2015) note, a completed teaching qualification, registration with the relevant teaching authority, any state/territory legislated child-related employment pre-screening, and a few years of teaching experience, are often the only needed formal requirements. Most often faith-based education systems will have established some additional leadership criteria that considers religious affiliation within the relevant education system faith.

Internationally, a myriad of attempts has been made to ascertain principles to underpin effective leadership development programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Dempster et al., 2011; Schleicher, 2012; Walker et al, 2013; Young, 2015). A synthesis of research exploring effective leadership development programs reveals a focus placed on the needs of both individuals and education systems, an emphasis on improvement of schools and student learning, that programs be time-rich—providing for spaced learning opportunities, be research informed, allow for school based application and reflection upon this, be context sensitive, and provide for the evaluation of the effects on both schools and leaders (Dempster et al, 2011; McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016; Walker et al, 2013). Dempster et al. (2011), particularly, expressed

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the need for effective leadership development to consider both individual and school system needs in order to contribute to both school improvement and the aims of student learning and achievement. Huber (2013) concluded that while no single method is most appropriate for the professional development of school leaders, taking an approach that utilises a wide range of strategies and methods would appear most appropriate. As such, a context specific program that considers these principles would appear the best approach to take to school leadership preparation and development. Importantly, there appears growing consensus for the need to consider the participants perspective.

Current school leadership programs range from high end, comprehensive professional development initiatives designed by national bodies, through to university qualifications, and qualification programs (Walker et al, 2013). Typically, these programs consist of combinations of characteristics including: active participant-centred instruction integrating theory and practice, interactive online sharing, reflective journals, simulations, problem-based learning, action research, the exchange of resource, assessment by peers, instructors and the learner themselves, and job-embedded applied learning (Corcoran, 2016; Dempster et al, 2011; McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016).

In Australia, there is little research that outlines the nature and extent of new principal support—and this is particularly the case in faith-based education systems. The research that does exist more broadly paints a picture that little support is provided, resulting in new school leaders having to ‘learn on the job’. This ‘apprenticeship model’ has been considered to provide inadequate training and preparation (Wildy et al., 2007). Clarke et al. (2011) developed a survey as part of the International Study of Principal Preparation which compared principal preparation programs in England, Scotland, Australia and Mexico, asking 45 novice Australian principals to identify their most significant challenges and to what extent their preparation programs had prepared them to deal with these challenges. The findings showed a lack of formal and suitable preparation programs to meet the needs of these novice school leaders.

It is interesting to note the conceptual framework for principal preparation outlined by Wildy and Clarke (2008) who investigated the role of novice principals in small rural and remote Western Australian government schools (a context not dissimilar to the school system which is the focus of this research), and the influences on their work within the context of their communities. This framework proposed four distinct, but interdependent focal points: *place, people, system and self*. Wildy and Clarke (2008, p. 5) described place as school leaders ability to “read the complexities of their

context”, which becomes crucial for school leaders in small, isolated or rural settings, as these communities often take on societal and cultural views that many first time principals may not be familiar with should they have come from more urban perspectives. The focus of people refers to the ability of the school leader to interact with diverse groups in an interpersonal space on a day-to-day basis, such as staff, students, parents, education system personnel or members of the broader school or local community—often in complex situations. These researchers also noted that for principals who work in small rural communities, which a number of the principals in this research study work within, there is increased likelihood that some of these teachers are also likely to be parents and members of the broader school or faith-based community, whose ‘goodwill’ is significant to the success of these leaders school improvement efforts. The domain of *system* refers to the ability of the school leader to navigate through system-imposed processes, regulations and protocols, and to skilfully prioritise aspects of their work role accordingly. Lastly, the focus of *self* refers to the innate personal resiliency that is required of the role of school leader, who often work within spaces that involve multiple and competing tensions and pressures, which may entail unanticipated levels of emotional labour.

