

Current state of play

Preparing future principals

Three major reports on the state of play for teaching and leadership across Australia have recently been released.^{1,3,5} A lot of this information is relevant to AITSL's current work in principal preparation. Although there is much great work occurring in principal preparation, and outstanding leadership in Australian schools, the information that follows sheds light on the key challenges we have identified.

"It is not surprising that in almost every country, the demands on and responsibilities of school principals are greater today than at any time in the past."³

Systems are key: enabling conditions must be in place to support cohesive principal preparation across the nation

Workforce planning is facing a number of challenges in the next few years.

Surveyed principals have an average of **26 years of teaching experience**.^{1,3}

71% of principals are aged over 50 and will soon reach retirement age.⁵

The pool of qualified candidates to fill the gap is limited. There are various factors influencing this.

Although 96% of surveyed principals would choose a principal role again if given the chance,³ about one-third think the role is (very) unattractive to qualified applicants.¹

On average, surveyed secondary school principals work 59 hours per week and primary school principals work 56 hours.¹

Time demands are the biggest factor in deputy principals not intending to apply for a principal role.¹

About **12% of surveyed school leaders** intend to leave teaching in the next three years.¹

There are still principal positions that are not attracting enough applicants with sufficient experience, especially those in disadvantaged or remote areas.⁴

Over 50% of school leaders whose first leadership appointment was outside a capital city have since moved to a capital city, but less than 10% have moved the opposite way.¹

"We don't sell our profession well enough – we need to take collective responsibility in developing future leaders. Raise the status of the profession so we make a difference."⁴

80% of school leaders agree that a better public image of school leadership would help retain leaders in the profession.¹

The principal job is not for everyone: the right people need to be identified early and deliberately developed

Theories of leadership development tell us that people can learn to become good leaders and are not simply 'born that way'.²

Less than 10% of surveyed principals intended to be a school leader when they started teaching.¹

One-third of principals decided to seek out a leadership post in their first few years of becoming a teacher.¹

The biggest factor in a leader's decision to take up the role was that they were encouraged and supported by their school leaders.¹

Women are under-represented in principal roles.

In primary schools **58% of principals** are female compared with **81% of classroom teachers**.¹

Of the primary school deputy principals who plan to stay in the profession, **only 26% intend to apply for a principal role** in the next three years, with males twice as likely as females to want to apply.¹

Principals should play a key role in collaborating with systems to identify talent and build capacity.⁴

Best-practice involves clear leadership pathways combined with detailed performance feedback. Organisations set clear expectations for leadership responsibilities and competencies for each position along the career pathway.²

There is a need to recognise the diversity of contexts and backgrounds of aspiring principals, whilst also providing clear pathways to leadership.⁴

Principals progress more quickly along the leadership pathway in other countries. Surveyed principals in Australia spent more time in other leadership roles than did their counterparts overseas (10.5 years cf. OECD average of 5.7 years).³

Content matters: principals need the skills and knowledge to meet the changing demands of the role

Indications are that succession planning is mostly ad hoc and some aspiring principals receive better development opportunities than others.⁴

*"All principal preparation programs need to be totally aligned to the Standard ⁷ so that new and aspiring principals are reflecting on practice and moving towards leadership."*⁶

In some sectors, design and delivery of programs is explicitly aligned to system values, initiatives and priorities. Program providers are increasingly using standards and frameworks to guide and structure professional learning.⁴

30% of surveyed principals in Australia have not undertaken instructional leadership training.³

Increasingly, principal preparation programs must emphasise leadership of instruction and school improvement.²

A leader's presence, actions, communication and style all contribute to their leadership and what they convey to others. Building effective teams within a culture of trust are important parts of the principal's role.²

*"Leaders need to develop their emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management."*²

35% of surveyed principals have not undertaken school administration or principal training courses.³

Preparation programs need to target managerial skills in addition to leadership skills. These include operations and project management, business and finances, decision making, strategy and managing people.²

Managerial and leadership skills require specific training and development that is different to the training most teachers receive.²

Some preparation strategies are better than others: focus on the ones that work

Programs which apply rigorous recruitment and selection processes ensure that successful applicants are those most likely to benefit from the experience and succeed in a principal role.⁴

Leadership development is an ongoing process, and specific principal preparation programs should be relevant to the stage a person is at in their career. The program will be most beneficial when the leader is in – or will soon be in – a position to put the learnings to use.²

Programs are changing to better reflect the principles of effective adult learning. They frequently now reinforce content over time, through varied activities. There is plenty of opportunity for experiential learning and feedback.⁴

Some leadership programs around the world include leadership opportunities within a new school setting, or even placements in business organisations.²

Ongoing mentoring or coaching is increasingly provided in principal preparation programs.⁴

“Aspiring principals need an avenue to determine strengths and needs so they can build on their knowledge, skills, understandings.”⁶

Different reflective diagnostic tools are used in many sectors and leadership programs, although 360 degree feedback is most common.²

35% of secondary principals have a Master's degree in Education.⁵

Several providers are engaging proactively with universities to ensure programs are accredited and count towards formal qualifications.⁴

84% of principals have participated in a professional network, mentoring or research activity.³

The role of the principal is crucial: we need to know what sort of preparation makes a difference

Although Australian principals report nearly the highest level of participation in professional learning in the OECD, **27% report receiving weak leadership training** in their formal education. This is one of the highest percentages in the world.³

A number of principal preparation programs currently being delivered are reporting improved levels of principal readiness for the job, as well as increased numbers of suitable applicants and successful appointments for leadership roles.⁴

Compared with three years ago, almost double the percentage of principals and deputy principals report feeling “well” or “very well” prepared for their first leadership role. Secondary teachers who intend to apply for a leadership position feel more prepared for the role than do primary teachers.¹

It is difficult to measure the impact of principal preparation programs on staff and student outcomes. To date, a majority of programs have been evaluated based on participant feedback alone.²

We need to focus more on evaluating programs and strategies, especially over the long-term, as measurable improvements in student performance may not be immediately apparent.²

Such findings need to be shared so that the profession as a whole can benefit from what is known about best-practice leadership development.²

You will find much more comprehensive information in the three published data reports referenced below.

1. Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 2014, *Staff in Australia's schools 2013: main report on the survey*, Department of Education, Canberra.
2. Jensen, B, Hunter, A, Lambert, T & Clark, A 2014, *Aspiring principal preparation*, Learning First, unpublished report prepared for Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).
3. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2014, *TALIS 2013 results: an international perspective on teaching and learning*, TALIS, OECD Publishing.
4. Watterston, B 2014, *Environmental scan, principal preparation programs*, Watterston Consulting, unpublished report prepared for Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).
5. Willett, M, Segal, D & Walford, W 2014, *National teaching workforce dataset data analysis report 2014*, prepared by Ernst and Young, Department of Education, Canberra.
6. AITSL Focus Group November 2014.
7. Australian Professional Standard for Principals.