Mentoring, or coaching, is a well-established area in the corporate and sporting landscape, but a much more recently introduced concept in the education sphere. Noble (2012) stated that “In its simplest form, coaching is the act of helping others to perform better” (p. 32). Leadership coaching for school principals has been identified to be growing at a rapid rate (Reeves, 2009; Reiss, 2006; von Frank, 2012; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). A national study undertaken in the US by Wise and Cavazos (2017) identified that almost half of the 1361 respondents (659 or 48.9%) had received formal leadership coaching within the last 5 years, with the greatest percentage receiving 1-2 hours a month (44%), but 23% received 2-4 hours a month and 26.8% received more than 4 hours of individualised leadership coaching per month. These results strongly identify that a place for coaching exists, as school principals see this as an important means of supporting them in their work.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative orientation adopting semi-structured interviews to collect data and adopts grounded theory methodology for the analysis of these interviews. The study is directed by the following research question:

What elements would teachers working within a private faith-based education system like to see included in ideal

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The data for this study was collected as part of a larger research project exploring the perceptions of elements of school leadership development held by those working within this faith-based education system. Approval was granted to approach employees within a particular district of this education system. Data was also accessed relating to the perceptions of a number of school-based administrators. Interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting at a number of school locations, with the interviews lasting approximately 30 – 40 minutes in duration. The interviewees provided written consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded. Twelve employees, from seven of the ten schools within this education system district, were invited to participate in the open-ended interview process, all of whom agreed to be involved in this research study.

The interview data was first transcribed from the audio recordings, and then subjected to grounded theory processes. Grounded theory is an inductive process, “based on concepts that are generated directly from the data” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 411). This allowed the textual data to initially be broadly coded, then these codes were refined into fewer categories, and finally, these categories were mapped into substantive themes (Byrne, 2017).

## Results

When interviewees were asked to identify elements they would like to see included in school leadership preparation and development programs, respondents were able to identify that this faith-based education system already has an aspiring leaders’ program, but they were largely unable to articulate what elements this program includes, how participants are selected, whether attending or completing this program led to promotion opportunities, or any other specifics related to this program. However, respondents were of the view that leadership development programs need to be in existence, and were open to exploring what other professional bodies do in this space, should they wish to access these on their individual journeys towards school leadership.

The interview respondents in this study identified five major themes which identify the necessary elements that they would like to see included in any newly designed leadership development programs: School and Community; Working With and Through Others; Special Character; System Understandings and Practice; and Leadership Wellbeing. There were also points raised relating to not only program content, but also program delivery.

### School and community

Importantly, a focus on understanding the local context

was identified by these interviewees. Identifying how a new school leader may work with community partners and the local school staff particularly, was seen as important given a number of schools in this faith-based education system region were based in rural or small community settings. Comments such as *“I think it can be quite risky when job applications are taken for principal from people all across Australia or wherever apply for these jobs and come into communities that they’re completely unfamiliar with, unaware of, have no relationship with, and pretty much try to impose their way of doing things, and I think it backfires. It’s backfired here”* (R2) outline the importance of school leaders having sensitivity training with regards to the local school and community contexts.

### Working with and through others

Respondents identified that effective leadership was based on effective relationships. As such, a key area for an ideal leadership development program involved effective communication. Elements such as professional conversations, basic counselling skills, conflict resolution strategies, effective team building procedures and skills to assist understanding different personalities in ways that inspire their staff to do their jobs to the best of their ability, were all seen as essential.

It was common for respondents to emphasise the inter-relational aspect of school leadership, with comments such as *“I think dealing with difficult people is an important one, how to have conversations and manage difficult people, conflict resolution, all of that”* (R5) highlighting the need for elements to upskill participants in this area.

### Special character

Respondents were keen to see any leadership development program include a strong spiritual emphasis. This is illustrated by a comment from Respondent 5: *“I think there should be a spiritual component to [the program] where they’re inspired in their own relationship with God, because ultimately that’s what is going to keep them inspired and equipped for what they are trying to do”*.

These faith-based education system respondents regularly acknowledged the ‘calling’ attribute when mentioning school leaders in this context. The mission, ethos and special character of this faith-based education system was stressed by these respondents and is unsurprisingly a point of emphasis for inclusion in any school leadership preparation and development program being offered. Rieger (2017) has “proposed an ethics, moral and spiritual purpose lens to ‘refract’ distinctive leadership profiles — *complementary* to the published Australian Professional Standard for Principals (APSP)” (p. 24).

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## System understandings and practice

These faith-based education system respondents were able to identify the need to be able to navigate through the education system's procedures and policies to be successful in leadership. Further, it was recognised that this required significant familiarity with the protocols of leading in this context. To have the required political and structural knowledge was seen as essential to being a successful school leader.

Given this perspective, these respondents identified elements such as a clear overview of the day-to-day aspects of running a school, basic financial skills, an overview of legalities and governance, policy writing, and school funding were all considered crucial components of a leadership program. Additionally, the learning management system (SEQTA) utilised by this education setting was specifically identified as an area to be given coverage.

Furthermore, these respondents identified the need for the system to provide support and initial directions (including such things as a 'Getting Started Checklist') for school leaders. The establishment of school leadership preparation and development programs was one such mechanism for how these respondents would perceive the education system to be supporting them. Comments such as *"I think if there was more training, if there was more—'we're [the education system] gonna set you up and give you the skills to be a leader' rather than throw you in the deep end and go, 'Oh well, you'll learn along the way'. I think more people would be likely to step up [to school leadership positions]"* (R3) illustrate this perception.

Respondents identified that inspirational presentations by people who are well recognised in their fields as effective, high performing leaders, is desired. These successful individuals sharing what has been their experience and tips they have learned along the way about effective leadership was seen as highly valuable. Comments such as *"I think understanding what it means to be a leader which is more than just ticking boxes and jobs. It's about leading people and emotional IQ and I guess sometimes the best programs are delivered by practitioners who share their own experiences and their wins, their losses, their successes, that sort of thing"* (R6) were often mentioned by respondents as forming an element of any ideal leadership development program. The frequency of occurrence of statements like this indicate that inspiration is the thing most needed to encourage people to want to step up to leadership positions.

## Leadership wellbeing

This theme captured respondent perceptions of wellbeing incorporating both improved work-life balance and strategies to assist the school leader in their day-to-day roles. It could be seen that many

elements identified by respondents relevant to wellbeing are interconnected, in that improving day-to-day efficiencies can lead to better work-life balance. For example, improving time management skills, skills profiling and self-awareness training, task delegation and 'working smarter not harder' are all seen to improve leadership wellbeing.

Tied to this was the respondents shared view that there be consideration of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2014) standards for school leaders. The preparation and development programs should reference these standards in their content, as these leadership standards were seen as one accessible benchmark for effective school leadership.

Including leader self-care in leadership preparation and development programs was also considered to be important. Strategies for dealing with personal stress was a commonly identified element, as noted by the following respondents: *"I think there has to be components on well-being and self-care for our leaders so that they're equipped in how to manage stress, how to actually take care of themselves in [school leadership] roles"* (R5), and *"...I think that work-life balance and prioritising family and themselves and their own well-being"* (R9).

## Program delivery

A view emerged from respondents that there may be a need to consider two different types of programs in this space: Firstly, a leadership aspirants' program in order to provide insight into both the role of the school leader, and an overview of systemic practices and support for school leaders – proving to be a taster of sorts. Secondly, a leadership orientation program for novice school leaders, which would address aspects relating to local school contexts, work processes or interpersonal elements with the aim of better equipping and upskilling participants. Both of these programs would incorporate the involvement of inspirational speakers, current school system leaders, and experts in the respective fields they present in. It was perceived that where participants are at in their journey with regard to school leadership should determine which of these programs has more benefit for them, and this also impacts the nature of the elements included in these leadership development programs. The participants did not often identify explicitly the difference between such programs, rather, they regularly identified the need for such programs to be in place. As one respondent stated, *"I actually think we need to be more intentional and proactive to actually give people those skills... I think there's value in continually providing upskilling because the reality is sometimes if it's left to the devices of the individual, in the business of life, they never get around to it"* (R10).

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These respondents also addressed the timing of when such leadership development programs would be run. A view emerged that these programs should take place during the school term, as it was seen that teachers are reticent to give up their holidays. It was acknowledged that towards the end of the year, or early in the year is better, while the Curriculum and Primary Education/Curriculum and Secondary Education (CAPE/CASE) meetings held every second year (being the major two day PD experience for the faith based system teachers) was also identified as a possible space for a parallel leadership development event. Lastly, a view was presented that such leadership development programs need to take place multiple times per year, and involve the entire potential leadership pool.

In terms of program delivery, respondents identified scenario-based learning situations and outdoor expeditions as potential program options to assist the building of leadership skills.

Finally, the respondents perceived that mentoring, both formal and informal, was important in any overall leadership preparation and development program. Connections enabling networking with other principals was also identified by respondents as being an important option to make available, particularly in the case of new or novice principals.

## Discussion of research findings

A study undertaken by Gentilucci et al (2013) which focused on the multifaceted roles of new principal's found that the most frequently mentioned challenges (100% of participants) included dealing with stress and time management, as well as the creation and sustainment of effective working relationships. Additionally, their study identified that almost all (91% of participants) of the new principals desired more mentorship and support in their roles. These elements of the role of a school leader were clearly identified by teacher respondents in this study as elements to consider for modules in school leadership programs. It is evident that work-related stress, time management, relationships, and support are areas that must be addressed in any effective school leadership training.

The vast majority of the leadership development program elements identified by the respondents of this study *School and Community, Working With and Through Others, System Understandings and Practice, Leadership Wellbeing, and Special Character* resonated with the—*place, people, system and self*—framework set out by Wildy and Clarke (2008).

The *School and Community* theme that emerged from this study is largely similar to that of Wildy and Clarke's *place* where there is a need for preparation and development programs to stress sensitivity to the local school context. For this faith-based education

context, it is important to understand that the local Church is a key community stakeholder. The *Working With and Through Others* theme had less emphasis on politics than Wildy and Clarke's *people* foci, but paralleled the elements relating to the interconnection of the local community and school community; it is not uncommon for staff members to be active participants in both of these communities. The theme *System Understandings and Practice* resonates with Wildy and Clarke's *system* in that these respondents recognise the need to be skilled in how to relate to and process school activities within the machinations of a school education system. However, this study context adds layers of system, given that the system consists of local, regional, and national systemic levels within the faith-based education system, but further this education system also must operate within the compliance regime of the government. It is not unexpected then, that this was an element heavily stressed by respondents in this research study. The theme *Leader Wellbeing* differed from Wildy and Clarke's *self* in that it included work-life balance as well as strategies to improve ability and confidence in performing the school leadership role.

The respondents had a clear desire to see programs include a strong spiritual emphasis, which is seen as an important way for this faith-based education system to strengthen spiritual capital, and emphasise *Special Character*. Gerald Grace (2010) defines spiritual capital as “the sustaining resource for everyday leadership in Christian living and working” which encourages “a personal witness to faith in practice, action and relationships” (p. 120). Barstow-Melley (2017), with reference to the Catholic education system, notes that preparation and development programs should have a focus around faith formation in order to strengthen and embolden the unique mission of the faith-based school setting.

Effective school leadership, while potentially impacting student outcomes directly, most often promotes improved student outcomes through facilitating improved support and work conditions for teachers, in order to positively impact staff and their work (Drago-Severson, 2012; Zepeda, 2012). The complexity of the role of school principal often presents challenges such as dealing with problems and dilemmas involving a high level of interpersonal relationship interaction at both the school and wider community levels.

## Recommendations

School leaders are being faced with a monumental challenge in accomplishing school improvement mandates. However, it is recognised that two major factors impact the success of effective leaders: the knowledge, characteristics and actions of the school

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leader, and the extent of support that exists for the school leader and staff from their regional, system or national level. In light of the clear need to create a pipeline of future potential leaders to ensure system sustainability for this faith-based education system, the extent of action taken at a systemic level to support school leadership preparation and development initiatives, could well prove to be its defining moment.

Resulting from this, it is firstly strongly recommended that this faith-based education system develop a minimum of two separate school leadership programs, one developed for aspiring school leaders, and one to be focused on novice principals. Consideration could also be given to the development of a program aimed at middle and senior school leadership levels. These programs should be tailored for these groups to incorporate the various elements identified by the respondents of this study that relate to the various points along their leadership journey, as well as any additional elements that this education system sees fit to add that may collectively enhance the school leadership capabilities of program participants. It is recommended that these programs be run at two different intervals, however the aspirants' program is recommended during the mid-year CAPE/ CASE given the wide availability of interested staff from across the regional area.

Following this, it is recommended that for the aspirants' program, both self-identifying aspirants and system/school identified classroom teachers who exhibit leadership potential and particularly those in the first 3-5 years of their career be encouraged to attend. In light of literature that emphasises the aspirations of younger teachers, it is advised to begin initiating insight and discussion with this staff cohort, as it is the most likely pool of potential future school leaders. As noted previously in this faith-based education system context, system leadership sustainability is contingent on these younger staff following through on their current aspiration for school leadership (Williams & Morey, 2018; Williams, 2019). However, it is recommended that this system cast a wide net to invitees, in order to promote and maximise the impact of such programs and resources, and in recognition of an ethos that God enables the called.

It is further recommended that the elements identified here be presented as professional development style modules tailored to the specific program participants. These modules may be delivered by system-based administrators for the purpose of encouraging consistent system wide practices, by current principals in order to provide role specific insights, or by recognised experts in the various other areas presented. For example, current school principals may present sessions where modules cover elements such as understanding the

local school context, and day-to-day aspects of leading at the school level. System-based administrators may wish to present modules covering support and mentorships, grant applications, learning management systems (SEQTA), school governance issues, and the mission of this faith-based education system. Other presenters may address remaining modules, such as dealing with conflict, time management, team building, counselling skills, positive communication, and wellbeing; as identified in the *School and Community, Working With and Through Others, Special Character, System Understandings and Practice, and Leadership Wellbeing* framework.

It is also recommended that all participants of these programs, whether they be aspirants, novice principals or other, should receive certificates of completion for the sessions and modules completed, which are then recorded on their personal service records and are able to be added to individuals' curriculum vitae if desired. Ensuring a readily accessible record of preparation and development modules which individual participants have completed may prove beneficial from a human resources perspective at a later time, such as the staffing of school leadership positions.

Furthermore, it is recommended that at the local school level thought be given as to how to enhance professional learning communities and creating extra leadership opportunities for example developing 'online learning' leadership positions. It should be a focus of these preparation and development programs, wherever possible, to include learning modules that upskill participants for use in the local school setting, in order to facilitate an ongoing school improvement focus. All leadership preparation and development programs need to include a mentoring/coaching component mostly based at the local school level.

It is clear to respondents that a role exists for the faith-based education system to initiate and develop a coherent set of preparation and development programs that are transparent and widely communicated. In the interests of sustaining a leadership pool who are well positioned to take on school leadership positions, developing such programs may prove to be a critical investment. **TEACH**

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“All leadership preparation and development programs need to include a mentoring/coaching component; most often based at the local school level.”

## Author information

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